

‘Explaining Actions and Explaining Bodily Movements’

§1. Introduction

In its current form, the Causal Theory of Action was developed in the second half of the twentieth century. The first explicit articulation of its basic tenets is found in Davidson’s 1963 paper ‘Actions, Reasons and Causes’. In that paper Davidson argued, roughly, that an intentional action (an action done *for* a reason) is an event (a movement of the agent’s body) caused by a mental event or state (a reason); and that, therefore, explanations of intentional actions in terms of the agent’s reasons are causal explanations.¹

In that and subsequent papers Davidson was reacting to an anti-causalist consensus that had formed in the previous decades and whose sources are to be found in the work of Ryle and Wittgenstein, and the latter’s followers (prominent among them, Elizabeth Anscombe), and also in the hermeneutical arguments related to the ‘Explanation and Understanding’ debate in the philosophy of history and the social sciences.² This anti-causalist consensus was, it must be noted, an exceptional state of affairs, for the view that voluntary human action is to be understood in terms of a causal relation between a mental event (a volition) and a movement of the agent’s body had been the received view at least since Descartes.³

Davidson’s rehabilitating of a causal picture of the concept of intentional action was not, however, just a reaction against the prevailing consensus. The rehabilitation served also to point the way for the project of ‘naturalising’ everyday explanations of actions in terms of agents’ reasons, that is, for reconciling these explanations with scientific explanations of human behaviour such as, for instance, those given by neurophysiology. As became clear later, the reconciliation, in Davidson’s eyes, did not require a *reduction* of explanations of the former type to explanations of the latter - indeed, he argued in later articles that, because the mental is anomalous and hence not susceptible to being subsumed under genuinely empirical laws, this kind of reduction is not in principle possible. The reconciliation that Davidson sought was rather ontological: that is, he sought to show how explanations in terms of reasons could be themselves *genuine* explanations without the need to postulate a dualist ontology of physical and non-physical entities with causal powers. Davidson’s solution was to suggest that the states and events that psychological explanations are about (reasons and actions) are token-identical to the events and states that neurophysiological explanations are about (brain states and motions of the body) (see Davidson, 1980, 17). In this respect, Davidson’s defence of the causal theory of action in his 1963 paper was of a piece with his ‘anomalous monism’ – his position on the relation between mental and physical reality (See Davidson’s 1970 and 1971).

§2. The Causal Theory of Action has been given many formulations but for the purposes of this paper it may be encapsulated in the following two claims:

¹ These two claims will be formulated a little more precisely in §2 below.

² See von Wright’s *Explanation and Understanding* (1971).

³ Davidson famously claimed that the view that ‘rationalization is a species of causal explanation’ which he was about to defend was ‘the ancient –and common sense– position’ (1980, 3). Regardless of whether Davidson was right about that, it is important to note that, as I shall explain below, this is weaker than the other causal claim Defended in that paper, namely that intentional actions are events *caused* by mental states and events which are reasons.

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

(ii) **Reasons Claim:** the reason that explains an action is a mental entity (a mental event or state, or a combination of these) that is a cause, or a causal condition, of the action (which is itself an event: a movement of the agent's body).⁴

Many causalists hold (i) because they hold some version of (ii) - but not all. That is, some causalists do not believe that what makes a reason explanation causal is that its *explanans* and *explanandum* are about causally related particulars: a reason and an action. These philosophers accept Davidson's argument in favour of causalism in 'Actions, Reasons and Causes', namely that the contrast between having a reason and acting in a way that is consistent with a reason, and having a reason and acting *for* that reason can only be accounted for in causal terms. Nonetheless, they do not think that it follows that when someone acts for a reason that reason is a cause of her action. Rather, they think that what follows from Davidson's argument is the weaker claim that the 'because' of reason explanations is a causal 'because'. Several suggestions about what this amounts to have been proposed; for instance, that reason explanations support counterfactuals that are backed by empirical generalisations; or that reason explanations explain the occurrence of an event and are, therefore, causal; or that the reasons that explain actions are facts that are 'causally relevant' to the agent's acting as she did.⁵

These thoughts are certainly suggestive, and each is worth examining separately. But I won't be doing that in this paper. Rather, this paper will focus for the most part on the second causalist claim outlined above, and for two reasons. The first relates to the causal theory's conception of reasons as mental states. The second concerns the causal theory's naturalising ambitions. I shall say something about each of these reasons in turn.

