

## Collingwood and the *justificandum* of the human sciences

**Abstract:** It is sometimes assumed that justification is factive. A negative implication of this claim is that reasons are not psychological entities such as *believings* or *desirings*. Another, positive, implication of this claim is that there is an important connection between justification and truth. If it is not raining, Paul is not justified in taking the umbrella not only because his *believing* it is raining is not the sort of thing which can play a justificatory role, but also because no action can be justified by something that is not the case. Elaborating on the work of Collingwood and Dray, this paper argues that there is a notion of justification at work in a hermeneutic context that is weaker than the one used in an epistemic context in so far as it severs the connection between justification and truth, but that it is nonetheless sufficiently robust to support the view that explanatory reasons are normative and that the explanation of action is a species of justification rather than causal explanation.

**Key words:** Collingwood, Dray, action explanation, externalism, internalism, psychologism, causalism, anti-causalism, explanatory reasons.

### Introduction

Since the publication of Dancy's *Practical Reality*<sup>1</sup> the view that justification is factive is fast becoming the new orthodoxy in the philosophy of action. An important implication of the claim that justification is factive is that no action may be justified by something that is not the case. If it is not raining the action of taking the umbrella is not justified precisely because no action can be justified by something that is not the case. Whilst we may speak of an agent who acts on the basis of false beliefs as having (bad) reasons for acting, this is only a manner of speaking because reasons justify actions only if they are normative and the notion of good/normative reasons is connected to that of factive justification. The considerations in the light of which agents act, therefore, fall short of being (properly speaking) *reasons* for acting if the facts are not as the agents conceive them to be.

This paper advocates a division of labour between the epistemologist, the moral philosopher and the hermeneutic enquirer. It argues in particular that the claims of the hermeneutic enquirer and those of the epistemologist do not conflict because they have different goals and that once these goals are disambiguated, it becomes clear that it is possible to defend the claim that agents have (normative) reasons for acting even if the considerations in the light of which they act lack factive justification. In section 1 I argue that the externalist claim that justification is factive comes into conflict with a particular view of explanatory reasons articulated by Collingwood and Dray, according to which the explanation of action is a form of justification (not causal explanation) and that explanatory reasons are normative even when they lack factive justification. This is a view concerning the nature of explanatory reasons that dominated the philosophy of history and social

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<sup>1</sup> Dancy, J. 2000. *Practical Reality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

science prior to the publication of Davidson's 1963 paper "Actions, Reasons and Causes".<sup>2</sup> In sections 2 and 3 I argue that the potential conflict between the externalist claim that justification is factive and Collingwood/Dray's claim that explanatory reasons are normative even when they lack factive justification, is unlike the current divide between externalists and internalists because Collingwood and Dray rejected psychologism. In the final section I suggest that externalists could accommodate the view that the answer to the question as to whether an action is or is not justified depends on what exactly one's *justificandum* is, without retracting the claim that justification is factive *in an epistemic context*. But if externalists are unwilling to allow that what it is for action to be justified varies in accordance with the context of justification, then there is an alternative way of accounting for error cases that cannot be accommodated within the parameters of the current debate between internalists and externalists.

### 1. The externalist critique of internalism

Paul takes the umbrella with him on the way out to work. He believes it is raining though in fact it is not. Does Paul have a reason for taking the umbrella? To allow false beliefs to play a role in the explanation of action, internalists<sup>3</sup> locate all beliefs (true or false) under a Lockean veil of perception and make a distinction between what is the case out there (facts) and the internal representation of those facts (beliefs). Rain is something that happens out there; the belief that it is raining, by contrast, is an internal psychological process that could take place in the absence of the external fact. Since it would be odd for facts to do the explaining in veridical cases and for psychological acts to do the explaining in non-veridical ones, it is better to assume that it is always the act of believing and not the fact which the belief represents that supplies the agent with reasons for acting. Locating mental representations behind a Lockean veil of perception allows false beliefs/representations to play an explanatory role. By shifting the explanatory burden from (external) facts to (internal) psychological acts it becomes possible to explain Paul's action as rational rather than random. So, at least, internalists argue.

However, in recent years a growing number of philosophers have defended an externalist position according to which reasons are factive and should not be conflated with mental states such as beliefs and desires.<sup>4</sup> If Paul takes the umbrella on account of the rain, the rain is Paul's reason for taking the umbrella. If Maria waters her plants to prevent them from wilting under the heat, the heat is Maria's reason for watering the plants. It is not Maria's *believing* a heat wave is about to arrive, or Paul's *believing* it is raining, which provide reasons

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<sup>2</sup> Davidson, D. 1963. Actions, Reasons and Causes. *Journal of Philosophy* 60: 685-700.

