**Reasons Explanations (of Actions) as Structural Explanations**

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**Abstract:** Non-causal accounts of action explanation have long been criticized for lacking a positive thesis, relying primarily on negative arguments to undercut the standard Causal Theory of Action (Wilson and Shpall 2016). Additionally, it is commonly thought that non-causal accounts fail to provide an answer to Donald Davidson’s (1963) challenge for theories of reasons explanations of actions. According to Davidson’s challenge, a plausible non-causal account of reasons explanations must provide a way of connecting an agent’s reasons, not only to what she ought to do, but to what she actually does. That is, such explanations must be truth-apt, not mere rationalizations. My aim in this paper is to show how a non-causal account of action can provide explanations that are truth-apt and genuinely explanatory. To make this argument, I take as a given an account of the practical syllogism (the syllogistic form of practical reasoning) discussed by Michael Thompson (2008) and Eric Wiland (2012), according to which the practical syllogism is *truly practical* rather than propositional in nature. Next, I present my primary positive thesis: reasons for actions have explanatory power in virtue of being parts of a *structure*–the practical syllogism—that contains the action being explained. I then argue that structural action explanations can meet Davidson’s challenge and that they genuinely explain actions. Finally, I conclude by addressing some objections to my argument.

1. **Introduction**

The Causal Theory of Action (CTA) is the standardly accepted theory of how reasons explain actions. According to the CTA, the agent’s reasons for acting are mental states, and they explain what she did in part because they caused what she did. But some action theorists object to the idea that the explanatory relationship between reasons and actions is causal. Non-causal accounts of action have long faced the criticism of lacking a positive thesis, relying primarily on negative arguments to try to undercut the CTA (Wilson and Shpall 2016). Additionally, non-causal views often fail to meet Donald Davidson’s (1980) challenge for theories of reasons explanations, according to which a plausible non-causal account of reasons explanations must provide a way of connecting an agent’s reasons, not only to what she ought to do, but to what she actually does. That is, action explanations must be truth-apt, not mere rationalizations. For Davidson, causal connections are necessary for reasons to be genuinely explanatory. My aim in this paper is to show how a non-causal account of action can provide explanations that are truth-apt and genuinely explanatory.

To make this argument, I take as a given a particular kind of practical syllogism (the syllogistic form of practical reasoning). In particular, I utilize the practical syllogism discussed by Michael Thompson (2008) and Eric Wiland (2012), according to which the practical syllogism is truly practical rather than propositional in nature. Next, I present my primary positive thesis: reasons for actions have explanatory power in virtue of being parts of a structure–the practical syllogism— that contains the action being explained. I then argue that structural action explanations can meet

Davidson’s challenge and that they genuinely explain actions. Finally, I conclude by addressing some objections to my argument.

1. **Theories of Action Explanation**

Near the end of W. Somerset Maugham’s novel *Of Human Bondage*, the following exchange takes place between Philip, the bookish protagonist, and a friend:

*“[A]re you under the impression that you have so great a mind that you can understand the most profound writer at a first reading?"*

*"I don't want to understand him, I'm not a critic. I'm not interested in him for his sake but for mine."*

*"Why d'you read then?"*

*"Partly for pleasure, because it's a habit and I'm just as uncomfortable if I don't read as if I don't smoke, and partly to know myself.”*

In this exchange, Philip demonstrates two different (or apparently different) ways of explaining his reading. The first explanation cites some motivating mental states—“pleasure”, “habit”, “discomfort”—to explain his reading. The second explanation cites another activity that his reading is helping him *fulfil*: the activity of knowing himself. Any good theory of action explanation should be able to make sense of both of these responses to the friend’s inquiry. The standard theory—the CTA—argues that the fundamental explanans of action explanations are those mental states referred to in Philip’s first explanation. The contemporary CTA originated with Donald Davidson, and most causal theorists today are still largely Davidsonian.

In his influential 1963 paper “Actions, Reasons, and Causes”, Davidson argued that reasons can explain actions if they stand in two important relationships to those actions: a *justifying* relationship, and a *causal* relationship. Davidsonian reasons are the familiar concepts of folk-psychology—desires, intentions, judgments, motives, beliefs, etc.[[1]](#footnote-1) An example of this is found in the excerpt above. When Philip’s friend asks him why he is reading, Philip cites a list of motivating attitudes: pleasure, and a desire to be free from discomfort. He then indirectly expresses a representing attitude: his belief that reading will satisfy those desires.

Davidson argues that these reasons cited in action explanations—beliefs and desires, etc.—must be the *causes* of that action being explained, and that they must also justify the action. In this case, Philip cites a desire for pleasure and a belief about how to attain pleasure (namely: by reading). This desire/belief combination rationally justifies his action of reading, and these attitudes also *cause* him to read.[[2]](#footnote-2) Davidson’s theory of action explanations holds that these causes are the appropriate constituents of *reasons explanations* of actions, where reasons explanations of an action render the action intelligible.

1. **Davidson’s Challenge**

To understand Davidson’s challenge, we must understand the philosophical milieu against which he was reacting. R.G. Collingwood, a 19th century historian and philosopher, thought that to explain actions in history is just to explain some happening *as an intelligible action*. D’Oro (2008) calls this the “semantic approach” to action explanation, which aimed at identifying the ways that we conceive of, and speak of, some happenings differently than others, and create explanations that respect this difference. We can see the skeleton of the semantic approach in Wittgenstein’s action theory, which was the dominant view of human action before Davidson. The famous fragment “what is left over if I subtract the fact that my arm goes up from the fact that I raise my arm?” (PI §621) is often used as a tool or “computation device” (Velleman 2000) used to pinpoint the feature that distinguishes the action from the surrounding non-action events. But on the contrary, the purpose of this question was to show that attempts to analytically delineate actions from non-actions are doomed to failure, because the proposed subtraction is impossible—a conceptual confusion. In essence, the Wittgensteinian idea of why I call one instance of my arm going up an “action” and another instance a “non-action” is that (as he discusses further in 630 of the *Philosophical Investigations*) I am playing two different *language-games* (Ford 2011; Hacker 2000, p. 605)

