

Objections to Davidson's early causal theory

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January 19, 2009

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We read the Davidson of 'Actions, Reasons, and Causes' as presenting a theory of intentional action of the following kind:

Davidson's early causal theory of intentional action

$A \phi$ s intentionally \iff (for some property F , (i) A has some pro-attitude toward actions which are F , (ii) A believes that her ϕ ing is F , and (iii) this belief and desire cause A in the right way to ϕ)

As before, the 'in the right way' proviso is meant to rule out cases of deviant causation of the kind discussed by Davidson in 'Freedom to Act.' It is an open question both whether 'in the right way' can be spelled out in a more illuminating way, and whether the theory requires that it should be possible to spell it out in a more illuminating way.

For now, we set this problem to the side and consider some other sorts of objections to this kind of causal analysis.

1 Frankfurt's objection

Frankfurt states his main objection to theories like Davidson's as follows:

"In asserting that the essential difference between actions and mere happenings lies in their prior causal histories, causal theories imply that actions and mere happenings do not differ essentially in themselves at all. These theories hold that the causal sequences producing actions are necessarily of a different type than those producing mere happenings, but that the effects produced by sequences of the two types are inherently indistinguishable. . . . It is integral to the causal approach to regard actions and mere happenings as being differentiated by nothing that exists or that is going on at the time those events occur, but by something quite extrinsic to them – a difference at an earlier time among another set of events entirely.

This is what makes causal theories implausible. They direct attention exclusively away from the events whose natures are at issue, and away from the times at which they occur.”

Frankfurt suggests that this is what gives rise to the problem of deviant causal chains; by contrast, Frankfurt thinks that the difference between actions and mere happenings has more to do with the behavior in question being in the agent’s guidance while it is going on than with the causes of the behavior.

Frankfurt distinguishes three different levels of action:

- (i) *Purposive behaviors* include all movements whose course is guided.
- (ii) *Intentional movement* includes all purposive behavior under the guidance of the agent.
- (iii) *Intentional actions* include all intentional movements which the agent intends ‘more or less deliberately and self-consciously’ to perform.

If this is right, then the theory of action needs to provide an account of three things: the difference between guided and un-guided movements; the difference between movements guided by an agent and movements guided by something else; and intention.

Davidson was certainly not out to provide an account of (iii); plausibly he was trying to give an account of what Frankfurt calls ‘intentional movement.’

If this is the right reading of Davidson, then we can express Frankfurt’s objection to Davidson as the claim that what makes a movement intentional is our being in touch with, or guiding, the movement as it occurs, rather than what states we were in prior to the movement’s happening.

A suggested response to Frankfurt’s objections on the part of the causal theory: require that part of what it is for a belief/desire pair to cause an action in the right way is for the pair to continue to cause the action throughout its duration. There is no reason why causal theories should be committed to the claim that the relevant causal factors must always be prior to rather than concurrent with the action. This amounts to the claim that what it is for a movement to be guided (or purposive) is for it to be caused by some ‘mechanism’ throughout its duration, and the claim that what it is for a movement to be guided by an agent is for this mechanism to be the right kind of belief/desire pair. (The causal theorist might press the point by claiming that Frankfurt’s talk of actions being guided is just a disguised way of talking about them being caused in a certain way.)

Frankfurt has a response to this kind of revamped causal theory:

“...it is not essential to the purposiveness of a movement that it actually be causally affected by the mechanism under whose guidance the movement proceeds. A driver whose automobile is coasting downhill in virtue of gravitational forces alone may be entirely satisfied with its speed and direction, and so he may never intervene to adjust its movement in any way. This would not

show that the movement of the automobile did not occur under his guidance. What counts is that he was prepared to intervene if necessary, and that he was in a position to do so more or less effectively. . . . The behavior is purposive not because it results from causes of a certain kind, but because it would be affected by certain causes if the accomplishment of its course were to be jeopardized.”

Does this count against our revised version of the causal theory?

In §V, Frankfurt offers a separate, and interesting, argument against Davidsonian theories, using the example of a spider. It is plausible, as he says, that even lower animals are capable of intentional movements, even if not of intentional actions (using these terms in Frankfurt’s sense). But is it plausible to ascribe to such animals the belief/desire pair required by Davidson’s theory? If not, does this show that Davidson’s theory is a false account of level (ii) of Frankfurt’s three levels of action, or that when Davidson is giving an account of ‘intentional action’, he is giving an account of some property in between Frankfurt’s (ii) and (iii)?

This comes back to the question of how stable the category of ‘intentional actions’ is as an analysandum.

2 Hursthouse on arational actions

Hursthouse gives a quite different criticism of Davidson’s theory. In ‘Arational Actions’, she claims that there is a class of intentional actions which do not fit Davidson’s analysis. These are intentional actions done because the agent was in the grip of some emotion, but for which there is no belief of the sort required by clause (ii) of the analysis which explains the action. The cases are thus ones which challenge the necessity of Davidson’s conditions on intentional action. So while Frankfurt focused on the causal element of Davidson’s theory, Hursthouse’s criticism focuses on Davidson’s choice of the relevant causes.

A few of Hursthouse’s examples:

- acts done out of anger, e.g. kicking an appliance that is not working properly
- acts done out of excitement, e.g. jumping up and down
- acts done out of grief, e.g. tearing at one’s hair

Hursthouse claims that in cases like these, we can always ascribe some desire which explains the action – e.g., my kicking the refrigerator is explained by my desire that the refrigerator work properly. But she also claims that we can find no belief which is both truly ascribable to the agent in question and fits Davidson’s analysis. In the present case, the belief would have to be something absurd which I do not believe – e.g. that my kicking the refrigerator will make it work. (Note that Hursthouse is not claiming that in cases of, e.g., kicking an appliance, we can *never* find an appropriate belief/desire pair; she is only claiming that in some such cases there is no appropriate pair.)

Here are a few possible replies to these examples on the part of the proponent of Davidson's theory (what she calls 'the standard account'):

1. In these cases, the agent desires to express emotion X, and believes that doing such-and-such will express emotion X.

But in many cases of acting in the grip of an emotion, there is no justification for ascribing this belief/desire pair. Why think that to intentionally act out of anger I *must* either desire to express the anger or have beliefs about whether my action will achieve this end?

2. The agent desires pleasure, and believes that doing such-and-such will give her pleasure.
3. The agent wants to perform the action in question, and believes that doing such-and-such bodily movement will bring about the performance of the action. (E.g., I want to kick the refrigerator, and believe that moving my leg in such-and-such way will result in my kicking the refrigerator.)

Two problems here: (i) on the standard account, this would show that moving my leg in such-and-such a way was intentional, not that my kicking was; and (ii) it's far from obvious that we always have beliefs of the relevant sort.

How wide is this class of counterexamples? Hursthouse's point (64) that her examples intuitively seem quite similar to many cases (e.g., fleeing from danger) for which many have thought that the belief/desire theory is correct.

Hursthouse's suggested solution: severing the notion of intentional action from the idea of acting on the basis of a primary reason, in Davidson's sense of that term.