

Objections to Davidson's early causal theory

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

$A \phi$ s intentionally \rightarrow (for some property F , (i) A has some pro-attitude toward actions which are F , (ii) A believes that her 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.

Following are some of the leading objections to this kind of causal analysis.

1 Hursthouse on arational actions

In 'Arational Actions', Rosalind Hursthouse 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.

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.)

Hursthouse considers a number of 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.

A possibility Hursthouse does not consider:

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.)

But this does not exactly fit the standard account either; can the standard account be revised so that this solution is a better fit?

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 (64-5).

2 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’s claim 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.’

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?

Frankfurt’s example of the 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)?

3 Davidson on pure intending

3.1 *The problem*

In “Intending”, Davidson presents a problem for his earlier theory. He offered an analysis of intentional action as action caused in the right way by the right kind of belief/desire pair. He now notes that it is very plausible that one intentionally ϕ s only if one’s ϕ ing is caused by one’s intention to ϕ . If this is right, then the earlier analysis would lead us to hope that causation by an intention just is causation by the right kind of belief/desire pair. But the problem he now raises is one familiar from Anscombe: we can sometimes intend to ϕ without carrying out our intention.

The problem posed by these cases of ‘pure intending’ (intending unaccompanied by the action which is the execution of the intention) is that it seems very likely that the state of intending mentioned in these cases is the same state as the one which is active in cases of intentional action. But then, even if we have said what it is to act intentionally, this does not itself suffice as an account of what it is to intend to do something. And, as Davidson says, “Our inability to give a satisfactory account of pure intending on the basis of our account of intentional action thus reflects back on the account of intentional action itself.” (88)

3.2 *Solutions to the problem*

To solve the problem, we want an account of pure intending which meshes well with Davidson’s account of intentional action. The natural choice is to identify intentions with beliefs, desires, or some combination thereof. We will consider four possible solutions to this problem.

1. One obvious solution, which Davidson surprisingly does not consider, is to identify intentions with belief/desire pairs of the kind of which he made use in “Actions, Reasons, and Causes.” On this view, to intend to ϕ would be, for some property F , to desire to perform some action which is F and believe that ϕ ing is F . This would mesh very well

with Davidson's original account, but does not seem very plausible. I can have such a belief and desire pair without having the relevant intention.

2. Davidson's first proposed solution is to identify intending to ϕ with believing that one will ϕ .

He gives two arguments against this analysis:

i. One can intend to ϕ without believing that one will ϕ . The example of the man who intends to make out a will to provide for his children without believing that he will (92). The example of the carbon copies (again). Possible response: these are cases of intentional action not accompanied by intentions.

ii. Intentions to ϕ cannot be beliefs that one will ϕ , since the reasons for the former are different than the reasons for the latter. My reasons for intending to get up early in the morning (preparing early for seminar) are different than my reasons for believing that I will (trust in the reliability of my alarm clock).

There is also another, more obvious argument, which he does not give: I can believe that I will ϕ without intending to ϕ . Example of an unwilling drug addict.

3. Davidson's second proposed solution is to identify intending to ϕ with wanting to ϕ .

While Davidson ultimately defends a solution of this sort, the discussion in this section of the article is confusing, partly because he moves from talking about wants to talking about judgements about certain actions being desirable. In any event, the simple view that intending to ϕ is simply a matter of wanting to ϕ is implausible, so we should follow Davidson in considering the thesis that intentions to act are a kind of desirability judgement. Davidson's claim is that wanting is a matter of finding some action-type desirable in a certain respect, whereas intending is an all-out judgement of desirability (given one's beliefs).

The problem that we can intend (and want) to do things which we do not regard as in any way desirable.

4. More complex analyses of intending to act in terms of belief and desire are also possible. Wayne Davis, e.g., offers the following (in "A Causal Theory of Intending"): an agent intends that p iff he believes that p because he (i) desires that p and (ii) believes that this desire will motivate him to act in such a way as to make p the case.

Problems with the complexity of the analysis, and with the fact that it seems that one can have the right kind of belief for the right reasons without having the requisite intention.

3.3 The simple view, and a different kind of solution

A different kind of response: the problem of the nature of pure intending does not cast doubt on the account of intentional action, because intentionally ϕ ing is not always accompanied by the intention to ϕ . A question about how far this really gets us.

This is something we will discuss more in connection with the Bratman article next week.