

Reasons and Causes

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Each of the two main terms in this entry's title has multiple senses. In the context of human action, 'reasons' can refer to *normative reasons*, or the conditions (generally external to the agent's psychological states) that rationally or morally justify a particular course of action for an agent in a given circumstance, whether or not the course of action is taken or the agent even acknowledges the existence of the reason. 'Reasons' can also refer to *motivational reasons*, the agent's own reasons for doing what he does, wise or foolish as it may be. In this latter sense, 'an agent's having reason *R* for doing *A*' is a psychological state or set of states (such as beliefs, desires, and intentions) that motivates the agent toward, and potentially explains, certain courses of action. It is this latter sense of 'reason' that is in view here (for further discussion of this distinction, see chapters 19 and 5). 'Causes' is employed in multiple senses as well in the context of the explanation of actions, and these will be adumbrated over the course of this essay.

Reasons as Not (Efficiently) Causal, Underwriting Irreducibly Teleological Explanations

Beginning in the 1950s, in the shadow of Wittgenstein, several philosophers argued that the reasons which explain an action cannot be among the factors which causally produce it. According to one such argument, the explanatory connection forged in citing reasons for actions is (allegedly) conceptual and hence logically necessary rather than empirical and contingent, as all efficient causal connections (allegedly) are (Melden 1961). According to another argument, which runs in a rather different direction, a causal explanation must cite a completely general 'covering law' encompassing types under which the cited cause and effect fall; but it is evident on the face of it that no plausible covering laws exist in the case of reasons and actions (Hart and Honoré 1959). These arguments are of less interest here than the non-causal account of the explanation of action to which they led many thinkers. On this view, explanations of action are teleological: they explain by citing an agent's goal or purpose in performing the action. Further, teleological explanations are basic; they are not reducible to, or a

shorthand for, another form of explanation such as the causal one. In particular, the adequacy of a teleological explanation does not rest on an implicit assumption that the agent's desire to attain the goal and her belief that an action of a certain type would contribute to attaining that goal were among the set of factors which causally produced the action. Teleological explanations are different in kind from, but no less legitimate than, the mechanistic causal explanations characteristic of science. Proponents of irreducible teleological explanation (for example von Wright 1971 and Sehon 2005) will often allow that human actions are identical to, or are wholly realized by, sub-personal physical phenomena, and that these underlying phenomena admit of wholly causal explanations. But this does not show that teleological explanations are fundamental, let alone dispensable, since only they are capable of accounting for what occurs as an *action* – as opposed to mere movement. Other non-causalists are motivated in part by the desire to account for autonomous or morally responsible agency and make stronger claims concerning the independence of teleological explanation. They will say either that the goal-directed formation of an intention or volition which is the originating core of an action cannot be identical to, or realized by, an event which admits of an efficient causal explanation (McCann 1998) or that it is at best contingent that this is so (Ginet 1990, 2002).

In a widely influential essay, Davidson (1963) challenged this whole tradition by arguing that true explanations of actions must cite events which are in fact causes. His central argument rests on the observation that “a person can have a reason for an action, and perform the action, and yet this reason not be the reason why he did it” (p. 9). The non-causalist, he argued, has no resources for making the required discrimination between those goals of which the agent is aware but which merely accompany the action and those which actually move the agent to act. Your rich uncle lies dying, in great and continuous pain. You want to see his suffering cease; you also want to receive your inheritance. You pull the plug on his life-preserving respirator. Why? We seem to be able to distinguish three basic scenarios – you were motivated by compassion, you were motivated by greed, you were motivated by both – where the non-causalist can discern only one. The causal theorist, by contrast, bid us to look to the actual causes in each case, an intuitively satisfying basis for determining the true reason(s) for the action.

The most important replies by non-causalists to Davidson's challenge point to the agent's intention in acting as grounding the required discrimination (Wilson 1989, Ginet 1990, McCann 1998, Sehon 2005). This action-guiding intention is conceived in somewhat different ways by these authors, but all posit that actions involve, or are accompanied by, an intention which refers to the purpose the agent is acting for. In the case of Davidson's rich uncle, the three scenarios are distinguished by there being in each case a distinct content to the intention that accompanies the agent's action. Critics of this content-of-intention strategy argue (1) that the teleological theories invoking intentions in acting cannot ground explanations of why an action occurred in the absence of a causal account of the formation and sustenance of the intention in acting and of its connection to the action itself; and (2) that it is implausible, on empirical grounds, that all actions feature intentions with the requisite content (see especially Mele 1992 and 2003; also Clarke 2000/2008 and O'Connor 1993; for a reply, see Ginet 2002 and Sehon 2005).

