

## **‘Explaining Actions and Explaining Bodily Movements’**

In this paper I explore some implications that recent discussions on the nature of agents’ reasons for acting have for the traditional causal theory of action.

§1. Much recent work on reasons for action has sought to unsettle certain doctrines that have commanded widespread support among philosophers since the 1960s. One such doctrine is the view that, when someone acts for a reason, the reason for which he acts is combination of two mental states, a state of believing and a state of desiring something. The doctrine, sometimes called the ‘psychological conception of reasons’, can be captured with the slogan: ‘our reasons for acting are mental states’ (where ‘our reasons for acting’ refers, not to the reasons there are for us to act, but to the reasons for which someone acts when she acts for a reason: what are sometimes called ‘motivating reasons’, a label I shall use when convenient).

Several philosophers have argued against this conception of reasons. Their positive views about what these reasons are differ in detail or in substance; nonetheless, they agree on the negative claim that our reasons are not mental states or indeed mental entities of any kind.

§2. The doctrine that our reasons for acting are mental states is associated with the ‘causal theory of action’, which can be encapsulated in these two claims:

(i) **Reason Explanations Claim:** explanations of action that cite the agent’s reason for acting are causal explanations; and

(ii) **Reasons Claim:** the reason that explains an action is a mental entity (a mental event, a mental state, or a combination of these) that is the cause, or a causal condition, of

the action.

Many causalists hold (i) because they hold some version of (ii) - but not all. That is, some causalists do not believe that what makes a reason explanation causal is that its *explanans* and *explanandum* are facts concerning causally related particulars: a reason and an action. These philosophers accept Davidson's argument in 'Actions, Reasons and Causes', namely that the contrast between having a reason and acting in a way that is consistent with a reason, and having a reason and acting *for* that reason can only be accounted for in causal terms. Nonetheless, these philosophers do not think that it follows that when someone acts for a reason that reason is the cause of her action. Rather, they think that what follows from Davidson's argument is the weaker claim that the 'because' of reason explanations is a causal 'because'. Several suggestions about what this amounts to have been proposed; for instance, that reason explanations support counterfactuals that are backed by empirical generalisations; or that reason explanations explain the occurrence of an event and are, therefore, causal; or that the reasons that explain actions are facts that are 'causally relevant' to the agent's acting as she did. These thoughts are certainly suggestive, and each is worth examining separately. But I won't be doing that in this paper. Rather, my concern in this paper will be, for the most part, the second causalist claim, (ii), and for two reasons. One is that the overthrow of the doctrine that our reasons for acting are mental entities, whether states or events, seems to be a threat to (ii) but not obviously to (i) (at least not without assuming some doctrines about causation). The second reason is that it is often thought that (ii) provides the basis for 'naturalising' reason explanations of action; that is, (ii) seems to enable us to regard reason explanations as *bona fide* explanations without the need to postulate causally powerful non-physical entities, that is, without the need for a dualist ontology of physical and non-physical entities with causal powers. The familiar way of doing this is to suggest that the mental events and states that cause actions are identical

to, or realised in, neurophysiological events states of the agent's. I should like to challenge the thought that (ii) helps the task of naturalising reason explanations along the lines just mentioned, and thus remove one motivation for holding that reasons (of any kind) are mental states or events that cause actions.

As just noted, it would seem that at least *prima facie* causal theorists, at least those who hold (ii), should be worried by the overthrow of the traditional doctrine about reasons. For the claim that the reason that explains an action is a mental entity that is the cause or a causal condition of the action seems to depend on the idea that our reasons for acting are mental entities (events or states). And if the latter is false, then it seems that (ii) must be false also. In the following sections (4-9) I shall try to decide whether this appearance is right, and if so, how deep this worry should reach; but first I should make a point of clarification.

