

Anscombe's and von Wright's non-causalist response to Davidson's challenge

Christian Kietzmann

Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg, Institut für Philosophie der FAU, Erlangen, Germany

Correspondence: Christian Kietzmann, Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg, Institut für Philosophie der FAU, Bismarckstr. 1, 91054 Erlangen, Germany.

Email: christian.kietzmann@fau.de

Abstract

Donald Davidson established causalism, i.e. the view that reasons are causes and that action explanation is causal explanation, as the dominant view within contemporary action theory. According to his “master argument”, we must distinguish between reasons the agent merely has and reasons she has and which actually explain what she did, and the only, or at any rate the best, way to make the distinction is by saying that the reasons for which an agent acts are causes of her action. “Davidson's challenge” to non-causalists is to come up with an alternative, more convincing, way of drawing the distinction. In this paper, I argue that G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright offer such an alternative. Moreover, I argue that Davidson's own account of interpretation makes no use of his causalist claim.

I | INTRODUCTION

From the 1950s through the 1970s, there was a lively debate about action explanation and how it is related to causal explanation. “Causalists” held that reasons are causes, and/or that action explanation is a species of causal explanation, whereas “intentionalists” denied both claims. While intentionalism was popular in the late 1950s and early 1960s, it was more or less displaced over the 1960s and 1970s, and causalism has come to dominate the mainstream philosophy of action. This change is largely due to the influence of Donald Davidson's seminal paper “Actions, Reasons, and Causes”, published in the *Journal of Philosophy* in 1963, and a series of further papers in which he extended and refined his position. Since Davidson, the “standard story of action” has been causal.¹ To

¹Cf. Smith (2004; and 2012).

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be sure, there are still dissenting voices: for example, Jonathan Dancy developed a radically non-psychological account of reasons for action,² Scott R. Sehon revived the teleological view,³ and since the re-publication of her book *Intention* in 2000, G.E.M. Anscombe's work has become influential with a new generation of philosophers. By and large, however, the dominant view has been that the debate between causalists and intentionalists came out in favour of causalism.

In his 1963 paper, Davidson offers a “master argument” for his causalist claim.⁴ It starts with the observation that agents typically have more reasons that are logically capable of explaining a given action than reasons that actually explain it. We must thus distinguish between reasons the agent merely has and reasons she has and which actually explain what she did. In other words, we must give an account of the “because” that occurs in explanations of actions. Davidson thinks that the only, or at any rate the best, way to give such an account is to say that the reasons for which an agent acts are causes of her action. “Davidson's challenge” to non-causalists is thus to come up with an alternative, more convincing, way of drawing the distinction.

In this paper, I propose to examine this master argument. On close inspection, it will turn out to be wanting. I argue that alternative, and better, ways of meeting Davidson's challenge are available in the work of G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright, and that somewhat surprisingly, Davidson's own account of interpreting the reasons for which intentional agents act does not rely on his causalist thesis.

II | DAVIDSON ON ACTION EXPLANATION

Davidson claims that action explanation through reasons is a species of causal explanation. In such explanations, we say of someone that “she did *A* intentionally because ...”, whereby the gap is filled by a statement of her reason, i.e. the reason why she did *A*. For Davidson, such statements have the canonical form of what he calls a “primary reason”:

C1. *R* is a primary reason why an agent performed the action *A* under the description *d* only if *R* consists of a pro attitude of the agent towards actions with a certain property, and a belief of the agent that *A*, under the description *d*, has that property.⁵

²See Dancy (2000: 161–163) for a discussion and rejection of Davidson's argument for the causal character of action explanation.

³Sehon (2005).

⁴Dancy (2000: 161).

⁵Davidson (1980a: 5).

In short, we explain an intentional action under some description *d* by identifying a pro-attitude and a belief of the agent such that the agent wanted to achieve some aim and believed that her action, under description *d*, was conducive to that end. Note that for Davidson, action explanations are canonically teleological in form. They explain intentional actions by revealing how they promote one of the agent's ends. Note also, however, that Davidson interprets such explanations in a particular manner. He thinks that their explanatory power derives, at least in part, from the attitudes of *having an end* and *thinking some action promotes that end*. Thus, he thinks that a primary reason consists of *attitudes*, namely of a pro attitude and a belief, and not, as more recent authors claim, of the *contents* of such attitudes.

Many intentionalists can, I think, go along with Davidson's C1.⁶ They would stop here, however, for they think that this much suffices for characterising action explanation. Davidson disagrees. He thinks that the mere fact that we can ascribe suitable attitudes to an agent, i.e. attitudes that have the right contents to rationalise the agent's action under some description, and thus construct a primary reason along the lines of C1, does not yet suffice for *explaining* the action. For Davidson, we have still not captured the force of the explanatory "because" that we use in action explanations. In "Actions, Reasons, and Causes", he makes this point against A.I. Melden:

If, as Melden claims, causal explanations are "wholly irrelevant to the understanding we seek" of human action (184) then we are without an analysis of the "because" in "He did it because ...", where we go on to name a reason.⁷

Davidson picks up on an observation he had made earlier in the paper, when he drew attention to the difference between merely *having* a reason and having a reason while also *acting on* it:

[A] person can have a reason for an action, and perform the action, and yet this reason not be the reason why he did it. Central to the relation between a reason and an action it explains is the idea that the agent performed the action *because* he had the reason.⁸

⁶Many others disagree, however, with the psychologism of Davidson's specification of a primary reason, i.e. with his claim that such a reason consists in psychological items, a belief and a desire, and not in, say, a fact. For this sort of criticism, see, for example, Dancy (2000) and Alvarez (2010). For the purposes of this paper, I will put this line of thought aside and assume, with Davidson, that primary reasons are beliefs and desires.