Central to the causal theory as developed by Davidson is a certain conception of reasons, often referred to as the 'psychological conception of reasons'. According to this conception, when someone acts for a reason, that reason is combination of two mental states, a state of believing and a state of desiring something. This is sometimes expressed with the slogan 'our reasons for acting are mental states' (where 'our reasons for acting' refers, not to the reasons there are for us to act, but to the reasons for which someone acts when he acts for a reason: what are sometimes called 'motivating reasons').

Several philosophers have argued against this conception of reasons. Their positive views about what these reasons are differ in detail or in substance; nonetheless, they agree on the negative claim that our reasons are not mental states or indeed mental entities of any kind.⁶ If these philosophers are right, then it would seem that (ii), the reasons claim, comes under threat. For (ii), the claim that the reason that explains an action is a mental event or state that is a cause or a causal condition of the action seems false if reasons *are not* mental events or states. (The

⁴ Many contemporary causalists think that reasons cause actions via intentions. As I hope will be clear, most of what I say about reasons applies also to this more complex causalist view, but I shall not mention intentions explicitly unless relevant to the point under discussion. Moreover, (ii) seems tailored for actions that involve bodily movements, what Mele calls 'overt' actions (Mele, 2000, 290). But, even putting aside so-called 'mental acts', there are actions that do not involve movements of the body, e.g. actions one performs by failing to do something. For instance, one can bring down a government by abstaining in a vote. Abstaining itself is not an action but an omission; however, bringing down the government is an action, and it is something one can do intentionally and for a reason but it does not require moving one's body (see Alvarez and Hyman, 1998; and Alvarez 2000). Whether (ii) can account for actions of this kind is doubtful but I shall not pursue this issue here.

⁵ For examples of these see Hornsby (1997); Child (1994); and Steward (1997).

⁶ See, for example, Bittner, 2001; Dancy, 2000; Stout, 1996; Stoutland, 1998 and 2001; Schueler, 2003, Alvarez, 2010.

same is not true of (i), at least not without assuming certain other doctrines about causal explanation).

The second reason for focusing on (ii) is that (ii) is often thought to provide the basis for ‘naturalising’ reason explanations of action in the sense outlined above; that is, (ii) appears to enable us to regard reason explanations as *bona fide* explanations without commitment to a dualist ontology of physical and non-physical entities with causal powers. As already noted, the suggestion here is that both reasons and actions are mental events or states that are (token-) identical to, or realised in, neurophysiological events and states of the agent’s.⁷ But I should like to challenge this idea. In doing that, I hope to remove one motivation for holding that reasons (of any kind) are mental states or events that cause actions.

Accordingly, the paper is divided in two parts. In the first part (§§4-9), I shall try to establish whether, if reasons are not mental states or events, then it follows that (ii) must be false. In the second part of the paper (§§10-12) I shall explore the connection between (ii) and the aim of naturalising reason explanations of action in light of the conclusions reached in the first part of the paper. But before embarking on those arguments, a point of clarification is in order.