Reasons as Efficient Causes

A great many theorists over the last forty years have followed Davidson's lead in defending some version of the idea that typical explanations through reasons are implicitly causal, or – to focus directly on the claim about how things are with respect to actions rather than on the claim about how people typically take them to be – that *true* explanations of actions in terms of reasons implicitly or explicitly identify the state/event of the agent's having reason *R* for doing action *A* as being among the salient factors which causally produced his *A*-ing. Such a reason might consist of an appropriately paired belief and desire, as Davidson originally suggested (for example your desire for beer and your beliefs that beer is in the fridge, that, if you start walking to the fridge, you will arrive there, and so on caused you to walk to the fridge). Or the reason might involve a richer set of states, for instance nested intentions that constitute wide-ranging and longer-term plans of action (Bratman 1987).

Soon after Davidson's essay, a number of authors, including Davidson himself (Chisholm 1966, Taylor 1966, Davidson 1980), noticed a serious obstacle to attempts to provide a plausible causal theory. It is easy to conjure up scenarios where one's reasons cause one to perform an action suited to the reasons, despite one's not having acted intentionally. Here is Davidson's example:

A climber might want to rid himself of the weight and danger of holding another man on a rope, and he might know that by loosening his hold on the rope he could rid himself of the weight and danger. This belief and want might so unnerve him as to cause him to loosen his hold, and yet it might be the case that he never *chose* to loosen his hold, nor did he do it intentionally. (1980: 79)

Here the climber has a reason for loosening his hold on the rope and this reason causes him to do so, but in such a way that it is evident that he did not intentionally act as he did. The *way* the reason caused the action was of the wrong sort for the action to have been intentional. The challenge for the causal theorist, then, is to say in general terms what the *right* way consists in. What kinds of causal process between motivating reasons and behavior must occur for the action to be intentional, according to the causal theorist?

This is the much discussed problem of 'wayward or deviant causal chains,' which is treated thoroughly on its own in this volume (chapter 21). Some have taken the problem to bring a decisive refutation of the causal theory, which led them to propose that causation *by the agent* should be taken as an ontological (Taylor 1966) or as a (merely) conceptual (Bishop 1983) primitive in the theory of action. Others have seen in the problem the futility of analyzing intentional action in fundamentally causal terms of any kind, and proposed a return to teleology (Wilson 1989, Sehon 2005). Sophisticated attempts to overcome the problem by advancing complicated conditions for the kind of reason-action causation involved in intentional action may be found in Bishop (1989) and Mele (1992). These are exercises in conceptual analysis; see chapter 5 for the suggestion that an account of the required causal process should come instead from a mature psychology and neuroscience, and chapter 21 for an argument that the problem is not distinctive to the causal theory of *action*, as we might imagine; we could

see this by inserting irregular links within *any* kind of regular causal process, by raising difficulties for any attempt to give a precise and fully accurate causal analysis of an original type of process. We would not abandon an otherwise promising causal theory of these processes in the face of the challenge, so why should we do so in the case of a causal theory of action?

Reasons, Causes, and Physicalism

We noted above that one objection to the thesis that reasons are efficient causes of actions was rooted in the twin claims that a genuine causal explanation must cite a general 'covering law' encompassing types under which the cited cause and effect fall and that there are no covering laws available for reason and action types (given the endlessly open-ended range of circumstances needed to ensure the outcome, and even given the reason). Davidson conceded these premises but argued that individual (token) mental events could be causes by being identical to physical events which are linked to them by causal laws. Token mental events can be classified in various ways by distinct kinds of predicates (for instance physical–chemical, neurophysiological, and psychological). Davidson supposed that every token mental event is identical to a token physical event, although there is no systematic way to correlate mental and physical event types, since token mental events of the same mental type can be identical to token physical events that do not fall under any unified physical type. Although there are no general causal laws that link event types under mental terms, for every instance of mental causation (for example, Fred's desire for beer and Fred's belief that beer is available in the fridge causing Fred to get up from his chair and walk to the fridge), there is (we may suppose) a causal law that links the token events under some physical description. In short, you can have mental causation without mental causal laws by embracing mental–physical token identity without type identity.

