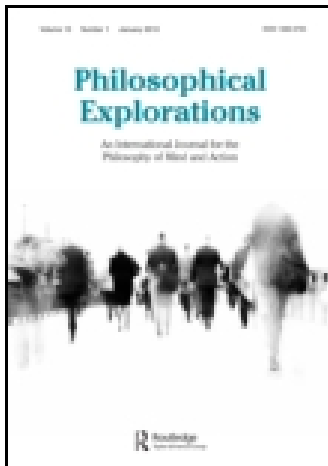


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Reasons and the ambiguity of 'belief'

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Reasons and the ambiguity of 'belief'

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Two conceptions of motivating reasons, i.e. the reasons for which we act, can be found in the literature: (1) the dominant 'psychological conception', which says that motivating reasons are an agent's believing something; and (2) the 'non-psychological' conception, the minority view, which says that they are what the agent believes, i.e. his beliefs. In this paper I outline a version of the minority view, and defend it against what have been thought to be insuperable difficulties – in particular, difficulties concerning 'error cases' (cases where what the agent believes is false); and difficulties concerning the explanation of action. Concerning error cases, I argue that if we are motivated by something believed that is true, what motivates us to act is a motivating reason. By contrast, if we are motivated by something believed that is false, then what motivates us to act is merely an apparent motivating reason. Either way, what motivates us is, as the non-psychological conception says, what we believe and not our believing it. I offer an account of the relation between motivating reasons and the explanation of action, and argue that this account helps bring out two important points. One is that the fact that we often do, and indeed sometimes must, use explanations such as 'He did it because he believed that p' does not vindicate the psychological conception of motivating reasons. The other is that endorsing the non-psychological conception of motivating reasons does not commit one to a non-factive view of explanations of action.

Keywords: action; belief; belief–desire model; motivation; reasons

1. Introduction

When discussing reasons in contexts of action, philosophers tend to distinguish between 'normative' reasons (also called 'justifying'), and 'motivating' reasons (also called 'operative'). Normative reasons are reasons for acting. Motivating reasons are reasons we actually act for. Sometimes these coincide. That is, sometimes there is a reason for A to do something, and A does it for that reason. For example, suppose that there is a reason for me to eat more spinach, namely that I need iron; and suppose I do eat more spinach and my reason for doing so is that I need iron. Here, the reason for which I act (motivating) is also a reason for me to act (normative), namely that I need iron.

There has been much discussion about normative reasons in recent literature but I shall have little to say about them here.¹ My focus in this paper will be the second kind of reasons: *motivating* reasons – the reasons for which we act when we act for a reason. And my purpose is to clarify the nature of motivating reasons and their relation to the explanation of action.

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Two conceptions of motivating reasons can be found in the literature. According to the dominant view, which I shall call ‘the psychological conception’,² motivating reasons are best articulated using a psychological verb: ‘his reason was *that he believes that p*’ (or ‘*his believing that p*’),³ and, it is often said, such reasons are mental states of the agent. The alternative, the non-psychological view, rejects the idea that motivating reasons are mental states as it holds that motivating reasons are best articulated by stating what the agent believes, i.e. ‘his reason was *that p*’. Thus, if I run home because it’s raining, according to the psychological conception my reason for running is *that I believe that it is raining* (or *my believing that it is raining*); while according to the non-psychological conception my reason is *that it is raining*.

The significance of this disagreement is often obscured, especially for those who hold the majority view, by the fact that the psychological conception is often stated using an ambiguous formulation, namely that my reason is ‘my belief’. But the term ‘my belief’ can be used to mean either my believing something, or what I believe. If we leave it unspecified which is meant, we seem to get both conceptions rolled into one, and the question of which conception is right seems to evaporate. But in fact the versatility of this formulation is only apparent, because my believing something and what I believe are not the same reason: ‘He believes it is raining’ and ‘It is raining’ are different reasons expressed in statements with different truth conditions. Thus, although the term ‘my belief’ can do duty for either notion, it cannot do duty for both at the same time, so the question indeed presses itself: which is the right conception, that which says that motivating reasons are our believing something, or that which says that they are what we believe? My answer will be that the second view is right.

Conceptions of motivating reasons similar to the one I shall defend have been persuasively presented recently by a minority of philosophers.⁴ This minority view has thus been established as a serious contender in what is really a new debate about the nature of the reasons for which we act. However, the minority view is still regarded as implausible or confused, mostly because it is not sufficiently well understood, or because it is thought to bring with it insuperable difficulties. In this paper I offer a detailed and distinctive version of the minority view which, I contend, overcomes those apparently insuperable difficulties.