§3. First, because the reasons claim (ii) is held in many different versions, it is hard to state is simply. So, the causal theory is often expressed with the slogan that 'reasons are causes' even by philosophers who think that reasons cannot strictly speaking be causes because they think that only events can be causes and think that reasons are not events. Many of these philosophers hold that reasons, which they think of as mental states, are causes in the sense in which antecedent states are said to be causes: they are background conditions that, together with the appropriate triggering event, are efficacious in producing the effect. This event is sometimes said to be the 'onslaught' of the mental state; and sometimes a mental event, such as a noticing, that occurs once the agent is in the mental state that his reasons are said to be, and which triggers the causation of the action. The reasons (states) genuinely contribute to the causation of the action, although their contribution depends on the occurrence of the triggering event. Other philosophers who subscribe both to the slogan and to the view that reasons are states are not so fastidious about whether states are the

right kind of particular to be a cause. While yet others think that the distinction between states and events is superficial: states are, they say, best thought of as a species of events. Davidson himself was somewhat equivocal on these issues. For, on the one hand, he appears to endorse a thought he puts in the mouth of his objectors, that although 'states, dispositions, and conditions are frequently named as the causes of events', this 'gives a cause only on the assumption that there was also a preceding event' (Davidson, 1980, 12). On the other hand, when responding to other objections, he says things such as the following:

If the causes of a class of events (actions) fall in a certain class (reasons) and there is a law to back each singular causal statement, it does not follow that there is any law connecting events classified as reasons with events classified as actions – the classification may even be neurological, chemical or physical (Davidson, 1980, 17).

This suggests that reasons are not only causes in the sense in which states and dispositions are causes but rather in the sense in which events are causes, since Davidson says that reasons can be classified as events and they are presented by him as entities of the kind that could stand in causal relations that are reported by single causal statements.

Be that as it may, what is distinctive of those who hold claim (ii) in the sense I am concerned with here, is that they think that both reasons and the relevant triggering events are entities (perhaps of quite different kinds from each other) that have spatio-temporal location and are susceptible to be given different descriptions; in particular descriptions in terms of vocabularies corresponding to different sciences: psychological, neurological, chemical, etc.

§4. To return to the implications that the overthrow of the doctrine reasons are mental states has for the causal theory and specifically (ii), it should be emphasised that the target of the recent arguments mentioned above is the claim that our reasons for acting are mental states

– that is, that the reasons that *motivate* agents to act are mental states, while the reasons that the causal theory holds to be mental states and to be the causes of actions are reasons that *explain* actions.

Now, it is often assumed (and this includes many causal theorists) that these reasons are always the same. But the assumption is unwarranted. For sometimes an action can be explained by reference to a reason which is not the agent's reason for acting – even when the agent acted for a reason *and even* when the explanation *mentions* that reason. So, it seems that showing that our reasons for acting are not mental states is not sufficient for showing that the reasons that *explain* our actions are not mental states. If that is right, then, even if the arguments about our reasons for acting succeeds, an independent argument would be needed to show that the reasons that explain actions are not, as (ii) says, mental states.

I believe such an argument is available – an argument that gives us a quick route to the conclusion that no reason is a mental state. And I shall come to that argument shortly. But for the moment it will be instructive, and helpful for later points, to explore how and whether arguments designed to show that our reasons for acting are not mental states affect the view that the reasons that explain our actions are mental states.

§5. Philosophers who have argued that our reasons for acting are not mental states often start by noting that an agent's reasons for acting are things that, at least in the agent's eyes, favour the action: they make the action right because good, valuable, appropriate, worth doing, etc., from the agent's perspective (at least at the time of acting). As we might put it, they are what in the agent's eyes somehow connect the action with the good, broadly conceived: for instance, that acting so is a means of achieving a desired goal (taking one's umbrella is a means of keeping dry given that it is raining); or is what duty dictates (marking students' work punctually is part one's contractual obligations); an act of friendship (helping one's friend to move house is such an act), etc. Such facts (or features

of reality, or whatever) are not mental states.

It is true that such facts cannot be one's reason for acting unless one is apprised of them. So the fact that water evaporates quickly in bright sunshine cannot be my reason for watering my plants at dusk unless I am somehow aware of that fact. But it is a mistake to conclude from this that if I water the plants after dark, then my reason for waiting is *my knowing, or believing* that water evaporates in bright sunshine. Rather, my reason is that fact about water – which I am aware of. (It is precisely *this* mistake that led philosophers – via another mistake I shall mention shortly – to the view that our reasons for acting are mental states.)

§6. But we saw above that this conclusion about motivating reasons, our reasons for acting, does not seem to be a straight license for a corresponding conclusion about the reasons that explain our actions. Indeed, one might accept everything said so far about our reasons for acting but insist that the reasons that *explain* our actions are not the same as our reasons for acting and are, indeed, mental states. So whether the causal theory, or at least the causal claim, is threatened by the conclusion about motivating reasons depends on whether it is right to say that these reasons are not the same.

