e-Journal Philosophie der Psychologie	**INTERPRETING DAVIDSON ON INTENTIONAL ACTION**

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Davidson's early papers on philosophy of action were immensely influential and no doubt largely responsible for there being a "standard story": Actionsa are those bodily movements caused and rationalized by beliefs and desires. It is not false to say that Davidson asserted that claim, but proponents of the standard story understand it somewhat differently than he did. His writings, I shall argue, spawned a widely accepted view that differs from his own in a number of respects.[1]

Wittgensteinian critics of the standard story generally assume that Davidson accepted it, as do its defenders, who invariably cite him as their inspiration and often credit him for rooting the story in physicalism: Jaegwon Kim, for instance, writes that Davidson's "main task has been that of finding for mind a place in an essentially physical world . . . [in which] we find nothing but bits of matter and increasingIy complex aggregates made up of bits of matter."[2]

But both critics and defenders overlook the substantial influence of Elizabeth Anscombe's work on Davidson, who took her *Intention* to be "the most important treatment of action since Aristotle."[3] Although usually viewed as having replaced an account like Anscombe's with the standard story, Davidson rather thought that such an account was consistent with a causal account of action. He also thought that the latter was consistent with significant claims of other philosophers influenced by Wittgenstein–von Wright, for example, or Kenny, Melden, and Hampshire–whom he read and learned from, as he did from Wittgenstein himself, noting "those long hours I spent years ago admiring and puzzling over the *Investigations*."[4] He was critical of their work, and in the last analysis his view was quite distinct from theirs; but an adequate interpretation of his philosophy of action must nevertheless see it against the background of all these philosophers.

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The most consequential misunderstanding of Davidson's account of action rests on missing the import of his distinction between causal *relations* and causal *explanations*. His well-known claim, that to differentiate an agent's acting *because* of a reason from her merely *having* a reason requires a causal "because", is often misunderstood since merely asserting that reasons cause actions blurs that distinction. Causal relations hold *only* between *events* (hence Davidson called this "event causation"), and they obtain no matter how the events are described, so that sentences ascribing them are *extensional*. Ascriptions of causal relations need not, therefore, *explain* phenomena: Saying truly that what Karl referred to last night was the event-cause of what happened to Linda a year ago does not explain what happened to Linda a year ago.

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[1] For the "standard story," see Michael Smith, "The Structure of Orthonomy," in *Agency and Action*, ed. John Hyman and Helen Steward (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 165. I long regarded Davidson as holding a version of the standard story, a mistake I want to correct here.

[2] Jaegwon Kim, "Philosophy of Mind and Psychology," in *Donald Davidson*, ed. Kirk Ludwig (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 113.

[3] From the cover of the 2000 Harvard edition of her *Intention*. My citations refer to the original edition: G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1957).

[4] Donald Davidson, "Replies," in *The Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, The Library of Living Philosophers, vol. 27, ed. Lewis E. Hahn (Chicago: Open Court, 1999), p. 268.

Although event causation holds only between particulars, Davidson thought it involves generality, hence his thesis of the "nomological character of causality": If events are causally related, there must be a *strict law* instantiated by true descriptions of the events.[5] We need not know those descriptions, but since laws are strict only if the events described belong to a *closed system* (one such that whatever can affect the system is part of the system being described), and since, Davidson held, only physics describes a closed system, all strict laws belong to (a completed) physics.[6] Because Davidson held that events are physical if they have a physical description, he also held that all causally related events are physical.

It does not follow that event causation does not involve mental events: Since events are mental if they have a mental description, and since events are causally related no matter how described, mental events can be causally related to either physical or mental events.[7] What does follow is that *reasons* are not causally related to actions, since the beliefs and desires Davidson took to be reasons are not events. "'Primary reason's . . . are certainly not events . . . Beliefs and desires are not changes. They are states; and since I don't think that states are *entities* of any sort, and so are not events, I do not think beliefs and desires are events."[8]

When Davidson asserted that reasons cause actions, he meant they causally explain actions: His view was that *rational explanation is a kind of causal explanation*. An explanation relates not to events but to sentences (propositions, facts), since to explain phenomena is always to explain them as such and such, that is, under a description (so that explanation sentences are *intensional*).[9] The point of an explanation is to render phenomena intelligible, and what does so under one description of the phenomena may not do so under another. Moreover, the same phenomenon may have different kinds of explanation, each explaining it under a different description.[10]

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[5] "Where there is causality, there must be a law: events related as cause and effect fall under strict deterministic laws." Donald Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2nd ed. 2001), p. 208.

[6] A strict law is "something one [can] at best hope to find in a developed physics: a generalization that [is] not only 'law-like' and true, but [is] as deterministic as nature can be found to be, [is] free from caveats and *ceteris paribus* clauses; that [can], therefore, be viewed as treating the universe as a closed system." Donald Davidson, *Truth, Language, and History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), p. 190.

[7] Cf. Davidson, *Truth, Language, and History*, p. 191: "The efficacy of an event cannot depend on how the event is described, while whether an event can be called mental, or can be said to fall under a law, depends entirely on how the event can be described." The main source for this is Davidson's "Mental Events," in Davidson, Essays on Actions and Events pp. 207-224. An extremely helpful supplement is the piece he wrote about his own work: Donald Davidson, "Donald Davidson," in *A Companion to the Philosophy of Mind*, ed. Samuel Guttenplan (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).

[8] Donald Davidson, "Reply to Stoecker," in *Reflecting Davidson*, ed. R. Stoecker (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1994), p. 287.

[9] "Explanation, like giving reasons, is geared to sentences or propositions rather than directly to what sentences are about." Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events*, p. 171.

[10] Strawson has an excellent discussion of this point, writing, for instance: "Causality is a natural relation that holds in the world between particular events or circumstances, just as the relation of temporal succession does or that of spatial proximity….But if causality is a relation which holds in the natural world, explanation is a different matter….It is an intellectual or rational or intensional relation and does not hold between things in the natural world….[but] between facts or truths." P. F. Strawson, "Causation and Explanation," in *Essays on Davidson: Actions and Events*, ed. Bruce Vermazen and Merril B. Hintikka (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), p. 115.

Not all explanation is causal; to be *causal* an explanation should, according to Davidson, meet three conditions.[11] First, its *explanandum* should describe either an event or a state whose existence entails an event. If the *explanandum* is that the bridge is slippery (a state), it follows that it became slippery, which is an event.

Second, its *explanans* should either describe an event *causally related* to the *explanandum* or entail that there is an *associated* event[12] so causally related. That is, if A causally explains B, "A" describes either an event causally related to B or an event associated with it that is so causally related. What "associated with" denotes will vary. The description of A may entail a description of the associated event: For example, if the car skids because the road is icy (a state), the associated event is the car's contacting the ice. Or there may be a generalization connecting A with the associated event: If the slippery road explains the car accident, the associated event is the car's skidding. Or the associated event may occur without anyone knowing what it is.