The structure of this paper is as follows. Section 2 is devoted to preliminary matters. In the third section I outline and argue for the minority conception of motivating reasons, and also introduce some of the difficulties associated with this conception. In the following three sections I provide solutions to these difficulties: to the ones that concern ‘error cases’, i.e. cases where an agent acts in the light of a false belief (Section 4); and also to the ones that arise from the relation between motivating reasons and the explanation of action (Sections 5 and 6).

2. Preliminaries

Before spelling out my account of motivating reasons, a few preliminary clarifications are required.

The reason why someone acted often is her reason for acting. Thus, if I eat spinach because I need iron then the reason why I eat spinach, namely that I need iron, is also my reason for eating spinach. But this need not be the case: sometimes the reason why someone acted may not be his reason for acting. For example, the reason why Arthur shouted at the traffic warden may be that he was angry. But that he was angry was not *Arthur’s reason* for shouting. The same is true of omissions. Thus suppose that I don’t turn up to give a paper because I forget I was meant to. Again, that I forgot is the reason why I didn’t turn up but it is not *my reason* for not turning

up. And so on. In this paper I shall focus on *motivating* reasons: the reasons for which we act when we act for reasons.

I also want to disregard a possible complication – I'm thinking of those cases where what the agent claims to be his reason for doing something was not *really* his reason. For example, Albert may say that he went to the library because he needed to borrow a book, but in fact he went because Helen, on whom he has a crush, was at the library. His reason for going to the library was that Helen was there and not that he needed to borrow a book, as he claimed. (The discrepancy in such cases may be due either to dissimulation or to self-deception, which will depend on how good the agent is at identifying his own motives and how keen he is to conceal them. And of course it is also possible to do something, e.g. go to the library, for more than one reason – but that need not detain us here either.)

Finally, in this paper I shall leave aside the role of desires in motivation. There has been much debate concerning the relationship between desires and both normative and motivating reasons, focusing on questions such as whether an agent's desires provide him with reasons for acting; whether reasons are dependent on the agent's desires (internal versus external reasons); whether beliefs alone can be motivating reasons or whether every motivating reason must comprise a belief and a desire; and so on. But, whatever the answers to those questions might be, it is true that the reason for which someone acts, is (at least partly) some belief of his. And my concern here is with understanding that – the nature of what might be called the 'cognitive' aspect of motivating reasons.⁵ So, for the moment, I put desires aside.⁶

3. Motivating reasons

The question: 'What was the reason that motivated the agent?' is a question about what made the action right or appropriate in the agent's eyes. And this is what motivates him to act. This question is closely connected to practical reasoning because answers to it are what would appear as premises in a reconstruction of the agent's (implicit or explicit) practical reasoning. These include things such as: 'it's late', 'she's in danger', 'it's great fun', 'it may be dangerous', 'I need iron', 'the weather won't hold', etc.⁷ So, the question 'What motivated the agent to act?' can be answered by saying what it was that seemed to her to make her so acting right or appropriate. And this very rarely takes the psychological form 'her believing that p'; rather, it normally takes the non-psychological form,⁸ 'that p': 'that it was very late', 'that her husband is arriving tomorrow', etc.

To see why, consider the following example. Suppose I give my cousin some money because I believe what he tells me, namely that he needs it to pay his rent. My reason for giving him the money is, it seems, that he needs it. It is that which, in my eyes, makes it right for me to give him the money, and not that *I believe* that he needs it. For suppose he'd deceived me and he wasn't really in need. Discovering that he had deceived me would be discovering that I was motivated to lend him the money by something that was not the case. But what I would discover not to have been the case would be that he was in need and not that *I believed* that he was in need – for that *was* the case: I did indeed believe that he was in need. And this suggests that what motivated me was that which I took to be the case, namely that he was in need.⁹

Thus, a motivating reason, what made the action appropriate from the agent's perspective at the time, is, typically, what the agent believed, and not his believing it. And this is what the non-psychological conception says motivating reasons are.¹⁰

At this point, two objections might appear to suggest that, after all, the psychological conception of motivating reasons must be right.

