Introduction

What image of human nature is suitable for the study of public administration? Such an image or model constitutes the very basis of research. Simultaneously it signifies what is human and how humans should be, constituting a basis for both description and moral judgment. If (the study of) public administration is aimed at achieving the ‘Good Society’, it seems we have to clarify what is good in the face of human nature to start with. However, is this still a relevant issue in a post-positivistic era? It seems perhaps too much ‘foundationalists’ language to talk about ‘human nature’ as something to be established universally. Yet, even if humans are but ‘a footprint on the beach’ of history as Foucault once stated, we do study footprints in the study of public administration and we may wonder how to study them. Perhaps it is not so much an issue of identifying the or even a human nature, but rather a point of view on what kind of interpretations and explanations are available to us.

The problem addressed in this paper is certainly not new, not to philosophy, nor to the study of public administration. It has, however, been treated fairly superficially in the study of public administration: the image of human nature in relation to the explanation and interpretation of human behaviour and action. When the issue pops up, it is in the context of a critique on main stream public administration. Bogason thus argues a sharp division among researchers, whereby post-modern researchers are ‘anti-foundationalist’ with regard to the interaction between analyst and object of analysis. Social reality is understood as fundamentally a construct: there is no external reality to be represented by social science; knowledge is uncertain, facts may be fabricated. Objectivity is constructed by comparing and reconstructing narratives and linking them to the community: “Rules for intellectual honesty apply: taking criticism seriously, using established standards of evidence and reason, and preferring positive theories that open new avenues of exploration. Objectivity, then, is a product of local reasoning.” (Bogason, 2002: 55). A question that remains is whether this also implies we can do without ‘rules of reason’ such as the demands of logic. The answer probably is yes and no, we do construct rules of the discourse, but they are as much constitutive for the discourse, as they are a product
of the discourse. One of the most fundamental and powerful concepts concerns ‘explanation.’ Modernist and post-modernist scholars try to explain, whether quantitatively or by means of for instance narratives. But what is an explanation? Fox and Miller, for instance, firmly reject a commitment to cause-and-effect explanations inherent in ‘the deterministic frame’ (1996: 96). The latter, they emphasize, brings with it claims on objectivity and value free inquiry. They point at the consequences in for instance the analysis of bureaucracy in terms of causal chains with predetermined effects (Fox & Miller, 1996: 98). As many will agree, this is not how public organizations work. We can even point at Max Weber, who specifically developed ideal typical (and not causal) analysis to focus on meanings as the central topic for social research.

Farmer also touches upon this topic. His main concern is that the positivistic approach blocks out important kinds of knowledge, in particular symbolic reality. In this context he also points at the distinction between behaviour and action: “…between knowing as identifying reasons and knowing as identifying causality” (Farmer, 1995: 84). Behaviour then refers to observable bodily movements, and action to intended, meaningful behaviour. Their relation is tricky and he points at the extensive literature on reasons and causes making a puzzling remark: “For example, sometimes reasons can be causes; sometimes causes can be reasons” (Farmer, 1995: 84).

The rejection of a deterministic framework does, however, not automatically imply that we do have an alternative methodology. Even in the discourse we can expect debates to focus on causal claims. Most arguments, still deal with identifying cause and effect, the alternative being ‘reasons’. Are causes and reasons indeed different? If so, do they warrant different kinds of explanation or argument as well? Box points at many different models of action being put forward by critical theorists in public administration (2004: 105/6). This also leaves open what kind of arguments, explanations and interpretations are regarded acceptable, i.e. valid. A central concept figuring in critical discourse theory is ‘choices’ and their legitimacy. If choices become our core concern, what are they? How do they relate to human action? Obviously both Fox and Miller, Farmer, and Box reject a deterministic image of human nature, this paper is concerned with some more arguments to support this stance, as well as, to figure out whether this amounts to a different kind of logic of research and, subsequent, explanation.

We are thus not concerned primarily with the issue whether value judgement can figure in scientific reasoning (which I content they can), or on the validity of a fact-value distinction. We are primarily concerned with how to explain (or understand) human action.

Two examples

The influence of the image of human nature on our explanations can be illustrated by two examples: Montesquieu and the economic man model: Montesquieu formulated in the

---

1 Fox and Miller are perhaps too quick (on page 97) in following the custom to attribute to Weber causal and even behaviouralist connotations. Peter Winch (1988) is critical of Weber’s attempt to still try and bridge causal explanations and interpretation of social reality.