⁷Davidson (1980a: 11).

⁸Davidson (1980a: 9).

Thus, recognising that someone *had a reason* for something she did does not as such license the conclusion that she did it *for that reason*. An additional premise is needed. Davidson concludes that this additional premise is the assumption that her reason also caused her action:

In order to turn the first “and” to “because” in “He exercised *and* he wanted to reduce and thought exercise would do it”, we must, as the basic move, augment condition C1 with C2. A primary reason for an action is its cause.⁹

For Davidson, “because” implies “cause”. He thinks the “because” of action explanation is a causal “because”. His argument for this claim is an inference to the best explanation. We must distinguish between primary reasons that an agent merely has and primary reasons that actually explain her action. And the only, or at any rate the best, way to account for this distinction is to think of primary reasons that are explanatory as *causes* of the action. Davidson's argument is thus really no more than a challenge – “Davidson's challenge”, as it has been called. It is a challenge for rival accounts to identify an alternative and more convincing way to distinguish between reasons an agent has and reasons for which she acts. Davidson's key claim is that there is no such alternative.

For Davidson, (primary) reasons are causes.¹⁰ But what exactly does he mean by this slogan? The word “cause” is ambiguous: it can denote a causal relation, but it can also indicate a causal explanation.¹¹ *Causal relations* hold between events, irrespective of how they are described. According to Davidson, events are a category of particulars that can be described in multiple ways.¹² That a causal relation holds between events means that there are true descriptions of the events that instantiate a strict causal law.¹³ Davidson explains the notion of a strict law in the following way:

Laws must be true universally quantified statements. They also must be lawlike: they must support counterfactuals, and be confirmed by their instances (these conditions are not independent). To qualify as *strictly* lawlike, they should contain no singular terms referring to particular objects, locations or times (strictly lawlike statements are symmetric with respect to time and location). Strictly lawlike

⁹Davidson (1980a: 11–12). See also Davidson (1980g: 232).

¹⁰Cf. Davidson (1980h: 264).

¹¹Cf. Davidson (1993: 312).

¹²Cf. Davidson (1980c; and 1980e).

¹³Cf. Davidson (1980d).

statements do not contain open-ended phrases like “other things being equal”, or “under normal conditions”.¹⁴

Causal relations are thus extensional relations among events, which they bear in virtue of instantiating a strict causal law under suitable descriptions, but which nevertheless hold irrespective of how the events that enter into them are described.

Causal explanations, by contrast, are intensional relations which do not require as their *relata* items from a narrow ontological category. They are explanations that invoke explanatorily pregnant general statements that are not strict causal laws. Among them are explanations invoking causal dispositions. For example, to say that a sugar cube dissolved because it was soluble and was placed in a cup of coffee is to give a causal explanation of the event of the cube's dissolution. Such explanations do not appeal to strict laws, and more often than not such laws are not even known. In the case at hand, instead of appealing to a strict law the explanation relies on the rough explanatory generalisation that is associated with the ascription of the disposition of solubility in water. According to Davidson, action explanation is of the same type as such causal explanations through dispositions. A pro attitude is for him a causal disposition that characterises a specific particular, and thus akin to the solubility of a piece of sugar or the brittleness of a glass window. Together with a suitable event, such as the onslaught of a relevant belief, a pro attitude can be invoked to give a causal explanation of the agent's behaviour.¹⁵ However, for Davidson, there exists an indirect conceptual link between causal explanations and causal relations. That some factor *A* causally explains event *e* entails that there is another event *e** associated with *A*, such that a causal relation holds between *e** and *e*.¹⁶ In other words, by giving a causal explanation of *e* through *A*, we commit ourselves to the claim that there is an event *e** associated with *A*, so that there are true descriptions of *e** and *e* under which they are covered by a strict causal law. Even though we may not know the law, and we may not even be able to pinpoint the event *e**, we nevertheless implicitly claim that they exist when we give a causal explanation.

Davidson's slogan that reasons are causes is, I think, best understood as a claim about the causal character of reasons explanations. This is the official thesis which he intends to defend in “Actions, Reasons, and Causes”. The word “cause” in Davidson's claim C2 is thus best interpreted as referring to causal explanations rather than to causal relations. Davidson intends to convince us that reasons causally explain actions.

¹⁴Davidson (2005: 203–204).

¹⁵Cf. Davidson (1980a: 14–15 and 1980h: 274).

¹⁶Cf. Davidson (1980a: 12–13).

According to my interpretation, Davidson's slogan does not claim that a primary reason is causally related to an action. His claim is not that there is a strict causal law connecting the two under the descriptions which appear in a rationalisation. Moreover, he does not think that the reason itself is an event. He only claims that it is somehow associated with one (such as "the onset of a belief" or the like...). Nor does he commit himself to the thesis that primary reasons and actions fall under strict laws when they appear in the guise of the descriptions we use in giving action explanations. Rather, what Davidson claims in C2 is that action explanations through primary reasons are causal explanations, and that the "because" in action explanations is the same "because" we are familiar with from other causal explanations, and in particular from explanations that invoke causal dispositions.