Davidson's picture seems to face a serious problem. It allows that mental events can be causes, but it doesn't appear to allow that there are distinctively mental causal processes: it is never *qua* mental that a mental event causes an effect, but always *qua* physical. This would seem to imply a kind of epiphenomenalism, in that mental event types as such lack causal efficacy (McLaughlin 1989). The threat of epiphenomenalism is not confined to Davidson's distinctive philosophy of mind, however. Many contemporary philosophers of mind accept the claims of mental–physical token identity and type non-identity, while they depart from Davidson by seeking to make room for distinctively mental-level causation. (This departure is facilitated by a rejection of the 'covering law' model of causal explanation, a model that is now widely seen as implausible.) On their views, mental properties are in every case 'realized by' physical properties, though the same kind of mental property can be realized by a wide variety of physical properties, given appropriately different circumstances. (My dog and I might both believe that there is food in her bowl without its being the case that the physical realizations of these beliefs share any interesting neurophysiological description.) Most such philosophers hold, further,

that the realm of purely physical causation is ‘complete’ or ‘closed’: in tracing the thread of causes running through my brain at a fundamental, physical level, one will not reach any mental event that makes an independent contribution. It is only at a level of organization which is subject to mental and actional description that mental causes make their mark. Mental processes are coarse-grained patterns running through a small, hierarchically organized portion of the physical world. These patterns neither are just a special case of physical patterns (they are in this sense irreducible) nor give rise to explanations that compete with the more fundamental physical explanations on which they supervene. The resulting picture of the physical world is one of multiple levels of causal processes (including physical, chemical, biological, psychological) that are independent of, and irreducible to, each other, each giving rise to true, mutually non-redundant causal explanations of distinctive kinds of phenomena.

It seems to some, however, that this resolution is an attempt to have one’s cake and eat it, too. Consider again Fred, whose desire for beer and beliefs concerning its ready availability supposedly cause his decision to move towards it. On the view under consideration, each of the relevant beliefs and desires is realized by causal-explanatorily prior physical events, where realization is a kind of one-way ontological dependency, such that the occurrences of the more fundamental physical events suffice in the circumstances for the mental events to occur. If this is so, then it might seem that, after all, the purely physical events cause, and thereby explain, Fred’s decision to move and subsequent action. By hypothesis, there is a complete, purely physical causal path at the lower level and, for each mental event at the higher level, there is a subvening physical event, which is ontologically prior and suffices for it. It appears that there is, after all, a competition between candidate physical and mental causes of Fred’s decision. Assuming that the decision is not overdetermined – that is, caused both by Fred’s relevant beliefs and desires *and* by purely physical causes – one set of causes must not be genuine. The ontological priority of the physical suggests that it is the claim about the causal efficacy of the mental that must go (Kim 1998).

The foregoing ‘causal exclusion’ argument challenges the reconcilability of non-reductive physicalism not just with a causal theory of action, but with the causal efficacy of mental states in general. There has been an enormous amount of discussion of this issue in the past few decades, and some of it turns on basic metaphysical issues concerning properties, events, and causation and on how views on these matters impact on the way in which mental events might be said to depend upon physical events. We cannot survey that discussion here. Interested readers are directed to Robb and Heil (2003/2008) and Bennett (2007), which include discussion of various attempts to demonstrate the unsoundness of the exclusion argument, and to O’Connor and Churchill (forthcoming), who argue that the argument goes through only under a certain view of causation. Here I wish to note two accounts of the causal role of mental states, including reasons for actions, which, if successful, would defang the exclusion argument’s conclusion. On both accounts, mental states can be causally relevant to decisions and to subsequent bodily movements even if they are not straightforwardly efficient causes of them.

