Although the concept of human agency is central to our everyday understanding and explanation of human action, it is often held to be anathemic to a properly scientific study of human action (Sheldon, 1982). The scientific psychologist treats human agency as, at best, a prescientific superstition (Skinner, 1974), and at worst, an objectionable piece of metaphysics. The hermeneutical psychologist does little to discourage this conception by appearing to remove the question of agency from the domain of legitimate empirical enquiry.

In this chapter, it is argued that those concerned with advancing a causal explanatory science of human action should take very seriously the supposition that many actions are the product of human agency. This is argued in the strong sense that many actions may be sui generis self-determined by agents, and not determined by any conditions, including the psychological states of agents. It is argued that there are no good reasons why this possibility should be conceptually excluded from a science of human action, and a fairly good reason for supposing that agency explanations may play a central role in such science. The only objectionable metaphysical positions in this debate are the scientific psychologist’s a priori rejection of human agency and the hermeneutical psychologist’s a priori avowal of it.

Agency and Causality

Unfortunately, the present debate about human agency is largely vitiated because it is usually presented in the guise of an entirely spurious conflict between scientific psychology and hermeneutical psychology. The scientific psychologist sees the goal of social psychological science as the explanation, prediction, and control of behavior via the identification of its causal determinants. The hermeneutical psychologist sees the goal as the explication of the meaning of human action in terms of purposes and reasons. The scientific psychologist committed to a causal science often sees this commitment as ruling out the possibility of human agency. The hermeneutical
psychologist believes, more often than not, that a commitment to human agency rules out the possibility of causal explanations of human action.

This spurious conflict arises because both parties are committed to the Humean account of causal explanation in terms of conditions that are ontologically sufficient for the production of an effect. The scientific psychologist is committed to the claim that all human actions are determined by such conditions. The hermeneutical psychologist denies that explanations in terms of agent reasons make reference to stimulus conditions sufficient to produce action.

The hermeneutical psychologist is right to complain that references to agent reasons cannot be presumed to provide explanations of action in terms of ontologically sufficient conditions. But the hermeneutical psychologist is wrong to claim that agency explanations are not causal explanations. An agency explanation is a characterization of an action as self-determined for the sake of reasons. It is a causal explanation that conflicts with alternative causal explanations in terms of stimulus conditions because it makes a claim about the generation of action. An explanation of an aggressive action as a self-determined act of revenge directly conflicts with alternative causal explanations (of the same action) in terms of internal or external stimulus variables, such as aggressive drives or environmental stimuli. The agency explanation entails the denial that the action was determined by any stimulus variables sufficient to produce the action, including the psychological states of the agent.

CAUSALITY AND DETERMINISM

The thesis of universal causal determinism may be defined as stating that for every physical event or human action there is a set of conditions that are ontologically sufficient for the production of that event or action. This should be immediately distinguished from the thesis of universal causal generation, which states that every physical event or human action has a causal explanation. An agency explanation of an individual action makes the claim that the action was causally generated by the agent, but that there were no conditions sufficient to determine the agent to do one thing rather than another. The agency account is thus inconsistent with the principle of universal causal determinism, but not with the principle of universal causal generation.

It is often said, however, that the thesis of causal determinism is a presupposition of all scientific enquiry. It is significant that this is usually said to be the case by social psychological rather than natural scientists, for this presupposition has long been abandoned by many natural scientists with respect to some physical phenomena (e.g., the subatomic phenomena of quantum mechanics). However, it is doubtful if this is in fact the primary reason why practicing natural scientists are not committed to causal determinism, even though they are concerned with providing causal explana-