2 Which is primarily analytic in my reckoning, as I discussed previously in Rutgers 2005.
18th century the theory of the separation of powers. Its influence on our ideas on public administration is tremendous. Montesquieu, in line with most contemporaries, asserted that the human nature is dependent on climate; hence, climate should determine the preferred kind of administration (Montesquieu, 1748/1994: livre XIV). Thus, the separation of powers fits a moderate climate (i.e. England). This, in Montesquieu's considerations, important context of administration has been entirely lost as relevant in present-day debates. If we stick to this idea on human nature, the expected climate changes will force us to change our textbook precepts on good administration.

Perhaps the best known, most influential as well as debated image of human nature is captured in terms of the ‘economic man model.’ It portrays humankind as a completely rational and utility-maximizing agent. Although there is (almost) consensus that decision-making does not work this way on the individual level. The philosophical and empirical untenability of this ‘model of man’ does not imply that it is regarded useless for economic analysis on the macro level. Famously Herbert Simon made corrections on the economic man model. He points at the limitations of human rationality, such as not being able to oversee all the criteria or alternatives, resulting in satisficing behavior. Since many additional corrections have been added, like organizational and political limitations and the human inclination to conformation and compromise. As a consequence we have long lost the idea that even the most satisfactory solution is optimal in relation to a problem, but rather that it is to be interpreted in terms of the interactions between humans.

There are many more different images of human nature around in the study of public administration. Few, however, are as elaborately developed as the economic and administrative man model and so clearly have consequences for both the ‘is and ought’ of humanity, as well as carries with it epistemological ideas on how we can know all this. The latter aspect is what this paper focuses on in particular: the consequences of our image of human nature for our ability to know and understand human behavior. At the heart of the argument is the tension between a passive and active image of humankind, in other words, between the explanation of human behavior in causal terms – the so called causal explaining – and interpretation in terms of reasons and responsibilities. Although support for traditional positivistic approaches to the study of public administration may have dwindled, the adherence to the idea that an explanation is and should provide us with causal mechanisms is still very much dominant, despite the recognition that we are dealing with cultural, i.e. contextual explanations. That this is not always immediately obvious is probably the result of the automatic, unnoticed replacement of ‘causes’ by ‘reasons’ in the explanation of human behavior. Yet, there are fundamental differences between the two. To illustrate this, nobody holds a volcano or a virus responsible for the effects they cause; it is merely a case of subsequent causes and not of active choice. Should not all explanation be similar in structure? Is it just a matter if a passive human whose behavior is caused by a mixture of physical and social processes? This is not an unimportant matter for the study of public administration, for it would seem to rob us of

---

3 Although climate changes may force us to take is very serious indeed for a very different reason.
4 There is an enduring and thorough debate about the question if this image of economic man, when it is not sufficient on the individual level, is indeed usable on an abstract, aggregated level; cf. Cook & Levi, 1990).
5 As a result of these corrections the modern administrative man model has become a common phrase (Robbins, 1980, p. 105)
the possibility to attribute responsibility. In a sense, it would rob human behavior of what is at the heart of anti-fundamentalism. Nevertheless, it deserves attention as causes are very much part of very day vocabulary and it is very difficult to avoid thinking and talking in terms of causes.

**Causes and causation**

An overwhelming amount of literature on the nature of causes and causation. This is not surprising as it is traditionally a key concept for our understanding of reality in general and scientific explanation in particular. For our present purposes it suffices to point out some of the characteristics of the debate, before turning to a more specific argument to be made here.

What is causality? Taylor may provide us with a definition: “A cause has traditionally been thought of as that which produces something and in terms of which that which is produced, its effect, can be explained.” (Taylor, 1972: 56) Causality is, however, a very problematic concept. Although Aristotle already discussed different kinds of causes, it is in the eighteenth century that we find the origins of modern discourse in Hume famous definition of causality. Hume pointed out that all our judgments on factual relations are of a causal nature. Based on experience “we expect similar powers and forces, and we look for a like effect’ (Hume, 2000: 32). His famous definition reads: “…we may define a cause to be an object, followed by another, and where all the objects, similar to the first, are followed by objects similar to the second. Or in other words, where, if the first object had not been, the second never had existed.” (Hume, 2000: 60) Of the true nature of this connection (or power) between cause and effect we have no idea. Hume thus avoids ontological claims; causality is (just) an expectation we develop due to experience.

This is certainly not all, as causality implies a more universal idea: “To assert that causation is universal is to assert that no change ever occurs without some cause – in short, that every event has a cause” (Taylor, 1972: 57). This comes close to Heidegger claims that the most fundamental statement is the ‘statement of foundation’ (‘Der Satz vom Grund’), which too easily may be read as ‘everything has a cause’. One way or another most authors regard causality as integral to scientific explanation, and indispensable in every day life (Taylor, 1972: 57).