Third, the explanation depends on an empirical generalization that connects a description of the cause with a description of the effect but which is a rough generalization and not a strict law. Davidson held that causal explanations must involve generality but do not cite strict laws since their point is to explain phenomena when we do not know, or because there cannot be, strict laws covering the phenomena. Since Davidson often called these strict laws "causal laws," he said that the causal *concepts* involved in a causal explanation do not figure in causal *laws*. "It is causal *relations*, not [causal] concepts that imply the existence of [strict] laws . . . Causal *concepts* don't sit well with strict causal laws because they enable us to evade providing strict laws."[13] While physics has lots of causal *laws*, "it is a sign of progress in a science that it rids itself of causal concepts."[14]

Davidson held that *rational* explanations meet these conditions. They meet the first because their *explananda* describe actions, which are events. They meet the second because, although an agent's reasons for action are states and not events, the *explanans* of a rational explanation (like that of causal explanations generally) entails that there is an event *associated with* the reason that is causally *related* to the action. Sometimes the reason *entails* the associated event: If Mark bought a book because he believed it important for his work, the associated event is his coming to believe that.

Sometimes the context determines the event: If I wave to you because you are my neighbor, the event is my recognizing you across the street. Or we may not know what the event is, but there is, nevertheless, an event that causes the action at a particular time and place.

They meet the third condition because desires are dispositional states, and hence ascribing a desire to an agent entails a rough generalization connecting the desire with a description of her action. "A want is, or entails, a certain disposition to act to obtain what one wants. That someone has a certain disposition may be expressed as a generalization or law governing the behavior of that person . . . [It means] we can say of someone who has a desire or end that he will tend to behave in

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[11] Although Davidson does not put it in this way, what follows is an accurate summary of his view. I discuss this matter in more detail in my "Intentionalists and Davidson on 'Rational Explanations,'" in *Actions, Norms, and Values*, ed. G. Meggle (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1999).

[12] The term is Davidson's; see Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events*, p. 12.

[13] Donald Davidson, "Reply to Bieri," in R. Stoecker (ed.), *Reflecting Davidson*, p. 312.

[14] Davidson, "Representation and Interpretation," in his *Problems of Rationality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), p. 96.

certain ways under specified circumstances."[15] These generalizations are lawlike because they support claims about what someone *would* do *were* he to have those desires, but they are not strict laws since they require *ceteris paribus* conditions.

They are empirical but in the special sense of being implicit in the concept of desire: To know someone's desire is *thereby* to know a rough generalization about what she would tend to do given certain conditions. What is empirical is whether someone has a certain desire; if she does, her action will necessarily (*ceteris paribus*) exemplify a rough generalization.[16] The latter is very low level, however, since what someone with a given desire would tend to do depends on her belief about how to fulfill it, and the generalization applies only to someone who has the relevant belief. "The laws implicit in reason explanations are simply the generalizations implied by attributions of dispositions. But then the 'laws' are peculiar to individuals at particular moments."[17]

Although such low-grade generalizations yield little explanatory force, Davidson insisted that "the main *empirical* thrust of...a reason explanation [comes from] the attributions of desires, preferences, or beliefs,"[18] and he refused to give these generalizations a more significant role by extending their scope to what *all* agents would do under certain conditions. Any list of such conditions that made a generalization about what all agents would do plausible, would also make the generalization nonempirical. It cannot be empirical, for example, that *anyone* who has a desire for fresh air and believes opening the window will provide it, opens the window, provided he meets a list of conditions. If someone appeared to have the desire and belief and to meet the conditions but had no tendency to open the window, we would conclude, not that the generalization was false, but that we were mistaken about his attitudes, about our list, or about whether he met the conditions. We must not look to empirical generalizations to understand the force of rational explanations.

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If we take seriously the distinction between causal relations and causal explanations, Davidson's claim that reasons cause actions looks different than often supposed. It does not mean that reasons are event-causes, but that they are states whose contents causally *explain* actions, a claim Davidson defended against two criticisms. The first appealed to Hume's thesis that causal explanations require general laws, the criticism being that since there are no general laws covering reasons and actions (no laws connecting content descriptions of reasons with descriptions of actions as intentional), reasons cannot causally explain actions. Von Wright accepted that criticism because he accepted Hume's thesis, but since Davidson rejected the thesis, he could claim that rational explanations are causal (in a non-Humean sense) even if there are no general laws

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[15] Davidson, "An Interview with Donald Davidson," in *Essays on Actions and Events*, p. 263. See also Davidson, "Problems in the Explanation of Action," in *Problems of Rationality*, p. 108: "If a person is constituted in such a way that, if he believes that by acting in a certain way he will crush a snail then he has a tendency to act in that way, then in this respect he differs from most other people, and this difference will help explain why he acts as he does. The special fact about how he is constituted is one of his causal powers, a disposition to act under specified conditions in specific ways. Such a disposition is what I mean by a pro-attitude."

[16] This is like Anscombe's point that "The primitive sign of wanting [rather than wishing or hoping] is trying to get." Anscombe, *Intention*, p. 68.

[17] Davidson, "Hempel on Explaining Action," in *Essays on Actions and Events*, p. 265; see also p. 274: "The laws that are implicit in reason explanation seem to me to concern only individuals–they are the generalizations embedded in attributions of attitudes, beliefs and traits."

[18] Ibid., p. 265.

connecting reasons and actions. Davidson and von Wright agreed, therefore, that rational explanations required no covering laws, but disagreed on what it is for an explanation to be causal.[19]

The second criticism (also credited to Hume, who asserted that cause and effect are distinct existences) was that conceptual connections exclude causal connections, and hence the conceptual connections between reasons and actions entail that reasons do not causally explain actions. Davidson recognized such connections, but rejected the criticism by appealing to the distinction between causal relations and causal explanations. The claim that cause and effect are distinct existences applies only to *events* and hence only to causal *relations* between events. *Conceptual* connections hold, not between events, but between sentences (propositons) or descriptions and hence are relevant only to causal *explanations*. The claim that causes and effects cannot be conceptually connected is, therefore, either nonsense or false. It is nonsense to speak of *events* as conceptually connected, while it is false to claim that *descriptions* of events (even if causes and effects) cannot be conceptually connected. It is a conceptual truth, for instance, that the cause of E causes E, but the connection between the descriptions "the cause of E" and "E" is distinct from the causal relation between the events described. Whether descriptions are conceptually connected is independent of whether the events described are causally related.

Davidson saw conceptual connections between reasons and actions as crucial to rational explanation. He wrote, for instance, that "There is a conceptual connection between pro attitudes and actions.... When we explain an action, by giving the reason, we do redescribe the action; redescribing the action gives the action a place in a pattern, and in this way the action is explained."[20] Indeed, he held that there is no principled distinction between what *constitutes* action and what *explains* it. "Explanation is built into the concepts of action, belief, and desire . . . We already know, from the description of the action, that it must have been caused by such a belief-desire pair, and we know that such an action is just what such a belief-desire pair is suited to cause . . . . Beliefs and desires explain actions only when they are described in such a way as to reveal their suitability for causing the action . . . . [They] explain an action only if [their] contents . . . entail that there is something desirable about the action, given the description under which the action is being explained."[21]

Why did Davidson hold that such explanation is *causal*? After all, explanation always aims at understanding phenomena–at rendering them intelligible–which can be achieved in different ways, One might redescribe the phenomena, specify their parts, spell out their function in a system, articulate the role they play in a narrative–or construct a causal exp|anation of them. Why count explanations that meet Davidson's three conditions as *causal*?