The ingenuity of Davidson's proposal lies in part in avoiding many of the standard arguments against the idea that actions are causes, or that action explanations are causal explanations, and in part in conceding many of the points of anti-causalists while still maintaining that reasons are causes. As to the first point, Davidson seems to show, against the consensus at the time, that it is possible to claim that reasons are causes. He does not postulate, for example, mental acts such as volitions as causes, nor does he claim that reasons and actions fall under covering laws under those descriptions that figure in rationalising explanations. Moreover, he raises convincing objections to arguments that purport to show that reasons cannot be causes. For instance, against Melden's "logical connection argument" he makes the valid point that actions as well as reasons (or at least the events associated with reasons) have many descriptions, and only some of them reveal them as falling under causal laws, whereas others reveal them as standing in relations of rationalisation. As to the second point I made at the beginning of this paragraph, Davidson's account seems to give the intentionalists, or anti-causalists, all they can reasonably want, while nevertheless retaining a recognisably causalist thesis. For example, Davidson emphasises the difference between mental and physical predicates, and the irreducibility of the former to the latter. This entails that explanations couched in mental terms cannot be reduced to explanations couched in physical terms. Davidson thus emphatically agrees with the intentionalists' claim that action explanation is intrinsically rational explanation that essentially invokes standards of rationality. For the intentionalist *and* for Davidson, rational explanations are explanations *sui generis*.

These features make Davidson's account attractive and no doubt go a long way towards explaining why it became so influential. But they are "strategic" considerations in favour of his version of the causalist thesis which will weigh only with those who already have leanings towards causalism, and moreover remain mainly implicit in his work. The *explicit* argument Davidson offers in support of his version of the claim that reason explanations are causal explanations is that causalism is the only or best response to Davidson's challenge. The question whether his causalist claim is correct thus largely hinges

on its merits. Moreover, there is actually no independent reason to believe in Davidson's claim that for every action explanation there must be some event e^* standing in a causal relation to the action to be explained, and suitably related to, associated with, or implied by the reason, i.e. the attitudes that figure in a C1-type rationalisation. The only reason to believe in its existence is acceptance of Davidson's analysis of causal explanation *and* his claim C2. And C2 in turn depends on the inevitability of giving a causalist answer to Davidson's challenge. Thus, much seems to depend on the cogency of the argument from Davidson's challenge. But, as I am going to show in the rest of this paper, this argument is far from conclusive.

In the following two sections, I will consider two alternative proposals for meeting Davidson's challenge that can be recovered from the work of G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright. In my view, these proposals are best seen as complementary. The first proposal, which I will consider in section 3, claims that the explanatory reason is the reason the agent *knows practically* as her reason.¹⁷ According to the second proposal, which I will discuss in section 4, the explanatory reason is the reason that not only agrees with the agent's self-understanding, but also fits best with the character and biography of the agent.¹⁸ Finally, in section 5, I will suggest that Davidson's own account of radical interpretation does not, in fact, make use of his causalism. A radical interpreter of an agent's reasons tries to find the best possible fit of a given action with the situation and background knowledge of the agent in order to come up with an interpretation of what the agent is doing and why. Uncovering causes or giving causal explanations does not play any role in this process.

III | MEETING DAVIDSON'S CHALLENGE, PART 1: PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE

The concept of practical knowledge is central to G.E.M. Anscombe's account of intentional action. She introduces it as the immediate, i.e. epistemically unmediated, knowledge of *what* one is doing intentionally, and *why* one is doing it. Anscombe claims for such knowledge a series of properties that distinguish it from “speculative”, i.e. theoretical knowledge¹⁹:

- a. *Practical knowledge is epistemically unmediated*: “[I]t is not by observation that one knows one is doing Z; or in so far as one is observing, inferring etc. that Z is actually taking place, one's knowledge is not the knowledge that a man has of his intentional actions.”²⁰

¹⁷Anscombe (1957). See also (Von Wright, 1971: 114–115).

¹⁸Von Wright (1979, 1980, 1994a, and 1994b).

¹⁹Compare Müller (1991).

²⁰Anscombe (1957: 50).

- b. *Practical knowledge is the cause of its object*: “[It] is ‘the cause of what it understands’, unlike ‘speculative’ knowledge, which ‘is derived from the objects known’.”²¹
- c. *Practical knowledge is contradicted not by factual statements, but by contradictory practical acts*: “[I]f a person says ‘I am going to bed at midnight’ the contradiction of this is not: ‘You won’t, for you never keep such resolutions’ but ‘You won’t, for I am going to stop you’.”²²
- d. *Practical knowledge is conceptually tied to practical reasoning*: “The notion of ‘practical knowledge’ can only be understood if we first understand ‘practical reasoning’.”²³
- e. *Practical knowledge is identical to practical capacity*: “A man has practical knowledge who knows how to do things; ... When we ordinarily speak of practical knowledge we have in mind a certain sort of general capacity in a particular field.”²⁴
- f. *When there is a mismatch between what the agent thinks she is doing and what she is doing, the error is in the performance and not in the thought*: “In some cases the facts are, so to speak, impugned for not being in accordance with the words, rather than *vice versa*. This is sometimes so when I change my mind; but another case of it occurs when e.g. I write something other than I think I am writing: as Theophrastus says (*Magna Moralia*, 1189b22), the mistake here is one of performance, not of judgment.”²⁵

All of these properties raise puzzles – or have, at any rate, puzzled philosophers. Some of these puzzles have been discussed extensively in the literature: for example, whether there can be epistemically *unmediated* knowledge of *what happens*²⁶; whether and, if so, how perceptual knowledge is presupposed in practical knowledge²⁷; or in what sense practical knowledge is the cause of what it understands.²⁸ Moreover, the question has been raised whether these different characterisations are in tension with one another.²⁹ For the purposes of this paper, however, I will lay these controversies aside and simply adopt Anscombe's notion of practical knowledge as we find it in her work.