Wittgenstein and Collingwood both understood the investigation of action as an investigation of semantics—of a language-game—carved out and given norms by human interests and human ways of relating to the world. It was against this backdrop that Davidson’s “Actions, Reasons, and Causes” emerged as a proposal for a radical new direction in the philosophy of action. Therein, he criticized the semantic approach to action-explanation, and adopts the now-common “ontological” turn in action theory (D’Oro 2008). The problem with thinking of action explanation as the process of giving “meaning” to someone’s doings, or with understanding and explaining actions in terms of a particular language-game, is that there are no (or no obvious) *truth-conditions* for these explanations. Indeed, it is unclear whether it is even possible, on these frameworks, to give a false explanation of an action, rather than just a useless one. But being able to give true explanations of actions seems 1) essential and 2) like something we already do or at least try to do. To give truth-apt explanations, a theory of action must have some way of connecting the agent’s reasons for acting to the action she performs. This connecting relationship, Davidson argues, is a causal one. His argument can be formalized as follows (1963, p. 691 and throughout):

P1: An agent may have rationalizing reasons for her action even if she does not act for these reasons.

P2: Given (1), a reasons explanation of an action requires more than a reasons rationalization to connect the agent’s reasons to her actions.

P3: A causal connection is the best candidate for the “more” required of reasons explanations to connect the agent’s reasons to her actions.

C: So, causes are the best candidates for reasons for actions.

If we are to take Davidson’s challenge seriously—and we should—then a plausible non-causal account of reasons explanations must provide a way of connecting an agent’s reasons, not only to what she ought to do (a mere rationalization), but to what she *actually* does. Put another way, any viable theory of action explanation needs to be able to separate the category of reasons the agent acted on from the set of all candidate reasons to act, where the reasons she acted on constitute a subset of her candidate reasons. Presumably, this will be done by showing the connection between what the agent does and her reasons for doing it. Davidson suggests that the most obvious—perhaps only—way to establish a connection between reasons and actions is by positing a causal relationship. In the following section I will begin sketching out my proposal for a non-causal explanatory relationship between reasons and actions. Toward this end, I begin with the practical syllogism.

1. **The Practical Syllogism**

Discussion of a practical syllogism is found in Aristotle, but there is disagreement over whether the conclusion of the Aristotelian practical syllogism is a *judgment* about what the agent ought to do (Audi 2006), an *intention* formed by the agent to do something (Bratman 1987), or an *action* (Dancy 2000).[[3]](#footnote-3) The difference between the first two and the third is demonstrated below:

P1: Reason – Sweet foods are to be eaten. P1: Reason – Sweet foods are to be eaten.

P2: Reason – This food is sweet. P2: Reason – This food is sweet.

C: Judgment – I should eat this food/ C: Action – [eats the food]

Intention – I will eat this food.

Here, I am not interested in doing Aristotle exegesis. Rather, in this section I will argue the following: there is a structure to human activity that takes the form of *a* practical syllogism (again, possibly not Aristotle’s view) and that has an action as the conclusion. Thompson (2008) and Wiland (2012) argue in favor of a view of reasons that fall under the umbrella of what Thompson calls “naïve action theory”: reasons for actions are not mental states or facts, they are actions.

To see how this would work, take the following example from Wiland: when asked why you are reading some book you respond by citing another activity, e.g. “Because I’m learning about reasons” (2012, p. 147). This analysis of answers to why-questions is most famously illustrated in Anscombe’s example of the person who is trying to poison the Nazi inhabitants of a house by pumping poisonous water into their well (1957/2000 §23). What exactly is the water pumper doing? She is poisoning, of course, and it is also true to say that she is pumping, that she is moving her hand up and down, and perhaps that she is overthrowing the Nazi regime. One may ask the water pumper for an explanation of any of these actions—“Why are you moving your hand up and down?”; “Why are you pumping water?”; “Why are you poisoning the Nazis?” The response to these questions will have to make reference to the larger action of which that particular action is a part—“Because I am pumping water”; “Because I am poisoning the well”; “Because I am overthrowing the Nazi regime”. Each of these “atomic” or “discrete” actions are constitutive parts of a larger activity, which is why they can be re-described as the larger activity itself. “I am pumping water” is a part of poisoning the well, and so may properly be re-described as “I am poisoning the well”.

* 1. *A Reasons Regress Problem?*

One may wonder if the naïve picture of reasons for actions suffers from a regress problem concerning where (or whether) reasons bottom out.[[4]](#footnote-4) That is, if my reasons for acting are other activities in which I am engaged, then where do my reasons end? This parallels the epistemic regress problem that seeks to determine how beliefs are justified; beliefs are justified by other beliefs, but only if those latter beliefs are themselves justified (Feldman 2003). The debate in epistemology usually comes down to three possible answers: (1) an infinite justificatory chain of beliefs justifies each individual belief (i.e. infinitism), (2) there can be circular chains of justification, provided such chains are sufficiently large and coherent (i.e. coherentism), or (3) there are some foundational self-justifying beliefs which justify our other beliefs (i.e. foundationalism). Most epistemologists think that the answer must be either foundationalism or coherentism, with infinitism being by far the least popular option of the three (see Sosa 1980 p.3, and Cameron 2018).

Like the epistemic regress question there are three possible options for answering (what I will call) the reasons regress problem. Do we have an infinite regress of activities that can serve as reasons for action? This seems unlikely, because we cannot be engaged in an infinite number of activities at one time. Do our reasons for action form a circle? That is, if my reason for φ-ing is that I am ψ-ing, and my reason for ψ-ing is that I am π-ing, could my reason for π-ing be that I am φ-ing? It is difficult to imagine a real scenario in which such reasons could form a circle in this way, and circular reasoning (even circular practical reasoning) is usually taken to be a bad thing. So, we are perhaps left with the following “foundationalist” option: for some class of actions, the action constitutes its own reason. I myself find this quite plausible for a small set of activities. We might, for example, think that “living the good life” or “pursuing the good, true and beautiful” are the sorts of actions that are not in service to another end—they are their own ends and, therefore, they are their own reasons. Accepting this picture is not, however, essential for my argument. There are defenders of all of these options in epistemology, and the action theorist can borrow from them.[[5]](#footnote-5) Insofar as one can make any of the three proposals work, one can still accept my argument.