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[19] Von Wright also thought that rational explanations were causal in some nonHumean sense: "Those who think that actions have causes often use 'cause' in a much broader sense than I do when I deny this. Or they may understand 'action' differently. It may very well be, then, that 'actions' in their sense have 'causes' in theirs." Georg Henrik von Wright, *Explanation and Understanding* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), p. viii.

[20] Davidson, "Actions, Reasons, and Causes," in *Essays on Actions and Events*, p. 10.

[21] Davidson, "Problems in the Explanation of Action," in *Problems of Rationality*, pp. 108, 115. This view is superficially similar to Anscombe's claim that "What distinguishes actions which are intentional from those which are not...is that they are actions to which a certain sense of the question 'why?' is given application; the sense is of course that in which the answer, if positive gives a reason for action." Anscombe, *Intention*, p. 9. The difference is that whereas Davidson defined an intentional action as one explained in terms of the agent's reason for acting, Anscombe did not require that the action be explained but only that the question "why?" applies–i.e., is appropriate.

John McDowell claims that an explanation is causal "if the understanding it supplies is causal understanding," which rational explanations provide because they involve "responsiveness to reason [which] makes a difference to what happens–a causal difference."[22] An explanation yields causal understanding if it describes the *explanans* in a way that makes it intelligible why the *explanandum*–as described–*came*, *ceased*, or *continued* to be. This allows for different kinds of causal explanation. On Davidson's view, rational explanations provide causal under.standing in that they describe, redescribe, or interpret an agent's acting, not instead of, but as a way of explaining *why* she acted intentionally as she did. They specify the reasons that made a difference in what she did and as a result in what happened. They are, therefore, *causal* even though they cite no exceptionless general laws or identify a reason with the event that causes the action.

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Davidson's account of rational explanation includes a condition central to the standard story that Wittgensteinian accounts omit, namely, that as causal it involves a causal *relation*. Although reasons are states and not events, Davidson thinks they explain actions only if there are associated events that cause the actions.

Most defenders of the standard story find no difficulty in this condition. They think the distinction between causal relations and explanations is irrelevant since beliefs and desires are easily construed as events, either by turning the nouns "beliefs" and "desires" into verbs–"believing" and "desiring"–or by speaking of *coming* to believe or desire, which are changes and hence events. In my view, both moves are objectionable.

The former changes labels but does not alter the status of beliefs and desires, which Davidson insisted are states and not events. It is, in any case, the *contents* of the attitudes that play the crucial role as reasons for action, and they are not event-causes.

Davidson himself suggested the latter move, but it is problematic. Whether a reason explains an action is independent of its coming to be. Furthermore, even if my coming to have a belief or desire is an event associated with my reason, it is seldom the reason for which I act. If I buy a book because it is important for my work, my reason for buying it is not my coming to believe that but the content of the belief I have come to have. In any case, Davidson did not require that the associated event be conceptually connected with the reason. For instance, the event-cause of an agent's waving at someone may be his recognizing her across the street, but his reason for waving is his desire to be friendly to his neighbor. Besides, since the event-cause of an action may, Davidson held, be unknown to the agent, it is evident that such an event does not increase the force of an explanatory reason.

Davidson insisted, nevertheless, that although reasons are not eventcauses of actions,[23] there must be event-causes associated with explanatory reasons. He had, apparently, three reasons for this, which, however, I do not find persuasive.

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[22] John McDowell, "Response," in *McDowell and His Critics*, ed. Cynthia Macdonald and Graham Macdonald (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 139, 67.

[23] Cf. Davidson's "Reply to Stoecker," in R. Stoecker (ed.), *Reflecting Davidson*, p. 288: "Beliefs and desires are not changes. They are states, and since I don't think that states are entities of any sort, and so are not events, I do not think that beliefs and desires are events....[There is] a broad popular use and a rather more limited use of the notion of cause...The more limited use allows only events to be causes [and in this sense] *reasons are not causes*."

The first is that a rational explanation should account for an agent's acting at a time and place, and hence there must be an event causing the action to occur at that time and place. This strikes me as weak: Even if there is such an event, it is irrelevant to the many explanations that do not account for an agent acting at a particular time and place. Buying a book because I needed it for my work does not explain why I bought it when or where I did (for which there may be no *rational* explanation). If time and place are significant, they will be integral to the reason for the action: If I bought the book at Border's before 10:00 because of their short-term sale, then the time and place of my action are explained by my wanting to save money, not by an event that caused the action then and there.

The second is that Davidson thought the difference between an agent merely *having* a reason and her acting *because* of it is not in the content of the reason but is additional. My reason to buy a book is that I need it for my work. If I do not buy the book, I merely have that reason, but if I buy it because of it, then there is an associated event that causes my buying the book. The reason is the same in both cases, but in the second there is an event-cause in addition to the content.

Davidson, unlike defenders of the standard story, did not think this account *explains why* an agent acted because of some reason. Any explanation of that is not part of a rational explanation, since the latter "provides no reason for saying that one suitable belief-desire pair rather than another (which may also have been present in the agent) did the causing,''[24] that is, was associated with an event that caused the action. Davidson elucidated what we *mean* by the assertion, "She acted because of reason R," but he gave no account of why she acted because of reason R rather than another reason.[25]

Davidson did not hold that *verifying* that an agent acted because of a certain reason requires verifying that an associated event caused the action (or that the associated event and the action have descriptions instantiated by a strict law). His view that what an agent did and her reason for doing it are conceptually connected means that they cannot be verified independently. This sets up an interpretive circle, and there is no appeal except to interpretation in order to verify whether an agent acted *because* of a reason.[26] Having established a plausible interpretation of an agent's reasons and actions, we do not establish *in addition* that there was an associated event that caused her action, since (Davidson claimed) the interpretive conclusion that she acted because of a certain reason *entails* that there was an event associated with that reason that caused the action.

This meets one objection to Davidson's account but strengthens another, since it implies that knowing there is an associated event comes *after* having established an explanation of the agent's action, which means the associated event is irrelevant to the force of the explanation. To claim that such an event is entailed is unobjectionable, simply because "associated event" is so broad there can hardly fail to be one. If we are more specific, however, the idea looks implausible. Consider actions like driving to Chicago or writing a paper, each of which is *an* action done for a reason. We can speak here of *an* action only if we count a complex and disorderly cluster of events as *an* event that is an action, whose event-cause must also consist of such a cluster. We could get the

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[24] Davidson, "Problems in the Explanation of Action," in *Problems of Rationality*, p. 109.

[25] This is contrary to Mele, who offers this as the causal theory's view: "In virtue of what is it true that he mowed his lawn for this reason and not the other, if not that the reason (or his having it) and not the other, played a suitable causal role in his mowing they lawn." Alfred Mele, "Philosophy of Action," in *Donald Davidson*, ed. Kirk Ludwig (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 70.