<sup>3</sup> For a recent defence of internalism see Andrei A. Buckareff, A. and Zhu, J. "The Primacy of the Mental in the Explanation of Human Action" *Disputatio*, Vol. III, No. 26, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> See for example Dancy, J. (2000), *Practical Reality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press and Alvarez, M. (2010), *Kinds of Reasons*, Oxford: Oxford University Press and Littlejohn, C. 2012. *Justification and the Truth-Connection*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

respectively for watering the garden or taking the umbrella. It is the heat wave and the bad weather that provide reasons or grounds for doing certain things, like taking out the hose pipe or fetching the umbrella on leaving the house.

Internalism (so externalists argue) collapses the distinction between believing oneself to have reasons for acting and really having reasons for acting. Paul thinks it is going to rain and so he believes that he has a reason to take the umbrella. But having a reason and believing that one has one is not the same thing. Jill has a reason for taking the red coat from the peg if it is her coat, not if she believes it is her coat. Jill may think she has reasons to take the red coat from the hanger but she does not really have them, if it turns out that it is not hers after all but one that looks just like hers. Believing it is her coat does not make Jill's action of taking somebody else's coat right. The internalist collapses the distinction between believing oneself to have reasons for acting and really having them, and in so doing loses sight of the normative and intersubjective character of reasons. If there really were no distinction between believing oneself to have reasons and having them, then what would be right for one person could be wrong for another. So whilst Jack would have a reason for claiming that Jill ought not to take the red coat because he believes the coat belongs to someone else, Jill would have a reason for taking the coat because she believed it to be hers. But what is right and wrong cannot be relative to Jack and Jill. This is unacceptable since reasons are, by their very nature, inter-personal and subject-independent. Internalism simply makes a mockery of the concept of reason.

One implication of the claim that reasons are factive is that psychological acts such as believing and desiring are *never* reasons for acting. Just as it is not Maria's (truly) believing a heat wave is about to arrive that provides grounds for watering the plants, so it is not Paul's (falsely) believing it will rain that provides grounds or reasons for taking the umbrella. We might of course speak as if beliefs were reasons and say, for example, that Paul's reason for taking the umbrella is that he thought the weather was going to be poor. But this is merely loose talk: that Paul's reason for taking the umbrella was his *believing* something about the weather is thus, at best, a *façon de parler*, and at worst, a philosophical mistake. The externalist's view seems to rest on a commitment to two claims. The first claim, we have already seen, is that reasons for acting are factive, not psychological. What follows from this is that psychological acts such as *believings* never play a justificatory role. An action (such as that of taking the umbrella) is not justified simply because the agent is in a particular state of mind (e.g. believes it is raining). The second claim is that there is a crucial connection between justification and truth. Since reasons are factive no action could be justified by something that is not the case. The action of taking the umbrella is not justified if the propositional content of the agent's belief "it is raining" is false. There is a negative and positive claim here that should be teased apart. The negative claim is a rejection of the view that psychological states (be they true or false) can play a justificatory role. Psychological states simply cannot play this role. Even if Paul truly believed that it is raining, it would not be his *believing* this that justifies taking the umbrella. The positive claim is that what does the justifying, *the justificans*, must be the case. It must be a true proposition. In other words, it is not just that what plays the justificatory role is the propositional content of the belief rather than the *believing* (or the psychological act more generally); it is

rather than the propositional content “that p” must be true if it is to play the required justificatory role. If “that p” (“that it is raining”) is not true, then the action is not justified precisely because justification is factive.

Externalism’s negative claim rules out a form of internalism which identifies beliefs with internal psychological states of the agent and takes beliefs to be psychological entities with a given propositional content. Here “belief” stands for the act of *believing* plus its propositional content. This form of internalism is arguably exemplified by Davidson’s claim that explanatory reasons are rationalizing causes of the action they explain. The rationalizing part is done by the belief *qua* propositional content. The causing part is done by the belief *qua* psychological act. Rationalizing causes differ from pure rationalizations because they individuate the actual thought processes which are causally responsible for the action.<sup>5</sup> Externalism’s positive claim, however, comes into conflict with a different account of explanatory reasons according to which the reasons which explain actions are pure rationalizations and, as such, a form of justification. On this account the *explanans* in action explanation is not a proposition which is either true or which is falsely assumed to be true by the agent, but a presupposition. The presupposition, unlike the assumption, rationalizes the action, *not* in so far as it is true or believed (rightly or wrongly) to be true, but in so far as it is presupposed as a premise in the practical argument that explains the action. Thus, for example, the presupposition “there is beer in the fridge” justifies the action of looking for beer in the fridge, even if what the agent assumes (that there is beer in the fridge) is false. The externalist account of reasons conflicts with Davidson’s model because it denies that psychological acts play any role whatsoever in the justification of action. It conflicts with the second account of action explanation because the latter claims that it is presuppositions that play the role of the *explanans* in the explanation of actions, and that presuppositions (unlike propositions) have no truth-value since they explain an action, not in so far as they are believed or assumed to be true or false, but in so far as they rationally entail the action which they explain. It is this relation of rational entailment between the presupposition and the action which it explains that makes the explanation a form of justification.