The first objection is the thought that, unless the agent believes (or knows, suspects, etc.) that p , that p cannot be *her* reason (i.e. unless the agent believes that her cousin is in need, the latter cannot be her reason).¹¹ This is true, but in fact, the very way the objection is articulated supports the non-psychological conception. For the objection says that *for something to be a reason* the agent must believe it (or somehow be aware of it). But this suggests that the reason is what she believes, not her believing it. Consider an analogy. Unless I have money, I cannot pay for my purchases with it. But if I do have money and pay for some purchase, I pay with the money I have, and not with 'my having the money'. Likewise, in order for p to motivate me to act, I must believe (or somehow be aware) that p ; but it is a mistake to infer from this that, therefore, the reason that motivates me to act is my believing that p , rather than what I believe.

The other objection is more complex and has been thought to be decisive in showing that motivating reasons must be my believing something rather than what I believe. The objection centres on error cases, where what the agent believes is false. In the example above, I initially said that the reason that motivated me was the fact that my cousin needed the money to pay his rent. But if we suppose that he didn't need it, that he just wanted the money to buy a plasma TV, my reason cannot be the fact that he needed it, for there was no such fact. But if my reason was not that fact, what was it, then?

The problem here is that I cannot, without an air of paradox, say something like: 'My reason for giving him the money is that he needs it, although he doesn't'; or 'I'm giving him the money because he needs it, although he doesn't'. These statements are reminiscent of Moore's paradoxes of belief. However, unlike Moore's paradoxes, these statements remain paradoxical when turned into the third-person: 'Her reason for giving him the money is that he needs it, although he doesn't'; or 'She's giving him the money because he needs it, although he doesn't'.¹² And again, unlike Moore's cases, these remain paradoxical, although perhaps to a lesser extent, when they are put in the past tense. Thus compare 'I believed that he was ill, although he wasn't' and 'I gave him the money because he needed it, although he didn't need it'.

The problem with these expressions is not that it is impossible to think of a context where they might be appropriately used but, rather, that their use will always involve a note of irony that subverts the claim about the alleged reason. And if we want to avoid the air of paradox or irony, we need to specify what motivated the agent by using a different form of words; typically, we use a locution involving psychological verbs such as 'believe'. That is, we need to say something like 'What motivated her was her belief that he needed the money (although he didn't need it)', 'Her reason was that she believed he needed the money (although he didn't)'; or 'I gave him the money because I believed that he needed it (although he didn't)', etc.¹³

But now it seems that, after all, the psychological conception of motivating reasons is right; or, at any rate, right for error cases. This is the claim I examine in the next section.

4. Beliefs as motivating reasons

In this section I shall focus on statements that appear to support the psychological conception such as 'What motivated her was *her belief* that p ', or 'Her reason is *her belief* that p ', and will leave expressions such as 'She did it because *she believed* that p ' for the next section. Here I shall argue that the fact that in some cases we resort to locutions such as 'Her reason was *her belief* that p ' in order to avoid the air of paradox, does not show that the psychological conception is right, even in error cases. Let me explain why.

Earlier in the paper, in the Introduction, I drew attention to the distinction between two uses of the term 'belief', namely to refer to my believing something and to refer to what I believe.

I return to that (act/object) distinction now, we can see that it is only the conflation of those two uses that makes the claim that motivating reasons are our beliefs seem a vindication of the psychological view. For such a vindication would require that we use 'her belief' in the first sense noted above (her believing). However, when we say that an agent's motivating reason was her belief, it is the second use (what she believes) that is at issue. Indeed, my discussion of the example of my cousin and the money above shows precisely that *only* if we construe 'my belief' thus, is it possible to make sense of the claim that the reasons that motivate us are our beliefs. For only if we construe 'her belief' to refer to what she believed (e.g. that her cousin was in need), can we make sense of the fact that she discovered that she had been motivated by something that turned out to be false – since what she subsequently discovered to be false is what she believed. So, even though the term 'my belief' is sometimes used to refer to my believing something, this is not the use at issue in these error cases. And therefore, to say that the reason that motivated her was 'her belief that p' is not to embrace the psychological conception, for 'her belief' is being used to denote what is believed.

Thus, talk of reasons as 'beliefs' does not lend support to the psychological conception because it is plausible to conceive of reasons as beliefs only if what is meant is what is believed. And this is what the minority view says motivating reasons are.

At this point, some might find the view that motivating reasons are beliefs, in the sense of 'what is believed', initially plausible. But they may feel unable to embrace it because of some lingering worries that appear to undermine it. Let me examine the two main possible worries and show that they are not real obstacles for accepting the minority view.