[26] Davidson did not hold that in order to know an agent's reasons and actions we must interpret or verify them. We may, for instance, know such things simply by observing an agent.

appropriate cause and effect only by implausibly cutting and stretching the notion of event. To respond that this is a mere consequence of the requirement that there be such causes and effects simply undermines the requirement.

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Davidson's third reason for his claim about associated events is that it yields a plausible account of the relation between rational and nomological explanation. Given that if an agent acts for a reason, there is an event that causes her action, and given Davidson's view of the nomological character of causality, it follows that there are physical descriptions of the event and of her action that instantiate a law of physics. This shows that rational explanations not only do not conflict with the laws of physics but are linked with them.

This is often construed as physicalism because it is thought that Davidson took events to be causes *in virtue of* having physical descriptions and hence concluded that all events that are causes or effects are physical rather than mental. Kim, for instance, argued that Davidson held that mental events as such are causally impotent since they have causal force only because they have physical descriptions, which "renders mental properties and kinds causally irrelevant.... [They are] causal idlers with no work to do,"[27] which is epiphenomenalism about the mental. This assumes, however, that events are causes *because* they have physical descriptions that instantiate the laws of physics, a claim that Davidson rejected along with all its variants–that events are causes *in virtue of* their physical properties, because they fall under physical kinds, or *qua* being physical–as inconsistent with events being causes no matter how described, the latter entailing that "it makes no literal sense" to speak of events as causing things because of, or in virtue of, anything.[28]

By the nomological character of causality, Davidson meant that A's causing B *entails* that there are physical descriptions of A and B that instantiate a law of physics. His defense of this was that events require *real* changes, which are not relative to how a situation is described, a point he illustrated by Goodman's discussion of predicates like green, grue, blue, and bleen. An object, Davidson wrote, may "change" from being grue to being bleen, but that is not a real change, for the real color of the object stays the same. Descriptions of real changes involve projectible, lawlike predicates, and since causal relations obtain only between real changes, there are causal relations only where there are laws, which shows that "singular causal statements...entail the existence of strict laws [of physics]."[29]

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[27] Jaegwon Kim, *The Philosophy of Mind* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996), p. 138.

[28] Davidson, "Thinking Causes," *Truth, Language, and History*, p. 196. The misunderstanding is partly due to some ways Davidson formulated his principle, for example, that "all causally related events instantiate the laws of physics" (ibid., p. 194) or "If a singular causal claim is true, there is a law that backs it..." (ibid., p. 202). But he states his view clearly in this passage: "The efficacy of an event cannot depend on how the event is described, while whether an event can be called mental, or can be said to fall under a law, depends entirely on how the event can be described….It is irrelevant to the causal efficacy of physical events that they can be described in the physical vocabulary. It is events that have the power to change things, not our various ways of describing them" (ibid., pp. 190, 195). Kim's response to this is to insist that if the causal relation obtains between pairs of events, it *must* be "because they are events of certain kinds, or have certain properties" (Jaegwon Kim, "Can Supervenience Save Anomalous Monism?" in *Mental Causation*, ed. John Heil and Alfred Mele [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933, p. 22]). But that makes Davidson an epiphenomenalist only if he first accepts Kim's (metaphysical) principle that causal relations must be explained by reference to properties of the events, which Davidson rejects.

[29] Davidson, "Laws and Cause," in *Truth, Language, and History*, p. 219.

That summary does not do justice to Davidson's paper,[30] which defended a subtle Kantian view, but I'm not persuaded that a causal relation between events entails a law of *physics* covering the events. He wrote that "The ground floor connection of causality with regularity is not made by experience, but is built into the idea of objects whose changes are causally tied to other changes . . . . Events are as much caught up in this highly general net of concepts as objects."[31] Accepting that obscure claim does not imply that whatever regularity causality involves entails laws of physics and hence physicalistic (not merely physical) predicates.[32]

In any case, arguing that there are causal relations only where there are strict laws is quite different from *grounding* rational explanations in the laws of physics, and Davidson rejected the latter in denying that events are causes *because of* physical laws. His account of the role of event causation in rational explanation was not intended to develop or defend physicalism. It is, moreover, different from the standard story because the latter makes event causation central to explanation of action, whereas in Davidson's account it is, as I have argued, peripheral to causal explanation. I would disregard it,[33] which brings his account closer to Wittgensteinian ones, but even if it is kept, Davidson's view lends no support to claims like Hartry Field's "that there is an important sense in which all facts depend on physical facts and all good causal explanations depend on good physical explanations.[34]

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Unlike most defenders of the standard story, Davidson held that "there is an irreducible difference between psychological explanations that involve the propositional attitudes and explanations in sciences like physics and physiology."[35] He accepted Collingwood's view that "the methodology of history (or, for that matter, any of the social sciences that treat individual human behavior) differs markedly from the methodology of the natural sciences."[36] The former belongs, as Sellers put it, to the logical space of reasons, the latter to the logical space of laws. Davidson noted three significant differences between these two kinds of explanation.

The fundamental one is the *normativity* of rational explanations, which has two dimensions.[37] One is that ascriptions to an agent of beliefs, desires, intentions, intentional actions, and the like must

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[30] For an excellent discussion of Davidson's paper and wider issues, see Björn Ramberg, "The Significance of Charity," in Hahn (ed.), *The Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, pp. 601-618.

[31] Davidson, "Replies to Essays I-IX" in Vermazen (ed.), *Essays on Davidson*, p. 227.

[32] Davidson wrote (quoted by Ramberg in "The Significance of Charity," p. 610) that "Our concept of a *physical* object is the concept of an object whose changes are governed by law" (emphasis added).

[33] John McDowell makes a similar criticism of Davidson, urging that we "drop the idea that for intentional items to belong to any causal nexus at all is for them to belong to 'the causal nexus that natural science investigates,' in a way that would need to be spelled out be redescribing them in non-intentional terms." McDowell also thinks that dropping this idea would undercut Davidson's monism because what underlies it is "the naturalistic picture of *the* causal nexus" ("Response," in McDowell and His Critics, p. 69). My view is that while it does undercut physicalism, it does not undercut Davidson's weak monism, which is based on supervenience. I discuss this below.

[34] Hartry Field, "Physicalism," in *Inference, Explanation, and Other Frustrations*, ed. John Earman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. 271. Field simply assumes this as "beyond serious doubt."

[35] Davidson, "Problems in the Explanation of Action," in *Problems of Rationality*, p. 101.

[36] Davidson, "Aristotle's Action," in *Truth, Language, and History*, p. 282.

[37] I use "norms" and "normative" to refer not only to normative requirements but to evaluative standards generally. The notion of a reason showing an action to be good is in this sense a normative notion.

preserve the rationality (or intelligibility) of the agent and hence meet standards of consistency and correctness: There cannot *be* attitudes or intentional actions that do not meet such norms. The other is that rational explanations appeal to reasons for action, which are considerations that bear normatively on an agent's acting by showing it to be good in some sense. Both are lacking in the physical sciences, which "treat the world as mindless,"[38] making it irrelevant whether the subject matter investigated meets normative standards. Phenomena treated as mindless do not occur because it would be good (or apparently good) if they did.