---

6 According to Taylor we ultimately have to accept, as Hume stated, that the nature of causation as some kind of power eludes us (Taylor, 1975: 42), and that definitions fail as “...no other concepts can be used to analyse it.” (Taylor, 1975: 43). Also Lewis points at the difficulty to define causality and aims therefore for a ‘counterfactual analysis of causation’ (Lewis, 1973: 557)

7 “We may, therefore, form another definition of cause; and call it, an object followed by another, and whose appearance always conveys the thought to that other.” (Hume, 2000: 60)

8 Nihil est sine ratione, i.e. Nothing is without grounds. This fundamental insight, Heidegger notes, is usually known only as Nihil fit sine cause, or Nothing happens without a cause, i.e. the principle of causation. However, a foundation or ground (Grund) does not have to be a cause. ‘All humans are mortal’ is the foundation for the truth of the statement ‘Socrates is mortal’, but it is not the cause of Socrates death. (Heidegger, 1956: 191/2).

9 According to Simon, however, ‘cause’ has been eliminated from the epistemology of empirical science, but requires attention due to its importance in everyday vocabulary (Simon, 1957: 50).
Other issues concern for instance ‘the direction of causation’. Perhaps the most prominent debate regards the claim that a cause needs to be both necessary and sufficient for the effect. A very problematic statement that needs modifications and refinement, for instance by including context: “...the statement ‘A caused P’ often claims that A was necessary and sufficient for P in the circumstances” (Mackie, 1974: 21). In this sense explanation always ‘ceteris paribus’: we cannot provide a complete explanation. This is closely linked to what is the prime issue in the context of this paper: the idea that causality or causal explanation involves laws.

The demand to be able to establish the relevant laws is an issue of much debate. This is of particular importance in relation to the explanation of human action and ‘singular causal statements.’ Hempel, perhaps the champion in this area, argued that laws are indeed involved in historical and singular causal explanations. His claim is that explanation is basically the same in all areas of science. A (causal) explanation amounts to “showing that the event resulted from the particular [specified] circumstances … in accordance with the [specified] laws....” (Hempel, 2001: 277). “...the given causal explanation implicitly claims that there are general laws … by virtue of which the occurrence of the causal antecedents mentioned .... is a sufficient condition for the occurrence of the event to be explained” (Hempel, 2001: 278/9). Psychological, social and historical explanation can have the shape of ‘partial explanation’ as they are not very specific, but rather point at more general human traits in contrast to a deductive-nomological explanation that is complete (Hempel, 2001: 283).

Mackie takes a similar stance, but denies that we do need to know the corresponding laws (Mackie, 1974: 35). To assert uniformity of causation is to affirm that causation has the form of general laws that we do not need to be able to specify. This is also characteristic for Davidson’s account. He refers to ‘causal explanation’ and ‘reason explanation’ and tried to identify to what extend they are similar and to what extend they differ. Davidson agrees with Hempel that explaining by means of reason or an agent’s intentional action is just an instance of the general logic of explanation (Davidson, 1980d: 261). Intentions thus become mental events we need to identify (Davidson, 1980b: 74). However, there is a twist, whereas Hempel refers to ‘known empirical laws’, like Mackie, Davidson does not: in a ‘reason explanation’ we do not need to know the laws involved (Davidson, 1980a: 3-4, Davidson, 1980c: 160). Similarly, we do not necessarily know the ‘prime reason’, but we know there is one (Davidson, 1980a: 7). We are not concerned

---

10 I.e. the difference between A causing B, and B causing A. It is common to regard causation asymmetrical, implying that the effect cannot precede the cause, i.e. rejecting ‘reverse’ or ‘backward causation. Often causation is simply defined as being asymmetrical. It should be noted that, as Taylor (1975) points out, a cause can be contemporaneous with its effect. Issue of direction at the core of debates on functional causes, as well as final or teleological causes (cf. Hollis, 1994).

11 Mackie goes even further and uses the notion of a ‘causal field’ in which causation can be attributed. That is, absolute sufficiency is never established, and necessity is also to be understood as part of a larger, presupposed whole.

12 He distinguishes two kinds of explanation deductive-nomological and probabilistic-statistical explanation. The former amounts to a deductive subsumption of what is to be explaned (the explanandum) “under principles that have the character of general laws.”

13 Hempel is keen to point out that this, according to him, “… [does] not in any way imply a mechanistic view of man, of society, and of historical processes, nor, of course, do they deny the importance of ideas and ideals for human decision and action.” (Hempel, 2001: 295).
with individual laws only valid at a particular time, but with very general laws for human behaviour (Davidson, 1980d: 265 & 266). The explanation of a person’s action thus provides us with a lot of information, “but almost nothing about people generally” (Davidson, 1980d: 274). The universality of causal explanation, does however not result in causal determinism in the case of intentional action according to Davidson, as accounts of intentional behaviour have to be done in a conceptual framework that is not within the reach of physical law (Davidson, 1980e: 118). I.e. all explanations include ‘laws’, although we may not be able – even need - to establish them. This is reflected in the absence of laws in the actual explanation; as Silver argues, laws as such do not explain an event: “Causal laws figure in the explanation of individual events by subsuming the event under the scope of the generalization. Such causal laws don’t then explain the individual event” (Silvers, 1987a: 123/4). This seems to bring us back to the original issue as to the nature of causal explanation.