A first worry might come in the form of this objection. A motivating reason cannot be what is believed because what is believed can be true or false, whereas reasons cannot be true or false. The objection, however, is misguided because, if it were right, we would have to conclude that what is believed cannot be a fact, and indeed that what is believed cannot also be known. For what is believed can be true or false but neither facts nor knowledge can be true or false. However, we know that, if it is a fact that p, and John believes that p, then what John believes is a fact, even though what John believes is also true and facts are neither true nor false. Similarly, if John believes that p and Mary knows that p, then what Mary knows is what John believes, even though what John believes is something that is true. Thus although reasons cannot be true or false this does not imply that what is believed, which can, cannot be a reason.

What is believed can also be doubted, suspected, etc., and it is called 'a belief' or 'a doubt' on account of its being something that can be believed or doubted respectively – that is, of its being a 'believable' or a 'doubtable'. More generally, what is believed is a 'thinkable', or a proposition – as far as I can see nothing hangs on using either term.¹⁴ I prefer 'thinkable' because it retains the link with the fact that these are things that can be believed, doubted, known, etc. which is relevant to motivating reasons. A thinkable is something that can replace p in 'John believes that p', 'Mary doubts that p', 'Angelina knows that p', etc. (though in the last one, the thinkable that replaces p must be true).

If John believes that p, then the thinkable that p can be called *John's* belief that p. And John's belief that p (i.e. the thinkable that p *qua* believed by John) can also be something that motivates John to act. And if the belief that motivates John to act is a true belief, then that belief is a reason that motivated John to act, i.e. it is a motivating reason.

Now, the fact that there are things that it makes sense to say of these thinkables, e.g. that they are true or false, only *qua* believables but not, *say, qua* what motivates, does not show that what is believed cannot be the thing that motivates. Consider an analogy. A particular object, for instance, a particular bicycle, may be a present. Now, presents, but not bicycles,

can be generous. But if Amy's bicycle was a generous present, the fact that bicycles cannot be generous does not show that Amy's bicycle was not a present, or that bicycles cannot, after all, be presents. Likewise, the fact that beliefs can be true or false but reasons cannot does not show that a belief – what is believed – cannot be a reason.

Thus what is believed, if true, can be a reason. What is believed and is false cannot be a reason, but it can still be what motivates someone to act. A motivating belief that is false is not a reason, though the agent takes it to be – so a false belief that motivates is what we might call 'an apparent reason'. An apparent reason is not a reason any more than a fake Vermeer is a Vermeer – it just seems to be one; but just as a fake Vermeer and a genuine one are both paintings, an apparent reason and a genuine reason are both beliefs, only one is false and the other true.¹⁵

This brings us to a second difficulty that one might think afflicts the minority conception of motivating reasons. According to the view I am proposing, when an agent is motivated by a true belief, since what he believes is something that is the case, the agent is motivated by a fact – by the way things are. On the other hand, when the agent is motivated by a false belief, what he believes is not the case and hence not a fact. But isn't there a problem with the idea that what is not the case can *motivate* someone?

The thought that there is a problem here, however, would only arise from a particular conception of what it is for a belief, whether true or false, to motivate someone. As far as I can see, in order for a thinkable to motivate someone, that thinkable must be believed and it must appear to the agent to speak in favour of acting in a certain way. Thus, in order to motivate me to take my umbrella, the thinkable 'It is raining' must be something that I believe and that I take to speak in favour of taking an umbrella. A false belief is a false thinkable that the agent takes to be true, and the fact that the agent takes it to be true explains why a false belief can still motivate him to act: if I falsely believe that it is raining, *that false belief* might make it seem to me that taking my umbrella is the thing to do. The fact that my belief is false does not deprive it of its capacity to motivate me.

It is true that a belief that motivates someone to act can only *justify* his so acting if the belief is true – that is, if that belief is a reason.¹⁶ And it is true that, therefore, false motivating beliefs cannot justify an action. But this does not mean that they cannot motivate an agent to act. Thus, in the absence of an argument against this conception of what it is for a belief to motivate, I see no reason to think that there is a problem with the idea that a false belief can motivate.

In the following section I explore the relation between motivating reasons and explanations of action. In it, I shall explain why and when we use psychological locutions of the second kind mentioned above, i.e. 'He did it because he *believed* that p'; and, in the process of doing that, I shall show why the use of these locutions does not support the psychological conception of motivating reasons either.