§3. Because the reasons claim, (ii), is held in many different versions, it is hard to state it simply. So, the causal theory is often expressed with the slogan ‘reasons are causes’ even by philosophers who think that reasons cannot, strictly speaking, be causes because they think that only events can be causes and think that reasons are not events. Some of these philosophers hold that reasons are *states* and are causes only in the sense in which antecedent states are said to be causes: they are background conditions that, together with the appropriate triggering event, are efficacious in producing an effect. On this view, the agent’s reason or reasons (his mental states) contribute to the causation of the action, although their contribution depends on the occurrence of a triggering event. Other philosophers who subscribe both to the causal slogan and to the view that reasons are states are not so fastidious about whether states are the right kind of particular to be a cause, so they are happy with the unqualified claim that reasons are causes. And yet others think that the distinction between states and events is not significant: states they say, can be thought of as a species of events (see, e.g., Eynine 1991, 30). Davidson himself was somewhat equivocal on this issue. On the one hand, he appeared to accept the objection that reasons cannot be causes without qualification, since he accepted the objection that although ‘states, dispositions, and conditions are frequently named as the causes of events’, this ‘gives a cause only on the assumption that there was also a preceding event’ (Davidson, 1980, 12). On the other hand, when responding to other objections, he says things such as the following:

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

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

⁷ The success in naturalising reason explanations is also thought to be a way of resolving the so-called problem of the ‘over-determination’ or ‘over-explanation’ of actions. The problem is nicely summarised in this passage:

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

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

Be that as it may, what is distinctive about those who hold (ii) in the sense I am concerned with here is that they think that both reasons and the relevant triggering events are particular entities (perhaps of quite different kinds respectively) that have spatio-temporal location and are susceptible to be differently described; in particular, to be described using vocabularies corresponding to different domains, for instance using common-sense and scientific psychological terms, or neurological, chemical, physical, etc. vocabularies.

§4. With that clarification in place, I turn to the debate about whether reasons are mental states. It is important to note that the target of the recent arguments mentioned above is the claim that our reasons for acting are mental states – that is, that the reasons that *motivate* agents to act are mental states. However, the reasons that the causal theory holds to be mental states and to be causes of actions are reasons that *explain* actions.

Now, it is often assumed (and this includes many causal theorists) that motivating and explanatory reasons are always the same.⁸ But the assumption is questionable. For sometimes an action can be explained by reference to a reason which is not the agent's reason for acting – even when the agent acted for a reason *and even* when the explanation *mentions* that reason.⁹ So, it seems that showing that our reasons for acting are not mental states is not the same as showing that the reasons that *explain* our actions are not mental states either. If that is right, then, even if the arguments about motivating reasons succeed, an independent argument would be needed to show that the reasons that explain actions (*explanatory* reasons) are not, as (ii) says, mental states.

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

§5. Philosophers who have argued that our reasons for acting are not mental states often start by noting that an agent's reasons for acting are things that, at least in the agent's eyes, favour the action: they make the action right because good, valuable, appropriate, worth doing, etc., from the agent's perspective.¹⁰ As we might put it, they are what in the agent's eyes somehow connects the action with the good, broadly conceived:¹¹ for instance, that acting so is a means of achieving a desired goal (taking one's umbrella is a means of keeping dry when it is raining); or is what duty dictates (marking students' work punctually is part one's contractual obligations); an act of friendship (helping one's friend to move house is such an act), etc. And such facts (or features of reality, etc.) are not mental states.

⁸ So it is often assumed that the reasons mentioned in (ii) above are also the agent's reason for acting and no distinction is made between the following two claims: 'The reason for which someone did something is a cause of her action' and 'The reason that explains why someone did something is a cause of her action'.

⁹ I mean that the *explanans* of the explanation of an action need not be the agent's reason for acting, even if the former mentions the latter – e.g. when the *explanans* has the form '(because) he knew that *p*.'

¹⁰ The idea, in various guises, is found in Anscombe (1957), Davidson (1980, 3), McDowell (1982), Raz (1999), Dancy (2000), etc. In as much as possible I am leaving it open whether on this view reasons are facts, propositions, considerations, 'bits' of reality, states of affairs, etc. For a detailed discussion of this see Alvarez, 2010, §§ 5.6 and 5.7.

¹¹ For philosophers who deny that reasons for action must relate to the good, the point above can be articulated as the claim that reasons are what in the agent's eyes somehow connect the action with what seems *desirable*.

