How can we explain pre-conventions?

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In this comment to Celano’s “Pre-Conventions. A Fragment of the Background”, the author introduces the following question: What kind of explanation fits better with behaviours that could be categorised as pre-conventions? Some possible answers to the question are explored, as well as some possible implications for Celano’s proposal.

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One of the main goals of Bruno Celano’s suggestive work on pre-conventions is to cast doubt on the distinction between nature and convention, as well as on other related distinctions, such as the one between the normative and the factual. In fact, Celano defines pre-conventions as “normative facts”,1 claiming that they “have both the character of de facto regularities, as well as a normative character”.2 Nonetheless, different kinds of discontent over Celano’s treatment of these classical distinctions can be detected, whether explicit or implicit, in almost every comment printed in this volume. In this brief text, I shall reintroduce this concern from a different perspective by introducing a genuine question to the text: What kind of explanation fits better with pre-conventions?

In what follows, I shall first show how the question arises and shall then explore some possible answers and its consequences.

1 THE QUESTION

First, having in mind Celano’s proposal, we can say that (almost) every meaningful piece of human behaviour is surrounded by a conceptual framework, as well as by some factual features related to our physiological constitution. In this sense, concerning the characterisation of human reality, Celano defends the idea of a continuum between the factual and the normative. Every game we play, every word we say is embodied in us, and they rest on our abilities and conceptual equipment. In agreement with Ludwig Wittgenstein, he shows that a mix of normativity and facticity pervades our life, and a clear distinction bet-

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1 Celano 2016: 9–10, 13, 22, 25.
ween them cannot be made. I think these ideas are not so problematic; indeed, one of the main tasks of philosophical pragmatism, for example, is to make this twofold (conceptual and natural) environment of human behaviour explicit.

More interesting for our discussion is Celano’s idea that pre-conventions have their own autonomous space in relation to other types of human behaviour. In order to show this autonomy, he presents some characteristic features of pre-conventions in sections 2 and 3, and gives us a variety of examples in section 4 of the paper. In this part of Celano’s proposal, pre-conventions appear to be one important link in the chain of the continuum between the factual and the normative, and not just a characteristic feature of (almost) every meaningful human behaviour. It is in relation to this idea that the genuine question emerges: What kind of explanation fits better with behaviours that could be categorised as pre-conventions?

Moreover, when we turn our attention to the philosophical company chosen by the author, we can see the pertinence of the question. On the last pages of his paper, Celano digs into a philosophical characterisation of pre-conventions and, after passing by some ideas of Wittgenstein’s, his spade reaches a bedrock in John Searle’s theory of the Background. Indeed, the paper’s subtitle is precisely “A fragment of the Background”. At this point, the connection with explanation is made by Searle himself, for the theory of the Background is thought of as an explanatory device of social phenomena. But the compatibility between Searle and Wittgenstein’s ideas is not so clear with regard to this topic. In his remarks on explanation, Wittgenstein distinguishes between reasons and causes as different ways of explaining human behaviour (meanwhile, Searle is committed only to causes as we shall later see). On the one hand, reasons are

4 Again, the title of Chapter 6 of his The Construction of Social Reality is “Background Abilities and the Explanation of Social Phenomena”.
5 Wittgenstein & Waissman 2003: 93–95, 103ff; Wittgenstein 2009: 102ff. Wittgenstein shows the distinction using some examples: “Let us imagine the case that somebody is calculating and, e.g., writes down a series of equations. In response to the question: ‘Why did you write down this equation?’, he can answer in two completely different ways. He can either say: ‘In my nervous system some processes occurred which innervated my finger muscles in such a way that those movements of writing resulted’. In that case he answers with the cause. However, he can also say: ‘Well, I found those equations a while ago and from them this follows’. Now he answers with the reason, i.e., with a rule that allows the transition from one equation to another” (Wittgenstein & Waissman 2003: 109). Elsewhere, he says: ”Let us suppose a train driver sees a red signal flashing and brings the train to a stop. In response to the question: ‘Why did you stop?’ he answers perhaps: ‘Because the signal says to stop here’. One wrongly regards this statement as the specification of a cause, whereas it is the specification of a reason. The cause may have been that he was long accustomed to reacting to the red signal in such-and-such a way or that in his nervous system permanent connections of pathways developed such that the action follows the stimulus in the manner of a reflex or yet something else. The cause need not be known to him. By contrast, the reason is what he specifies. He answers
related to intentional explanation, and are a key concept in the explanation of those conventions which are backed by trains of reasoning. On the other hand, causes are related to causal explanation, and are used with a view to identifying some de facto regular connections between events linked to human behaviour.

Therefore, if we consider that a specific group of human activities exists which we can recognise as pre-conventions, and that these are neither conventions nor mere de facto regularities, the question emerges: How can we explain a pre-convention? Or, more precisely, what kind of explanation should we provide in order to make a pre-convention intelligible as such? Moreover, taking into account Wittgenstein’s distinction, we can ask whether what fits better is intentional explanation or causal explanation, or whether perhaps there is some other kind of explanation which awaits us so that we can explain pre-conventions.