It seems possible to argue that they are the same not because on the general grounds that the reasons that explain actions must make reference to the agent's believing and wanting (or having some 'pro-attitude' towards) certain things. Indeed, some philosophers take this to be not just obvious but central to our understanding of actions performed for reasons. The doctrine is variously expressed: that our actions are explained by our propositional attitudes or by our mental states, that the reasons that explain our actions are mind-based, etc. And one can support this claim with the following thoughts.

First, there is the thought that even if (in most cases) my reason for acting is *not* my believing or knowing something, nonetheless my action cannot be explained except by

reference to my knowing or believing that thing, which are mental states. That is, although my reason for watering the plants at dusk might be a fact about water, my action of watering is explained only by my *knowing* or *believing* that fact. The fact about water alone, it seems, cannot explain my action: my being somehow aware of the fact needs to feature in the explanation.

Secondly, there is the thought that even my awareness of that fact about water does not suffice to explain my action; for my action will only be explained if my *having a goal* in so acting is also mentioned: awareness of the fact about water explains my watering after dusk only against the presupposition of my having a certain goal e.g. economizing on water. If my goal had been to use as much water as possible, then my awareness of the fact about water evaporation would not explain my watering after dark. In short, my action is explained only in as much as the explanation includes reference to my awareness of the relevant fact(s) and to my having an appropriate goal. These may often not be explicitly mentioned in explanations of action that cite my reasons, but they seem to be essential parts of any such explanation.

Moreover, it is sometimes said that the distinction between our reasons for acting and the reasons that explain one's action is simply the distinction between first- and third-person perspectives on the action, and that explanations always take the third-person perspective - i.e. they mention mental states.

Finally, there is a consideration that seems decisive in favour of the view that at least some explanations of action that cite an agent's reason must refer to the agent's psychology. When an agent acts on the basis of a consideration that he believes to be the case but is not the case, any explanation that mentions the motivating consideration *must* incorporate some psychological term such as 'because he *believed* that ...'; 'or *thought* that...'; or 'because, as he believed, p'. And therefore, at least in these cases, the reasons that explain actions are mental states.

§7. But this view about the explanation of action has been challenged. Some have pointed to the fact that there are many action explanations that *mention* the agent's reasons and her goals but do not mention or refer to any psychological factors. On the one hand, they say, explanations of why one acted in terms of motivating reasons, such as 'Because she's my sister', '...it is pleasant'; '...the film was over'; '...I promised to do it', etc.' (as opposed to 'I know or believe that she's my sister, that it is pleasant, that the film was over', etc., etc.) are common and seem perfectly explanatory – as are, it could be added, explanations in terms of goals 'In order to help her; to enjoy myself a little; to get home as early as possible, to do my duty, etc.'. And it seems to be mere philosophical prejudice or theoretical preference for a particular form to insist that these explanations are ellipses for the corresponding psychological-form explanations. Moreover, as Anscombe noted (in *Intention*) and Michael Thompson has emphasised recently, redcriptions of what one is or was doing are also reason-explanatory but, again, do not mention the agent's mental states: 'I am helping her, making a quick exit, doing my duty', etc. Here, explanation by redescription can be thought of as giving the agent's goal on acting (to help her, to leave quickly, to do one's duty, etc.), or has giving a reason (that it would help her, that it was a way of making a quick exit, that it is one's duty, and so on.) Besides, one can agree that my having the relevant belief (or my having grasped a fact) and my having an appropriate pro-attitude must be presupposed by any explanation but argue, as Dancy does, that this does not mean that those are explanatory factors themselves – rather they may be thought of as 'enabling conditions' for the explanation.

As for the claim that the distinction between our reasons for acting and the reasons that explain one's action is simply the distinction between first- and third-person perspectives on the action, this is simply false. I can explain someone's action by saying 'She waters her garden in the evening because watering during the day is wasteful of water' or 'She waters her garden in the evening in order to save water', 'She was making a

quick exit', etc. These are all third-person perspective explanations but they do not mention her knowing or believing something, or her having any goal; rather they mention something she knew (or believed) and a goal she had, or simply redescribe what she was doing.