Imagine one person hitting another, The physical process (physical causation) can be explained fairly accurate in terms of nerve pulses and muscular contractions, and involve laws as to the way nerves and muscles work. However, why a person is hitting another involves reasons: Does this also involve laws? There clearly are many different possible reasons or mental causations possible to explain the action.

Some authors argue causation should simply be limited to physical causation (cf. Silvers (1987a). When ‘mental events’ are included as explanandum, we have to determine the nature of reasons somehow. Reason in this sense is “The general human ‘faculty’ or capacity for truth-seeking and problem-solving” (Honderich, 1995: 748), or “The power of the mind to think, understand, and from judgments by a process of logic” (Pearsall, 2001). It involves intentionality: “the capacity of the mind to represent objects and states of affairs in the World other than itself” (Searle: 1996: 6/7). Thus we do not enter a room because there is a danger sign. As Searle points out, the sign can only be a cause for not entering due to intentionality. It indicates that causes involve intentional objects, i.e. a whole complex of human understanding and representation of the world. This seems to imply some kind of ‘active human agent’ as a basis for explanation.

**What or who?**

What would you write down in an essay on the question: “Who am I?” Most of us will, after some pondering, write down characteristics like ‘cheerful’ or ‘sportive’ and outline roles such as ‘teacher,’ or ‘mother.’ These answers, however, not so much concern who you are, but what you are: what kind of characteristics and relationships you have. Are

---

14 See also the earlier remark on Heidegger.
15 Silvers argues that a non-physical causation, i.e. mental causation would be outside time and space, i.e. without location.
16 This is similar to what is sometimes referred to as the ‘non-natural’ meaning of words (cf Strawson, 1971: 28).
17 Based on Hollis (1977).
you merely the passive totality of these, or is there perhaps a person – a ‘who’\(^\text{18}\) – that hides behind all this and actively accepts or rejects social roles?

The what-question is the question of the job-interview: ‘what can you do?’, ‘which diplomas and experiences do you have?’ This is a matter of an *external* and *passive* approach of humans as carriers of personal traits. However, we also try to acquire an idea of ‘who’ is in front of us: what does someone feel, motivate, or frighten? These are the *internal* question in which we assume an *active* man who appropriates those roles and traits.

The only correct answer to the question “Who am I?” is, as suggested by Hollis (1977, p. 87), to write down your name.\(^\text{19}\) The who-question embodies the fundamental, existential question ‘why do I exist?’ That seems to be necessary to explain why people do as they do: it is a matter of *reasons* and *meanings*. Nevertheless, when the topic becomes ‘meaning’ the traditional scientists shies away; that also a legacy of positivism and the Enlightenment.\(^\text{20}\) This is where hermeneutics and more generally speaking antie-essentialism pops in.

In the social sciences the focus is traditionally on the question ‘what is human?’: a passive question. We see humans as carriers of roles, fulfillers of functions and followers of rules of games. This brings us the capacity to discover explanations for the behavior of rulers and ruled. We can detect causes, identify effects and consequently deduce recommendations. The search is for regularities, if possible laws, establishing solid connections between causes and effects. A causal relationship cannot be said to be, if one phenomenon is coincidentally observed after the other. As we have seen, causality will commonly be regarded as implying that under equal circumstances by necessity B will be observed after A, and is regarded fundamental to the explanatory model in the natural sciences. Research is, moreover, limited to finding one or some causal relations.

According to Harré (1967), a portrayal of man is nothing more than a causal model: if necessary a different model for each research, as long as we can distinguish cause and effect. As a consequence, the causal portrayal of man is reductionist. The search is oriented backwards at previous causes eventually we may even expect to end up with physical factors, like biological and chemical mechanisms,\(^\text{21}\) or if this proves impossible, with situational causes such as ‘the effects of the situation on motivation and behavior’ (Van Dijk, 2003, esp. 12 & 14).

---

\(^{18}\) Some caution is needed here. Inherent to the language conventions the distinction between ‘what’ and ‘who’ is one of thing and situation on the one side and a person on the other side to which is referred. We will have to be careful in holding language conventions (and surprising use of it) for profound questions.