Causally Relevant, though Not Causes

Jackson and Pettit (1988 and 1990) distinguish 'process' and 'program' explanations. A process explanation specifies the causally efficacious properties that directly contribute to the effect's production. Even for high-level effects such as an agent's choices, these causally efficacious properties will be low-level ones, ultimately of fundamental physics. So mental events are not, strictly speaking, causes of any effects. They are, however, *causally relevant*, insofar as they figure essentially in informative program explanations; and these provide a kind of information not given by the corresponding process explanation:

The realization of the property ensures – it would have been enough to have made it suitably probable – that a crucial productive property is realized and, in the circumstances, that the event, under a certain description, occurs. The property-instance does not figure in the productive process leading to the event but it more or less ensures that a property-instance which is required for that process does figure. A useful metaphor for describing the role of the property is to say that its realization programs for the appearance of the productive property and, under a certain description, for the event produced. The analogy is with a computer program which ensures that certain things will happen – things satisfying certain descriptions – though all the work of producing those things goes on at a lower, mechanical level. (1990: 114)

I shall not consider here whether this retreat from causation to causal relevance allows the theorist to retain everything that is essential to a straightforwardly causal theory of action. I merely note that one's views concerning the nature of causation may affect whether, on the picture Jackson and Pettit provide, reasons are *causally* – as opposed to *explanatorily* – relevant in a weaker sense.

Structuring Causes

Motivated by a different set of concerns than to respond to the causal exclusion argument, Dretske (1988, 1989) nonetheless presents a picture of mental causation that could be marshaled in response to it. (For fuller discussion, see chapter 18 here.) Dretske suggests that, for many kinds of naturally and artificially organized processes, we need to distinguish two kinds of causes. There is the triggering cause of the outcome and the structuring cause of the entire causal process. We may explain the distinction via an example. When you press the button outside my door, the doorbell rings. Your pressing the button triggered the ringing of the bell. That the type of event which is the triggering cause reliably has the bell-ringing effect has a distinct explanation, however – one which lies in the factor which created a causal pathway between the button and the bell. The electrician's establishing a circuit that can be opened by the pressing of the bell is a structuring cause of the effect, for each occasion when the button is pressed.

Likewise, in the case of animal and human action, each instance of, say, movement away from a predator has an electrochemical triggering cause within the agent's brain. The intentional properties of that event – it's being a desire to avoid harm and a belief

that moving in a certain direction will potentially enable that desire to be realized – do not directly trigger the effect, only certain electrochemical properties do. The movement, then, has purely physical causes. However, we should also step back from the particulars of the triggering cause and its effect in this instance, and take note of the fact that a certain kind of electrochemical event in the brain reliably issues in certain kinds of movement (relative to a set of external circumstances). As in the bell-ringing case, although here for purely natural reasons, a kind of process is being exhibited that has a distinctive cause, a structuring cause. The reason why there is a reliable causal pathway of this sort is that the relevant events in the brain have not just electrochemical properties, but also meaning. Dretske's suggestion is that the process of learning operates on the agent's particular kind of cognitive system, recruiting its natural causal and informational regularities, so that certain kinds of representational states come to function as beliefs and desires. As a result, the physical causal sequence of brain state and movement is also a *behavior*, something that the agent is purposively doing. Beliefs and desires cause movements through their physical properties. The *causing* of movements that constitutes behavior is, however, explained by facts about *what* is believed and desired; and the latter facts are themselves, in part, historical – a function of a process of learning. In behavior based on learning, beliefs and desires play the causal roles they do precisely because of their acquired intentional content. In this way they are causally relevant to – structuring causes of – the behavior of which they are a part (Dretske 1990: 831). For a critical discussion of Dretske's conception of the causal role of reasons in action, see Stampe (1990) and Kim (1991).

Reasons, Causes, and Free Will

A different set of concerns comes to the fore when philosophers consider the nature – not of action *simpliciter*, which encompasses the range of animal and human action from the most instinctual or automated to that which is carefully and reflectively deliberated upon through complex considerations – but of actions that are done freely or autonomously, such that the agent is properly subject to moral praise and blame for the action. It is a debated empirical question whether human actions ever are undertaken freely, as we commonly assume in everyday life. (For a discussion of the present status of this question, see O'Connor forthcoming and Mele 2009.) Quite apart from giving a verdict on that matter, however, philosophers can and do ask what it would take to be free agents – to possess 'free will.'