The question emerges from two considerations. First, from the idea that pre-conventions as “normative facts” challenge the distinction between the normative and the factual, and, second, from the philosophical company chosen by Celano in invoking this idea. In the next section, I shall explore briefly some possible responses to the questions presented.

2 EXPLAINING PRE-CONVENTIONS

In order to explore the question presented above, I shall focus on one of the examples of pre-conventions given by Celano, that is, that of the correct swimming stroke in front crawl. When we explain something, we adopt the point of view of an observer and we “make intelligible facts which have already been recorded.” Thus, the question is directed at the way in which, after identifying some particular case of pre-conventional behaviour (e.g., Jane is swimming), we can explain that someone’s behaviour is a correct stroke in crawl. This concerns the last part of the object of explanation since, in this example, according to Celano, the given pre-convention is “not an actual behaviour, but its form.” As far as the former is concerned, to identify someone’s behaviour as an action is to recognise that behaviour as a manifestation of one’s will. In doing this, we usually classify the behaviour as some kind of action (e.g., to swim, to walk, to

7 Von Wright 1971:1.
8 Here, we are concerned with the microtheory and not the macrotheory of social explanation (cf. Jackson, Pettit & Smith 2004: 131–162).
smoke). After identifying the action, we can start to explain it. Let us see what we can say about this.

First, as I have mentioned above, we have two main kinds of explanation of the behaviour: the intentional and the causal explanation. On the one hand, intentional explanation appears with agency. When some behaviour is understood to be an action, we attribute a mind to the being whose behaviour has been identified. In doing this, we attribute mental states and thoughts (e.g., propositional attitudes, such as beliefs, expectations and desires) to the agent and we represent the behaviour as governed by reasons. On the other hand, causal explanation appeals to the relationship between events (or facts), focusing on the physiological aspect of behaviour. Causal explanation shows the behaviour to be governed by laws of nature.

At first sight, it seems plausible to think that intentional explanation is the one that depicts the correct form of a crawl-swimming stroke. Intentionality appeals to the way that agents represent the world to themselves and the way that they act according to that representation. Thus, for example, when we see someone swimming in a correct way, we attribute to her some beliefs about her bodily movements and we explain her behaviour as an application of those beliefs. An important issue here is that her beliefs can be mistaken. For example, an agent may believe that she is moving her arms in some way, but she is not. This point is important because, by appealing to intentionality, we can explain the normative aspect of pre-conventions.

On the other hand, we can found the defence of the relevance of causal explanation in Searle. What guides Searle’s work at this point is showing how the Background is part of a causal explanation of our behaviour. He says that: “It is important to see that when we talk about the Background we are talking

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10 The “after” expresses a logical (not a chronological) relationship between identification and explanation. We can identify something without explaining it, but the inverse is not possible.
11 About this general distinction, cf., amongst others, von Wright 1971: 83ff; Dennett 2013: 73ff.
12 On this matter, Robert Brandom says the following: “the acts we perform count as actions just insofar as it is proper to offer and inquire after reasons for them” (Brandom 1994: 5; cf. Brandom 1994: 55ff).
13 Besides, intentional explanation commonly shows the behaviour to be purposive, while causal explanation avoids this kind of consideration.
14 These attributions do not attend (necessarily) to the mental states that the agent is aware of. The attribution is a normative one based on the interpretation of the context of the action. This has two consequences: first, the attribution can be challenged by showing different interpretations, and, second, a correct explanation can be opaque to the agent, although he can understand it.
15 Moreover, although we can face a case where the agent is swimming correctly and effortlessly, our intentional explanations will attribute to her a mind and we shall establish a connection between her mind and her behaviour assuming that, although she is swimming correctly, she could be mistaken.
about a certain category of neurophysiological causation”16 and “If we think of the Background intentionalistically, then we have abandoned the thesis of the Background”.17 From this angle, he presents the Background as formed by dispositions, skills and abilities without intentionality. If Celano is committed to Searle at this point, we can say that Celano is committed to causal explanation in explaining pre-conventions.

Causal explanation explains clearly the factual aspect of pre-conventions. If we assume a more or less fine-grained account, we may include in a causal explanation some aspects of an individual’s history, such as her learning experiences or the way she automatises some behaviour.

Notwithstanding, in contrast to reasons and intentional explanation, causes are related to regularities and their grammar is not evaluative. Events occur or not, and their occurrence is independent of what the person believes to be doing.18 When we identify a cause, we identify regularities between the occurrences of kinds of events. Accordingly, we can make intelligible pre-conventions as regularities through causal explanation, but we cannot assess the behaviour as correct or incorrect.19 If we choose this path, we face the risk of reducing pre-conventions to de facto regularities in our aiming to explain them.