§8. Given these competing considerations about 'the form' of reasons explanation of actions, the reasonable conclusion might be some sort of 'explanatory pluralism': the view that there is no canonical form but rather a variety of forms of action explanation all of which mention, more or less explicitly, the agent's reason. Nonetheless, those who favour the psychological form of action explanation need to fully surrender for they can still insist on one point, namely, that it is always *possible* (and sometimes necessary, *viz*, when the agent acted on a false belief) to give explanations in the psychological form. In some cases the explanation would be something like 'He did it because he knew that p'; in others 'Because he thought that p' (or similar), and in both cases the explanation is to be supplemented by something to the effect that the agent had a relevant desire or goal. And if this is right, the causalist can claim:

(a) that *these* are explanations that *cite* an agent's reason for acting – the reason is mentioned in the *explanans*, in the 'that'-clause that follows the cognitive verb;

(b) that the *explanans* of such an explanation is a mental state (or a combination of two mental states: that he believed/knew that..., that he had such-and-such a goal); and

(c) that those mental states are the cause, or a causal condition, of the action.

In other words, the causal claim stands. But are these claims plausible?

§9. I said earlier that there seems to be a quick argument to the conclusion that no reason is a mental state or event (which would make (b) false). The claim that the kinds of reasons that explain actions just mentioned are mental states depends on the general claim that my believing or my knowing that p, or my having a certain goal, are mental states. But this

claim needs to be handled with care. The expression ‘my believing that p’ is a nominalization of the sentence ‘I believe that p’ (the same goes for ‘my knowing that p’). Now, many philosophers think that if one believes that p, then one is in a mental state, namely a state of believing that p and think, further, that there is then an entity, a mental state, that one can refer to with the corresponding nominalisation. Perhaps that is so. But these nominalisations have other uses. For instance, they can also be used to refer to facts. So the expression ‘my believing that water evaporates in bright sunlight’ can be used to refer to the fact that I believed that water evaporates in bright sunlight, and ‘my wanting to save water’ can be used to refer to the fact that I want to save water.

So, even if a nominal expression can be used to refer to a mental state it can also be used to refer to a fact. And, in ‘Her believing that p explains her  $\phi$ -ing’, the nominalisation ‘her believing that p’ refers, not to a mental state, but to the facts that she believed that p. And, more generally, when we say that the *reason* that explains someone’s action is her believing that p, his knowing that q, her having such and such a goal, etc., these nominalisations should be construed as referring to *the facts* that she believes that p, knows that q, or has such and such a goal.

This can be seen from the fact that, whenever we use the nominalised form ‘his believing that p’ to talk about reasons in explanations, it is possible, and appropriate given the nature of explanations, to replace it with the expression ‘the fact that he believed that p’. This is surely implicit in the claim that explanations are factive, which I construe as the claim that, if the explanation is true, the *explanans* and the *explanandum* are both facts ; and if it is false, then they should at least capable of being true (or false), and so they must both be propositional in form.

So, it is true that we can always explain actions by citing reasons that involve agents and their beliefs and goals, or their knowledge: e.g. the fact that the agent believes that p, the fact that she knows that q, the fact that he wants X, etc. And we can, if we wish, call these ‘mental’ or ‘psychological’ facts. But in doing so, we are not allocating these reasons

to a category different from other reasons, namely to the category of mental states. These reasons are still facts; just as, if we explain why someone did something by citing the fact that he is diabetic, or rich, and call these 'medical' or 'financial facts respectively, we are not allocating these explanatory reasons to different categories: they are all facts. Thus, in so far as it makes sense to say that a reason that explains an action is a mental state, what that means is not that this reason belongs in a distinctive ontological category, e.g., a category of 'psychological entities'. Rather, what this means is simply that this reason is a fact that concerns an agent's 'mental states', that is, a fact about how things are, psychologically speaking, with the agent.

§10. A defender of the causal theory could concede all this but argue that, even if the reasons that explain our actions are not mental states but facts, nonetheless, the facts cited in action explanations *imply* the existence of certain mental states: the fact that I believe (or know) that water evaporates in bright sun implies that there is a mental state of my believing (or knowing) that fact; the fact that I have a particular goal implies that I am in a mental state of having that goal, and so on. And, the causalist might add, it is *these* mental states that play a causal role in producing actions: these states are the cause, or the causal condition, of the actions that the corresponding reasons explain.