The distinction between propositions and presuppositions was made by Collingwood in *An Essay on Metaphysics*<sup>6</sup> where he claimed that statements can fulfil two roles. They can be answers to questions, in which case they are propositions, or give rise to questions, in which case they are presuppositions. What distinguishes a presupposition from a proposition is the role it plays in what he calls “the logic of question and answer”. Much as a footballer could play in attack or defence, so a statement could be either a presupposition or a proposition, depending on its role in the asking and answering of questions. For example, “there is salt on

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<sup>5</sup> To distinguish between genuine explanations of action from mere rationalizations Davidson identified explanatory reasons with rationalizing causes of the action. Davidson’s identification of explanatory reason with the rationalizing causes of the action is sometime regarded to be as the main motivation underpinning internalism. See Alvarez (2010), p. 50.

<sup>6</sup> R.G. Collingwood 1940 [1998]. Collingwood also distinguished between relative and absolute presuppositions. The latter are not relevant to this paper because (for Collingwood) they are the object of metaphysical analysis. see author 2011.

the table” could be an answer to the question “Is there any salt?” or it could be presupposed by the question “Could you pass the salt?” Presuppositions, Collingwood argued, differ from propositions because the notion of truth and falsity does not apply to them. This is because they play their role, not in so far as they are believed to be true, or asserted in the manner of a proposition, but in so far as they are presupposed. Thus for example, when the adults ask “how much money did the tooth fairy leave you under the pillow?” they do not believe the proposition “there is a tooth fairy” to be true; they presuppose it.

The view that action is explained by invoking presuppositions gives rise to an account of explanatory reasons which accepts the externalist claim that psychological acts are the wrong sort of *justificans*, but disagrees with the externalist on what counts as the proper *justificans* in a hermeneutic context. For the externalist an action is justified either by the facts, or by a true proposition concerning the facts. On the account defended here action is justified neither by the facts, nor by true propositions, but by presuppositions. And the latter, as we have seen, do their justificatory role in so far as they are presupposed, not in so far as they are believed to be true or propounded as true propositions.

The account of explanatory reasons that clashes with externalism’s positive claim is not new. It was a dominant position in the 1960s prior to the publication of Davidson’s 1963 essay “Actions, Reasons and Causes”, where the distinction between mere rationalizations and rationalizing causes of action was introduced.<sup>7</sup> This (non-Davidsonian) account of action explanation was defended by W.H. Dray who brought Collingwood’s work to bear upon the debate for and against methodological unity in the sciences<sup>8</sup> and was endorsed by philosophers who defended the irreducibility of action explanation to event explanation in the philosophy of history and social science.<sup>9</sup> On this model of action explanation, to explain an action is to establish an internal conceptual connection between the premises of a practical argument (the *explanans*) and its conclusion (the *explanandum*). The explanation of action is thus a form of justification in the sense that the action is rendered intelligible by showing that it is based on the rational conclusion that follows from certain presuppositions or premises. This (pre-Davidsonian) form of non-reductivism argued that action explanation does require taking the agents’ point of view into account and, to this extent (but to this extent only), it was sensitive to the considerations that motivate contemporary internalism. Yet it also explicitly denied that taking an agent’s point of view into consideration is tantamount to internalizing reasons or identifying them with mental states; in fact it explicitly denied that reasons may be identified with acts of thinking or internal monologues. In the following I want to bring into focus this pre-Davidsonian account of explanatory reasons according to which the explanation of action is a form of pure rationalization and, as such, a kind of justification, not a form of causal explanation. I argue that if the differences between the account of reasons for action provided by present-day externalists and that provided by Collingwood and Dray cannot be resolved

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<sup>7</sup> Davidson, D., (1963) “Actions, Reasons and Causes”, *Journal of Philosophy* 60, pp. 685-700.

<sup>8</sup> See Dray 1957, 1958, 1963 and 1980.