Maybe we can find other ways of explaining pre-conventions in what Celano and Searle say about the Background.20 For example, we can think about the abilities that are part of the Background. Following Searle, we have to think about non-intentional (non-conceptual) abilities that are sensitive to structures of intentionality. Here, the first thing that has to be clarified is what it means when we say that an ability is sensitive to structures of intentionality, and how we can explain this. Searle talks about abilities that allow us to imitate others and to learn from the same in order to internalise some kinds of behaviour. However, if we assume that imitation can be separated from any intentional feature, the quality of a specific performance turns out to be a question of luck, and not something we can choose or work on (not even in the learning process). This is not completely satisfactory in explaining a piece of behaviour such as the correct swimming stroke in front crawl. Luck and correction are not good friends. It seems that we cannot say that to swim in a correct style depends only on our non-reflective imitations of others (or that someone swims correctly just because she has the abilities of a good imitator).

17 Searle 1995: 140.
18 Of course, with Merton, we can talk about self-fulfilling prophecies, but I think that this does not affect the argument.
19 A causal explanation could be wrong, but it is the observer who is mistaken, and not the (caused) behaviour.
When we move to dispositions, something similar happens. As Saul Kripke argues in his famous work on rule following, dispositions are related to a descriptive stance and they cannot account for the normative aspects of behaviour.\(^{21}\) Dispositions are usually related to mechanisms (commonly understood to be properties of machines) and a failure in this context is understood in terms of broken or damaged mechanisms, and not in terms of an agent’s mistakes or wrongs. Correction presupposes the possibility of failure and the possibility of choice,\(^{22}\) something that is not present in the description of mechanisms and causal explanations. Functional explanation faces similar problems, especially if this explanation has to avoid purposive (i.e., teleological) issues.\(^{23}\)

### 3 POSSIBLE CONSEQUENCES, MORE GENUINE QUESTIONS

If what I have said in the last section is correct, the distinction between the normative and the factual is not easy to avoid when we try to explain human behaviour. It seems that we think about human reality assuming the distinction, and from the different angles of the distinction we face different aspects of it. Anyway, I am not sure about the consequences that this has for Celano’s idea that there is a part of human behaviour which is normative and factual at the same time.

Maybe one direct consequence is that we have to reject the possibility of normative facts or the possibility of explaining them as such, or the consequence is perhaps that we have to choose between the kinds of explanation presented above, that is, choose the one that is better in explaining how we should understand pre-conventions. At this point, it is worth asking what it is that Celano is saying when he affirms that pre-conventions are functionally equivalent to rules.\(^{24}\) If this

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21 On the way dispositionalists could respond to the problem of quadversion, he wrote the following: “Suppose I do mean addition by ‘+’. What is the relation of this supposition to the question how I will respond to the problem ‘68+57’? The dispositionalist gives a descriptive account of this relation: if ‘+’ meant addition, then I will answer ‘125’. But this is not the proper account of the relation, which is normative, not descriptive. The point is not that, if I meant addition by ‘+’, I will answer ‘125’, but that, if I intend to accord with my past meaning of ‘+’, I should answer ‘125’. Computational error, finiteness of my capacity, and other disturbing factors may lead me not to be disposed to respond as I should, but if so, I have not acted in accordance with my intentions. The relation of meaning and intention to future action is normative, not descriptive.” (Kripke 1982: 37). A response to Kripke’s challenge is found in Gibbard 2012: Ch. 2 & 3.

22 Here, “choice” does not (necessarily) have to be understood in a metaphysical way incompatible with determinism.

23 Besides, functional explanation is commonly understood to be a complex kind of causal explanation for its defenders. Cf., amongst others, Couch 2011 (with further references).

24 Celano 2016: 29.
means that pre-conventions guide our actions, maybe we have to explain them in intentional terms. If this is correct, abandoning Searle’s thesis of the Background and embracing Brigaglia’s interpretation of pre-conventions (i.e., understanding them to be a kind of normative behaviour surrounded by a Background of norms) would be recommendable.\textsuperscript{25} This would place pre-conventions in the intentional realm. Notwithstanding, the author could be thinking, like Searle, that the pre-conventional place is primarily a causal one, and that there is (almost) nothing we can do to avoid it,\textsuperscript{26} with the causal explanation fitting best. Finally, maybe we must keep looking for other kinds of explanation that better depict the special traits of pre-conventions, rejecting classical explanatory device designs that account for other kinds of human behaviour.\textsuperscript{27} I am not sure about what Celano’s reply to these questions could be, nor am I sure about the consequences of his possible response. Nonetheless, the question remains open.

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**References**


\textsuperscript{25} Brigaglia 2016.

\textsuperscript{26} Of course, this is a way to understanding the idea of a second nature. Cf. Celano 2016: 12.

\textsuperscript{27} Additionally, we can think that every example of pre-convention must receive different treatment.