5. Motivating reasons and the explanation of action

One possible way of explaining someone's action is to specify the belief that motivated the agent to act. And this is explanatory because, as has often been pointed out, in knowing what motivated the agent, we come to see what it was that, from his perspective, made the action appropriate, appealing or right for him to do. And this makes the action intelligible, i.e., to use Raz's way of putting it, 'an intelligible object of choice for the agent' (1999, 24). Thus, any specification of what motivated the agent provides enough information to construct an explanation of the action.

Now, if what motivated the agent was a reason, then it is possible to construct a *reason* explanation, that is, an explanation whose *explanans* is precisely the reason that motivated the

agent to act. For instance, if her reason for leaving was that the concert had finished then we can construct a *reason* explanation: 'She left because the concert had finished'. Such explanations specify the belief that motivated the agent to act but they also tell us that it was true, i.e. that she was motivated by a *reason*.

On the other hand, if what motivated the agent was a false belief, then it is not possible to construct a reason explanation. Instead, we must resort to what I shall call a 'psychological *explanation*',¹⁷ whose *explanans* is a statement to the effect that the agent believed that *p*.¹⁸ For instance, 'She left her job because she believed that she had a fatal disease' is a psychological explanation. These psychological explanations explain by citing what motivated the agent prefixed by a phrase like 'she believed that', and without implying that what motivated her was true (indeed they carry the suggestion that it wasn't).

It is important to note that it is possible to construct psychological explanations both in veridical and in error cases. So one could say that there are psychological-reason explanations and psychological-apparent-reason explanations. In the first, what follows the 'she believed that' is true and hence a reason, while in the second it is false.

Thus, while it is possible to construct psychological explanations both in veridical and in error cases as just outlined, proper *reason* explanations are available only in veridical cases. And it is precisely the fact that in error cases we *have* to use these psychological (apparent-reason) explanations that has proved one of the most resilient grounds of support for the psychological conception of motivating reasons. But, as I shall show, this support for the psychological conception is actually rather shaky.

Psychological explanations are taken to support the psychological conception of motivating reasons because it is believed that the *explanans* of a psychological explanation (namely 'she believed that *p*') is also the reason that motivated the agent. But this is wrong on two counts.

Firstly, in error cases, there is *no* reason that motivated the agent, and hence the *explanans* of a psychological explanation of his action cannot be the reason that motivated the agent, since there was no such reason. Thus, in error cases, these psychological explanations do not cite a motivating reason (for there was none) and *a fortiori* they do not show that the motivating reason was *that the agent believed that p*.

Second, although they are often called 'reason explanations', psychological explanations are not really *reason* explanations, if by that it is meant an explanation whose *explanans* is the reason that motivated the agent. In fact, the *explanans* of a psychological explanation is not what motivated the agent, whether the latter is true or false. As we have seen, what motivates an agent is what he believes, that *p*, whether true or false. But the *explanans* of a psychological explanation is a statement of the kind 'She believed that *p*' and the fact that she believed that *p* is rarely the reason that motivates someone to act.

However, although these psychological explanations are not *reason* explanations, they are important for explaining actions and, once their use is understood, it becomes even clearer that the fact that we often do, and indeed sometimes must, use them does not vindicate the psychological conception of *motivating reasons*.

These psychological explanations have a three-fold use: (1) to identify the belief that motivated the agent, whether that belief is true or not; (2) to convey, directly or indirectly, the speaker's own view about the truth or otherwise of what motivated the agent; and (3) to specify the kind of epistemic state of the agent's relative to what motivated her.

The first aspect of the use of psychological explanations we have seen already: an explanation such as 'She lent him the money because she believed he was in need' identifies the motivating belief (that he was in need). This is something that a reason explanation can also do but, as we have seen, when the belief is false, we need to resort to some kind of psychological locution.

Moreover, and relatedly, these psychological explanations can be used by the speaker providing the explanation to control the strict implications or the conversational implicatures of the explanation and, in doing so, the speaker can also convey his or her own views about the truth of what motivated the agent. Let me explain what this means.

As we saw above, the reason explanation 'She left because the concert had finished' implies that the concert had finished. On the other hand, 'She left because she believed that the concert had finished' also explains why she left by saying what motivated her (her belief that the concert had finished) without implying that things were as she believed, i.e. without implying that the concert had finished – indeed it has the conversational implicature that it hadn't. Thus, the psychological locutions under discussion can be used when the speaker wants, for whatever reason, to distance himself from the truth of what the agent believed and was motivated by. This may be because he *knows* that what the agent believed is false, or he wishes to suggest that it is, or wants to leave it open whether it is; which in turn may be because what the agent believes is something that is disputed or controversial, such as, e.g., whether giving money to drunken beggars is the right thing to do.¹⁹

It must be noted, however, that some psychological locutions, far from suggesting that what motivated the speaker may be false, *imply* its truth. 'She left because she knew the concert had finished' implies that the concert had finished, that the agent knew it, and that the concert's having finished was her reason for leaving.