It is true that such facts cannot be one's reason for acting unless one is apprised of them. So the fact that water evaporates quickly in bright sunshine cannot be my reason for watering my plants at dusk unless I am somehow aware of that fact. But it is a mistake to conclude from this that if I water the plants after dark, then my reason for doing so is *my knowing, or believing* that water evaporates in bright sunshine. Rather, my reason is that fact about water – which I am aware of. (It is precisely *this* mistake that led philosophers – via another mistake I shall mention in §9 – to the view that our reasons for acting are mental states.)

§6. But we saw above that this conclusion about motivating reasons, our reasons for acting, does not seem to license the corresponding conclusion about the reasons that explain our actions. Indeed, one might accept everything said so far about our reasons for acting but insist that the reasons that *explain* our actions are not the same as our reasons for acting and are, indeed, mental states.¹² So whether the causal claim is threatened by the conclusion about motivating reasons depends on whether it is right to say that these reasons that motivate one's action are the same as the reasons that explain them.

It seems possible to argue that they are not the same on the general grounds that the reasons that explain actions must make reference to the agent's believing and wanting (or having some 'pro-attitude' towards) certain things. And in fact, some philosophers take this to be not just obvious but central to our understanding of actions performed for reasons.¹³ The doctrine is variously expressed: that our actions are explained by our propositional attitudes, or by our mental states, or that the reasons that explain our actions are mind-based, etc. And this claim is supported as follows.

First, there is the thought that even if (in most cases) my reason for acting is *not* my believing or knowing something, nonetheless my action cannot be explained except by reference to my knowing or believing something. And, the thought continues, my knowing or believing something is a mental state. Thus, although my reason for watering the plants at dusk might be a fact about water, my action of watering the plants at dusk is explained only by my *knowing* or *believing* that fact. The fact about water alone, it seems, cannot explain my action: my being somehow aware of the fact needs to feature in the explanation.

Secondly, there is the thought that my awareness of that fact about water alone does not suffice to explain my action; the explanation needs to make reference to my *having a goal* in so acting because, it seems, the fact about water evaporation explains my watering after dusk only against the presupposition of my having a certain goal e.g. economizing on water.¹⁴ If my goal had been different, for example, to waste as much water as possible, then my awareness of the fact about water evaporation would not explain my watering after dark. In short, my action is explained only in as much as the explanation includes reference to my awareness of the relevant fact(s) and to my having an appropriate goal. These may often not be explicitly mentioned in explanations of action that cite my reasons but they seem to be essential parts of any such explanation.

¹² See, for example, Davies (2010).

¹³ See Davidson 1980, 4-5; where he introduces the idea of a 'primary reason'.

¹⁴ I use 'goal' rather than 'desire' for two reasons. First, to avoid controversies about whether we *want* to do (as opposed to, e.g. think that we must, regard as a duty, etc.) everything that we do for a reason. The second is that the term 'desire' suffers from the same state/object ambiguity as 'belief' mentioned above: 'state': desiring/'object': thing desired, while 'goal' does not. The state is expressed only as 'having a goal'. I distinguish between motivating reasons and goals (see Alvarez, 2010, §4.1). However, in this paper and for the sake of brevity I shall often refer to both as reasons, whenever this does not affect the point at issue.

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

Finally, there is a consideration that seems decisive in favour of the view that at least some explanations of action that cite an agent's reason must refer to the agent's mental states. When an agent acts on the basis of a consideration that he believes to be the case but is not the case, any explanation that mentions the motivating consideration *must* incorporate some psychological term such as 'because he *believed* that ...'; 'or *thought* that...'; or 'because, as he believed, p'.¹⁵ And therefore, at least in these cases, the reasons that explain actions are mental states.