The epistemic regress question is a difficult one—it seems obvious that our beliefs can be justified, and the difficult task is determining which of the three proposed theories of justification is the correct one. The reasons regress question is, I think, no more of a concern than the epistemic regress question, because it is quite widely accepted that there are some activities that are good for their own sake and, therefore, are their own reason for doing them. Additionally, it is not, I think, a worry for my view of reasons explanations of actions if some actions are unable to be given a full-bodied explanation. This would be a larger problem for the CTA, because its theory of action explanation relies on its theory of action ontology. That is, intentional actions are those events “caused by the right mental states and events in the right way” such that they can be explained by reference to their reasons (Schlosser 2015). Anything that cannot be explained as an intentional action is, for the CTA, not an intentional action. The naïve view of reasons explanations is committed to no such explanation-dependent ontology and is therefore open to the possibility that there are actions that have no further explanation. Anscombe, widely regarded as a hallmark non-causalist about action explanation, discusses such cases of intentional actions in which the agent is asked why she has acted and she answers “'For no particular reason' or 'I don't know why I did it '” (1957/2000, p. 5 §17). Such cases need not disturb the action theorist whose theory of action explanation is not wed so tightly to their theory of the ontology of intentional actions.

* 1. *Naïve Action Explanation*

Going back to our previous discussion of naïve action theory, it must be admitted that the surface grammar of action explanations is not, on its own, sufficient evidence for the view that reasons are actions. After all, if someone asks why I am cracking eggs, it sounds nearly as natural to respond “because I want to make omelets”; “because I am trying to make omelets”; “because I am going to make omelets”; and “because I intend to make omelets”, as it does to say “because I am making omelets.” In fact, all of these expressions of answers to the question are true, and all seem to be the same answer. Instead of claiming to be poisoning the Nazis, the water-pumper may respond “I *want* to poison the Nazis”—and the agent may indeed desire this. But, if the “naïve” action theory is correct, it is not the desire that ultimately explains the action; rather, what explains why the water pumper moved her hand up and down was that the movement was *a part of something else* she was currently doing: pumping water. In other words, the *position* of an action relative to the larger action of which it is a part—what Thompson refers to as “naïve” action explanations—is what does the explaining. Wiland writes:

Thompson doesn’t deny the propriety of the sort of explanation emphasized by the sophisticates. Sometimes we do explain actions by citing what we want. But he holds that sophisticated action explanations are in a certain sense dependent upon the success of naive action explanation. Naive action explanations are primary, and the sophisticated ones are to be understood as variants of these. (2012, p. 148)

Rather than pointing out a *cause* of your action (brain states which prompted me to knock the egg on the rim of my bowl), a naïve action explanation makes the egg-cracking intelligible by showing that it is a constitutive part of your larger task of making omelets. This picture of reasons can be understood by formalizing the reasoning into a practical syllogism:

P1: Activity-Reason – [making omelets for dinner].

P2: Fact about a means to P1 – Cracking eggs is part of making omelets.

C: Action – [cracks the eggs]

In P1, we see an activity that someone is already engaged in—the activity of making omelets. P2 is a fact about a means to the end of the activity described in P1—the fact that one must extract the contents of egg shells before one can use them in omelets. The conclusion is an action: the person cracks the eggs.

Recall Maugham’s example from the beginning of this paper: when Philip’s friend asks him why he was reading, Philip gives two different explanations. The first answer is a standard causal-theoretic explanation: reading brings him pleasure by eliminating discomfort, and he desires to eliminate discomfort, so he reads. But his second explanation did not mention any desires explicitly; instead, Philip says that the reason he is reading is “to know myself”. This response posits a larger activity as a reason for acting, rather than a causal attitude. Philip is engaged in the process of knowing himself, and a means to this end is reading.

My view about non-causal reasons explanations begins with precisely this picture of “naïve” action theory. To be clear, by endorsing this picture, I am not saying that what we desire, or what we believe is true about the world, does not influence what we do. Indeed, we often consider our desires when choosing an action (“Where should I eat? I think I want Italian tonight”), and what we believe is true about the world will determine how we go about pursuing these desires. Yet, my desires do not always constitute reasons for me to act. For example, I may desire to skip dinner but not consider this desire to be a reason for skipping dinner if I am engaged in the activity of trying to gain weight. On the other hand, I may be engaged in activities which provide me reasons *without* desire—for example, I may be engaged in the activity of maintaining oral hygiene and see this as a reason to schedule an appointment for a root canal, despite not being aware of a desire to do any of these things.

So, if desires and beliefs are always present in the causal antecedent of everything I do, it is at least not always apparent to me, and I would not always explain what I am doing in terms of desires and beliefs. Indeed, on my view of reasons explanations, such desires never constitute reasons for acting unless they are in service to an activity I am engaged in. Here an activity may be construed very broadly, e.g., pursuing the good or pursuing pleasure. My reason for going to the gym may be the pursuit of the activity of being healthy; my reason for studying philosophy may be the activity of engaging in the good life.

But Wiland’s account of reasons-as-actions lacks a clear picture of how naïve action explanations actually *explain*. In particular, it is unclear how these action explanations can meet Davidson’s challenge for distinguishing actual reasons from candidate reasons. Wiland briefly describes the explanatory relation between reasons and actions as a contextualizing one:

How well does this Anscombean view meet our various Constraints? If the reason for some particular action is a larger action of which it is a part or a means, then the reason contextualizes the first action, showing how it fits in a larger pattern and how it makes sense in the life of the agent. Contextualization is a familiar form of explanation. (2012, p. 156)

But contextualization is not a familiar form of explanation—contextualizing something and explaining something are usually considered two different goals or activities, because we may be able to make sense of something by placing it within a false context. Standardly, explanations are taken to be factive. Even those who want a non-factive understanding of “explanation” acknowledge that this is the minority position. For example, Bertrand (2020, p. 1) writes, “Say that A metaphysically explains B. Do A and B need to be true? Orthodoxy answers yes. One thing cannot metaphysically explain another unless both are so” (see also Bird 2006, p. 44). There are objections to this condition on explanation: Bertrand himself offers one, as well as Bokulich (2011), among others. Still, facticity as a requirement of explanation is much more broadly accepted. Surely Davidson himself took explanation to require facticity, and for both him and Hempel, a condition of adequacy for an explanation is that the explanans be true (Hempel and Oppenheim 1948, p. 137). Even those with different views about explanation—e.g. causal, unificationist, etc.—generally accept the facticity element of explanation (see Woodward 2003 and Kitcher 1989). But, one may wonder, should we?