With this move, it seems, the causalist can take on board the claims about reasons for action *and* about reasons that explain actions canvassed here, while retaining commitment to the causal theory. However, it is important to note that this move would require a substantial modification of the second causal claim, along the following lines:

(ii\*) **Reasons Claim:** when an agent acts for a reason, the action is caused by mental states and events that are appropriately related to the reason that explains that action.

It is worth noting that (ii\*) effectively involves abandoning the bold claim that reasons are

mental states that cause actions, whether we think of causes as events or as states.

Nonetheless, it might be thought that even this weaker claim suffices for the task of ‘naturalising’ reason explanations of action along the lines mentioned above. For even if reasons themselves do not cause actions, they are closely related to mental events and states that do. And now the naturalising move can be made. For instance, Mele’s construal of Davidson’s challenge to non-causalists (as issued in ‘Actions, Reasons and Causes’) seems to make precisely this kind of move:

If you hold that when we act intentionally we act for reasons, provide an account of the reasons *for which* we act that does not treat (our having) those reasons as figuring in the causation of the relevant behavior (or, one might add, *as realized in physical causes of the behavior*). (Mele, 2000: 279-80. My italics).

And Wayne Davies responds to the suggestion that thinking of mental states as causes creates a problem as follows:

There is no problem at all if, as the evidence for physicalism suggests, mental states *are* physical. For in that case your beliefs and desires are part of the complete neurophysiological explanation of your action (Davis, 37).

These, and similar remarks by others, suggest the following account:

- (1) The mental states and events whose existence is implied by the reasons that explain actions are identical to, or realised in, neurophysiological states and events;
- (2) These neurophysiological states and events cause bodily movements; and
- (3) These bodily movements are the actions that the corresponding reasons explain.

Accordingly, our actions are indeed caused by mental states and events which, though not reasons themselves, are closely related to them; and they are caused by them because these mental states and events are identical to, or realised in, neurophysiological events and states that cause the bodily movements in which our actions consist. So, we still have causation of action by mental states and events in such a way that our reasons for acting seem to be genuinely explanatory but within a strictly physicalist ontology.

However, this way of naturalising reason explanations is problematic because it involves an equivocation on the term ‘bodily movement’. As has been pointed out before, the term ‘bodily movement’ has a kind of ambiguity inherited from the fact that the verb ‘move’ has both a transitive use, as in ‘I moved the fork’ and an intransitive use, as in ‘The fork moved’. Thus, the term ‘bodily movement’ can be used to talk about an action that is someone’s moving her body, e.g. someone’s raising her arm; or it can be used to refer to what I shall call ‘a motion’ of the body, e.g. to someone’s arm’s rising.

A motion of one’s body may not be the result of one’s action of moving one’s body – as happens when one has a spasm. When the motion of my body is the result of my action of moving my body, my action and the resulting motion are nonetheless different. My action is my moving my body, which is my causing a motion of my body; its result is the motion of my body that I cause: raising my arm is causing a rising of my arm; raising my arm is my action, and the motion that I cause, the rising, is not my action but its result, just as moving a table is causing a motion of the table, and my action of moving the table is different from the motion of the table that I cause.

Now, some philosophers have claimed that this is true for so-called ‘non-basic’ actions, things one does by doing something else (e.g. opening a lock done by turning a key), but not for ‘basic actions’, things done not by doing something else. So they say that, e.g., my moving a table and the resulting motion of the table are distinct but my moving my body and the resulting motion of my body are one and the same. Thus, in his paper ‘Problems in the Explanation of Action’, Davidson writes:

If I raise my arm, then my raising my arm and my arm rising are one and the same event (1987: 37).

But it has been argued that this cannot be right. First, as Hornsby reminds us, if someone asks: ‘What did he do?’ an answer such as: ‘his arm rose’, or ‘his head turned’, does not tell us what the agent did. And, as we saw above, in cases where an agent moves his body, the events just mentioned are events that the agent made happen when he moved his body.

But this creates a serious problem for the view that, if I raise my arm, my raising of my arm and my arm's rising are one and the same event. For raising my arm is causing my arm to rise, that is, causing a rising of my arm. But if my raising of my arm and my arm's rising were one and the same event, then it would follow that my action of causing a rising of my arm is identical to what I cause: to my arm's rising. And that seems absurd because it says that causing an event may be identical to the event caused.