<sup>9</sup> See for example von Wright 1971.

amicably by disambiguating the notion of justification at work in epistemic and hermeneutic contexts, then there is a distinctive way of accounting for error cases that rejects internalist and externalist premises alike.

## 2. Not internalist

Now there is a view of action explanation which, when properly understood, appears to be neither externalist nor internalist in so far as it holds that the explanation of action is rational and that rational explanation is a species of justification. This is the view of action explanation that was developed by Collingwood (1946) and Dray (1957) in the context of the philosophy of history and social science in an attempt to defend the autonomy of humanistic explanations. Dray argued that to make sense of an action, the interpreter must understand it as the conclusion of a practical argument where beliefs and desires supply the epistemic and motivational premises of the reconstructed argument. Yet the beliefs and desires cited in the explanation of action are not mental states (*believings* or *desirings*) because the practical argument that is invoked to make sense of the action does not describe an actual psychological process that the agent went through. As Dray put it: "... what makes an action understandable rationally, is not necessarily a set of propositions which the agent recited to himself. Our understanding of his action may arise out of our perception of a rational connection between an action and the motives and beliefs we ascribe to the agent without any such psychological implications. What is claimed rather is that the understanding of what he did is achieved by ordering such ingredients, once made explicit, in the form of a practical calculation".<sup>10</sup> On this model of action explanation the agent need not have silently recited any internal monologue in order to be ascribed reasons for acting on the basis of certain presuppositions. There is a clear difference between the psychological process and the practical argument that the interpreter ascribes to the agent in order to make sense of the action. The psychological process, if there ever was one, could be muddled, but the practical argument which the rational explanation cites cannot be, for, as Dray says, "one cannot rethink a practical argument one knows to be invalid."<sup>11</sup>

Like present-day internalism, this account of explanatory reasons seeks to take into consideration the epistemic situation of the agent. Yet although this account of action explanation is sensitive to some of the considerations which motivate present-day internalists, it differs from it in one important respect. On this model, to make an allowance for the epistemic situatedness of the agent in an explanatory context has nothing whatsoever to do with identifying reasons with internal states which may then be seen to function as the causes or causal conditions of the action. It simply requires constructing a practical argument which proceeds from presuppositions that may differ from those of the interpreter. To say that Paul took the umbrella because he believed it was raining is not to say that the belief it was raining is an internal mental

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<sup>10</sup> Dray, W.H. "The Historical Explanation of Actions Reconsidered" in S. Hook's (ed) *Philosophy and History*, New York: New York University Press, 1963, p. 105-135, p. 111.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, p. 113.

state of Paul which is either a cause or a causal condition of his action. It is to say rather that the presupposition "it is raining" (together with some motivational premise about avoiding dampness) justifies the action of taking the umbrella. On this model of action explanation since the practical syllogism which is invoked to explain the action is not an actual psychological process, beliefs and desires are not the (Humean) causes of the actions which they explain. For they stand to the action which they explain as logical ground stands to its logical consequent, not as a cause to its effect. What motivates this account of explanatory reasons is not, as Alvarez puts it, "a commitment to the doctrine, made popular by Davidson among others, that the reasons for which we act are the causes or, at any rate, the causal conditions of our actions" (Alvarez, 50). And if externalists such as Alvarez are correct in claiming that present-day internalism is motivated by this Davidsonian picture, rejecting the Davidsonian picture cannot be a reason for rejecting the account of explanatory reasons defended by Collingwood and Dray. In fact the non-reductivism defended in the context of the philosophy of history and social sciences prior to Davidson explicitly denied that reasons may be the causes of the action which they explain. They rejected the idea of a rationalizing cause as an oxymoron.<sup>12</sup>

### 3. Not externalist

If the above is right, then this account of explanatory reasons is not internalist. The ascription of a reason to the agent requires neither that the agent recited an internal monologue, nor that the presupposition which rationalizes the action should be identified with a mental state which can fulfil the role of a Humean cause.

Is it, however, covertly externalist? There are certainly points of contact between this account of action explanation and present-day externalism. Like externalism, this view rejects the identification of reasons with internal mental states of the agent. Yet there is also a crucial difference between this model of action explanation and present day externalism about reasons. On this model of explanation, it is a presupposition (not the believing of it) that justifies the action and the presupposition does its justificatory work not in so far as it is assumed or believed to be true by the interpreter, but in so far as it is presupposed to have governed the action for which explanation is sought. In a hermeneutic context reasons, are not "true propositions", but rather presuppositions with a content suitable to rationally account for the action. The notion of justification is thus disconnected from the notion of truth. Collingwood and Dray denied explicitly that truth is a norm which governs the explanation of action. The task of the interpreter, for Collingwood, is to find out which presuppositions are logically efficacious, *not whether they track the truth*. Although this is a general point, its