A notable dissenter from the received view that explanations must be factive, or must cite true explanatory facts, is Jonathan Dancy, who argues that an agent’s reasons for acting may explain what she did even if those reasons were false. Dancy understands reasons as facts, and his claim can be understood by looking at the following case: “Mary jumped out of bed because there was a spider in her sheets” explains what Mary did by citing a reason—the fact that there was a spider in her sheets. But suppose there were no such spider in her sheets. Still, Dancy thinks, the spider in the sheets explains what the agent did.

There are a couple things to be said in response to someone skeptical that action explanations need to be factive. The first is found in Sandis’ (2013, p. 42) response to Dancy, where he argues that Dancy’s view relies on true facts about the beliefs the agent has (e.g. about the spiders in her sheets):

I agree with Dancy that we can ‘explain action by laying out the considerations in the light of which an agent acted, without committing ourselves to things being as the agent conceived them to be’ (2000: 131). The ‘laying out’, however, crucially involves numerous implicatures which the explanation is reliant upon. […] This implicature is no mere enabling condition but a core part of the explanation that cites agential reasons: cancel it and you have no such explanation at all.

Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, if action explanations need not be factive, then there is really no challenge at all for non-causal theories of action. No one would contest that actions may be contextualized in a sense-making way, or that non-factive reasons could rationalize an action without causing it. So, regardless of whether a good definition of “explanation” includes some non-factive explanations, the more interesting challenge for the non-causalist is to show how reasons could provide true explanations of actions that are non-causal.

So, an adequate response to Davidson’s challenge will assume a factive view of explanations, and contextualization is not always factive. But what *is* a familiar form of factive explanation, and what naïve action theory lends itself perfectly to, is structural explanation.

1. **Structural Explanations**

In remarking upon recent developments in the philosophical literature on the nature of explanation, Alexander Reutlinger (2016, p. 2) claims, “Currently, one finds a strikingly common theme in philosophy of science, philosophy of mathematics, and metaphysics: an increasing attention to non‐causal explanations.” One type of explanation is structural explanation. I understand structural explanations approximately as follows: “When the properties or behavior of a complex entity are explained by alluding to the structure of that entity, the resultant explanation may be called a structural one.” (McMullin 1978, p. 139). But what sorts of “entities” are candidates for structural explanations? Some structural explanations are clearly mathematical (e.g. Euler’s (1736) explanation of why it is impossible to cross the Seven Bridges of Königsberg), and some are not (e.g. Putnam’s (1975) explanation of why a square peg will not fit into a round hole). So, while getting a precise definition of structural explanations seems difficult, relevant structures can include mathematical, logical, geometric, and even social structures.

In a defense of structural explanations, Huneman (2018) describes a case where two ice cream vendors have set up shop on a beach and have both moved toward the middle of the beach. Huneman asks—what explains the fact that the vendors have positioned themselves where they have? The answer, he claims, lies in the relation between the two vendors and the distribution of potential customers on the beach:

What explains the position of the vendors—and more precisely, the fact that they are found one next to the other at this location, and not at another one or at two others—is the fact that it simultaneously maximizes the share of each of them, or in other words that it’s a Nash equilibrium. (p. 6)

This is an example of a structural explanation: the position of the vendors can be explained by citing relational facts that hold between the two vendors, the beach, and the potential customers.

Structural explanations are often considered superior to causal explanations, even when causal explanations are available, because they are modally robust in ways that causal explanations sometimes are not (Haslanger 2015). For instance, a causal explanation might be able to tell you why the pinewood derby car ended up at a particular spot on the gymnasium floor, but a structural explanation (where the track and cars is the relevant structure) may be able to tell you why it would have ended up there despite changes in acceleration or friction. Modal robustness is important for action explanations, as we often expect that action explanations will not only explain why we did something rather than nothing but will also explain why we did **φ** rather than **ψ.**

Structural explanations are not the only type of non-causal explanation. Others include: narrative explanations (Roth 1988, Carr 2008, Velleman 2003), teleological/functional explanations (Sehon 1997, McLaughlin 2000), equilibrium explanations (Sober 1983), and mathematical explanations (Lange 2013, 2014). However, it is unclear, and a matter of intramural debate, what the relationships are among these sorts of explanations—perhaps they are all types of structural explanations, or perhaps they are all distinct. It is also a matter of debate whether some of kinds of explanations are genuinely non-causal. For example, Lipton (2004) argues that at least some mathematical explanations of events are non-causal, while Skow (2014) argues that all explanations of events are causal.

Importantly, that something is explained non-causally does not imply the absence of causal antecedents. As Alisa Bokulich (2018, p. 2) points out, “Noncausal explanations do not require finding a phenomenon for which no causal story can be told. […] One can have a noncausal explanation of a phenomenon even in cases where a complete causal account of the phenomenon is available.” Bokulich argues that noncausal explanations are sometimes the *best* explanation, even given the availability of causal explanations of the same phenomenon. But in order to determine whether we can explain actions structurally instead of causally, we first need to identify a structure from which we could derive these explanations.

1. **The Syllogism as a Structure**

Are practical syllogisms structures? Almost certainly. Stewart Shapiro (1997) describes three features of structures: places, objects, and relations, where a “place” is e.g. Vice President of the United States, an “object” is e.g. Kamala Harris, and a “relation” is the extent to which the place or object is constrained by other places/objects in the structure (pp. 77-79). While Shapiro focuses specifically on mathematical structures, he sees these criteria as spanning domains.

It is no difficulty to locate all three of these features of structures within the practical syllogism. Recall our practical syllogism from section 4:

P1: Activity-Reason – [making omelets for dinner].

P2: Fact about a means to P1 – Cracking eggs is part of making omelets.