²¹Anscombe (1957: 87).

²²Anscombe (1957: 55).

²³Anscombe (1957: 57).

²⁴Anscombe (1957: 88).

²⁵Anscombe (1957: 4f).

²⁶Moran (2004), Grünbaum (2009), and Schwenkler (2015).

²⁷McDowell (2013) and Schwenkler (2011).

²⁸Velleman (1989), Setiya (2007), Hursthouse (2000), and Moran (2004).

²⁹Müller (1991: 545–546).

According to Anscombe, practical knowledge primarily captures the teleological means-end structure of intentional action.³⁰ It thus has the same structure as practical reasoning, in the sense of reasoning from an end towards an action that serves as a means for realising that end. For Anscombe, practical knowledge and the action it is about are often established together through practical reasoning. Notably, Anscombe characterises practical knowledge, loosely following St. Thomas Aquinas, as “the cause of what it understands”.³¹ However, “cause” here means, at least primarily, “formal cause”: the agent’s practical knowledge gives an intentional action its form, both in the sense of its character as an intentional action and in the sense of its nature as exemplifying specific action types.³²

The notion of practical knowledge allows us to give a straightforward answer to Davidson’s challenge: the reason for which the agent acts is the reason that figures in her practical knowledge, whereas reasons she merely has are not known practically by her.

Due to the intimate connection between practical knowledge and practical reasoning, this proposal may seem to be identical with the idea that the reason for which an agent acts is the reason that figures in the agent’s practical reasoning that underlies her action. Whether or not this is true depends on how we understand practical reasoning. If what we mean by it is an episode of thinking in which an agent seeks to identify a course of action to be carried out, the proposals are different. For there are immediate, unpremeditated but nevertheless intentional actions, and for them, the proposal, so understood, will not work. Of course, as has often been remarked, even in such cases, the agent’s reasons are such that she *could have* entertained them in a piece of practical reasoning.³³ But “could have” is not strong enough to explain the difference we are after, since reasons that the agent merely has are also such that the agent could have entertained them in a piece of practical reasoning. In recent literature, “practical reasoning” has also sometimes been understood as a practical cousin of the basing relation that obtains between a belief and the reasons for which one holds it.³⁴ If we subscribe to this less episodic understanding, which makes practical reasoning more like

³⁰I say “primarily” because Anscombe also acknowledges backward-looking and interpretative motives besides forward-looking (i.e. teleological) ones.

³¹Anscombe (1957: 87).

³²Compare Moran (2004). It is a contested question whether practical knowledge also has some sort of efficient causal role to play in intentional action. Some authors, such as Velleman (1989), Setiya (2007: 47–48 and 56–57), Schwenkler (2015: 8–10), and Boyle (2009: 138–140), claim that it does. Others, such as Frost (2019: 334–335), are sceptical. Anscombe herself contrasted mental causes with genuine motives (1957: 15–18) and argued against the idea that action explanation is causal explanation (2005).

³³See, for example, Smith (1994: 131–132), McDowell (1979: 66, footnote 22), and Davidson (1980b: 85f).

³⁴See, for example, Rödl (2007).

knowledge or a standing belief, then the reasoning proposal and the knowledge proposal do indeed come to the same thing.

Davidson famously rejected Anscombe's notion of practical knowledge, by giving a counterexample which, at least for a while, more or less killed off that notion within analytic philosophy of action:

[I]n writing heavily on this page I may be intending to produce ten legible carbon copies. I do not know, or believe with any confidence, that I am succeeding. But if I am producing ten legible carbon copies, I am certainly doing it intentionally.³⁵

Note that Davidson does not reject the thought that intentional action often or even usually comes with some knowledge or beliefs about what one is doing. Rather, what he rejects is the idea that intentional action is invariably practically known by the agent, and thus the thought that practical knowledge is a necessary ingredient in intentional action. Yet, even in this weak form, Davidson's scepticism may be beside the point. At least, his counterexample does not decide the issue. For one thing, the case he is imagining is one of successfully trying to do something under uncertainty about the reliability of the available means, and one could argue that this is not a paradigm, but rather a marginal case, and that action theory should proceed from the centre to the margins and not the other way around. Moreover, as Michael Thompson has argued, practical knowledge is about doing something, i.e. about an action in progress. Expressions of practical knowledge employ progressive forms of the verb, and one of the peculiarities of the progressive is that statements using it remain true even if one is not currently engaged in the action, for example, because one is taking a break. Similarly, Thompson argues, such statements remain true in the face of failure to pull off the deed as long as one can improve on one's performance, or try again. Thus, the case is problematic only when just a single attempt is possible. But once more, cases where you have only one chance to succeed seem to be marginal, and it would be odd to use them as the basis for one's account of intentional action.³⁶

I do not mean to pretend that these remarks settle the matter. But I think they at least indicate that Davidson's carbon copier does not undermine Anscombe's notion of practical knowledge once and for all. And once we accept Anscombe's

³⁵Davidson (1980b: 92). Compare Bratman (1987: 37f): “[T]here seem to be cases in which there is intention in the face of agnosticism about whether one will succeed when one tries. Perhaps I intend to carry out a rescue operation, one that requires a series of difficult steps. I am confident that at each stage I will try my best. But if I were to reflect on the matter, I would have my doubts about success. I do not have other plans or beliefs which are inconsistent with such success; I do not actually believe I will fail. But neither do I believe I will succeed.” The notion of practical knowledge was forcefully revived by Velleman (1989), and has recently attracted much attention through the Anscombe renaissance that is currently under way.