§7. But this view about the explanation of action has been challenged. Some have pointed to the fact that there are many action explanations that *cite* the agent's reasons and her goals but do not mention or refer to any psychological factors. On the one hand, they say, explanations of why one acted in terms of motivating reasons, such as 'Because she's my sister', '...it is pleasant'; '...the film was over'; '...I promised to do it', etc.' (as opposed to 'I know or believe that she's my sister', etc.) are common and seem perfectly explanatory – as are, it could be added, explanations in terms of goals such as: 'in order to help her'; 'to enjoy myself a little'; 'to get home as early as possible', 'to do my duty'. And it seems mere philosophical prejudice or theoretical preference for a particular form to insist that these explanations are ellipses for the corresponding psychological-form explanations. Moreover, as Anscombe noted (in *Intention*, 1957) and Michael Thompson (2008) has emphasised recently, redescriptions of what one is or was doing are also reason-explanatory but, again, do not mention the agent's mental states: 'I am helping her', 'making a quick exit', 'doing my duty', etc. Here, explanation by redescription can be thought of as giving the agent's goal in acting (to help her, to leave quickly, to do one's duty, etc.), and/or as giving her reason (that it will help her, that it was a way of making a quick exit, that it is one's duty, and so on.) Besides, one can agree that my having the relevant belief (or my having grasped a fact) and my having an appropriate pro-attitude must be presupposed by any explanation but argue that this does not mean that those are explanatory factors themselves – rather they may be thought of, as Dancy does (2000, 127), as 'enabling conditions' for the explanation.

As for the claim that the distinction between our reasons for acting and the reasons that explain one's action just is the distinction between first- and third-person perspectives on the action, and that the latter always takes the psychological form, that is simply false. I can explain someone's action by saying 'She waters her garden in the evening because watering during the day is wasteful of water' or 'She waters her garden in the evening in order to save water', 'She was making a quick exit', etc. These are all third-person perspective explanations but they do not mention her knowing or believing something, or her having any goal; rather they mention something she knew (or believed) and a goal she had, or simply redescribe what she was doing.

§8. Given these competing considerations about 'the form' of explanations of action, the reasonable conclusion might be some sort of 'explanatory pluralism': the view that there is no canonical form but rather a variety of forms of action explanation all of which mention, more or less explicitly, the agent's reason and goal.

¹⁵ Dancy (2000, 127) denies that these explanations refer to mental states and tries to give a different role to the psychological locutions used in them. For a discussion of this see Alvarez, 2010, §§5.3 and 6.2.3.

Nonetheless, those who favour the psychological form of action explanation (and (ii)) need not surrender yet for they can still insist on one point, namely, that it is always *possible* (and sometimes necessary, *viz*, when the agent acted on a false belief) to give explanations in the psychological form: . In some cases the explanation would be something like ‘He did it because he knew that p’; in others something like ‘Because he believed that p’, and in both cases the explanation is to be supplemented by something to the effect that the agent had a relevant desire or goal.¹⁶ And if this is right, the causalist can claim:

(a) that *these* explanations explain in terms of an agent’s reason for acting – the reason is mentioned in the *explanans*, in the ‘that’-clause that follows the cognitive verb;¹⁷

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

(c) that this mental state is a cause, or a causal condition, of the action.

In other words, the causal claim (ii) stands. But are (a)-(c) convincing?

§9. I said earlier that there is a quick argument to the conclusion that no reason is a mental state or event (which would make (b) and (c) false). The claim that the kinds of reasons that explain actions just mentioned are mental states depends on the general claim that my believing or my knowing that p, or my having a certain goal, are mental states.¹⁸ But this claim needs to be handled with care. The expression ‘my believing that p’ is a nominalization of the sentence ‘I believe that p’ (the same goes for ‘my knowing that p’). Now, many philosophers think that if one believes that p, then one is in a mental state, namely a state of believing that p and think, further, that there is then an entity, a mental state, that one can refer to with the corresponding nominalisation. Perhaps that is so. But these nominalisations have other uses. For instance, they can also be used to refer to the facts that the corresponding sentences can be used to express. So the expression ‘my believing that water evaporates in bright sunlight’ can be used to refer to the fact that I believe that water evaporates in bright sunlight, and ‘my wanting to save water’ can be used to refer to the fact that I want to save water.