C: Action – [cracks the eggs]

Here, premise 1 is an action, a structural “place” to be to be occupied by some specific activity (e.g. [making omelets for dinner]). Premise 2 specifies *a means to attaining the end* mentioned in premise 1. And the final structural place of the practical syllogism is the conclusion which, on the “naïve” picture of reasons, is itself an action. This action in the conclusion will be a constituent of the larger activity noted in premise 1—in this case, making omelets. In a practical syllogism all these places will be occupied by objects (premises). While practical syllogisms have places and objects, they also have relations. The conclusion of the practical syllogism is constrained by the first premise, because the concluding action must be a constitutive part of the larger activity in premise 1. The conclusion is similarly constrained by the second premise—it would make no sense, for instance, for me to crack many more eggs than were needed to make my omelets. A practical syllogism perfectly displays all three features of Shapiro’s structures, making its parts (in particular, its conclusion) good candidates for structural explanations. But what do structural explanations look like, and how can we tell if action explanations would count as structural explanations?

Philip Huneman (2018, p. 693) lists four characteristics that we can use to identify structural explanations:

(1) they are often explanations of some patterns; (2) they are such that trajectories of the focal system are not by themselves explanatory of the explanandum; (3) they are generic; and (4) they use formal properties in an explanatory way.

Huneman elaborates on point (2) by saying that “This goes against Salmon’s insistence on causal processes and interactions” (2018, p. 671) He illustrates the characteristic with the example of stones falling from the top of a cliff and ending up in the valley below, which is then explained by detailing the height difference between the cliff and the valley. The trajectories of the particular stones, he says, do not contribute to the explanation of why the stones ended up in the valley. Analogously, we can say that action explanations fulfill this criterion if the causal processes and interactions of the reasons and actions are not by themselves explanatory of the action. This paper has, of course, been partially an effort to present a view of actions and reasons that does meet this criterion.

Regarding the third characteristic, Huneman understands “generic” as follows: “the specific nature of the mechanisms in the explanans doesn’t figure in the formulation of the explanation, or play in any explanatory role since this nature can be shifted without altering the validity of the explanation” (2018, p. 672). Syllogistic explanations clearly fulfill this criterion—so long as we hold fixed the larger activity, constitutive action, and means-end relation between them, the syllogism will always explain. The particular agent, the setting, physical details of any sort, can change even while the explanation continues to explain.

And finally, criterion (4). On the “naïve” model, the formal properties of the practical syllogism—the major premise, minor premise, and the conclusion—illuminate one another in explanatory ways in virtue of consistently standing in the same relation to one another. Premise 1 will always be an activity the agent is engaged in, while premise 2 will always be a situationally relevant means to the end of the activity in premise 1. The conclusion is always the agent’s taking these means, and thereby furthering her premise 1 activity. These formal properties are explanatory because they (premises 1 and 2) demonstrate why the action—the conclusion—is *the thing to do*.

Assuming I have thus far been successful in crafting a plausible theory of action explanation that fulfills criterion (2), and assuming the view of reasons and the practical syllogism that I am using, such action explanations fulfill Huneman’s list of characteristics of structural explanations. In the following section, I will argue that conceiving of action explanations as structural explanations can provide a satisfactory answer to questions about reasons raised by Davidson’s challenge.

1. **Candidate vs. Actual Reasons for Actions**

When discussing Davidson’s challenge, I mentioned that a good theory of action explanation must be able to provide truth-apt action explanations—that is, an explanation of an action must be able to be true or false. Among other things, this will involve being able to distinguish an agent’s candidate reasons for acting from the actual reason(s) she did what she did. Davidson thought that the way to go about making this distinction was to look for the causal connection: the reasons that *caused* what I did were the reasons *for which* I acted. If the explanatory relation between reasons and actions is not causal, how might this distinction be established?

If the “naïve” model of reasons for action is correct, then R is a candidate reason for me to φ just in case:

1. R is an activity I am engaged in.
2. I believe that φ is a means I can take toward R right now.

For example: assume that φ = purchasing eggs. Further assume that I am engaged in three different activities, all of which would be furthered by my purchasing eggs right now: making omelets for dinner, planning for an Easter egg hunt, and writing a philosophy paper (for which, at some point, I will need to conduct an experiment using eggs). All these activities are candidate reasons for my purchasing eggs at T1 so long as I believe that I can further all these ends by purchasing eggs at T1.

Still, it may be that not all candidate reasons for my egg purchasing at T1 were the actual reasons that I purchased eggs at T1. Imagine that, while I *could* further the writing of my paper by purchasing eggs and conducting the experiment today, I could *also* do the experiment any other day of my career (of which, I hope, there are many). It is perfectly possible that [working on my paper] is not a reason for which I purchased eggs at T1, even though it was a candidate reason for this action.

If some candidate reasons can fail to be actual reasons for some action, what distinguishes candidate from actual reasons? The causal theorist has an easy answer—in the above case, the beliefs and desires that caused me to buy the eggs were simply not beliefs and desires about writing my paper, and, therefore, writing my paper cannot be a reason that I bought the eggs. But we need not rely on causal relationships to pick out our actual reasons for acting from the set of all candidate reasons for acting. If reasons for action are the activities that I am furthering with my action, then my reasons for acting *are those activities* I am trying to further by acting.

On the “naïve” account of reasons, actual reasons bear a different relationship to actions than candidate reasons do: namely, a constitutive relation. What makes some activity an actual (instead of merely candidate) reason for one’s action is that the action in question *is partially constitutive* of this activity. To go back to our example, what makes [is making omelets for dinner] the reason for [is buying eggs] is the relationship that the egg-buying bears to the omelet-making. But propositions about this relationship—e.g. the proposition that “her egg-buying is partially constitutive of her omelet-making”, must be either true or false.

* 1. *Grounding Propositions About Reasons in Counterfactuals*

To review, in virtue of having many candidate reasons for buying eggs (that is, being engaged in multiple activities that require eggs to fulfil their end), X’s practical agency *may* be structured in any or all of the following ways as she is buying eggs:

P1: [is planning an Easter egg hunt]

P2: Eggs are needed for an Easter egg hunt.

C: [Buys eggs]

P1: [is working on a philosophy paper]

P2: Eggs are needed to continue the philosophy paper.

C: [Buys eggs]

P1: [is making omelets for dinner]

P2: Eggs are needed for omelets.

C: [Buys eggs]

X is engaged in all the activities noted in P1 of the above practical syllogisms. However, this does not mean that X’s agency is actually structured in each of the above ways. While each of these syllogisms represents a candidate explanation for X’s action, they may not all constitute actual explanations for what she does. While X may be purchasing eggs for all of the above reasons—omelets for dinner, the Easter egg hunt, her philosophy paper—it is also possible that X is only buying eggs for one of these reasons. If X is only buying eggs because she is making omelets for dinner, and not because of the Easter egg hunt or her philosophy paper, then the first two potential syllogisms do not actually represent the structure of her agency.