The second is that rational explanations can be verified only by *interpretive* inquiry that resembles interpreting a text. We want to understand a text in its own terms but we do not know what those terms are unless we already understand the text (the "hermeneutical circle"). So with action: We want to explain an agent's actions in terms of her own standards of rationality or intelligibility–in terms of what she takes to be sufficient reasons to act–but we do not know what those standards are unless we already know what she is doing intentionally and hence her reasons for so acting. Assuming we *share* standards of rationality would be idle, for that simply assumes we already know what her standards are. Nor can we appeal to the standards of others to show that our standards are correct, because we must assume that our own are correct in order to determine the standards of others.

"The interpreter has . . . no other standards of rationality to fall back on than his own . . . . There is no going outside this standard to check whether we have things right, any more than we can check whether the platinumiridium standard kept at the International Bureau of Weights and Standards in Sevres, France weighs a kilogram."[39]

The physical sciences are different, for "when we try to understand the world as physicists…we do not aim to discover rationality in the phenomena,"[40] and hence we use standards that we share with other investigators and that must be agreed on before using them.

The physical world and the numbers we use to calibrate it are common property, the material and abstract objects and events that we can agree on and share. But it makes no sense to speak of comparing, or coming to agree on, ultimate common standards of rationality, since it is our own standards to which we must turn in interpreting others. This should not be thought of as a failure of objectivity but as the point at which questions come to an end. Understanding the mental states of others and understanding nature are cases where the questions come to an end at different stages. How we measure physical quantities is decided intersubjectively. We cannot in the same way go behind our own ultimate norms of rationality in interpreting others.[41]

The third difference is that rational explanations are *first-person* explanations: they appeal to, and hence require that we identify, what the agent took herself to have done and to be her reason for doing it. They are first person because the normative significance of states of affairs–their practical significance as reasons for an agent's action–is manifest only when viewed from that agent's point of view. Understanding why someone takes a Stockhausen concert to be a reason to go to Chicago requires understanding what it is about that concert that appeals to him–requires grasping, without necessarily accepting, that person's point of view. The physical sciences, by contrast, aim at a kind of understanding and explanation that does not depend on understanding the agent's own point of

[38] Davidson, "Indeterminism and Antirealism," in *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, p. 71.

[39] Ibid., pp. 215, 217.

[40] Ibid., p. 215.

[41] Davidson, "Donald Davidson," in Guttenplan (ed.), *A Companion to the Philosophy of Mind*, p. 232.

view. Neuroscientific explanations, for instance, cite brain states, cellular structures, computational mechanisms, and the like that experts in the field understand but that may be unintelligible to the agents whose behavior is being explained.

That rational explanations are first person is consistent with their being interpretive, because the aim of the interpreter in using his own standards is to interpret other agents' understanding of their own actions. It is also consistent with *radical* interpretation, which is a third-person point of view but a feature not of rational explanation but of Davidson's approach to mental phenomena. Its purpose is to show that meaning, thought, and action are socially grounded and hence publicly accessible: "What a fully informed interpreter could learn about what a speaker means is all there is to learn; the same goes for what the speaker believes."[42] What a fully informed interpreter could learn is precisely the features of meaning, thought, and action that are first person, and hence Davidson denied that first-person phenomena are private, internal, or known only to introspection. The third-person point of view does not exclude the first but is a philosophically perspicuous way of understanding it: "The point of the study of radical interpretation is to grasp how it is possible for one person to come to understand the speech and thoughts of another, for this ability is basic to our sense of a world independent of ourselves, and hence to the possibility of thought itself."[43]

6

These considerations show that Davidson rejected physicalistic reductions of rational explanations and did not attempt to ground them in the laws of physics. But it is widely thought that he embraced nonreductive physicalism as a consequence of his commitment to supervenience, and he has undoubtedly motivated many philosophers to accept such a view. I think, nevertheless, that the monism entailed by Davidson's conception of supervenience is not physicalism even of the nonreductive kind.

Davidson characterized physicalism as an antirealism that "tries to trim reality down to fit within its epistemology,"[44] writing that "I have resisted calling my position either materialism or physicalism because, unlike most materialists or physicalists, I do not think mental properties (of predicates) are reducible to physical properties (of predicates), not that we could, conceptually or otherwise, get along without mental concepts....Being mental is not an eliminable or derivative property."[45] He rejected both physicalism and dualism–physicalism because entities can have both mental and physical predicates, dualism because there is but one kind of entity. Showing how to reject both was one of his most significant achievements.

He first formulated supervenience as follows: "Mental characteristics are in some sense dependent, or supervenient, on physical characteristics. Such supervenience might be taken to mean that there cannot be two events alike in all physical respects but differing in some mental respect, or that an object cannot alter in some mental respect without altering in some physical respect."[46] This implies that "a change in mental properties is always accompanied by a change in physical properties, but it does not imply that the same physical properties change with the same mental properties."[47] He later wrote[48] that his first formulation is "easily misunderstood" in using

[42] Davidson, "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge," in *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, p. 148.

[43] Ibid., p. 143.

[44] Ibid., p. 69.

[45] Davidson, "Replies to Essays X-XII," in Vermazen (ed.), *Essays on Davidson*, p. 244.

[46] Davidson, "Mental Events," in *Actions and Events*, p. 214.

[47] Davidson, "Thinking Causes," in *Truth, Language, and History*, p. 189.

"dependent on" as equivalent to "supervenient on," which suggests that an object's physical predicates *explain* its mental predicates. But he denied that supervenience is explanatory, agreeing with Kim that "Supervenience itself is not an explanatory relation....It is a 'surface' relation that reports a pattern of property covariation."[49]

But Davidson did not agree with Kim's further claim that supervenience suggests "the presence of an interesting dependency relation that might explain it." He gave as a "noncontroversial example of an interesting case" the supervenience of semantic on syntactical predicates:

A truth predicate for a language cannot distinguish any sentences not distinguishable in purely syntactical terms, but for most languages truth is not definable in such terms....[This] gives one possible meaning to the idea that truths expressible by the subvenient predicates "determine" the extension of the supervenient predicate, or that the extension of the supervenient predicate "depends" on the extensions of the subvenient predicates.[50]

The scare quotes are Davidson's, for he did not mean "depend" or "determine" to be explanatory: The supervenience of semantic on syntactic predicates suggests no underlying explanation, nor does the supervenience of the mental on the physical. The latter holds simply because a change in mental predicates *accompanies* some change in physical predicates, but not vice versa, which, as Davidson noted, is a very weak relation.

Davidson did hold that "supervenience in any form implies monism"[51] because, if entities having distinct mental predicates also have distinct physical predicates sufficient to distinguish the former, then all entities have physical predicates. Davidson said this meant the *identity* of mental events with physical events, but this is identity of tokens, not of types; his conception of supervenience rules out the latter because the same mental predicates may be accompanied by different physical predicates. Moreover, if a mental event is identical with a physical event, the latter is also identical with the former (identity being symmetrical). The only physical events not identical with mental events are events without mental descriptions,[52] but the latter are not mental and hence are not events physical events *could* be identical with.