³⁶Compare Thompson (2011) and Falvey (2000).

notion, it offers a promising way to meet Davidson's challenge without invoking efficient causation.

But before we can accept this proposal, we must address another worry. For there are cases where practical knowledge and acting for a reason come apart. One set of such cases concerns self-deceived action. Consider an example: Adrian gives some money to Betty, who is in financial trouble, and thinks he does so in order to help his friend. However, Adrian deceives himself. His true motive is to appear generous to himself and others. But he cannot admit this motive to himself, and prefers to think of his action as an attempt to relieve a dear friend's financial distress. On our Anscombean proposal, we would have to say that the reason for which Adrian acts is the reason that figures in his practical knowledge – that is, to help out a friend. However, we feel that the *real* reason for which he acts is another one, namely, his desire to appear generous. The reason that Adrian “knows” practically is one thing; the reason for which he acts is quite another.

Notice that Davidson's causalism offers an attractive response to such cases. Davidson postulates that self-deceivers have a divided mind, with contradictory beliefs and desires residing in different parts, and that the parts are held apart from one another, such that they do not come into conscious contact. Self-deceived action can then be described as action in which beliefs and desires from *one* part of the mind merely *rationalise* the action, whereas beliefs and desires from *another* part *cause* (as well as rationalise) it.³⁷

Anscombe does not discuss such cases. But Georg Henrik von Wright does. The practical knowledge proposal that I laid out in this section was endorsed by him when he wrote *Explanation and Understanding*:

My immediate knowledge of my own intentions is not based on reflection about myself (my inner states), but *is* the intentionality of my behavior, its association with an intention to achieve something. ... Am I saying then that my intention (right now) to ring the bell and my thinking the pressing of the button necessary for this end is the same as the fact that I now press the button? To this should be answered: It is not *the same* as the sequence of bodily movements and events in the external world which terminates in my finger's pressing against the button and the button's sinking into the hole. But it is this sequence *meant* by me (or *understood* by others) as an act of ringing the bell.³⁸

In his later work, by contrast, von Wright became suspicious of the notion of an agent's (or, for that matter, anyone's) *knowledge* with respect to the reasons for which she acts, and concentrated more on the notion of *understanding* that an *interpreter* has of an agent, and the criteria of adequacy for such understanding.

³⁷See Davidson (2004b, 2004c, and 2004d).

³⁸Von Wright (1971: 114–115).

He developed a distinctive answer to Davidson's challenge out of these considerations, to which I will turn in the following section. In my view, it complements rather than supplants Anscombe's practical knowledge account. For although von Wright concentrates on the criteria of understanding the actions of *another person*, he still accords the agent's *self-understanding* a central place among them.

IV | MEETING DAVIDSON'S CHALLENGE, PART 2: UNDERSTANDING WHY SOMEONE ACTS

From roughly the mid-1970s onwards, von Wright thought that, of the reasons that an agent has, the reason for which she acts is the reason which has the best overall fit with a description of the situation and a wider story about her. In this section, I will explain this idea. Moreover, through a closer reading of Davidson's account of interpretation, which I will undertake in section 5, it will emerge that something like von Wright's answer to Davidson's challenge is actually all Davidson himself can offer. Any appeal on Davidson's part to reasons as causes remains somewhat vacuous, in the sense that it does not play any serious role in his account of how we come to understand an agent's reasons.

Before I come to von Wright's response to Davidson, I would like to briefly consider his objection to the claim that reasons are causes. Von Wright presupposes an understanding of causation according to which causal explanation depends on a nomic connection between *explanans* and *explanandum*. Both are connected by a causal law that reveals the *explanans* as both necessary and sufficient for the occurrence of the *explanandum*. He denies that reasons for action are causes, because he thinks that action explanations work differently from causal explanations. They exemplify a logically different sort of explanatory schema. Explaining an action with a reason is not to give a necessary and sufficient causal condition of its occurrence, but to reveal its teleological meaning, as captured by a practical syllogism. Von Wright and Davidson differ in their analysis of causation: for the former, causes are necessary and sufficient conditions, and causal relations hold between facts or states of affairs; for the latter, causal relations hold between events that are backed by laws of a certain kind. This disagreement notwithstanding, it should nonetheless be clear that Davidson actually agrees with von Wright on his main point, namely, the deep logical difference between the kinds of explanations we find in advanced natural sciences on the one hand, and the explanations of actions in everyday life and in writing history or in the social sciences, on the other.³⁹

For this reason, I think that von Wright's strongest argument against Davidson is not so much that the latter overlooks the peculiarities of action explanation. Davidson is very much aware of them, and he explicitly highlights

³⁹See, for example, Davidson (1980f and 1980h).

the special status of rationalising explanations. In my view, von Wright's strongest argument is that Davidson's appeal to reasons as causes is superfluous in an account of action explanation, because whether or not the reason also plays a causal role is not among our criteria when we decide for what reasons someone acted. In order to see this, let us take a closer look at what an "understanding explanation of action" entails for von Wright:

In an explanation of actions of the kind which I have termed "understanding", one sees the commission or the omission of an action in the light of its reason, thus seeing the action against the background of its motivation. This assumes that the action has been correctly identified and that the reasons given actually exist.⁴⁰

Von Wright presupposes that we have already identified a set of reasons the agent has. In *Explanation and Understanding* and related work, von Wright analyses the structure of such reasons in great detail.⁴¹ There he claims, first, that the reason consists in an intention and a belief, second, that their logical connection with the action can be displayed in a practical syllogism, and third, that this syllogism is valid, i.e. that there is a relation of logical consequence or truth-preservation between its premises and conclusion, if the premises are hedged in several ways. In later work (roughly in the writings in which he responds to Davidson's challenge), von Wright back-tracks on the first of these claims. In addition to teleological explanations, he introduces action explanations through "challenges" that derive from certain institutions:

Other actions – perhaps the majority – are done *in response to a* (symbolic) *challenge*. Two sub-types of challenge may be distinguished. One consists of challenges presented in what may be called *communicative action* patterns. Examples are orders, requests, questions. Traffic lights and (many) other signals also belong here. The other type consists of (prescriptive) rules or norms, and of norm-like things such as customs, fashions, or traditions within a community. Example: Why did you stop your car? Because the traffic light turned red. Why do you stop in front of the red light? Because there is a rule prohibiting one to drive against this signal. Such answers give reasons for action.⁴²

⁴⁰Von Wright (1997: 11).

⁴¹The related works I have in mind are two papers on practical reasoning: von Wright (1963 and 1972).

⁴²Von Wright (1981: 128). See also Von Wright (1976, 1979, and 1980). Anscombe also allows for motives other than "forward-looking" (i.e. teleological) ones, namely "backward-looking motives" and "motives-in-general" (or "interpretative motives"); cf. Anscombe (1957: 20–21).

This change of mind does not touch, however, his main point about the connection between reasons as displayed in a practical syllogism and action explanations – that is, that the practical syllogism can, when read retrospectively, be used to explain the action appearing in its conclusion. In other words, it can be used to connect an action under a given action description which is true of the *explanandum* (i.e., the agent's behaviour), with the *explanans*, which is either an intention and a belief that the agent in fact had, or else a challenge he believed himself to be confronted with. The explanatory import of this connection lies in the fact that, given the fact that the agent had this intention and this belief, or that he believed he was faced with the challenge, it follows *logically* that what she did falls under the action description. The action must be seen in this light if the describer (or explainer) is to remain consistent in his description of the agent and her behaviour. I take this to be the core of von Wright's version of the “logical connection argument”.

This sort of logical connection between reasons and action is true of all reasons the agent has when she acts. So far, von Wright has not responded to Davidson's challenge. In his early work, von Wright explicitly set aside the crucial question that occupied Davidson:

A problem which we have not considered here is which of alternative sets of premises should be accepted for a given conclusion. This is the problem of testing the correctness (truth) of the “material,” as distinct from “formal,” validity of a proposed teleological explanation of action. *It will not be discussed in the present work.*⁴³

Von Wright makes good on this omission only in his later work. I will here chiefly consider an important paper that was first published in German (1994a) and later in English translation as “Explanation and Understanding of Actions”:

What is it that will guarantee the correctness (or truth) of a given understanding explanation for an action? To begin with, there is a purely “formal” answer which can be given to this question: The explanation is correct if the reasons indicated in the explanation were not only *present* but also *effectual* in such a manner that one can say: “He committed (or omitted) this action *for* these reasons (or because he had these reasons, or by virtue of these reasons).” Our question as to the accuracy (or, alternatively, the truth) of the explanation is then identical with the question: “How can one know whether an existing reason is also

⁴³Von Wright (1971: 117–118)

an efficacious one, which therefore actually influenced the action?"⁴⁴

In this passage, von Wright introduces the very question that inspired Davidson to postulate the causal character of action explanations. However, von Wright denies the consequence Davidson draws from it. He does not think that the distinction between *reasons we merely have* and *reasons for which we act* lies in the fact that only the latter are suitably connected with a causal relation between some event and the action.

Von Wright's alternative answer is the following:

I will now answer this new form of our original question as follows: Efficacious reasons are precisely those in whose light we understand the action. In other words, I submit that the *understanding explanation* for an action presents no basis for [determining] truth (no criterion for [determining] accuracy) beyond the connection formed in the act of understanding between the action and its reasons. If we were to exaggerate, we might say that an understanding explanation for an action is neither true nor false; it lies outside the categories of truth and falsehood.⁴⁵

I think von Wright's point is that the criteria we employ in distinguishing between reasons that are present and reasons that are effective lie *exclusively* in the activity of interpretation itself. In interpreting people's actions, we do not invoke some truth-ground that is independent and prior to that activity, such as a causal connection between reasons and causes that holds independently of the interpretation. The effective reason simply *is* the reason which the best available interpretation of the behaviour identifies.⁴⁶

With this move, von Wright shifts the criteria of the correctness of understanding action explanations from some independently ascertainable facts – such as the existence of causal relations – to whatever criteria we use in order to arrive at a good interpretation of what someone did and why. For von Wright, the ultimate criterion for a good interpretation is that a consensus be reached between interpreters and the agent interpreted. He offers the following explanation for why the latter is in the picture:

⁴⁴Von Wright (1997: 11).

⁴⁵Von Wright (1997: 11–12).