By “structure of her agency” I mean the form that the agent is in the process of realizing. We can think of practical agency as having a shape to it, which determines what the agent is doing even before she has completed her action. To illustrate this idea, suppose that Anaya is building a house. Suppose further that, so far, the house’s roof has holes in it, the walls are leaning, the floors are uneven, and there are no doors or windows—and Anaya has no plans to fix these problems. The end result, then, may not be something that can be called a “house”, and Anaya may ultimately fail to build the house. Suppose Anaya finishes her project, and the result is a very large wooden crate. Had you asked someone, while she was still building, what Anaya was doing, the person you asked should have answered “She is building a house”. They ought not to have answered “She is building a crate”, even though a crate was the final product. Why? Because that would not have been a true description of the structure of her agency.

Christine Korsgaard (2009, p. 30) describes the in-progress realization of a form as follows:

The producer of the house looks to the normative standards that are constitutive of houses—in Aristotle’s terms, to its form—and tries to realize that form in appropriate matter—in building materials. Since building is a goal-directed activity, that is what the activity of building essentially is. The description of the form of a house could be read as a sort of recipe, or a set of instructions, for building a house: join the walls at the corners, put the insulation in the walls, put the roof on the top[.]

The real structure that we can use to explain an action is, then, the one that truly corresponds to the way the agent is working to realize a “form” or a type of thing. To this extent, I agree with teleologists like Sehon (2005) that action should be understood as aiming at some end. But the important question is still unanswered: what makes it the case that some form, rather than another, is being realized in an action? What makes it the case that our agent really is buying eggs to make omelets for dinner and isn’t buying eggs to conduct an experiment for her paper?

Sehon’s answer to this question is that there are facts about the aim of the agent—facts about what the agent is actually doing—that cannot be reduced to causal facts (Sehon 1997, Löhrer and Sehon 2016). Rather, he argues, they are strong teleological facts, the sort that Aristotle understood to be immanent in the natural world. Sehon argues that, given the irreducibility of teleological action explanations, we should doubt naturalistic and reductive theories of the mind.

There are a couple of things I want to say about Sehon’s response. The first is that Sehon is not positing an entirely unique theory of action explanation, but rather arguing that teleological action explanations—which both causal theorists *and* non-causalists can and do accept (see Mele 1992)—are non-causal. On Sehon’s view, action explanations still explain by citing the things that bring about the action. He departs from the causalists only to say that the explanans of action explanations are irreducible teleological facts rather than causal facts. This is where I part ways with Sehon: on my view, action explanations do not explain by citing productive features of the world (be they causes or teleological facts) but by revealing the structure of the agency of the actor. But for these action explanations to be true, they need to explain via the actual activity the agent is involved in. So again: if not causal facts or irreducible teleological facts, what makes it the case that the agent is involved in some activity or action rather than another?

Going back to our original example, our egg-purchaser need not end up actually making omelets for the egg-buying to be a part of the activity of making omelets; she need not actually make omelets for omelet-making to be the reason for the egg-buying. There are several non-causal facts about the world that can ground the truth of the proposition “She bought eggs because she was making omelets for dinner” which do not make use of either (1) mysterious irreducible teleological forces or (2) productive causes. These include: facts about how the agent would answer when asked “why are you buying eggs?”, facts about what she would do if her partner phoned to say they no longer wanted omelets for dinner, facts about what she might say if asked about her experiment, among many others. Presumably, there are counterfactual facts about how our egg-purchaser would respond in these scenarios. For example, if asked why she was buying eggs, she may respond, “I’m making omelets for dinner tonight!” Or, if her partner phones to suggest something else for dinner, she may put back the eggs she had planned on purchasing. If asked about the status of her experiment for the paper she is writing, she may respond, “Oh, yes, I really should get around to doing that at some point this year”. Of course, even if she is purchasing eggs to make omelets for dinner, she may *in fact* not respond in any of the above ways, for various reasons: she may not trust the person asking her the question(s), or she may feel embarrassed about the status of her experiment, or any number of other things. But that is not a problem for the claim that counterfactual facts ground the status of reasons for actions, for we can merely adjust the hypothetical scenario to account for the untrustworthy friend/the embarrassment/etc.[[6]](#footnote-6)

However, one might feel dissatisfied with anchoring the truth of action explanations in such a way. In a talk given at the APA Pacific Division Meeting, 2013[[7]](#footnote-7), Sarah Paul expresses concern that such a counterfactual account of reasons may *imply* the truth of the proposition “She acted for reason R”, but that this account cannot *ground* the truth of the proposition. To make such a theory work, she argues, one would need to offer an account of what makes the counterfactual conditionals true, or of “why it is that we expect a particular set of counterfactual behaviors as opposed to any others.” In this context, Paul argues that causal processes explain why a counterfactual conditional seems true or false to us. She elaborates that, without reference to causal processes, we will struggle to identify which counterfactual conditionals are plausible and which are not: “in other words, there will be no common causal story between [behaviors] that would ground and vindicate our prediction of them and not others.” Here I am fully on-board with Paul: our ability to use causal laws to make reliable predictions about what is more or less likely is certainly the reason behind our expectation. But why would our expectations of counterfactuals be relevant to the question of how to ground the truth of propositions about reasons? The insinuation is, I take it, that causal laws are ultimately what make a counterfactual conditional true or false—hence our expectations about what would be the case in nearby possible worlds. Therefore, Paul argues, causal relations are the real explanatory relation lurking behind the appeal to counterfactuals.