\(^{19}\) Jean-Paul Sartre states that a search for your true self, our inner ‘core’ eventually will be fruitless, because our ‘I’ is elusive (Sartre, 1978). But can we avoid the ‘who’-question? According to Heschel (1992) we cannot, because self-knowledge is precisely characteristic for man.

\(^{20}\) For instance Plamenatz (1963, p. xxi) point at the fact that man as a rational being is capable of self-reflexion, but that a scientific answer to the question ‘what is man’ cannot tell something about the destination of man. This equals the standard depiction of science like formulated in the Enlightenment: giving meaning to life and values do not fall within science and also in the study of public administration this idea can be detected quite often.

\(^{21}\) “The natural science model is, as a rule, a reductionist model; that is, it often assumes that the best and most complete explanation of human behavior, actions and experiences lies in the discovery of their biological coordinates.” Jahoda, 1980: 281.
On the one hand we have the idea of humans as responsible beings and on the other the idea that everything has a cause and can be causally explained. In the study of public administration we find both approaches. For instance, we assume that responsibility in public administration embodies that there is ‘blamefulness’ and ‘a certain causality’ present. There has to a causal relationship between someone’s behavior and that what we hold the person responsible for. The behavior in the latter case is regarded as ultimately caused by an active or autonomous human being, i.e. not as something we can or have to reduce to earlier causes such as education, hormones, et cetera. In a word, some things are seen as caused in a physical sense; others are not, i.e. the very things we hold people responsible for.

Scientists try to and can pinpoint cause-and-effect relations in an increasingly detailed manner. The universe is explained by looking for regularities that cause things to be as they are; humans are no exception, just part of this universe. Possible deviations of regularities are examined and explained with other regularities. In this pattern is no room for an active man who is the source of his own behavior, i.e. causa sui.

What can we conclude from this? If we perceive reality only in terms of causal conditions, there can be said to be causal chains: one thing is caused by another, which in turn also has a cause, et cetera. There is no room, then, for responsible, autonomous humans, only for passive humans as a link in a chain of causes and effects. The suggestion that we do not need to know the actual laws (Davidson, Mackie) does seem a bit strange, and doesn’t change the position fundamentally. The universe is deterministic from the perspective of causal explanation. Thus, there appears to be no room for value judgments: values do not fit cause and effect relations. A way out is the conclusion that science can simply never give us a full understanding of human nature. But perhaps we are giving up too fast?

To start with, a possible way out is to try and find some remote corner within the deterministic universe for the idea of active, free human beings. To give a concise overview of such attempts: first there is the way of John-Stuart Mill. He stated that psychological laws apply universally, but are not inevitable. We can identify a cause when something happened, but it would not have had to happen given the many other possibilities (cf. Hollis, 1977, p. 34). Another way out is that a parallel is made with the quantum-theory and freedom is sought in the “dynamic and creative undetermined side of existence” (Wielemans, 1993, p. 173). Here quantum physical concepts like the Uncertainty principle and Schrödinger’s cat come at play. The question remains what such analogous reasoning exactly implies. In 1967 Honderich already points at the fact that such an attempt to avoid determinism pass by the ‘embarrassing fact’ that there is no single interpretation of the quantum-theory. Furthermore, quantum theoretical phenomena concern things (‘undetermined things’) and not ‘phenomena’ (Hondrich (1967). In the end, I would like to point at the attached argument that embodies that social behavior is so complex that we cannot oversee the many causes and their

---

22 The previous looks like an old discussion point in social sciences: structure versus action (‘Mill’ versus ‘Durkheim’). The matter is a quarrel about the nature of the causal relation. It is a ‘duel’ that in my opinion cannot be solved, because there are two unequal perspectives involved that are not reducible to one another. cf. Jochoms & Rutgers (2005).
23 Compare: “Someone who could not help that he got in the causal chain is usually blamed for nothing.” Bovens, 1990: 37.
24 See for example Reynolds, 1980: 45.
consequences. However, that does not alter the principle behind the passive image of human nature. The argument by Oudemans that freedom and determinedness do not exclude each other does not seem to be convincing. After all, the causal model does depart from the fact that, to stick with his example, the choice of the billiard player to play in a certain way can in principle be causally explained (Oudemans, 1980, p. 160). Plainly stated, it all comes down to the fact that we, because we do not know properly what the cause is, just name a blameworthy one.

This brief overview shows that there appears to be no real room for active humans as a responsible individual; at best it is an illusion due to our inability to grasp the complexity of reality. As Dessaur\textsuperscript{25} concludes: the free will is not commensurate with a causal universe. In the causal model, humans are essentially nothing more than a coincidental concurrence in the complexity of causal relations.\textsuperscript{26} Something that seems to resemble autonomous humans comes into the picture only when we are talking about matters that we cannot – or not yet – explain scientifically or in case of ‘undetermined matters’ that are inherent to a chaotic and complex reality. Even in the latter case, the concept of a reasoned choice or of a ‘will’ makes little or no sense. There is no conscious choice in a sense commensurate with its meaning in common sense or philosophical debate; just some complex coincidental factors having their focal point in the actions of some particular individual which we then blame or praise as being responsible for having caused something to happen (or not).