So, even if a nominal expression of the type under discussion can be used to refer to a mental state it can also be used to refer to a fact. And, in ‘Her believing that p explains her ϕ -ing’, the nominalisation ‘her believing that p’ refers, not to a mental state, but to the fact that she believed that p. And, more generally, when we say that the *reason* that explains someone’s action is her believing that p, his knowing that q, her having such and such a goal, etc., these nominalisations should be construed as referring to *the facts* that she believes that p, knows that q, or has such and such a goal.¹⁹

¹⁶ I include explanations such as ‘He did it because, as he believed, p’ where p may be false but is not the *explanans*, which is, rather, ‘he believed that p’ (See Alvarez, 2010, §6.2.3).

¹⁷ Sometimes the *explanans* mentions a reason, sometimes merely an ‘apparent reason’ – something the agent took to be the case and treated as a reason for acting.

¹⁸ The same goes for my having an intention to do something.

¹⁹ Here I draw on Alvarez, 2010, § 5.4, where I rely on Strawson’s discussion in his paper ‘Causation and Explanation’ (1992), where he says that in the sentence ‘His death’s coming when it did was responsible for the breakdown of the negotiations’, the expression ‘his death’s coming when it did’ does not refer to an event in nature, i.e. to his death. Rather, it refers to *the fact* that his death came when it did. For his death coming when it did, unlike his death, ‘did not come at any time. It is not an event in nature. It is *the fact* that a certain event occurred in nature at a certain time’ (Strawson, 1992, 110).

This can be seen from the fact that, whenever we use the nominalised form ‘his believing that p’ to talk about reasons in explanations, it is possible and appropriate, given the nature of explanations, to replace it with the expression ‘the fact that he believed that p’. This is surely implicit in the claim that explanations are factive, which implies that the *explanans* and *explanandum* of any true explanation state facts.

So, it is true that we can always explain actions by citing reasons that involve facts about agents’ believing or knowing certain things, and having certain goals, that is, the fact that the agent believes that p, the fact that she knows that q, the fact that he wants X, etc. And we can, if we wish, call these ‘mental’ or ‘psychological’ facts. But in doing so, we are not allocating these reasons to a category different from other reasons, namely to the category of mental states. These reasons are still facts; just as, if we explain why someone did something by citing the fact that he is diabetic, or rich, and call these ‘medical’ or ‘financial’ facts respectively, we are not allocating these explanatory reasons to different categories: they are all facts. Thus, in so far as it makes sense to say that a reason that explains an action is a mental state, what that means is not that this reason belongs in an ontological category different from that to which other reasons belong, e.g., the category of ‘psychological’ or ‘mental entities’. Rather, what this means is simply that this reason is *a fact* that concerns an agent’s mind, that is, a fact about how things are, psychologically speaking, with the agent.

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

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

(ii*) **Reasons Claim:** when an agent acts for a reason, the action is caused by mental states and events that are appropriately related to the reason that explains that action.²⁰

It is worth noting that (ii*) effectively involves abandoning the bold claim that reasons are mental states that cause actions, regardless of whether we accept or reject the claim that states, mental or physical, can be causes. Nonetheless, it might be thought that even this weaker claim suffices for the task of ‘naturalising’ reason explanations of action along the lines mentioned above. For even if reasons themselves do not cause actions, they are closely related to mental events and states that do. And now the naturalising move can be made, as follows.

(1) The mental states and events whose existence is implied by reason explanations are identical to, or realised in, neurophysiological states and events;

(2) These neurophysiological states and events cause bodily movements;²¹ and

(3) These bodily movements are the actions that the corresponding reasons explain.