Some philosophers ('compatibilists') endorse a view of freedom of action on which to act freely is, roughly, for one's act to be caused in a suitable way by one's own reasons – whichever reasons are motivationally the strongest at the time one acts – and for this to occur in such a way that one is not subject to any form of external manipulation or internal compulsion. Certain philosophers will adorn this basic account with certain additional requirements, which are not of concern here. All that we need to note is that, on this broad family of views, no special issues about the causal role of reasons arise.

Other philosophers, however, deem this sort of view to be fundamentally inadequate. On their view, free actions are (or would be) actions in which the agent selects from among alternative possibilities in such a way that it is not predetermined by

factors influencing the action, including the agent's own reasons, which possibility the agent shall choose. Freedom of action, then, requires the action not to be causally determined by the action's past. This raises two questions: how is this indeterministic variety of control conceived, and how is its exercise influenced by the agent's reasons?

There are three broad types of indeterminist views of free action. Non-causalist views (Ginet 1990, McCann 1998) take control to be an intrinsic property of choices or volitions and espouse a purely teleological view of how choices are guided by reasons. Causal indeterminist views (Kane 1996) understand an agent's control much like the compatibilists discussed above. It is a function of the fact that the causes issuing in the action include the agent's own reasons for acting. What is different is simply the requirement that the causation between reasons and the action be indeterministic: the reasons cause the action in fact, but it might have been the case that they did not: there was a non-zero probability in the total set of circumstances that a different action might have been caused (by different or perhaps the same set of reasons, as the case may be). Twentieth-century physics has taught philosophers to be comfortable with the idea of indeterministic (or 'probabilistic') causation, though how exactly one is to think of this idea is much debated, and the differences will matter for accounts of the way in which reasons cause free choices indeterministically.

Finally, there is the agent causationist view of freedom. Agent causationists think that free control over one's own actions requires not merely that one's actions be undetermined by one's reasons and other influencing factors, but also that one have a capacity directly to determine which of the several alternatives with a non-zero probability actually occurs. On such a view, this sort of control is an ontologically basic causal capacity of free agents.

Assuming that they reject the adequacy of purely teleological views of the way reasons explain actions, agent-causal views seem to face a dilemma when it comes to the influence of reasons. If they say that reasons influence free actions by causing the agent to cause her decision, then it seems that the view is not a real advance on the causal indeterminist view. In the end, what action the agent selects is settled by the indeterministic activity of the agent's reasons. Why, then, incur the theoretical cost of positing the ontological primitive of agent causation? However, if agent-causal views deny that reasons cause agent-causal events, then it seems that they have no account of how reasons guide free actions. Agent causation would then be a causally unconstrained but 'blind' capacity, one whose exercise would seemingly be random, and not obviously the capacity of a free and responsible agent.

In response to this dilemma, two strategies have been proposed. Clarke (2003) suggests an 'integrated account,' on which an action is caused *both* by the agent and by the agent's reasons so to act. But the cooperative activity of the agent and of her reasons is not fortuitous. Instead, we may suppose that a law of nature governs the fact that the agent's causal capacity is exercised when and only when the appropriate reasons act, and vice versa. (For criticism of this proposal, see O'Connor and Churchill 2006).

O'Connor (2000, 2008) suggests, alternatively, that reasons might causally 'structure' the agent-causal capacity, in the sense of inducing or altering, in the agent, an objective propensity or likelihood (greater than zero but less than one, which designates certainty of outcome) to cause an appropriately matching decision to act. On this

approach, nothing produces the agent's causing her decision, and hence nothing calls into question the ultimacy of the agent's control capacity. The causal activity of the agent's reasons is exhausted by their alteration of the likelihoods of various outcomes. But the capacity is inherently subject to the continuous influence of factors, chief among them being the agent's own reasons. (For critical discussion of this proposal, see Clarke 2003, Hiddleston 2005, and, in reply, O'Connor 2008.)

See also: THE CAUSAL THEORY OF ACTION (5); TELEOLOGICAL EXPLANATION (16); TRIGGERING AND STRUCTURING CAUSES (18); MOTIVATING REASONS (19); HUMEANISM ABOUT MOTIVATION (20); DEVIANT CAUSAL CHAINS (21); MENTAL CAUSATION AND EPIPHENOMENALISM (23); AGENT CAUSATION (28); VON WRIGHT (72); DAVIDSON (73).

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