There are other problems that attend this view of basic actions. Davidson articulates one of them with clarity:

if a man's arm goes up, the event takes place in the space-time zone occupied by the arm; but if a man raises his arm, doesn't the event fill the zone occupied by the whole man? (1980[1967]: 124).

Davidson does not regard this difficulty as decisive, although as far as I know he does not provide a satisfactory response to it (partly because he thinks this is a problem that afflicts events in general - but it is not clear that it is so, and he gives no reason why we should think that it is a problem endemic for events.) Thus, my action of moving my body is not the same as the motion of my body. It is indeed true that motions of the body occur when we move our bodies, for when, say, I lock a window by turning my hand, a certain motion of my hand occurs. And it seems plausible to suggest that this motion is caused by neural states and events (and, more generally, by a complex of neurophysiological occurrences and conditions). However, these motions and the related events are not themselves actions but the results of actions: they are the things we make happen when we act.

It is important to note that the point I am making is not that a motion of my body cannot be an action because it is a kind of motion that might have occurred without my having moved my body - for, depending on how we classify kinds of motion, a motion of my body that I make happen is of a different kind from a motion that occurs when I do not act, e.g. as a result of an electrical current: one is caused by me and hence is an actions' result, and the other is not. The point is, rather, that it is a category mistake to confuse the

causing of an event (my moving my body) with the event thus caused (the motion of the body).

Now, let us return to the strategy for naturalising reason explanations that I outlined above. The strategy depends on saying that the ‘bodily movements’ caused by neurophysiological events and states are *actions*. But it should be clear by now that the bodily movements caused by neurophysiological states are not actions but rather their results: motions of the body. So, although the causalist is right that when one acts (by moving one’s body) some neural states and events cause the relevant motions of the body, this does not sanction the conclusion that when one acts some neural states and events cause one’s action, for those motions are not one’s action.

Thus, these neurophysiological states do not cause actions but their results and explanations that mention these neurophysiological events and states do not explain actions but rather explain the motions of our bodies – motions that occur when we act but that are not our actions. And therefore, the claim that mental states are identical to, or realised in, neurophysiological states does not help to show how mental states can cause actions, and hence it does not help to explain how the corresponding reasons explain them either.

Because of this, the causal claim (whether in its original version or in the modified form) does not help to see how reason explanations can be ‘naturalised’ and, therefore, whatever motivation one might have had for saying that mental events and states that are, if not our reasons themselves, at least closely related to them cause actions, it had better not be that that claim helps to naturalise psychological explanations of action.

So we have seen that a proper understanding of both the reasons for which we act and of the reasons that explain our actions make the bold claim that reasons are mental states that cause actions untenable. And we have also seen that the naturalising motivation for holding that mental states and events that are related to our reasons cause actions is misconceived.

Many issues concerning the causal theory of action remain. Among others, the question whether, if reasons are not mental states that cause actions, it is nonetheless plausible to say that reason explanations are causal and, if so, what that claim amounts to. I leave those issues for another occasion.

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November 2010

## References (tbc)

A. Mele, 'Goal-Directed Action: Teleological Explanations, Causal Theories, And Deviance', *Philosophical Perspectives*, 14, *Action And Freedom*, 2000: 279-300.

Many contemporary causalists think that reasons cause actions via intentions. As I hope will be clear, most of what I say about reasons applies to this more complex causalist position that includes intentions also, but I shall not mention intentions explicitly unless the point under discussion requires it. Moreover, (ii) seems tailored for actions that involve bodily movements, what Mele calls 'overt' actions (Mele, 2000, 290). But, even putting aside so-called 'mental acts', there are actions that do not involve movements of the body, e.g. actions one performs by failing to do something. For instance, one can bring down a government by abstaining. Abstaining itself is not an action, but an omission, but bringing down the government is, and something one can do intentionally and for a reason but it does not require moving one's body (see Alvarez and Hyman, 1998; and Alvarez 2000). Whether (ii) can account for actions of this kind is doubtful but I shall not pursue this issue here.

For examples of each of these, see Hornsby (1997); Child (1994); and Steward (1994).