Davidson's monism would be a version of physicalism only if physical predicates were more *basic* overall than mental ones. They are more basic in that every entity has a physical predicate but may not have a mental one, which implies that if you destroy everything physical, you thereby destroy everything mental but not vice versa. They are also more basic in that physical predicates are supervenient on mental predicates but not vice versa, but that has no consequences for explanation: Explanations (and causal relations) can run from the physical to the mental and from the mental to the physical, and whether a physical or mental explanation (or cause) is more basic depends on the context. In an overall sense, physical predicates are not more basic than mental

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[48] Ibid., p. 187n.

[49] Jaegwon Kim, *Supervenience and Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 167. Cf. Terry Horgan, "From Supervenience to Superdupervenience: Meeting the Demands of a Material World," in *Philosophy of Mind*, ed. David J. Chalmers (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 151.

[50] Davidson, "Thinking Causes," in *Truth, Language, and History*, p. 187.

[51] Ibid.

[52] Davidson once noted ("Mental Events," in Actions and Events, p. 212) that mental descriptions can easily be constructed that apply to every entity so that *every* entity would be both physical and mental. He also noted that since this "failed to capture the intuitive concept of the mental," perhaps not all entities have mental descriptions. Even if they did, it would not make him a dualist. My own view, it should be said, is that token identity should also be rejected because physical and mental events (including intentional actions) are individuated differently.

ones, which means that Davidson's conception of supervenience allows for monism without commitment to physicalism of any kind.[53]

7

Davidson understood the assertion that "Actions are those bodily movements caused and rationalized by beliefs and desires" differently from the way most proponents of the standard story do. Having considered how he understood "caused and rationalized by," I want now to consider his understanding of "actions are bodily movements."

He wrote in a well-known passage that "Our primitive actions, the ones we do not by doing something else, mere movements of the body–these are all the actions there are. We never do more than move our bodies: the rest it up to nature."[54] Proponents of the standard story often see this as central to Davidson's supposed project of finding for mind a place in a physicalistic world with (in Kim's words) "nothing but bits of matter and increasingly complex aggregates made up of bits of matter." They think Davidson claimed that actions *consist of* the bodily movements of neurophysiology and hence are nothing but complex aggregates of bits of matter. While actions are *described* in other ways, *what* are described are mere bodily movements. In Quine's terms, the *ontology* of action is physicalistic, while everything else is *ideology*.

On this reading, mere bodily movements count as actions only if they are also caused (in the right way) by an agent's (coming to have) beliefs, desires, or intentions. Thus Mele: "A necessary condition of an overt action's being intentional is that (the acquisition of) a pertinent intention 'proximately causes the physiological chain' that begins concurrently with, and partially constitutes, the action . . . . The causal route from intention acquisition to overt bodily movements in beings like us involves a causal chain initiated in the brain."[55] This involves "mental causation"–neural events cause beliefs, desires, or intentions that cause the physiological chain that causes bodily movements–and hence raises the classical problem of how mental-physical causation is possible, which many defenders of the standard story would resolve by appeal to nonreductive physicalism. Thus Mele, again: "Causalism is typically embedded as part of a naturalistic stand on agency according to which mental items that play causal/explanatory roles in action are in some way dependent upon or realized in physical states and events."[56]

In brief, defenders of the standard story typically attribute to Davidson the view that action consists of mere (physicalistic) bodily movements caused (in the right way) by mental events. Although they may not regard his ontology of mental events as physicalistic, they think his ontology of *action* surely is.

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[53] In his later work, Davidson seems to have endorsed Spinoza's view that explanation in physical terms cannot *explain* the mental and vice versa, but that would only reinforce my claim that Davidson did not make physical explanations more basic overall than mental ones–see Davidson, "Spinoza's Causal Theory of the Affects," in *Truth, Language, and History*, p. 308. For further discussion of this point, see my "The Problem of Congruence" in *Philosophical Essays in Memoriam: Georg Henrik von Wright (Acta Philosophical Fennica*, vol. 77, 1955).

[54] Davidson, "Agency," in *Actions and Events*, p. 59.

[55] Alfred Mele, *Springs of Action: Understanding Intentional Behavior* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 201; see Fodor, who says that "Commonsense belief/desire psychology…takes for granted that overt behavior comes at the end of a causal chain whose links are mental events–hence unobservable–and which may be arbitrarily long." Jerry Fodor, *Psychosemantics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), p. 16.

[56] Mele, "Introduction," in *The Philosophy of Action*, ed. Alfred Mele (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 3.

There are numerous reasons for rejecting this as Davidson's view. As I have argued, he was not a nonreductive physicalist and he did not think that action explanation is dependent on physical explanation or that causal relations are fixed by anything. He denied that mental causation is a problem, writing that "the mental is not an ontological but a conceptual category,"[57] that is, a matter of how events are described. Since event causation is not dependent on how events are described, whether an event is mental or physical does not affect its causal relations to other events.

Moreover, he regarded beliefs, desires, and intentions not only as states rather than events but as states of persons not of brains (or minds): "Beliefs, desires and intentions belong to no ontology....When we ascribe attitudes we are using the mental vocabulary to describe people. Beliefs and intentions are not….little entities lodged in the brain."[58] Since changes in attitudes are events, they can figure in event causality, but

Since beliefs, desires, and intentions are not entities, it is a metaphor to speak of them as changing, and hence an extension of the metaphor to speak of them as causes and effects. What happens is that the descriptions of the agent changes over time. The relevant entity that changes is the person . . . . The only thing that changes when our attitudes change is us.[59]

Such changes no doubt have causes and effects, but to think that the former are neural events in the brain, or that the latter are physiological changes that produce bodily movements, is vastly oversimplified, if not far-fetched.

For Davidson, the role of beliefs, desires, and intentions is to rationally *explain* actions and hence also the bodily movements essentially involved in them (as *bodily* actions). This is fundamentally not a matter of event causation, but of causal *explanation* in the logical space of reasons,[60] and it is in the light of this that we should consider Davidson's claim that "out primitive actions . . . . mere movements of the body . . . . are all the actions there are."

A primitive act is one *not* done by doing some other act, hence one we must do whenever we act, on pain of a vicious regress of being unable to act until we have already acted. This formulation is misleading, however, because Davidson's view (which he ascribed to Anscombe) was that an agent whose act has many results acts only once, although her acting has as many descriptions as it has results. A primitive act is, therefore, not numerically distinct from the acts done by performing it: Whether an act is primitive depends on how it is described, so the notion is *intensional*. If I illuminate the room by pulling on the light cord by moving my arm, I act only once, but my acting has three descriptions: The first two describe what I did *by* (because caused by) moving my arm, but the first does not describe anything I did by which I moved my arm–does not describe my arm's moving as the result of anything I did–and hence, unlike the other descriptions, it is primitive.[61]

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[57] Davidson, "Problems in the Explanation of Action," in *Problems of Rationality*, p. 114.

[58] Nor are they neural processes in the brain that either are or realize functionally defined beliefs, desires, and intentions (or our acquiring them).

[59] Davidson, "Reply to Bruce Vermazen," in Hahn (ed.), *The Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, pp. 654-655.