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<sup>12</sup> For the "vintage" defence of this claim see Dray, W. H., *Laws and Explanation in History*, London: Oxford University Press, 1957; Von Wright, G. H., *Explanation and Understanding*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971, amongst others. For a contemporary defence of this claim see Author (2012); Tanney, J., "Why Reasons May Not Be Causes", *Mind & Language*, vol. 10, pp. 103-126, 1995; Tanney, J. (2009), "Reasons as Non-Causal Context-Placing Explanations" in Sandis, C. (ed) *New Essays on the Explanation of Action*, Basingstoke and New York, Palgrave MacMillan, pp. 94-111 and Tanney (2013) "Prologomena to a Cartographical Investigation of Cause and Reason" in D'Oro G. and Sandis C. (eds.) *Reasons and Causes: Causalism and Anti-Causalism in the Philosophy of Action*", Palgrave, pp. 124-140.

significance becomes particularly clear when one considers agents who do not share the epistemic context of the person trying to interpret them. Historians who wish to understand the actions of agents who lived in a distant past should, Collingwood claims, refrain from being epistemically judgemental about the presuppositions which inform their actions. For such epistemic moralizing can only impede genuine understanding. As he puts it:

if the reason why it is hard for a man to cross the mountains is because he is frightened of the devils in them, it is folly for the historian, preaching at him across a gulf of centuries, to say "this is sheer superstition. There are no devils at all. Face facts, and realize that there are no dangers in the mountains except rocks and water and snow, wolves perhaps, and bad men perhaps, but no devils". The historian says that these are the facts because that is the way in which he has been taught to think. But the devil-fearer says that the presence of devils is a fact, because that is the way in which he has been taught to think. The historian thinks it a wrong way; but wrong ways of thinking are just as much historical facts as right ones, and, no less than they, determine the situation (always a thought situation) in which the man who shares them is placed. The hardness of the fact consists in the man's inability to think of his situation otherwise. The compulsion which the devil haunted mountains exercise on the man who would cross them consists in the fact that he cannot help believing in the devils. Sheer superstition, no doubt: but this superstition is a fact, and the crucial fact in the situation we are considering.<sup>13</sup>

Some important points need emphasising here. First, Collingwood's claim that the *explanans* in historical explanations are not facts but beliefs, is motivated *not* by the endorsement of internalism or psychologism, but by the rejection of the claim that truth is a norm which governs the interpretation of action. What is being asserted here is not that it is the *believing* which does the justifying but rather that *in a hermeneutic context* the truth or falsity of the belief is irrelevant to the task at hand, which is that of justifying the actions from the perspective of the cultural anthropologist, rather than that of the epistemologist or moral philosopher. The actions of the devil fearer can be explained normatively as the rational thing to do only if the interpreter is willing to suspend judgement as to the truth or falsity of the epistemic premise "there exist devils", thereby acknowledging its role as presuppositions rather than a proposition. Second, the point being made here is not that historically to understand behaviour based on epistemic (or moral) presuppositions which differ from those of the historian's own is to justify a false belief (or to condone immoral action) but that historical understanding is concerned with a notion of justification that is very different from that of the epistemologist (or the moral philosopher). Thirdly, however different the notion of justification at work in this hermeneutic context is, it does not obliterate the distinction between being justified and believing oneself to be justified because (for the historian/cultural anthropologist) the action is justified by the presupposition "there are devils", not by the agent's believing that there are devils.

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<sup>13</sup> Collingwood, R.G. (1946), p. 317.



If the notions of justification at work in the epistemic, moral and hermeneutic context are disambiguated, it is clear that the historian or the cultural anthropologist who makes sense of the ancient practice of human sacrifice as an attempt to appease the gods believes neither that the proposition “sacrificing human beings appeases the gods” is true, nor does she condone the practice of sacrificing human beings to the gods morally. The concept of justification used in this hermeneutic context must be fit for purpose. Failure to distinguish the notion of justification at work in a hermeneutic context from the epistemic and moral notions would lead to the ludicrous conclusion that the cultural anthropologist who makes sense of the ancient practice of human sacrifice as an attempt to appease the gods endorses this practice epistemically and condones it morally, thus sanctioning its very existence. To avoid this conclusion, we need to be very careful to distinguish the concerns of the hermeneutic enquirer (or we might say, a philosopher of understanding) from those the moral philosopher and the epistemologist. If one is seeking for a justification of the claim that the Earth is flat, then that claim will not be justified unless the Earth is flat and the required justification will be factive. But if one is seeking to rationalize the actions of agents who believe the Earth is flat, then one’s concern in this context is not the truth value of the proposition that Earth is flat but the conduct which is underwritten by that presupposition. What it means for something to be “the right thing to do” or to be justified depends on what the context of justification is. It is clear that what is of concern to the cultural anthropologist are the presuppositions which govern actions not the moral or truth-value that would attach to such presuppositions if they were to be asserted as propositions. The latter are matters of concern for the epistemologist and moral philosopher respectively.