The success in naturalising reason explanations is also thought to be a way of resolving the so-called problem of the 'over-determination' or 'over-explanation' of actions. The problem is nicely summarised in this passage:

If human action can be completely explained by physical causes, as successes in neurophysiology suggest, then how can they be caused by mental states as beliefs and desires? (Davis, 2010, 37).

As Davis goes on to say 'this objection is serious for theories that make mental states to be independent of physical states' (ibid).

Incidentally, this passage contains another reason for holding claim (ii), related to the one given above. Davidson agreed with Hempel that all genuine explanations conform to the covering-law model. However, unlike Hempel, Davidson did not think that the laws that support reason explanations could be psychological laws and, therefore, he held that the singular causal claims implied by reason explanations relate entities that could be described in the terms in which the laws that back each of those singular causal claims were articulated. In other words, (ii) seems to enable Davidson to retain the covering-law model of explanation and the claim that reason explanations are genuine explanations, while rejecting the possibility of strict psychological laws.

So it is often assumed that the reasons mentioned in (ii) above are also the agent's reason for acting and no distinction is made between the following two claims: 'The reason for which someone did something is the cause of her action' and 'The reason that explains why someone did something is the cause of her action'.

I mean that the *explanans* of the explanation of an action need not be the agent's reason for acting, even if the former mentions the latter (e.g. when the *explanans* has the form '(because) he knew that *p*.')

The idea, in various guises, is found in Anscombe (1957), Davidson (1980, 3), McDowell (1982), Raz (1999), Dancy (2000), etc. In as much as possible I am leaving it open whether

on this view reasons are facts, propositions, considerations, ‘bits’ of reality, states of affairs, etc. For a detailed discussion of this issue see Alvarez, 2010, ch5, Sections 5.6 and 5.7.

For philosophers who deny that reasons for action must relate to the good, the point above can be articulated as the claim that reasons are what in the agent’s eyes somehow connect the action with what seems *desirable*.

Many philosophers do. See, for example, Davies (2010).

Davidson (1980, 4-5; where he introduces the idea of a ‘primary reason’); Smith (1998).

I use ‘goal’ rather than ‘desire’ for two reasons. First, to avoid controversies about whether we *want* to do (as opposed to, e.g. think that we must, regard as a duty, etc.) everything that we do for a reason. The second is that the term ‘desire’ suffers from the same state/object ambiguity as ‘belief’ mentioned above: ‘state’: desiring/‘object’: thing desired, while ‘goal’ does not. The state is expressed only as ‘having a goal’. I distinguish between motivating reasons and goals (see Alvarez, 2010, §4.1). However, in this paper and for the sake of brevity I shall often refer to both as reasons, whenever this does not affect the point at issue.

Dancy (2000, 127) denies that these explanations refer to mental states and tries to give a different role to the psychological locutions used in them. For a discussion of his views see Alvarez, 2010, §§5.3 and 6.2.3.

Thompson (2008).

He writes:

The suggestion is therefore that the believing, conceived traditionally as a psychological state, is an enabling condition for an explanation which explains the action in terms of the reasons for (that is, in favour of – the good reasons for) doing it (...) But the believing does not contribute directly to the explanation (Dancy, 2000: 127).

I am doubtful that this is the right picture for the role of these ‘psychological states’ for two reasons. One is that denying that they are part of the explanation leads to the conclusion that these explanations are not factive, which I think is a mistake. The second is that the application of that notion as found in explanations of events to intentional actions is not straightforward. It is possible to explain the occurrence of an explosion by citing the fact that there was a spark and characterise, e.g., the presence of flammable gas, as an ‘enabling condition’ for the explosion, and hence for the explanation. The parallel suggestion, along the lines that Dancy proposes, is that it is possible to explain why someone went home by citing the fact that the film was over, and characterise his believing or knowing that it was over as an enabling condition for the explanation. However, an important difference between the two is that the presence of gas alone could not suffice to explain the explosion if there was no spark (or similar trigger); however, his believing that the film was over (together with his having the relevant goal) is enough to explain his going home – even if the film was not over. (His knowing that the film was over is also enough to explain his going home but of course this explanation implies that the film was indeed over.) So it seems that, at least in many cases, the agent’s believing something plays much more than merely an enabling condition in the explanation of the relevant action.

I include explanations such as ‘He did it because, as he believed, p’ where p may be false but is not the *explanans*, which is, rather, ‘he believed that p’.