⁴⁶In his disputation with Georg Meggle, von Wright elaborates on his perhaps somewhat misleading claim that the explanation of action has no independent truth grounds and therefore cannot be knowledge. See Von Wright (1994b).

It is obvious that the self-understanding of an agent plays a key role in the correct explanation of an action. Normally, the agent knows *what* he has done – that is to say, he knows in what way his behaviour has been intentional. He likewise also knows what his reasons were for and against carrying out the act and which reasons actually moved him to carry out the act. If we as outsiders wish to know *why* he acted as he did, the simplest way to find out is to ask him. ... If he (for some reason) had reflected on his actions, or if someone had asked him (for some reason), he could have given an immediate answer which no one would have reason to doubt. Implicit here is, admittedly, an agreement of opinions, and, as already has been intimated, this consensual agreement guarantees the truth of the explanation, should one be necessary.⁴⁷

Agents are normally able to tell what they did and why they did it. And normally the best way to understand an action, and reach a consensus on what type of action it was and why it took place, is to ask the agent and accept her answer.

This holds only normally, however, because there are cases – necessarily marginal ones, as von Wright observes – in which we are tempted to contradict the agent's own information about his action. We think the agent is not telling us the truth. Perhaps he is lying. A consensus could be reached by getting the agent to admit that he lied and to voice his own true understanding of the action. However, he may also have deceived himself. What he tells us may be an honest disclosure of his self-understanding, and yet not what he, somehow subconsciously, really thinks. This is the kind of case I introduced above as posing a problem for an Anscombean response to Davidson's challenge. The case is also a problem for von Wright, because here it is more difficult to reach a consensus. Perhaps it takes a long and elaborate discussion to convince the agent of our interpretation. Perhaps only a therapy can get him to see through his self-deception. And perhaps we never reach an agreement with him. In these cases, our own understanding deviates from the agent's self-understanding. And this raises the question on what grounds we may want to contradict the agent's story about himself and what he did:

By what right, though, could the outsider assert that he knew the motives of the agent better than the agent himself? Perhaps he will cite knowledge, based on earlier experience, of the agent's character. ... This outsider knowledge sees this particular case, the deed which has been done, against the broad background of facts from

⁴⁷Von Wright (1997: 12–13).

the life of the agent. His explanation agrees more with that which we know about the agent than with the explanation we hear from the agent; besides that, the explanation of the outsider is more compatible with the agent's doings and his character.⁴⁸

We contradict the agent because we feel that a different story is more coherent with the rest we know about him, his character, his opinions, and other actions.⁴⁹

From these considerations, two criteria for a valid understanding of an action emerge. On the one hand, it should fit the agent's own immediate understanding of her action. This is the Anscombean criterion I introduced in the previous section. On the other hand, however, it should *also* fit within a larger story about the agent, her character, opinions, and actions. As we have seen, these two criteria may on (rare) occasions, such as in cases of self-deception, pull in different directions. In these cases, a consensus may or may not be reached.

Consider now the case in which we can convince the agent of our interpretation. Von Wright insists that, in the agent's revised understanding of the action, he does not come closer to an independent truth-ground in the form of a causal connection that exists independently of any interpretation. Rather, when the agent revises his self-understanding, he “creates” a new connection between his reasons and his action:

I say that in the case of what we are calling a “conversion,” the agent connects his actions with their motivational background *in a new way* in his self-understanding. He understands himself and his action in a different way – not because new facts have come to his attention, but because he assembles already present facts into a new image. If we say that this new image is “more true” or that it bears a greater similarity to reality than the old one, that merely means that it better matches a more comprehensive assortment of facts concerning his life and character – facts in whose light the external judge of these events had [already] seen the action of the agent.⁵⁰

In other words, the efficacious reasons of an agent, as opposed to those he merely has, are those on which there is consensus that they are the best fit

⁴⁸Von Wright (1997: 14).

⁴⁹Compare Von Wright (1979: 426–427): “Ob *A* *x* getan habe, weil es ihm befohlen wurde, oder wegen irgendeiner anderen Ursache, hängt davon ab, wie gut oder schlecht – und ich drücke mich hier absichtlich etwas vage aus – diese Weil-Aussage mit *anderem*, was *A* getan hat und tun wird und über seine eigenen Absichten berichtet und was wir sonst von ihm wissen, *zusammenpaßt*.”

⁵⁰Von Wright (1997: 17).

within a wider story about the agent – a consensus which the agent herself can accept.

Von Wright offers a radically anti-causalist answer to Davidson's challenge. He points out that the criteria we employ in interpreting agents are fundamentally different from those we employ in finding out about causes or causal factors. Reaching a rationally coherent story about the agent and the best possible fit of the action within that story is an altogether different undertaking from finding out about the causal interdependence of factors in controlled experiments, or through statistical analysis. We do not need to invoke causes at all in order to construct a story of the first type. Causation is simply not among the criteria for reaching a valid interpretation of an action. When we decide whether an agent acted for one reason or another, we are not interested in causes and in figuring out which one actually caused the action, as we are when we try to determine which candidate factors were actually responsible for, say, the collapse of a bridge. In particular, when we give an action explanation, it is not important whether or not there was an event that caused the action and was suitably related to the reason we give for it. The occurrence of such an event is simply not among the criteria for ascribing reasons for someone's action. And as Wittgenstein once said in a different context: "a wheel that can be turned though nothing else moves with it, is not part of the mechanism".⁵¹ We can safely remove it without damaging the machine. Rather, what we do when we explain someone's action is that we try to construct a maximally coherent true story about the agent into which we can meaningfully fit the action to be explained and which the agent herself can endorse.⁵²