But there are many different accounts of what makes counterfactual conditionals true which require neither (1) accepting that causal laws make counterfactuals true, nor (2) accepting that counterfactual facts are brute. One canonical account is Stalnaker’s (1975), which argues that the proposition “‘If *A*, *B*’ is true simpliciter iff *B* is true at the nearest *A*-world to the actual world.” Such a proposal does not require any causal relations between A and B—all that is required is that B holds in the nearest possible world in which A holds. And to be sure, there have been many attempts to flesh out what makes a counterfactual world “nearby”—this, I take it, is the root of Paul’s question about why I should “expect” some set of counterfactual conditions instead of others. Stalnaker (1984, Ch. 7) argues what makes a possible world “nearby” depends on the context of the utterance of the conditional. Another prominent account, Lewis’s (1973, sections 1 and 3.4, and 1986), holds that what makes a world nearby depends on a way of weighing violations of natural laws and how closely synced the occurrent facts are between the actual and the possible world. Lewis’ neo-Humean understanding of natural laws would *not* include standard causal laws, as Lewis evaluated causation itself in terms of counterfactuals. So, neither Stalnaker nor Lewis understood the “nearness” of possible worlds to be ultimately grounded in causal laws.

One objection one may have with grounding the truth of action explanations in counterfactual conditionals is that it seems to disallow for cases like the following. When asked why I am purchasing eggs at the egg stand I respond, “I’m making omelets for dinner tonight”. As it happens, however, that is not the reason I am purchasing eggs; I am actually purchasing eggs because I have a romantic interest in the person who runs the egg stand, and I want to see them. The reason I gave for my egg-purchasing was not a lie—I do plan to make omelets for dinner, and I mistakenly believe this is my reason for going to the egg stand. In this scenario, however, my chicken farmer crush, and *not* my future omelet-making, is my reason for visiting the egg stand. However, in the closest possible world in which I knew my crush would not be working the stand, I would still go and purchase eggs because my “backup reason”, the omelets, would kick in. This seems to present a tricky case for my theory of counterfactual conditional truth-makers because it fails Stalnaker’s test: in the nearest possible world where A (my crush not being at the egg stand) does not obtain, B (me not going to the store) still obtains. Seeing my crush, therefore, would not count as a reason that I went to the egg stand.

Although this case is interesting, as it stands it is under-described. What role is the “backup reason”, the omelet-making, playing in my practical reasoning? If both were reasons for my going to the egg stand, then we have no problem: the action is over-determined, and the relevant counterfactual conditional must be a world where neither obtains. But as described, the case states that the omelet-making was *not* a reason for my going to the stand. So, consider both worlds: the actual world, in which I go to the stand because I’m trying to see my crush and *not* because I’m making omelets (W1), and the second world in which I know my crush will be absent but go to the egg stand anyway because I’m making omelets for dinner (W2). Something must change between the actual world and this possible world with respect to the candidate reason [is making omelets for dinner]. What causes omelet-making to go from merely a *candidate* reason to patronize the egg stand (in W1) to *actual* reason to patronize the egg stand (in W2)? Whatever these changes are, they probably prevent W2 from being the nearest possible world to W1 (the actual world), since we can imagine a world in which A (my crush not being at the egg-stand) obtains but nothing else changes from how it is in the actual world. And in *this* possible world (Wn) where nothing but A changes, we should expect [is making omelets for dinner] to remain merely a candidate reason for acting. Therefore, in this world where A obtains, I would not go to the egg stand. The nearest possible world to W1, in this case, is Wn.

1. **Further Objections**

Here I want to discuss what I take to be the most pressing objection to my thesis. The idea, defended by Bradford Skow (2014), is that structural explanations of events—indeed, *all* explanations of events, save for in-virtue-of explanations—are at least partially causal. Skow allows that there are non-causal explanations of things like mathematical facts, but he believes that structural explanations become causal once they are tasked with explaining an event. To make his argument, Skow relies on the following theory of how to identify causal explanations: “A body of facts partially causally explains E iff it is a body of facts about what causes, if any, E had; or if it is a body of facts about what it would have taken for some specific alternative or range of alternatives to E to have occurred instead”(2014, p. 449). Given this definition, Skow argues that all explanations of events (aside from in-virtue-of explanations) are (at least partially) causal. Prima facie, this fits nicely with the Davidsonian understanding of action explanations which, while certainly causal, do not explain merely by citing causes. For Davidson, while the causes are necessary to explain, they are only doing part of the explanatory work.

Skow’s objection relies on an account of causation that amounts to one of counterfactual difference-makers. This is a popular account, similar in many ways to Lewis’ (1986). Combining Skow’s definition of a (partially) causal explanation with his view of causation, we get the following: if an explanation cites a fact that, were this fact not the case then E would not be the case, then that explanation is partially causal. If this is all it takes to be a causal explanation, then my “non-causal” view would seem to be in trouble.

Recent literature on counterfactual theories of explanation list causation as just one of many types of explanations that all fall under a monist counterfactual theory of explanation (Reutlinger 2016). We can therefore reason that it is not universally accepted that all counterfactual difference-makers are causes. But more importantly, causal theories of action have generally taken a *productive* view of causation rather than a counterfactual difference-maker view. Davidson writes: “A person may have certain motives for an act, and yet perform it either by accident or for quite different reasons. So reasons explain an action only if the reasons are *efficacious* in the situation” (2001 p. 215, emphasis added). Elsewhere in Davidson’s work, we see explicit discussion of the “productive” nature of causes (1967, p. 703). Strictly speaking, Davidson’s view of causation was explicitly Hempelian in its understanding of causal laws as descriptive: “if A causes B, there must be descriptions of A and B which show that A and B fall under a law” (2001, p. 213). “Causation” for Davidson, like Hempel, is a kind of non-ideal tool for speaking about the opaque aspects of the laws connecting events to one another.[[8]](#footnote-8) That is, if everything about two (causally related) events was understood, we could cite the full law itself with no need for a discussion of causation. But insofar as we rely on the notion of causation, what is important is that two events be related in a law-like way such that one event (under certain conditions) brings about the other event. The productive view of causation is commonly assumed in causal views of free will and agency as well (see, for example, O’Connor 2000, p. 68). Even non-standard causal theories of actions, like Dretske’s (1993) discussion of “triggering” vs. “structuring” causes, place the importance of each of these causes in the roles they play in producing actions. The productive view of causation seems to be the best option for preserving what Davidson refers to as the “force of the ‘because’” (1963, p. 691); in other words, to Davidson, the role of producing the action was integral to the explanation of that action.