#### **4. Is there really a neglected alternative?**

Now it could be argued that the difference between the leaner notion of justification defended by Collingwood/Dray in a hermeneutic context and the more robust notion of justification defended by present-day externalists could be accounted for by the fact that they are asking different questions, and so looking for different answers. Collingwood and Dray were interested primarily in explicating the logical structure of action explanation in the context of a debate for and against methodological unity in the sciences. Their primary concern was to defend the autonomy of humanistic explanations from the claim that they are not different in kind from explanations in the natural sciences and they did so by arguing that humanistic explanations are species of justification. Their goal was to distinguish *Verstehen* from *Erklären* and to defend the view that the human sciences have, *qua* hermeneutic sciences, an autonomous domain of enquiry. Present-day externalists, by contrast, seem to be guided by an epistemic concern with the nature of our beliefs, and whether they are justified rather than with a hermeneutic goal. If this is the case, then there is no tension between the account of action explanation defended by pre-Davidsonian non-reductivists such as Collingwood and Dray and present-day externalists. The tension would be merely apparent and could be deflated by pointing out that the term “justification” functions differently in different contexts depending on the kind of question we want to have answered. The moral philosopher is interested in whether certain goals are right or wrong and thus when she asks “was the ancient tribe justified in engaging in the practice of human sacrifice?” she will say that

there is no justification for such practice because killing humans is not a morally acceptable goal. The epistemologist is interested in whether our beliefs are true or false and so when asking “Was the ancient tribe justified in engaging in the practice of human sacrifice?” she will say that there is no justification for this practice because sacrificing humans does not, contrary to what members of the tribe believe, appease the gods. The hermeneutic enquirer is interested in rendering the actions of agents who do not share the same system of beliefs intelligible and she says that since the tribe’s behaviour is underwritten by different presuppositions the members of the tribe had normative reasons for acting in that way, even if such justification is neither of a moral nor of an epistemic nature. The reasons invoked in this hermeneutic context do not justify the proposition “human sacrifice appeases the gods”; they justify the action *only* as something that is entailed by the presupposition that “human sacrifice appeases the gods”. To assume that to extend the notion of justification to the hermeneutic context is unwittingly to endorse false propositions or to sanction immoral conduct is to fail to note the different roles that the statement “sacrificing humans appeases the gods” can play either as a presupposition or as a proposition. Once it is noted that the *justificans* in a hermeneutic context is a presupposition, not a proposition, and the notion of justification at work in the epistemic, moral and hermeneutic context is disambiguated, there is no quarrel, just a division of labour between the moral philosopher, the epistemologist and the hermeneutic enquirer. Or at least so one might argue.

Yet however pertinent it may be to remember that present-day externalism and the anti-causalism defended by Collingwood and Dray were developed in answer to different philosophical concerns, it may not suffice to resolve the tension between them if externalists insist on claiming that there is only one sense of “justification”, factive justification.

Here is Alvarez:

“... when I act on the basis of a false belief... my action is not mechanical, irrational or arbitrary, and it can be explained by a ‘rationalization’: an explanation that, to paraphrase Davidson, shows what I thought there was to be said for that action.”<sup>14</sup>

“False motivating beliefs cannot justify an action, although the fact that someone had a false belief can make it intelligible that she acted as she did” (155)

If the claim that an action can be rendered intelligible by a rationalization concedes that there is a weaker form of justification that is at work in a hermeneutic context, then this would suggest that there is no conflict. But we should note that in order for there to be no conflict here the externalist would have to concede that an action that is intelligible is rational (in the sense of being rationally entailed by a presupposition), and that an action that is rational in this sense is also justified (in some hermeneutic sense). In other words, the externalist

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<sup>14</sup> Alvarez (2010), p. 135.

would have to concede that there is a sense in which not only the agent, but the action itself is justified even if merely in a hermeneutic context. And this Alvarez does not seem to concede.