[60] Davidson would reject Fodor's claim (for example, in *Psychosemantics*, pp. 16-17) that causation is physicalistic (syntactic) and hence that content (semantic) is *causally* impotent. Davidson's view is that event causation is independent of ontological categories, whereas rational explanation is a matter of contents that are themselves causally explanatory.

[61] Defenders of the standard story often think this view of the individuation of action is something one may take or leave. But Davidson (and Anscombe) thought it absurd to say that when I illuminate the room by pulling

Described as primitive, my act may have a rational explanation (I moved my arm because of my desire to illuminate the room), but while it has many results, it is (as primitive) not described in terms of any of them. Not is it (as primitive) described in terms of its cause, although as intentional it had a cause: "If my arm going up is an action, then there must also be an intention. But in my view, the intention is not part of the action, buf a cause of it."[62] By "cause" here, Davidson surely meant "causally explain," since intentions are states and not events and since, if the intention were only an event-cause of the movements, it would cause them no matter how they were described, in which case it would not account for their being intentional under some descriptions but unintentional under others.

Actions described as primitive, therefore, are intentional under *some* description, and if primitive actions *are* bodily movements, the latter are also intentional under some description. Davidson held that whether we use "bodily movement" transitively–"S moved his body"–or intransitively–"S's body moved"–we describe the same event,[63] and hence if moving my body at *t* is intentional, so is my body's moving at *t*: It is an intentional bodily movement.

When Davidson wrote that "our primitive actions…mere movements of the body…are all the actions there are [and] the rest is up to nature," he did not, therefore, mean by "*mere* movements of the body" the nonintentional bodily movements of neurophysiology. He meant that actions are primitive if *merely* described as movements of the body, which must, since they are the movements of an agent who moves her body intentionally, be intentional under some description. And when he said that such bodily movements are all the actions there are, the rest being up to nature, he did not mean that we only move our bodies. He meant that we illuminate rooms, destroy buildings, start wars, make revolutions, and so on *by* moving our bodies, but that whether we succeed is up to nature because it is not up to us whether moving our bodies will actually result in rooms being illuminated, wars beginning, and so on. It is when such things do result from intentionally moving *our* bodies that they are actions *we* perform, and it is because intentionally moving our bodies is not the result of any act of ours that "moving our bodies" is a primitive description.[64]

This, then, is my reading of Davidson's claim that all actions are primitive and hence *merely* movements of the body. We can put that as the claim that actions *consist* of bodily movements only if we recognize that he meant "bodily movements *intentional* under a description." Bodily movements are, of course, nonintentional under many descriptions, but since, in his view, all actions are intentional under some description, the bodily movements of which they consist are also intentional under a description. They are movements of our limbs–our arms, legs, fingers, and so on–which, if we are not disabled, we move intentionally, something we cannot do with our fingernails, kidneys, or hearts, which are not limbs since it is not their nature to move or be moved intentionally.

It follows that Davidson is not committed to a physicalist ontology of action, because on his view whatever is intentional under a description has a mental predicate. Physicalists may think that is

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the cord by moving my arm, I am acting three times. What is optional is a metaphysical theory about how many actions there really are somehow underneath my one acting. But that is metaphysical speculation of the kind Davidson thought pointless and not explanatory.

[62] Davidson, "Problems in the Explanation of Action," in *Problems of Rationality*, p. 105.

[63] Ibid.; see also pp. 102-103.

[64] I think there are consequential confusions in Davidson's account of primitive actions, but I do not have the space here to discuss them.

ideology and not *ontology*, the latter concerning *what* is described, namely, the bodily movements of neurophysiology. But this ignores Davidson's view that although events occur under any description, whether they are mental or physical depends on how they are described. Bodily movements described as intentional are mental; described as neurophysiological they are physical. It may be responded that nothing has yet been said about *what* is described, to which Davidson might respond with Anscombe: "The proper answer to 'What is the action, which has all these descriptions?' is to give one of the descriptions, any one, it does not matter which; or perhaps it would be better to offer a choice, saying 'Take which ever you prefer.'"[65] The claim that what has all these descriptions is just the movements of neurophysiology can only mean that descriptions in those terms are *basic*–that they yield the essential nature of bodily movements–whereas descriptions under which bodily movements are intentional are not basic. But Davidson did not take the logical space of laws to be more basic overall than the logical space of reasons; indeed, the latter is the basic level for understanding action, since there is no action where there is no intention. It is essential to having limbs that one can move them intentionally: They are limbs only in name if one cannot do that.

Davidson's ontology of action (like Aristotle's and Spinoza's) is "ontological monism accompanied by an uneliminable dualism of conceptual apparatus…. There is only one [kind of] substance [but] the mental and the physical are irreducibly different modes of apprehending, describing, and explaining what happens in nature."[66] There are no nonphysical entities–none that cannot be described as physical–but this is not physicalism, because all actions are intentional under some description and hence are (also) mental.

8

There are two objections to Davidson's account of action I want to discuss, one by defenders of the standard story, one by its critics. The first concerns the problem of *deviant causal chains*, which is taken to arise because an agent's beliefs and desires can cause his bodily movements without their being actions. An example is Davidson's climber, who "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 hirn to loosen his hold, and yet it might be that he….[did not do] it intentionally."[67] The problem is that the climber's movements are not caused in "the right way," which calls for a specification of conditions necessary and sufficient for a causal chain to constitute the agent's bodily movements as action, hence intentional under a description. Davidson contended that we cannot give conditions "that are not only necessary, but also sufficient, for an action to be intentional, using only such concepts as those of belief, desire, and cause."[68] Many have attempted, nevertheless, to specify these conditions, sometimes by appeal to scientific investigation.

His position on this issue is complex.[69] Were we to take him to mean by "cause" *event causation*, then we surely could not give the conditions necessary and sufficient for a bodily movement to be intentional using only concepts of belief, desire, and cause. Since event causation obtains between

[65] G. E. M. Anscombe, "Under a Description," in *Metaphysics and Philosophy of Mind*, p. 209.

[66] Davidson, "Aristotle's Action," in *Truth, Language, and History*, p. 290.

[67] Davidson, "Freedom to Act," in *Actions and Events*, p. 79.

[68] Ibid., p. 232.

[69] Thanks to John Bishop for pushing me on this issue; I doubt that he is satisfied.

events no matter how described, an event-cause, however complex, cannot constitute an event as an intentional action, because an action is not intentional no matter how described, but intentional under some descriptions and unintentional under others. No event-cause can account for the latter, regardless of what conditions are put on it.