Accordingly, our actions are indeed caused by mental states and events which, though not reasons themselves, are closely related to them; and they are caused by them because these mental states and events are identical to, or are realised in, neurophysiological events and states that cause the bodily movements in which our actions consist.²² So, we still have causation of action by mental states and events related to our reasons, so that the latter seem to be genuinely causal-explanatory but within a strictly physicalist ontology.

§11. However, this way of naturalising reason explanations is problematic because it involves an equivocation on the term ‘bodily movement’. The term ‘bodily movement’ has a kind of ambiguity inherited from the fact that the verb ‘move’ has both a transitive use, as in ‘I moved the fork’ and an intransitive use, as in ‘The fork moved’.²³ Thus, the term ‘bodily movement’ can be used to talk about an action that is someone’s moving her body, e.g. someone’s raising her arm; or it can be used to refer to what I shall call ‘a motion’ of the body, e.g. to someone’s arm’s rising.²⁴

²⁰ That is, they are states of believing, etc. whose ‘contents’ are the relevant reasons and goals.

²¹ There is much simplification here – among other things, these neurophysiological states and events also cause changes in nerves, tendons, bones, muscles, etc. but that complication can be ignored for present purposes.

²² This picture is implicit in Davis’s remark, quoted above that ‘human action can be completely explained by physical causes, as successes in neurophysiology suggest’ (Davis, 2010, 37).

²³ The importance of this dual use for claims concerning the identity of actions and bodily movements was first highlighted by Hornsby in her 1980 book *Actions*. For a detailed discussion see also Alvarez and Hyman, 1998 and Hyman 2007. Here I follow Hyman (2007) and called movements corresponding to the transitive use ‘bodily movements’ and movements corresponding to the intransitive use ‘bodily motions’.

²⁴ The idea that actions are motions of the body with a distinctive etiology is common among defenders of the causal theory:

Causal theories of bodily action maintain that what makes a mere bodily movement an action is its causal history. This is so regardless of whether one considers the action the bodily movement (a *product* of the right kinds of mental causes) that is brought about in the right way or considers the action the very *causing* of the movement by those right kinds of mental causes. On the product view (...), *my clenched fist opens and is an action* because I intend to open it and my intention produces my open fist in the right way (Adams, 2010, 229. Italics in last sentence mine).

As this quotation says, some causalists take actions to be the causing of motions of the body by mental states and events, and others hold, as Mill did, that actions are complexes that include both the causation of

A motion of my body may not be the result of an action of mine – as happens when I have a spasm. But when a motion of my body is the result of my action, my action and the resulting motion are nonetheless different. (I use ‘result’ here to mean the event that must happen, or process that must unfold, for one to have performed the relevant action: e.g. the result of an action of killing is a dying, or a death; ‘result’ can also be used to refer to a state in which an action issues; in this sense, the result of a killing is someone’s being dead). The result of my action is what I cause or bring about, and my action is *my causing or bringing* about that result. Thus, my action of moving my body is my causing a motion of my body; its result is a motion of my body caused by me. For example, my action of raising my arm is my causing a rising of my arm; its result is the motion that I cause: my arm’s rising. To use a different kind of example, my action of moving a table is my causing a motion of the table; its result is the motion that I cause, the motion of the table. In both cases, my actions and its result are different from each other.

Now, some philosophers have claimed that this is true for so-called ‘non-basic’ actions, what one does by doing something else (e.g. break a vase by striking it with a hammer), but not for ‘basic actions’, things done not by doing something else (e.g. raising an arm ‘directly’).²⁵ So they say that, e.g., my breaking a vase and the vase’s breaking are distinct but my moving my body and the resulting motion of my body are one and the same.²⁶ Thus, in his paper ‘Problems in the Explanation of Action’, Davidson writes:

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

But this seems wrong. For we just saw that raising my arm is causing my arm to rise, that is, causing a rising of my arm. But if the raising of my arm and the rising of my arm were one and the same event, as Davidson suggests, it would follow that my action of causing a rising of my arm would be identical to what I cause: to my arm’s rising. And that seems absurd because it says that causing an event might be identical to the event caused.²⁷

There are other problems that attend this view of basic actions. Davidson noted one of them: if a man’s arm goes up, the event takes place in the space-time zone occupied by the arm; but if a man raises his arm, doesn’t the event fill the zone occupied by the whole man? (1980, 124).