It is of great importance that scientific research into, for example, organizational structures and decision-making processes are molded in causal terms. It has provided us with our highest regarded insights into public administration. Problems arise with value questions, as in the case of the question for the legitimacy of public administration. The study of law, ethics and political philosophy cannot exist with a passive image of human nature.\textsuperscript{27} In these studies we have to rely on the idea of autonomous choosing human beings whose behavior is not determined, but conscious and active. The importance of the attribution of responsibility is evident in the important legal fiction of ‘the legal person.’ A legal person is not a natural person, but can be used for both an individual as a corporation or municipality so that we can treat them as if they are responsible persons (Broekman, 1979: 59).

Two choices

We now have two options presented to us: we can limit the study of public administration and accept that volition and with it responsibility are more or less illusionary. Alternatively we abolish the passive image of human nature and try to understand how and why we arrived at such a position to begin with. The first way is that of Herbert Simon. We leave questions of value outside the study of public administration and say farewell to some traditional topics, such as legitimacy and responsibility. Do we have to

\textsuperscript{25} C.I. Dessaur, 1982, p. 237.
\textsuperscript{26} Compare M. Hollis, 1977, p.39.
\textsuperscript{27} Compare: “Responsibility is in the public life (but not solely there) a crucial and central concept.” Nieuwenburg, 2001: 39.
leave the sphere of rational argument and take refuge in metaphysical interpretations? No, we can stick to the rationalist idea that whatever exists and determines our behavior is rationally knowable. We are, after all, dealing with an epistemological issue: Is the causal approach to reality the sole valid one? We can take a different track and take the responsible human as starting point, thus reversing the question: is it possible within an active portrayal of human beings to leave any room for a passive explanation? Subsequently, will such a comprehensive image of human nature be adequate for the study of public administration?

What does an active image of human nature amount to? To start with, attention focuses on reasons: the meaning of actions becomes the prime interest, and not the observable physical action. An illustration is provided by Gilbert Ryle. He point at the fact that it matters whether a chess piece is moved by a drunk, a baby, or a Grandmaster in chess (Ryle, 1983: 45 a.f.). It is not the physical cause of action by either of the three that interests us, but that the action can be evaluated (Cf. Oudemans, 1980: 25). This means, that we are interested in the question as to the possibility to hold someone accountable for his or her behavior. We can ask for reasons (motives, values), and possible expected outcomes. That there is a vast difference between the physical causes and the reasons for an action that can be evaluated makes the difference between our three actors: To play chess, implies to know and follow the rules; otherwise someone simply is not playing chess. This is not a matter of causal regularities, as humans can divert from the rules that apply, asked to account for such behavior, as well as (possibly) alter his or her behavior (Oudemans, 1980: 4). We may even alter the rules as they are the product of human reason as well.

The false move of a chess player who cheats is not evaluated the same as the drunk or baby that coincidentally makes a right move. The baby, however, cannot cheat, because cheating presupposes that the rules are broken on purpose, and are thus known. We will exclude a drunk, as well as a cheating player for different reasons from playing chess, maybe even wanting to exclude them from the game for ever. But this does not apply for a baby. The latter will not be held accountable, for is not (yet) regarded a responsible human being. Rather, learning and correcting behavior is the essence of becoming an adult human agent.

The previous denotes that reasons play a crucial role: humans can take responsibility for their actions and indicate which meaning something has for him or her. The crux is that reasons are accepted as the explanations for behavior. This raises the epistemological issue whether reasons are different from causes in an explanation of

---

28 Heschel (1992), for example, simply rejects the rationality thesis and almost immediately gets into the metaphysical and theological (if not religious) arguments to answer the question ‘who is man’. For now, it seems more rational to me to identify that we not yet have a (rational) explanation instead of directly shift to not further to discuss religious articles.

29 Of course we can constantly depart form a priori’s and unproved presumptions, with “belief” in other words. But as rational beings we can come up with good reasons, or search for them, so that we not have to be satisfied with belief. ‘Belief’ is in this way per definition never a reasonable argument. Is there a circle in my reasoning? Perhaps, but not that I ‘believe’ in rationality, because there are good reasons to be brought up in my opinion that are intersubjectively discussable and correctable, even if they eventually end up with a priori’s like the demand of consistency. Rationalism is a knowledge claim, no belief, and certainly not a religion.
action. Put differently, are reasons establishing a causal relationship between a ‘volition’ (or mental event) and its effect.