Here is Dancy:

For one's having reasonably believed that p is often offered as a justification of one's action in cases where it turns out that it was not the case that p. And it may indeed succeed in justifying one's having acted as one did, that is, in defending one against certain charges, without this meaning that it is able to play the role of a normative reason.<sup>15</sup>

This reply is ambiguous because on the one hand it seems to allow that there is a weaker sense of justification. On the other hand it seems to deny that this weaker sense of justification is normative (and one might wonder what to make of a notion of justification that is not normative). The reply could be construed in two ways. It could be taken as saying:

1. *The importance of practical reasoning in understanding action and the irrelevancy of the truth of the premises underlying the action simply has no tendency to show that the truth of those premises is irrelevant when assessing whether the action is morally commendable or epistemically well informed.*

Or it could be taken as saying:

2. *Actions carried out on false epistemic premises have no justification whatsoever because justification proper is normative.*

In the first case there is no tension between the externalist position and the view that the explanation of action is a form of justification. For in this case the externalist is saying that the notion of justification in an epistemic context is different from the notion of justification in a hermeneutic context. Cultural anthropologists simply mean something different when they enquire whether something was "the *right* thing to do". Justification can be moral, epistemic or hermeneutic and the notion of justification invoked will depend on the context in which we are asked to produce reasons. In the second case, on the other hand, there is clearly a disagreement. This second way of construing the reply implies that in the hermeneutic context we explain what somebody does by appealing to certain propositions which the agent believes to be true, and then we excuse the agent by pointing out that what she believed was false. "Justify" in this context, means to exculpate. As we have seen, this is not how explanation works for Collingwood and Dray. They did not say that in error cases explanations justify the agents in the sense of exculpating or excusing them. Collingwood and Dray were not disjunctivists. They did not claim that in the case of true belief the explanation of action is a form of genuine/normative justification whilst in error cases it is a form of exculpation. Their claim was that action explanation is a form of

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<sup>15</sup> Dancy, J. (2000). *Practical Reality*, Kindle edition, location 1541.

(normative) justification in all cases because it uncovers the relation between an action and the presupposition that rationalizes it. And since the presupposition that rationalizes it is not a proposition it does not do its justificatory work in so far as it false, nor does it do it in so far as it is true, but only in so far as it is presupposed. For this reason whether what the agent believes is true or false does not change the *form* of the explanation: in historical explanation the interpreter explains an action by uncovering the presuppositions which rationally entail it and, in this hermeneutic context, such uncovering counts as a justification both in the case in which what agent believes is true, and in the case in which what the agent believes is false precisely because what does the explaining is not a proposition such as “there are devils in the mountains” but that very statement in a different role *qua* presupposition.

In a less compromising mood Littlejohn (2012) categorically denies that false propositions can ever justify actions. He argues that the externalist should deal with error cases by disconnecting the notion of justification from that of explanation. If Leo runs down the hall because he believes there is a killer running after him (when there is in fact no such killer), Leo simply has no reasons and thus no justification for so acting:

“I do not deny that we can explain Leo’s actions. What I deny is that Leo acted for a reason and that this reason explains Leo’s actions (Littlejohn 2012: 154).

And:

“We regard Leo’s actions as reasonable because we accept a causal explanation of his behaviour according to which Leo’s behaviour was controlled by the mechanisms responsible for responding to reasons and because we think he was not unreasonable in taking himself to have the reasons that would speak in favour of running” (Littlejohn 2012: 155).

Littlejohn here seems to explicitly rule out that the explanations of actions given in error cases could be forms of justification and this claim directly conflicts with the view held by Collingwood/Dray according to which the reasons which explain an action ipso facto justify it, in the relevant sense of “justify” at work in a hermeneutic context.

Externalists tend to claim that in error cases the action of say, looking for beer in the fridge, is not justified (either because there is no beer in the fridge or because the proposition “there is beer in the fridge” is false) and yet it is intelligible because the agent’s inference (from the false proposition “there is beer in the fridge”) is rational. The view defended by Collingwood and Dray, by contrast, claims that in an explanatory context error cases should be treated in exactly the same way as normal cases. An action is justified by the presupposition which explains it, and since the notion of truth and falsity does not apply to presuppositions, whether or not an action is justified does not depend on the facts, or whether the agent truly or falsely believes them. This is not the same as saying that in error cases false propositions justify action in the sense of exculpating them as some externalists suggest. It is rather to say that since in an explanatory context it is presuppositions and not propositions which supply the *explanans*, what matters is not whether what the agent

believes is true or false, but whether the presupposition which is invoked to justify the action rationally entails the action it seeks to explain. The interpreter is like the adult who acts surprised when so many presents have appeared under the tree on Christmas morning or when the tooth fairy has been unusually generous: adults do not believe in Santa or the tooth fairy, but they presuppose their existence for the sake of their children. Likewise historians do not believe that devils exist or that sacrificing humans appeases the gods; they do not propound the propositions “there are devils” or “sacrificing humans appeases the gods”; they presuppose them.