Davidson takes "cause" here to mean *causally explain*, and hence the problem arises because of his contention that in order for an agent's belief and desire to causally explain his action, not only must their contents be his reasons for acting, they must be associated with an event that causes the bodily movements that are intentional under a description yielded by his belief and desire. Thus, if the climber's belief and desire causally explain his intentionally letting go of the rope, their contents must not only be his reason for letting go but must be associated with an event that causes the bodily movements intentional as "letting go." In the deviant case, the agent's bodily movement are caused by his becoming nervous (associated with his belief and desire), and they are not, therefore, intentional under the description "letting go." The difficulty is that the bodily movements for which his belief and desire are a reason are not the same bodily movements caused by the event associated with his belief and desire. That requires that the bodily movements are caused in the right way, that is, that their cause is *appropriately associated* with his reason for acting. Davidson despaired of specifying the conditions for such an appropriate association and, indeed, given his overall view, he could not specify them, because that would require the kind of lawful connections his view ruled out. It was not a problem that could be solved and hence not worth pursuing.[70]

There is another way of viewing Davidson's discussion of the climber that I find more interesting. The climber has a belief and desire whose content he takes to be sufficient reason for him to act and that causes his body to move, but it is not a reason *because of* which he acts. The problem is whether we can fill in the gap between taking the content of a belief and desire to be sufficient reason to act and really acting because of that reason. If we do act because of it, then we may rightly claim that the reason causally explained our action, but we have adequate grounds for that only *after* we have acted. Before we act there is no assurance that what we take to be the strongest reason to act will actually explain our action, whereas after we act we can make that claim, at least about ourselves, and normally be right.

Davidson considered filling the gap with additional factors that would link reasons to act with acting for those reasons but concluded that "it is largely because we cannot see how to complete the statement of the causal conditions of intentional action that we cannot tell whether, if we got them right, the result would be a piece of analysis or an *empirical* law for predicting behavior." An *empirical* law would require stating "the antecedent conditions in physical, or at least hehavioristic terms," which presumes psychophysical laws of the kind Davidson rejected and would rule out explanation in mental terms. An *analysis* would let "the terms of the antecedent conditions…remain mentalistic,…[but] the law would continue to seem analytic or constitutive" and hence not explanatory. If we were able to fill in this gap, we would eliminate the "need to depend on the open appeal to causal relations. We would simply say, given these (specified) conditions, there always is an intentional action of a specified type."[71]

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[70] This problem would not even arise if we rejected Davidson's claim that causal explanation requires an event causally related to the action.

[71] These quotations are from Davidson, "Freedom to Act," in *Actions and Events*, p. 80.

The scientist in us may regtet that gap, but as autonomous agents we should, in my view, prize it. It enables an explanation to be both causal and normative, since the open-ended nature of causal claims permits the adjustments in our ascriptions of attitudes and actions that may be necessary to preserve an agent's rationality. Moreover, it rules out causal laws connecting an agent's beliefs and desires with his action, thereby meeting one condition for agent autonomy.

The other objection comes from critics of the standard story, who think Davidson's view cannot accommodate the knowledge of an agent's own actions that Anscombe called "practical" in contrast with "theoretical" or "speculative" knowledge. I contend that this criticism misses the mark (though I agree with critics that practical knowledge should play a more central role in an account of action than it does in Davidson's account).

Anscombe's "certain sense of the question 'why?' [that] is given application" to events that are intentional actions is "refused application by the answer: 'I was not aware I was doing that.'"[72] Although we act in many ways of which we are not aware, we act *intentionally* only if we are aware of our acting in that way. Anscombe claimed such knowledge is not based on observation–either perceptual or introspective–for then it would be theoretical, which would make it mysterious since it is not confined to knowing our own beliefs, desires, or intentions, but includes some knowledge of what we are doing in the world, hence what happens (under a description). Knowledge by observation of what happens is theoretical, but what is essential to intentional action is *practical* knowledge–knowledge of what happens because we *do* what happens.

Rosalind Hursthouse nicely pur Anscombe's account this way:

Practical knowledge is "the cause of what it understands."….The intentional action must match the knowledge in order to be that action. Suppose I am intentionally painting the wall yellow. Then my knowledge of what I am doing makes it to be the case that it is so. I am so doing because (in virtue of the fact that) I know it….When I am in error, the mistake lies in the performance, not in a judgment about what I am doing….[The agent's knowledge] is conceptually guaranteed by the nature of intentional action itself. An intentional action essentially is that which is determined by the agent's knowledge.[73]

That is to say, what makes it the case that I am intentionally painting the wall yellow is that I know I am doing it under that description: It would not be that intentional act if I did not know (without observation), in doing it, what I am doing.

Hursthouse thinks no causal account of action (one that defines an intentional act as one with the right kind of cause) can allow for practical knowledge making it the case that the agent is acting intentionally: "Since agent's knowledge could not make it the case that the action had certain causes, the intentional action could not essentially be an action with this further feature." Nor can it allow for expressions of intention, for example, my expressing my intention to paint the wall yellow next week, which is not a prediction because if I fail to paint the wall yellow, I make an error not in judgment but in performance (or I may change my mind). But "on the causalist view, an agent's knowledge-of-his-present-or-future-intentional-action *must* be speculative knowledge of action-caused-by-certain-mental-items."[74] This objection applies to the standard story but not to Davidson's account, for two reasons. First, Hursthouse thinks of causal accounts in terms of causal

[72] Anscombe, *Intentions*, p. 11.

[73] Rosalind Hursthouse, "Intention," in *Logic, Cause, and Action: Essays in Honor of Elizabeth Anscombe*, ed. Roger Teichman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 103.

[74] Ibid., p. 104.

relations, not causal explanations. Her objection that an agent's knowledge "could not make it the case that the action had certain causes" is surely true if it means that prior causes of the action could not be determined by the agent's knowledge in acting. That, however, misses Davidson's view that causal *explanation* is basic to action, since reasons explain actions only under descriptions, whereas causal relations are indifferent to descriptions. Although Davidson thought that there must be an event associated with an explanatory reason, the agent need not know that event, which, therefore, plays no role in his knowledge of what he is doing or in determining the description under which his acting is intentional.

Second, Davidson held, as noted above, that there is a conceptual connection between the reason that explains an agent's acting and the description under which he acts intentionally, and hence the reason determines what the action it explains *is* (*qua* intentional) just *because* the action is causally explained by the reason. Hence to know the reason for which one is acting *is* (except in unusual cases) to know what one is doing intentionally.

This is not theoretical knowledge, because agents know the reasons for which they are acting not by observation but simply by taking considerations to be reasons for acting (on Davidson's view, by having beliefs and desires). This is a matter not of agents noticing the reasons for which they act, but of their acting for those reasons. Nor is knowledge of the intention with which one acts theoretical: If what one does is not what one intends to be doing, then the error is in what does; one is wrong about what one is accomplishing, not because one has an erroneous belief, but because what one did was not what one intended.

Conclusion

My aim has been to pry Davidson's account of action apart from the standard story and shield it from criticisms aimed at it that too often do not apply to his account but to the standard story. I do not think his account in unflawed; indeed, I think that in the end both the deep assumptions that underlie it and the belief-desire model of reasons for action that it incorporates should be rejected. But it is much better than most of its critics think–an extraordinary philosophical achievement that escapes facile objections, is philosophically penetrating and instructive, and one that no adequate account of action can ignore. He should be recognized, even by philosophers in a broadly Wittgensteinian tradition, as a collaborator in resisting physicalism and other extravagant metaphysical theories while insisting on careful distinctions, argumentative precision, and a larger vision of the aim of philosophy.

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