Moving on from Skow’s controversial starting assumptions, and applying his account to action explanations, we must recognize that, even if the reasons cited in action explanations are causes of the action (e.g., even if my activity of making omelets for dinner somehow was a cause of my purchasing the eggs), it does not then follow that the causal relation my omelet-making stands in to my egg-purchasing is the relation that *explains* my egg-purchasing. Skow seems to be aware of this. The first part of Skow’s definition of a (partial) causal explanation does not tell us that our explanations need merely to cite any cause of E in order to be partially causal—rather, the explanation needs to be a “body of fact *about* what causes, if any, E had;” (p. 449, emphasis my own). This “about” seems important here because, especially in action explanations, we often (or at least I have argued) cite things that stand, or might stand, in *multiple* relations to E—both causal *and* structural, causal *and* rationalizing, etc. Merely citing the fact that I am making omelets for dinner, or the fact that I want to visit Rome, does not tell me all I need to know; I need to know if it is the causal or the structural (or otherwise) relation that is the explanatory one. For his part, Davidson would say that both relations work together to explain—but this is an open question. If I am right, then the causal relation is not needed to explain the action, even though the facts or events cited in the explanation may also stand in a causal relation to the explanandum.

So how can we discover what relation(s) explains? By discovering the why-question relevant to our desire for an explanation. On the typical model of explanation—the erotetic model—where explanations are focused on answering particular why-questions, it is not the case that any why-question *about* an event should be explained causally (see van Fraassen 1980 p. 156; see also Schaffer 2007). It is only obvious that we need a causal explanation if the question in need of explanation is a question about how some action-event was brought about. Skow’s argument assumes that we are interested in answering a particular kind of why-question when we ask for action explanations: why did E, rather than ~E, come about? But there are many reasons to doubt that this is the why-question relevant to action explanations.

First, this why-question is not distinct from how we inquire into non-action behavior like twitching, blinking, etc. “Why did you sneeze?” is a question that must be answered causally, because the relevant why-question is something like “why did this happen?” or “what brought this about?” But we generally think that our questions, and the explanations that get returned to us, are different from those questions and answers relevant to non-action behavior.

Additionally, there are lots of other why-questions that may be the relevant ones for action explanations. For instance: why some particular action is *the thing to do*, why it is rational, as opposed to some other action. Curry (2018) writes, “When people demand an explanation for Patrick’s behavior of walking to the fridge, they do not want to know what cognitive machinery produced his footsteps. They want to know what rationalized his purposeful journey to the fridge” (p.12). Remarking on Collingwood’s views on why-questions in action explanations, D’Oro and Connelly (2015) write, “The question that the genuine historian asks is not ‘what kind of event usually precedes the event that I am trying to explain?’ but ‘what reasons make the action intelligible?’” Davidson himself recognized that when we ask for explanations of actions we are asking for rationalizations. He posits that action explanations must be rationalizing *and* causal, and they must be causal only because it seems the only way to connect an agent’s actions to her reasons. But if we could secure this connection in another way, perhaps we would not need the causal connection, and we have little reason to think that the relevant why-questions are those that require a causal explanation.

1. **Conclusion**

In this paper I have sought to provide a robust, positive, non-causal account of how reasons can explain actions. If Thompson and Wiland are correct about “naïve action theory”—that is, if they are correct that our reasons for action are, at bottom, other activities in which we are involved—then human activity has a nesting-doll structure where smaller actions are constituents of larger activities. I have argued that this structure maps perfectly on to a practical syllogism, where the action being explained is the conclusion of the syllogism, and the major premise is another activity the agent is engaged in. I have further argued that this conception of action explanation is a widely accepted form of non-causal explanation already used in the philosophy of science: a structural explanation.

For my proposal to get off the ground, however, it needs to capable of answering Davidson’s Challenge. I have argued that such structural explanations are compatible with the thesis that counterfactual facts about the agent can ground the truth of propositions such as “She acted for reason R”. This account undermines Davidson’s contention that only causal relations can distinguish candidate from actual reasons for acting.

And finally, I have responded to a pressing objection: that structural explanations of events are causal in nature. In my response I have first noted the tendentious position this objection rests on: a counterfactual difference-maker view of causation, rather than the productive causation view assumed by most causal theorists. Additionally, I noted that this objection takes a problematic position on the why-question relevant to action explanations. All of these considerations taken together render this objection, at least, a rather weak one.

The virtues of this account over others are, I believe, multifarious, though further explication beyond a brief mention of these virtues is beyond the scope of this paper. First, it shows that positive non-causal accounts of reasons explanations can be given without positing highly contentious metaphysics—that is, this account is suitably naturalistic. My account also keeps the agent at the heart of the explanations of her actions, whereas standard accounts of action explanation run the risk of losing the agent in a sea of mental-state causes. And finally, the account avoids what is possibly the most pressing problem for causal (and possibly formal-causal) views: the problem of deviant causation (Paul 2011). It is my hope that such an account can help revive a rather stagnating debate between non-causal accounts and what remains the “standard” theory.

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1. Davidson himself generally only speaks of beliefs and desires, though in his later work he incorporates a discussion of intentions (1978, p. 99). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I must note here the distinction between the standard theory, which “construes beliefs, themselves, as producing causes of behavior” (Curry 2018, p. 4) and Davidson’s actual thesis. While Davidson did not endorse the popular view strictly speaking, he held to an indirect thesis: “belief explanations must [...] highlight an inner cause that produced the action under scrutiny.” (Curry, p. 5) This thesis stems from Davidson’s “anomalous monism”, which denies the existence of causal laws that hold between mental events physical events. Any actual cause of a physical event like an action, on this view, must be another physical event. The actual cause is, therefore, only highlighted (and not directly denoted) by the belief-desire pair. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Although I will follow the literature in referring to Aristotle’s examples, as well as my own, as “practical syllogisms”, I recognize that none of these examples constitute *deductive* syllogisms. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for bringing this worry to my attention. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Peter Klein (2011) for a defense of infinitism, Lawrence BonJour (1985) for a defense of coherentism, and René Descartes (1641/2013) for a defense of foundationalism. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Sehon (2005) advances a similar approach in his use of counterfactual truth-conditions for teleological action explanations. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. “The Force of the ‘Because.’” [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Hempel writes, “even when used to account for individual events, [deductive-nomological] explanations are not always causal” (1965, p. 352), and clarifies that “causal explanation is, at least implicitly, deductive-nomological” (1965, p. 349). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)