Whether a psychological explanation implies the truth of what motivated the agent, then, depends on whether the cognitive verb is factive, i.e. whether 'A Vs that p' (knows, believes, suspects, etc.) implies that p.

This brings out the third feature of the role of these psychological explanations, which is that they allow the speaker to specify the precise epistemic attitude of the agent towards what motivated her.²⁰ Thus, whereas the reason explanation 'She left because the concert had finished' implies that the agent was, in one way or another, aware of the fact that the concert had finished, the psychological locution permits the speaker to specify precisely what the relevant epistemic state was: 'She left because she knew/believed/suspected/deduced etc., that the concert had finished'.

We have seen, then, the role that psychological explanations can play. And the question of *when* we use them has been implicitly answered: this is a matter of the pragmatics of explanation, of what is appropriate in the context, given the logical implications and the conversational implicatures that explanations of different kinds have. Thus, depending on whether the speaker wishes to (or can, epistemically speaking) endorse or not the truth of the motivating belief, and depending on how much detail is appropriate, he'll use either a reason explanation or a psychological explanation.²¹ But whichever is used, it is still the case that what motivates agents is what they believe, not their believing it. In short, the fact that we may and sometimes must use these psychological locutions does not support the psychological conception of *motivating* reasons.

Before finishing this paper I should like to make a point of clarification about the character of explanations of action, and in particular about the 'facticity' of these explanations. This is the topic of the following section.

6. The facticity of explanations of action

The conception of motivating reasons I have defended here is similar to one that has been defended by Jonathan Dancy among others – although Dancy might regard mine as a version

of 'the content-based view' which he classes as a form of 'psychologism' (Dancy 2000, 112); a classification that is, in my opinion and for the reasons given in the previous sections, mistaken. Be that as it may, what I wish to emphasise here is an element of Dancy's account that I reject, namely the view that some reason explanations are not factive, i.e. that a true reason explanation may have a false *explanans*.²²

Like Dancy, I think that whichever form of explanation we use, what motivates the agent is what he believed and not his believing it, regardless of whether what he believes is true or false. But, unlike him, I don't think the same is true of the *explanans* of an explanation of action. In my view, the idea that an explanation (of any kind) may have a false *explanans* is untenable – but, fortunately, it is not implied or even suggested by the conception of motivating reasons I am defending.

The reason why the minority view does not have that implication is that it is possible to specify what motivated an agent without, on the one hand, commitment to its truth, and on the other, without commitment to the view that what motivated the agent is what explains her action. This can be done by using any of the locutions involving psychological terms mentioned above. For instance, the locution 'What motivated her was her false belief that her car had been stolen' specifies what motivated her without committing the speaker to its truth – in fact it says it is false; nor does this commit the speaker to the view that what motivated her is also what explains her action. As I said above, it is possible to explain an action by citing the belief that motivated the agent directly: 'She left because the concert had finished', or by citing it in the psychologised form: 'She left because she thought/knew that the concert had finished'. In the first case, the *explanans* is that the concert had finished; while in the second, it is that she thought/knew that the concert had finished.

A proper understanding of the relation between motivating reasons and the explanation of action allows us to walk a line between two mistakes that are the mirror image of each other. One is to think that the *explanans* of any explanation of an action that mentions the belief that motivated the agent must also be *the reason* that motivated the agent (this leads to the psychological conception of motivating reasons). The other mistake is to think that the belief that motivated the agent can be the *explanans* of an explanation of her action, regardless of whether the belief is true or false (this leads to the view that some reason explanations are not factive).

It follows from the discussion so far, then, that explanations of action where the agent was motivated by a false belief are also factive: the truth of the explanation implies (and requires) the truth of its *explanans*, namely that she believed that p; what it does not require, however, is the truth of what she believed, that p, which is what motivated her. Thus, endorsing the non-psychological conception of motivating reasons does not commit one to a non-factive view of explanations of action. Let me finish with a point about the form of explanations of action.

Many philosophers believe that what I have called reason explanations are actually ellipses for psychological explanations; and that, therefore, the *explanans* of any reason explanation, when made explicit, is not 'p' but rather 'she believed that p'. Whether they are right that all explicit explanations of action fit this psychological model is something I should like to leave open here, for I think there are reasons for and against this view.

