Mechanism and Action

by JAMES D. WALLACE

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS

In *The Explanation of Behavior*, Charles Taylor asks whether "the concepts we use in our everyday account [of human behavior] can be applied without change of meaning to beings whose behavior could be explained by non-teleological laws" (p. 40). Taylor's answer is no. He concludes that if there were an adequate non-teleological theory of human behavior, then this would show that such concepts as 'action,' 'intention,' and 'desire,' in their present meanings, do not apply to human beings (pp. 40, 49). The discovery of a general non-teleological theory of human behavior would show, according to Taylor, that human behavior is not action. I shall try to show that Taylor's arguments for this contention are unsound, and in doing this I shall argue that there are certain conditions under which a non-teleological theory of human behavior would be compatible with our ordinary teleological explanations of human behavior as action.

Taylor provides a subtle and elaborate analysis of action which I will not attempt to set out here. The crucial part of the analysis for the purposes of this paper is the claim that it is a necessary condition for some behavior's being an action that some intention or purpose of the agent have a role in bringing about the behavior (p. 33). "Thus the laws by which we explain action must be such that the antecedent is the condition of the agent having a certain intention or purpose . . ." (p. 36). Such laws Taylor calls "laws governing action." An example of such a "law" is 'He strikes whoever contradicts him.' In this example, Taylor says, if certain intentions and purposes of the agent are changed — as a result of his changing his policy or becoming more tolerant — the sort of event described as the antecedent in this "law" would not result in the behavior described as the consequent (p. 35). Since laws governing action are laws which state conditions for inten-
tions or purposes, the explanations afforded by these laws are teleological explanations. To explain that an agent did x because such and such was his intention or purpose is to say that the behavior occurred because the agent deemed doing x adequate to his goal (p. 37). Such an explanation is a teleological explanation. Laws governing action are for this reason teleological laws. If the behavior of a certain system S is explained by non-teleological laws, then, Taylor concludes, the behavior of S is not action. The non-teleological laws do not make the system's behavior dependent upon intentions and purposes in the proper way, and consequently the behavior of the system is not action.

A non-teleological theory of human behavior could not preserve the status of behavior as action in the present sense of 'action,' Taylor argues. Even if it were possible for the antecedents of behavior on such a theory also to be the causes of intentions, as long as the theory is genuinely non-teleological, the behavior cannot be action. For the account to be non-teleological, the antecedent-behavior connection must hold independently of the antecedent-intention connection, such that the antecedent would produce the behavior whether or not the intention occurred. But in this event, the intention would not have a role in bringing about the behavior, and therefore the behavior would not be action (pp. 41–42). If we were to stipulate that the antecedents of behavior on such a non-teleological account are intentions, this would preserve the role of "intentions" in bringing about behavior, but, Taylor argues, this would also change the meaning of 'intention.' In the present meaning of 'intention,' intentions are non-contingently linked with the production of behavior. That intending x is, in the absence of interfering factors, followed by doing x is "part of what we mean by 'intending x'" (p. 33). The antecedents of behavior of a non-teleological theory would be contingently related to the behavior which they produce. If we were to stipulate that intentions are these antecedents, then intending x would be contingently connected with doing x. Hence, 'intention' on this stipulated definition would not have its present meaning (p. 42).

The argument of Charles Taylor for the thesis that behavior which is explained by non-teleological laws is not action can be summarized in the following way. (1) A law which accounts for a piece of behavior which is an action must make the occurrence of that behavior dependent in a certain way upon an intention. (2) A law which makes the occurrence of a piece of behavior dependent in this way upon an intention is necessarily a teleological law. (3) Therefore, a law which accounts for a piece of behavior which is an action is necessarily a teleological law. (4) Therefore, if the laws which account for the behavior of S are non-teleological, then these laws do not account for behavior which is action.