CHARLES TAYLOR ON PURPOSE AND CAUSATION

ABSTRACT. Charles Taylor analyzes purposive action as involving both teleological explicability and intentionality on the part of the agent. This paper examines (a) the adequacy of this analysis of purposiveness, and (b) an incompatibility that Taylor finds between purpose, thus analyzed, and causal explicability. My conclusions are that (1) there is at least one aspect of our concept of purpose that Taylor's analysis does not capture, and (2) even if his account were correct, it would not rule out the possibility that all actions are caused.

One recurrent theme in the philosophy of action has been an alleged incompatibility between two sorts of explanation, one purposive and the other causal. This incompatibility—which is said to follow from the very concept of purposive behavior—has frequently been invoked in conjunction with the premise that human actions are indisputably purposive, to establish the impossibility of causally explaining human actions, and so to demonstrate the falsity of determinism. These large claims have perhaps more often been advanced than argued for; but there is at least one place where they have received the sort of extended defense which they require. This is Charles Taylor's book The Explanation of Behaviour; and it is the resourceful discussion of purpose and causation in that book that I propose to examine here.

Taylor argues, specifically and at length, that (1) to perform an action is necessarily to behave purposively, and (2) all behavior which is purposive is necessarily incapable of being deduced from any set of causal laws and statements of antecedent conditions. In the first section of this paper I will try to clarify the first of these propositions, and to elicit the analysis of purpose that underlies it; in the second section, I will examine Taylor's attempt to utilize this analysis of purpose to effect a transition to the second proposition. My conclusions will be, first, that Taylor's analysis of purpose is inadequate, and, second, that even if it were adequate it would not entail the impossibility of causally explaining purposive actions.
On the relation between action and purpose, Taylor writes:

Implicit in our everyday notion of action is that of 'direction' to a goal or end. That is, our ordinary action concepts generally pick out the behaviour they are used to describe not just by its form or overt characteristics or by what it actually brings about, but also by the form or goal-result which it was the agent's purpose or intention to bring about.³

The most natural way to interpret this passage is to read Taylor as saying that the application of any given action-description carries with it the imputation to the agent of the goal that this very action-description be instantiated by him. On this reading, for instance, to describe someone as raising his arm would be to imply that among that person's goals was the goal that he raise his arm. Of course, the agent might have entertained this goal only because he thought that achieving it would help to achieve some other goal (e.g. that food be transported from his plate to his mouth), but this would not harm the thesis that if an agent is correctly described as doing A, then the doing of A is at least one of his goals.

What does harm that thesis, however, is the fact that there is room in our conceptual scheme for actions that are done accidentally, or unwittingly, or uncaringly, or in a large number of other non-purposive ways. For this reason we cannot infer from (say) the assertion that Jones killed Smith, to the conclusion that Jones must have entertained the purpose of killing Smith (or that Jones entertained the purpose that Smith should die, or anything else along these lines). At best we can say that the assertion "Jones killed Smith" raises the question of Jones' purpose in initiating the movement that culminated in Smith's death; but this of course is very far from establishing any connection between doing A and actually having the doing of A among one's purposes.

Taylor is not unaware of these considerations; and some of his other formulations of the relation between action and purpose are more cautious. Thus

The notion of an action normally involves that of behaviour directed towards a goal. For action terms generally cannot be applied at all unless behaviour is directed towards some goal, and specific action terms cannot be applied in an unqualified manner unless behaviour is directed towards the specific goal concerned.⁴

This is certainly an improvement over his first formulation of the relation between action and purpose; but is it really true that 'specific action terms cannot be applied in an unqualified manner unless behaviour is