Sometimes the *explanans* mentions a reason, sometimes merely an ‘apparent reason’ – something the agent took to be the case and treated as a reason for acting.

The same goes for my having an intention to A.

Here I draw on Alvarez, 2010, § 5.4, where I make use of Strawson’s discussion of this point in his paper ‘Causation and Explanation’ (1992), in which he says that in the sentence ‘His death’s coming when it did was responsible for the breakdown of the negotiations’, the expression ‘his death’s coming when it did’ does not refer to an event in nature, i.e. to his death. Rather, it refers to *the fact* that his death came when it did. For his death coming when it did, unlike his death, ‘did not come at any time. It is not an event in nature. It is *the fact* that a certain event occurred in nature at a certain time’ (Strawson, 1992, 110).

These states are related to the relevant reason in the sense that they are states of believing, knowing, etc. facts –or apparent facts– that are the agent’s reasons for acting, and also states of having goals for the sake of which the agent acts. Another way in which this point is sometimes put is this: these are mental states whose ‘contents’ are the relevant reason and goal.

Davis goes on to say: ‘if it should turn out, however, that our beliefs, desires and intentions are causally ineffective, it would seem to follow that it is an illusion to think that we act intentionally or for reasons. There is no more reason to think that we act for reasons than there is to think that our mental states influence our actions’ (*ibid*).

There is much simplification here – among other things, these explanations also imply the occurrence of physiological changes in tendons, muscles, etc. but that complication can be ignored for present purposes.

The importance of this dual use for claims concerning the identity of actions and bodily movements was first highlighted by Hornsby in her 1980 book *Actions* and in recent papers (2004). For a detailed discussion see also Alvarez and Hyman, 1998 and Hyman 2007.

I follow Hyman’s terminology for bodily movements in his illuminating discussion of this issue in Hyman (2007) and I use ‘result’ here as von Wright does (in *Norm and Action*), to mean not an end state but the event (or process) that must logically happen for me to have performed the relevant action; e.g. the result of an action of killing is a dying, or a death.

It may be tempting to think that I raise my arm by doing something else. For instance, one may think that I raise it by causing certain events to occur in my brain and inside my body. But even if when I raise my arm I cause events of certain kinds to occur in my brain and nervous system, this does not imply that I raise my arm *by* making those events happen: at most it implies that to raise my arm *is* to make those events happen – as well as the event of my arm’s rising. And so it does not follow that I raise my arm by doing something else. Another temptation might be to think that we raise our arms by, e.g., willing, or deciding to do so. But, putting aside various difficulties inherent in the idea that every bodily action is preceded (and caused?) by a willing or a decision, this won’t do. For even after one has willed or decided to raise one’s arm, one still has to do something, namely, raise it, so it cannot be that it is by doing those things that one raises one’s arm.

And yet others argue that the two changes are the same in every case: so my killing a fly and the fly’s dying are one and the same. But I shall leave this view aside as it implies the one above which, if true, would suffice to undermine my claims.

See Alvarez & Hyman 1998 and Alvarez 1999.

The difficulty remains even if we accept that the arm's rising is a more complex event, which includes also events in the agent's central nervous system as the complex formed by those events and the motion of the arm is still more tightly circumscribed than the action of raising one's arm.

For a detailed discussion of this, see Alvarez & Hyman 1998.

It has been claimed that it is wrong to say that when I move my body I cause it to move and hence that I cause a motion of my body. But, although in most cases it is misleading to say that I caused my body to move when I move it directly (for it suggests I did it by doing something else), or that my body has moved, when *I* moved it (for it suggests that it moved of its own accord), both are nonetheless right. For otherwise we should say either that when I raise my arm my arm does not rise, which seems paradoxical; or that it does rise but I do not make it rise – but then *what* exactly does raising it amount to if not making it rise? Hacker seems to endorse the first claim when he says: 'If I raise a patient's head from a pillow, does his head rise? No -- it is raised' (Hacker, 2010, 155, fn38). But of course the second does not exclude the first because although my arm might rise without being raised, it might also rise because it is raised, by me or by someone else, just as a table moves when and because it is moved. The proof that I can move a heavy stone is, precisely, that it moves when I push against it; and to say that the stone is moved by me is to say that I cause its motion.

This point is pressed by Hornsby, 2005.

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