While externalists appear to reserve the term justification for factive justification, it is unclear that the target of their attacks is the position that is defended by Collingwood and Dray, since as we have seen, what Collingwood and Dray claimed, is neither that the *explanans* in an action explanation is a psychological state, such as a believing, nor that in error cases actions are justified by false propositions. They claimed rather that actions are justified by presuppositions, which have no truth value and that it is therefore inappropriate, in a hermeneutic context, to ask whether the agent was justified in holding certain beliefs. So either externalists have to concede that once the relevant distinctions (between the context in which the epistemologist and the hermeneutic enquirer/interpreter are asked to produce reasons for acting) are made, they have no quarrel with Collingwood and Dray’s claim that the explanation of action is a form of justification, or if they still believe that, even once all the relevant distinctions are made, their differences cannot be resolved amicably because they are not unwittingly talking past each other, and there is still a substantive issue at stake, then there is a way of accounting for error cases that cannot easily be accommodated within the parameters of the internal/external distinction as they are typically drawn in the contemporary debate.

The debate concerning reasons for action has moved very far from the hermeneutic context in which it was conducted in the 1960s, when Dray appropriated Collingwood’s philosophy of history to articulate an argument for the autonomy of hermeneutic explanations against the claim for methodological unity in the sciences. Dray sought to isolate a notion of explanatory reasons that is normative, not descriptive, because he believed that action is understood in the hermeneutic sense of “understand” when the explanation relieves us of our puzzlement by ascribing the agent a calculation that enables the interpreter to “get” its point. But in order to relieve us of our puzzlement the explanation must have a certain *normative* force. The interpreter “gets” the point of the action when she sees it as the thing which *ought* to be done if one suspends disbelief and *presupposes* (for argument’s sake only), what the agent *believed to be true*.

The contemporary debate concerning reasons for action has arguably grown out of very different concerns from those which motivated Collingwood and Dray’s defence of the claim that action explanation is a species of justification. The Gettier cases have questioned the connection between justification and knowledge, thereby allowing for the possibility that there could be beliefs which are justified and yet false or, in other words, that there could be justification without knowledge. The efforts of present-day externalists have thus been focussed on reinstating the connection between justification and truth which was put into question by the Gettier cases. Thus, bearing in mind how the debate concerning reasons for action has evolved, and the

different concerns to which present-day externalists are speaking, may help us to acquire a better understanding of Collingwood and Dray's strategy for dealing with error cases. For this strategy was *not* motivated by an attempt to psychologise/internalize the explanation of action in order to facilitate its naturalization, but by an attempt to defend a normative notion of explanatory reasons against the claim that all explanation is causal and thus, at bottom, descriptive in nature.

To conclude: if the claim that presuppositions (not *believings*) can play a *justificatory* role in a *hermeneutic context* can be reconciled with the externalist's claim that justification is factive by disambiguating the contexts of hermeneutic and epistemic *justification*, then there is no genuine tension between Dray's claim that action explanation is a species of justification and the account of present-day externalists concerning what can legitimately count as reasons for acting. Externalists may use the considerations provided here as further ammunition against internalists to show that there is no need to identify reasons with psychological entities in order to render actions intelligible in error cases. But if externalists deny categorically not only that false *believings*, but also that presuppositions can play any justificatory role in the explanation of action, then the account of reasons for acting offered by Collingwood and Dray in a hermeneutic context does offer an alternative way of thinking about error cases which rejects externalist and internalist premises alike. It rejects externalist premise because it argues that, in a hermeneutic context, a practical argument has explanatory power if it shows that the action is entailed (and thereby justified) by the presuppositions which are uncovered in the process of interpretation. The account of explanatory reasons offered by Collingwood/Dray differs from the internalist position because it does not define explanatory success in terms of representational correctness. On Collingwood's and Dray's account reasons explain actions not in so far as they correspond to something that went on in the agent's head, but in so far as they establish rational connections between actions and presuppositions. Demonstrating that defining explanatory reasons in terms of presuppositions would enable Collingwood and Dray to meet the Davidsonian challenge of how to discriminate between different rational explanations/justifications would take another paper. But I do believe they can. And so, at the risk of sounding like Gylderoy Lockhart from the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, I am going to have to say "for full details please see my published works"<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> I have defended the anti-Davidsonian view that it is possible to distinguish between the *reasons why* an agent acts from more generic *reasons for* acting without identifying explanatory reasons with the causes of the action in Author 2012.

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