Is the relationship between reason and behavior simply a causal relationship? In an important sense they are different. This is perhaps easiest illustrated by what we may call the final or ultimate nature of a reason. We accept a reason as the explanation for an action if it can provide a basis for having done that action, i.e. there is no necessity to presuppose earlier, previous reasons. This is not to say that we can sometimes point at more encompassing or earlier reasons, but they are not required for the explanation of an action as is the case in a causal chain. That is, whereas A causes B only if C caused A before; a reason can stand alone: ‘John wanted to buy the flowers” without there being previous reasons (such as ‘wanting to cheer up the room’ or ‘to woo his girlfriend’). The more principled reason why we accept some reason as explanation has to do with its link with the ability to hold someone responsible: we would otherwise get bogged down in never ending chains in which responsibility evaporates. Sometimes we do so in casual explanations as well: the bush fire was caused by the lightning. We may continue to look for the causes of the lightning, or the dry whether that caused the grass to be easily flammable, and so on. But obviously, we are not concerned with tracing a reason to hold the lightning accountable. The situation would be very different in the case of the bush fire being caused by an unattended barbeque, somebody should have guarded. In this case both ‘somebody’ and ‘should’ point at a human agent being involved in the explanation. The presence of a human agent implies that there is a someone that could or should have done otherwise because a person can reflect on actions i.e. can assess or evaluate possible consequences of actions in advance. Here the same arguments apply as in the previous chess game example.

Hollis sees the solution in distinguishing the human agent as ideal typical starting point; we have to presume his/her reasons as autonomous and self-explaining. The matching explanatory model is the ‘normative explanation’: someone knows which behavior goes with a certain role. For example, a student knows the difference between his role as a member of a student fraternity, as listener in the class room and as a responsible citizen. That does not exclude in any way contradictory role expectations or role changes.

The explanation for someone’s behavior is to be found in showing that this person knew what to do and can give reasons for the actions undertaken. Someone knows or is able to know the expectations that constitute a role, but that does not make these roles causes. People interpret rules: person and role do not coincide.

It is not a ‘what’ but a ‘who’, an agent, having reasons for behavior. Ultimately reasons are to be traced back to the self-determination of an individual. That is to say, on how a person positions him/herself in the world as an active, interpreting, meaning establishing and valuing human being that can be held responsible for its choices, beliefs, actions, i.e. its behavior.

This brings us to a second claim that has to be made: Explaining in terms of the image of the active human being requires that we can validate reasons. The question is, first, if someone will and can express his/her reasons, and, second, more importantly whether reasons can be establish in research in a way that is open to methodological scrutiny and, thus to rational argument. The latter concerns the so called ‘Problem of the Other Minds’
which has caused a lot of turbulence in the philosophy of the social sciences (cf. Hollis, 1994). Nevertheless, we do have to know one’s reasons for an explanation of the active man. When we want to explain the behavior of, for instance, someone who accidentally takes a poison pill to be a peppermint and of someone who takes a peppermint thinking it is a poison pill, the reason for that physical identical behavior, then, is decisive for the explanation.

The only entrance we finally have to another persons reasons is by way of the interpretation of behavior and utterances (Hollis, 1977: 147). This needs the assumption that others in principal think in a similar fashion, or, in other words, that people are rational and thus consistent in their behavior. When we finally presume such a rationality-assumption, we can subsequently perceive and try to explain differences and deviations.

For revealing reasons we will have to know what goes on in the mind of another human being, who may perhaps not even be aware of the specific reasons that motivated an action. This again is topic of long debate (especially in psychology). Yet we may for brevity consider the experience that sometimes an other person seems more or earlier aware of our own feelings and intensions than we do ourselves.30

We cannot get delve into this problem here, but the methodology of the so called interpretative and hermeneutic research is often, justifiably in my opinion, still called weak. At the same time, causality is not without its problems either as a basic assumption.

Priority of the active

Earlier on we posed the question if there is room within an active image of human nature for a passive approach and, if so, if this will result in a comprehensive image of human nature. The answer to both questions can be cautiously formulated: yes, an active image of human nature can be unified with a passive, but no, it does not result in a comprehensive explanation of human behavior.

To start with the last, it is obvious that our freedom of choice is limited and that we are really responsible for just a few things as an autonomous acting individual. The freely active human being is in certain sense a marginal phenomenon. It seems paradoxical, but most of our behavior is externally determined – or in other words heteronymous – we can act autonomous and because of that held responsible for our behavior. The active human agent can be used as a starting point, even though most of the behavior does not resemble it. It is, then, an ideal typical image of human nature which we use to explain actual behavior, both causal as evaluative.

