

# Davidson's "Actions, Reasons, and Causes"

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## 1 Davidson's argument for the causal theory

### 1.1 *Intentional action and action for a reason*

Davidson begins the article talking not about the nature of intentional action, but about the nature of reasons for action. But there is a connection between these topics, which many take to be captured by the equivalence

$$A \phi \text{ intentionally} \equiv A \phi \text{ for a reason}$$

If this is right, then one way to give an account of what it is to act intentionally is to give an account of what it is to act for a reason. This is what Davidson tries to do.

His basic claim about the nature of acting for a reason can be summarized in two parts:

- (1) An agent's reason for  $\phi$ ing consists in a pro-attitude toward actions of a certain kind along with a belief that  $\phi$ ing is an action of that kind. (He calls the combination of this sort of belief and desire a *primary reason*.)
- (2) Primary reasons are the causes of actions.

The distinction between the nature of reasons for action and the nature of having something as a reason for action.

Davidson provides considerations in favor of both (1) and (2).

### *1.2 Primary reasons for action always consist of a pro-attitude and belief related in the right way*

Davidson does not so much give a deductive argument for (1) as show how certain examples seem clearly to point in its favor. The example of the burglar; why do we say that the agent's turning on the light switch was intentional, but that his alerting the burglar was not? It seems almost impossible not to say that the difference is that the agent *wanted* (i.e., had a certain pro-attitude) to turn on the light, but did not want to alert a burglar; or, again, that the agent knew that his action would turn on the light, but did not know that his action would alert the burglar. Reflection on cases like this seems to make it clear that the difference between intentional and unintentional acts is to be found in the beliefs and desires of the agent.

Why we often cite merely a pro-attitude or merely a belief when rationalizing actions.

Davidson's response to the claim that some actions are done 'for no reason'; how these can be accommodated given his conception of reasons for action.

### *1.3 Primary reasons are causes*

If Davidson's main argument for (1) is that certain kinds of examples make it plausible, his main argument for (2) – that the beliefs and pro-attitudes which rationalize actions also cause them – is that there is no real alternative. Davidson puts it as follows:

“How about the other claim: that justifying is a kind of explaining, so that the ordinary notion of cause need not be brought in? Here it is necessary to decide what is being included under justification. It could be taken to cover only what is called for by C1: that the agent have certain beliefs and attitudes in the light of which the action is reasonable. But then something essential has certainly been left out, for 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. Central to the relation between a reason and an action it explains is the idea that the agent performed the action *because* he had the reason. Of course, we can include this idea too in justification; but then the notion of justification becomes as dark as the notion of reason until we can account for the force of that ‘because.’”

Putative alternatives to treating this ‘because’ as causal: when we give reasons for action we describe it, put it in its context, or place it in a pattern; ‘non-causal bringing about.’

#### 1.4 *The status of Davidson's account*

It is important to see that Davidson in this article only provides necessary conditions for acting intentionally. The claims that he makes are the biconditional claim

$A \phi$ s intentionally  $\equiv A \phi$ s for a reason

and the conditional claim

$A \phi$ s for a reason  $\rightarrow$  (for some property  $F$ , (i)  $A$  has some pro-attitude toward actions which are  $F$ , (ii)  $A$  believes that her  $\phi$ ing is  $F$ , and (iii) this belief and desire cause  $A$  to  $\phi$ )

But these only entail the following conditional:

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

Davidson is explicit about this in the article (see footnote 5 in the reprinted version). He seems to have had in mind cases of 'deviant causal chains', which we'll discuss below. If this is right, then the above can be turned into a constitutive account of the nature of intentional action by adding a qualifier to clause (iii) of the right hand side:

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

The difficulty is then to spell out what 'in the right way' amounts to.

## 2 **Davidson's replies to traditional objections to causal theories**

### 2.1 *The 'logical connection' argument*

The most prominent argument against causal theories of action in the 1950's and early 1960's was the argument that there is a conceptual connection between actions and the reasons for which they are performed, whereas causal relations can only hold between distinct events.

Davidson discusses and responds to several different versions of this argument:

1. When we cite a reason for action, we redescribe the action; so there is only a single event here, which is given two descriptions. But a causal relation requires two distinct events.

Reply: the possibility of redescribing an event in terms of another does not imply that they are not distinct. I can redescribe the patient's pain as the event caused by the dentist's drilling; but this does not make the drilling identical with the pain.

2. The relationship between reasons and actions is logical; but there can be no logical relations between events which are causally related.

What exactly is the logical relation between reasons and action supposed to be? There seem to be no obvious entailment relations.

Difficulty with the idea of logical relations.

3. Statements which give reasons for action are analytic, whereas statements about causal relations are always synthetic ('empirical' is Davidson's term).

A problem with the idea that claims about reasons for action are analytic.

Davidson's point that "the truth of a causal statement depends on *what* events are described; its status as analytic or synthetic depends on *how* the events are described."

## 2.2 Causal theories of action are incompatible with privileged access

It is familiar view in the philosophy of mind that we have some sort of privileged, non-observational kind of knowledge about our own mental states. As Anscombe pointed out, this privileged access seems to extend to facts about what intentional actions we are undertaking. But Davidson points out, correctly, that we also often seem to have this kind of non-observational knowledge (in many cases) of the reasons for which we act:

"The fact that you may be wrong [about your reasons for action] does not show that in general it makes sense to ask how you know what your reasons were or to ask for evidence. Though you may, on rare occasions, accept public or private evidence as showing you are wrong about your reasons, you usually have no evidence and make no observations."

The puzzle is then how we can have this kind of knowledge of a causal relation.

Davidson's only reply seems to be that we have no reason to suppose that these are incompatible; we cannot, e.g., infer that this knowledge is not knowledge of a causal relation from the fact that it is not inductive, since sometimes we can be "persuaded without direct inductive evidence" of a causal relation. But this does nothing to make this kind of self-knowledge intelligible.

## 3 Deviant causal chains

A problem for the view that causation by a matching pro-attitude and belief is necessary *and sufficient* for intentional action:

“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.”  
(Davidson, ‘Freedom to Act’)

The modest response to deviant causal chains; the analogy with the causal theory of perception; the right roles for philosophy and empirical science. Does this leave Davidson’s ‘because’ as unexplained as that of his opponents?

A less modest response (see Davidson, ‘Freedom to Act’, and Setiya, ‘Explaining Action’). The distinction between basic and non-basic actions; non-deviance in the case of basic actions a matter of continued guidance, non-deviance in the case of non-basic actions a matter of causation according to a plan.