On the one hand, it is clear that what I called 'proper reason explanations' do explain actions, and it is not clear that they do so only if we read them as ellipses for psychological explanations. On the other hand, it is true that it is possible to construct psychological explanations also in veridical cases – as we saw above, we have psychological-reason explanations as well as psychological-apparent-reason explanations. And we could argue that we use the elliptical

form (i.e. reason explanations) because psychological explanations, as I pointed out above, have the conversational implicature that what the agent believed is false or doubtful – an implicature which we may often want to cancel.²³ (And although this implicature could be cancelled by using the verb ‘to know’ in the relevant psychological explanation, i.e. ‘because she knew that p’, it is also true that sometimes the speaker may not want to commit herself to a knowledge claim about the agent.)

I am inclined to think that, since different forms of explanation fulfil different roles along the lines spelled out in the previous section, there is no reason to insist that all explanations ultimately share the same form. What is true is that all these forms of explanation are factive because their *explanantia* are always true; and also that, whatever form of explanation we provide, what motivates the agent is always what the agent believes, true or false, as the non-psychological conception of motivating reasons says.

To conclude: I have argued that a motivating reason is what an agent believes rather than the fact that they believe it or their believing it. I have also explained why, although we sometimes use expressions that appear to vindicate the psychological conception of motivating reasons, they do not in fact do so, as we can explain the use of those expressions and the roles they play without commitment to the psychological conception.

One of the questions that occupied philosophers of action in the second half of the twentieth century was whether the reason for which someone acts is the cause of her action, as well as the related but distinct question whether explanations of action that cite an agent’s reason are causal explanations. It is probably true to say that the majority of philosophers today believe that the answer to those questions is ‘yes’ – although it is also true that the number of the dissenting minority has been growing in recent years. However, that debate was mostly conducted on the assumption that the psychological conception of motivating reasons is right. Therefore it would seem that, if that is not the case and if the minority view of motivating reasons that I have defended in this paper is right, the causalist debate in the theory of action needs to be thought afresh.

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Notes

1. Some of the most influential recent contributions are: Korsgaard (1996, 1997), Quinn (1993), Scanlon (1998, especially Part 1), Smith (1994), and Raz (1999) which builds on his influential *Practical Reason and Norms* (Raz 1975).
2. I borrow the labels for each account from Parfit (1997, n28).
3. In this paper, I shall take ‘his believing that p’ as an expression that can be used to refer to the fact that he believes that p. And I shall use either ‘my believing that p’ or ‘that I believe that p’ as variant ways of expressing what the psychological conceptions says motivating reasons are, according to what seems more idiomatic in the context. Some people think that nominal constructions such as ‘his believing that p’ can be used to refer to mental states of the agent. But even if that is right, it is clear that these

nominal constructions can also be used to refer to facts, as I am using them here. (See Strawson, 1992, 110, where he explains that 'we use nominal constructions of the same general kinds – nouns derived from other parts of speech, noun clauses, gerundial constructions – to refer both to terms of the natural and to terms of the non-natural relation', i.e. to refer both to events (and, some would add, to states) which, according to Strawson, stand in the natural relation of causation; and to refer to facts, which stand in the intensional, non-natural relation of explanation, respectively.)