This can be illustrated with the role of the public servant. Person and role do not coincide. The person cannot be said to be plainly responsible for that what he/she did as a public servant. This is the most obvious in the distinction between responsibility as office holder and guilt as a person. The greatest worry of Weber was that the public servant is and should become wholly heteronymous: inherent to the office is that someone tries to realize the values and goals that are not his/her own (See Rutgers & Schreurs, 2003).

---

30 For instance someone may point out that you are apparently in love, confused, bossy, and so on, without previously having realized this yourself.
But, we can make a distinction between accepting a role and acting according to that role. Thus the fundamental choice is that a person autonomous chooses to become a public servant, and as a public servant will act heteronomously.\(^{\text{31}}\) That is what Weber called bureaucrats honor: it is his professional ethos to do as well as possible what is required. This somewhat paradoxical situation gives us a bridgehead to call someone to account for a crime committed in concurrence with the duties of his office. One cannot hide behind the office endlessly, since the role acceptance is not absolute or irreversible. There is a moment where personal ethics will demand to leave an office, if no other options are available. Note that, this implies that we can and will just as much blame someone for having abandoned his/her office in a time of need: accepting a role and acting in accordance with it are two separate choices, with different criteria to evaluate them. But this does not constitute some final unification of an active and a passive approach to human nature, rather how in a specific case the two can be related to one another.

As for the possibility of unifying an active image of human nature with a passive it appears that an appeal to reasons does not necessarily imply a choice between active and passive. In a passive model intentions and reasons can be treated as instances of regularities, but with the earlier described disadvantages. The other way around, an active image of human nature requires that reasons are comprehended as distinct from causal relationships (Hollis, 1977: 116). Inherent to the active man is that behavior is not just caused, but that it is a part of giving meaning by man. Instead of ‘what causes something?’ we look at ‘who wants or intends something?’ From this perspective the individual is not the product of social roles and positions, but chooses and creates roles himself. The ideal typical individual is distinct from his characteristics and relationships. But this image of human nature may seem unrealistic and fictive (it is an ideal type after all). We can compare this to the legal fiction that everyone is said to know the law. Of course we know many rules, but nobody knows all the rules. In fact a reversed burden of proof is apparent here. Without the fiction in place we would always be able to call ignorance and reject responsibility.

Thus approached we can and should take an active image of human nature as starting point, not as residue, even though we know that most human behavior is perhaps heteronymous and (even) causal. Here also the reversed burden of proof applies: if we want to explain human behavior causally, provide arguments why we can let go of an active image of human nature.

It should be noted that the active image of human nature is not a presumption as in the case of the economic man model. The ideal type of the active human nature is used to trace deviations and subsequently explain these; it is not as such part of the explanation: the reasons found for that behavior. The main assumption is that reasons are not causes in the methodological sense. We are not dealing with causal explanations of action, but with reasons resulting in understanding of actions rather than explanation.\(^{\text{32}}\)

\(^{\text{31}}\) This most certainly not to do away with the importance, even primacy of agency in moral reasoning (cf. Harmon, 1995) as I do hope is apparent from the argument made in this paper.

\(^{\text{32}}\) Explanation versus understanding is a common philosophical; debate (cf Hollis, 1996). One has to be aware that in every day discourse both are validly referred to as ‘explanations’, however, philosophically we are dealing with explanation as causal explanation and understanding as the explanation of behavior in terms of reasons.
Many more is to be said about images of human nature in the study of public administration, like gender issues and the question how an image of human nature is applicable on collectivities. For the public administrator it is, furthermore, not enough to just take knowledge about the scientific images of human nature. The non or not-scientific images also determine our ideas on public administration: as the famous Thomas Theorem states: “If men defines situations as real, they are real in their consequences.” (Thomas, 1951: 81). Especially in the international and multicultural context of contemporary public administration this is an extremely important topic.

In the light of the previous it is not to be expected that the study of public administration as a differentiated science will reach a complete integration of images of human nature. We have seen that from a causal, passive image almost no bridge can be made to include an active image of humans, but that the reversed can be done. In a word, sometimes there are unbridgeable differences and sometimes we can make some coherence in our knowledge about public administration.

33 Feminine and masculine can scarcely be ascribed to persons. I agree with Beloff that at the abstract level of images of human nature there is no fundamental difference in the nature of men and women: man/woman differences sometimes are relevant, sometimes not: “There can be no argument for a model of woman, nor for a model of man” Beloff, 1980: 273.

34 For instance the fundamental Western ideas about public and private are unfamiliar to Confucianism. This becomes clear in the education to non-Western students who sometimes cannot get a grip on the central concepts in Western thinking about public administration.
References


Stolker, C. (2003). ‘De dag verga, waarop ik geboren werd’ [May the day be doomed I was born]. Leiden: Leiden University.