Davidson does not regard this difficulty as decisive, although he does not provide a satisfactory response to it (partly because he thinks it a problem that afflicts events in general - but it is not clear that it is).²⁸

So, my action of moving my body is not the same as the motion of my body that I thereby make happen. Motions of our bodies do occur when we move our bodies. And it seems plausible

the motion and the motion caused. In this paper I am only concerned with views that identify actions with (properly caused) motions of the body.

²⁵ It may be tempting to think that I raise my arm by doing something else. For instance, one may think that I raise it by causing certain events to occur in my brain and inside my body. But even if when I raise my arm, events of certain kinds occur in my brain and nervous system, this does not imply that I cause those events, and *a fortiori* it does not imply that I raise my arm *by* making those events happen and so it does not follow that I raise my arm by doing something else.

²⁶ And yet others argue that my action and its result (in my sense) are always identical: so my killing a fly and the fly’s dying, they say, are one and the same change (Coope, 2007, attributes this view to Aristotle and endorses it). I shall not discuss this view in particular, as it implies the weaker one mentioned above which, if true, would suffice to undermine my claims.

²⁷ For detailed discussion see Alvarez & Hyman 1998, Alvarez 1999 and Hyman 2007.

²⁸ The difficulty remains even if we accepted that the arm’s rising is a more complex event, which includes also events in the agent’s central nervous system, as the spatial location of the complex formed by those events and the motion of the arm is still more tightly circumscribed than the location of the action of raising one’s arm. For a detailed discussion of this, see again Alvarez & Hyman 1998.

to suggest that these motions are caused by neural states and events and, more generally, by a complex of neurophysiological occurrences and conditions. However, these motions are not themselves actions but the results of actions: they are (among) the things we make happen when we act.²⁹

It is important to note that the point I am making is not that a motion of my body cannot be an action because it is a motion *of a kind* that might have occurred without my moving my body - for, depending on how we classify kinds of motion, a motion of my body that I make happen is of a very different kind from a motion of my body that occurs without my acting, e.g. as a result of a spasm: one is caused by me and the other is not. My point is, rather, that it is a category mistake to confuse the *causing* of an event (my moving my body) with the event thus *caused* (the motion of the body).

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

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

Because of this, the causal claim (whether in its original version or in the modified form given in §10) does not help to naturalise reason explanations. Therefore, the naturalising ambition does not seem a good motivation for holding the reasons claim, either in its original form (ii), or in the modified version (ii*).

Conclusion

So we have seen that a proper understanding of both the reasons for which we act and of the reasons that explain our actions makes the bold claim that reasons are mental states that cause actions untenable. And we have also seen that the naturalising motivation for holding that mental states and events that are related to our reasons cause actions is misconceived. Many issues concerning the causal theory of action remain. Among others, the question whether, if *reasons are not mental states that cause actions*, it is nonetheless plausible to say that reason explanations are causal and, if so, what that claim amounts to. I leave those issues for another occasion.

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²⁹ It has been claimed (e.g. by Hacker 2010, pp.154ff.) that when I move my body, it is false that (i) my body moves; or (ii) that I cause it to move, and hence that I cause a motion of my body. But, although in most cases it is misleading to say that my body has moved, when *I* moved it (for that suggests that it moved of its own accord), or that I caused my body to move when I move it *directly* (for that suggests I did it by doing something else), both are nonetheless true. For otherwise it would follow either that when I raise my arm, my arm does not rise, which seems paradoxical; or that it does rise but I do not make it rise – but then *what* exactly does raising it amount to if not making it rise?

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