4. Among those who have explicitly defended the minority view, on a variety of grounds, are Bittner (2001), Dancy (2000), Stout (1996), Stoutland (1998, 2001) and Schueler (2003). Related conceptions, articulated in terms of the first-person perspective, can also be found in Kim (1998) and Manson (2004). The minority view about motivating reasons is sometimes called the 'externalist' view. For reasons I cannot go into here I think the label is not very helpful in this context and I shan't be using it.
5. I should also note that in my discussion of motivating reasons I use the term 'belief' as a generic term for a range of epistemic concepts such as suspicions, things known, deductions, suppositions, etc. This is common practice in the literature and I shall follow that practice for ease of exposition.
6. For more detailed discussion of whether an agent's desires provide reasons for action and whether motivating reasons require desires as components see Anscombe (1957, especially sec. 35ff), Quinn (1993), Raz (1999, chap. 3), Scanlon (1998, chap. 1), Dancy (2000, 35ff).
7. My claim is that the agent's reason is something she believes; something which she also believes to make her action appropriate. Her reason is *not* (or not normally) her believing that thing, or her believing that such a thing makes her action appropriate.
8. Although, as some authors have pointed out, it may take the psychological form: for instance, my reason for visiting a psychiatrist might be that I believe that I'm being pursued by the Security Services. See Hyman (1999, 444).
9. Stout (1996, chap. 2) makes a similar point.
10. In his paper 'How Knowledge Works', John Hyman (1999) argues that a reason for which someone acts must be something *known*, rather than something merely *believed*, *suspected*, etc. I cannot examine this issue here but, if Hyman is right, my version of the minority view would have to be modified accordingly (i.e. that a motivating reason is something one knows, rather than one's knowing it, etc.).
11. For further discussion of this point see Dancy (2000, 127ff).
12. Compare these with Moore's paradox: 'I believe that p, but not p' and 'She believes that p, but not p', where only the first-person statement is paradoxical. The reason why in our examples of reasons both first- and third-person statements have the air of paradox is that 'because' is 'factive': a 'because' statement implies the truth of both the statements linked by the connective 'because'. And this, unlike cases of Moore's paradox, holds even when we put the statements in the past tense: 'My reason was that he was in need, although he wasn't' has an air of paradox that 'I believed that p, but not p' doesn't.
13. Note that resort to the psychological form won't work, at least not in a straightforward way, with first-person present-tense forms. 'I'm giving him the money because I believe he needs it, although he doesn't'; 'My reason is that I believe he needs money, although he doesn't' still have the air of paradox. The explanation of why these statements won't do is, simply, that they involve clear-cut instances of Moore's paradox about belief.
14. So long, that is, as one conceives of propositions roughly along the lines of Frege's notion of a thought, and not in Russell's terms, i.e. as being composed of objects, relations, etc.
15. This point also helps to see that the claim 'His reason was his false belief that p' does not imply that a false belief is a reason (as opposed to an apparent reason), just as 'His Vermeer was a fake' does not imply that a fake Vermeer is still a Vermeer.
16. This is a necessary and not a sufficient condition for a motivating belief to justify the action it motivates. And it should also be noted that although a false belief cannot justify an agent's action, something else might, even when the agent acts on a false belief. Thus, what motivates me to take my umbrella might

- be my false belief that it is raining. This false belief does not justify my taking the umbrella. But if someone had played a practical joke on me and made it look as though it was raining, then, since I might be justified in believing that it was raining, I might also be justified in having taken my umbrella – though not by my false belief, but by the fact that someone made it look as though it was raining.
17. These psychological explanations are often called ‘Humean explanations’. Or, to be precise, Humean explanations are thought to have the form ‘He did it because he wanted to . . . and believed that . . .’, however, I am here only concerned with the belief part of explanations.
 18. Other explanations explain also by reference to some psychological feature of the agent, e.g. ‘He ran because he is a coward’. However, unlike the psychological explanations under discussion, these do not mention the belief that motivated the agent.
 19. Note that the speaker *could* be the agent who may simply want to acknowledge that the belief that motivates her is controversial: ‘I don’t pay taxes because I believe that taxation is a form of theft’.
 20. See Note 5.
 21. To endorse the truth of a reason statement is not to endorse the reason as a good reason for that agent to do what he did, i.e. to judge that the agent did what he did for a good reason.
 22. See Dancy (2000, 131–7, 146–7). I agree with much of what Dancy says there. For instance, I agree that there is ‘a way of explaining an action by laying out the considerations in the light of which an agent acted without committing ourselves to things being as the agent thought’ (2000, 132). But this is a very different claim from the idea that ‘a thing believed that is not the case can still explain an action’ (2000, 134). When the thing believed is false, what explains the action is, rather, that the agent had that false belief.
 23. One may wonder whether the distinction between ‘He ran because he was late’ and ‘He ran because he thought he was late’ should be understood in terms of the difference between *oratio recta* and *oratio obliqua*. One reason to think that it shouldn’t is that both *oratio recta* and *oratio obliqua* reports of what someone said or thought may be true regardless of the truth of their subclauses. Thus ‘He said: “It is a beautiful day”’ and ‘He said that it was a beautiful day’, which are *oratio recta* and *oratio obliqua* reports of what he said, respectively, can both be true regardless of whether what he said was true. However, ‘He ran because he was late’ or ‘His reason for running was that he was late’ can be true *only if* he was late, as both imply that he was late, and that suggests that this is not a form of *oratio recta*. If he wasn’t late, we need to resort to ‘His reason for running was that he thought he was late’ or ‘He ran because he thought he was late’.

Notes on contributor

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