But must there not be a truth ground in virtue of which an action explanation is true, something that is independent of and stands behind the consensus between agent and interpreter? And is this truth ground not some causal relation associated with the true action explanation? Von Wright has an attractive response to this objection. He distinguishes between two different connections that are at play when someone acts for a reason. There is, on the one hand, the nexus of understanding between the action and its reasons, and there is, on the other hand, the explanatory connection of the bodily movement with its causal antecedents. Both relations hold between different kinds of things, and operate on different conceptual levels of description: the mental or rational level, and the neural or physiological level. Bodily movements have *causes*, in the neural system and beyond it in the outside world, and these causes explain why the

⁵¹Wittgenstein (1953: §271).

⁵²Frederick Stoutland, who is otherwise known as a staunch defender of intentionalism against causalism, has claimed, in a late paper of his, that the difference between Davidson and intentionalists like himself or von Wright is marginal and mainly verbal (cf. 1999.) I think this is wrong. Despite their agreement on many issues, Davidson and von Wright have very different views on what makes an action explanation true – the existence of a causal relation for Davidson, and the agreement of agent and interpreter on how the action fits into a coherent story about the agent for von Wright.

bodily movement occurs. But does this mean that, because the bodily movement is identical with the action, the causal antecedents of the former are the truth ground of the understanding that connects the action with its motivating reasons?

In response to this challenge, we can, following von Wright, make three points. First, there is actually not much reason to assume that action and movement are identical rather than two separate but intimately connected events. To be sure, it is quite natural to think that a (bodily) action *consists in* some bodily movement, and that the movement *constitutes* the action. But these relations of consisting in and constitution need not be identity relations. Rather, we can say that a bodily action is *correlated with* a bodily movement, without assuming that the two are identical. After all, bodily movements and actions are picked out by means of vocabulary that operates on quite different levels of description. It is therefore to be expected that *what* we thus pick out is shaped by these different vocabularies and the different purposes and interests they serve. So we should expect that the items that have been picked out have different boundaries and shapes, and cannot easily be identified with one another. Second, the why-question which is appropriate for actions, the one that asks after reasons, is quite different from the why-question which is appropriate for bodily behaviour, i.e. the one that asks after (neural or physiological) causes. Each question corresponds to a quite different line of inquiry, which issues in quite different kinds of answer.⁵³ And third, the causal line of inquiry actually presupposes the rational one, because we must have identified actions and attitudes with our mental or rational vocabulary before we can wonder what their neural or physiological correlates are.

Because of this third point, von Wright thinks, a causal connection on the neural or physiological level cannot be made the truth ground for a reasons explanation on the mental or rational level of description:

The causal hypothesis which explains the bodily movement *rests* on acceptance of the rational explanation of this movement when seen as the performance of an action. Therefore one cannot make the (assumed) causal connection between neural processes and muscular movement the *warrant of truth* of the rational explanation.⁵⁴

According to the objection we are considering, the causal connection is conceptually more basic than the rational-explanatory one. But now it turns out that it is actually the other way around. Any hypothesis about the causes of

⁵³Cf. Anscombe (2005).

⁵⁴Von Wright (1998: 149).

the bodily movement in fact rests on a rational explanation of the action. The rational-explanatory connection is thus conceptually more basic than the causal one.

I will end this paper by pointing out that Davidson himself, in his account of interpretation, offers a story about understanding which is, in its salient features, very much like von Wright's. And just like von Wright's account, causality is conspicuously absent from Davidson's story. Somewhat surprisingly, in *both* accounts of interpretation of actions, causal hypotheses play no role.

V | DAVIDSON ON RADICAL INTERPRETATION

Let us briefly recapitulate some salient features of Davidson's theory of interpretation. His starting point is the observation that people's beliefs and desires, and the meanings of their words, are mutually interdependent.⁵⁵ We can assign different meanings to their words if we make suitable adjustments to the beliefs and desires we take them to hold, and vice versa. Interpretation must therefore in principle break into this holistic web without assuming any of the items within it. Davidson's method of "radical interpretation" is designed to achieve this. However, as Davidson describes it, radical interpretation is doubly hypothetical.⁵⁶ First, the formal structure or theory it postulates – roughly, a Tarskian theory of truth combined with Richard Jeffrey's version of decision theory⁵⁷ – is such that someone *could* know what people mean, believe and desire on the basis of that structure, which is not to say that actual interpreters ever actually know these things on its basis. And second, the method is such that interpreters following it *could* come to know a theory of this kind on the basis of certain evidence; but again, this is not to say that they ever employ the method. Despite the artificiality of theory and method, Davidson thinks that his construction reveals something essential about belief, desire and meaning as we actually find it, and about how we understand people's words and psychology in real life.

The evidential basis for radical interpretation is the attitude of preferring sentences to be true, as revealed by the agent's utterances and behaviour.⁵⁸ Davidson takes it to be relatively unproblematic to identify this attitude in people's behaviour. From knowledge of which sentences the agent prefers to be true, and knowledge about the agent's circumstances, Davidson proposes to fill in, all at once, the content of the formal structure he takes to capture meaning, belief and desire. In constructing the contents of the formal structure, it is

⁵⁵Cf. Davidson (1984b).

⁵⁶Davidson (1984a: 125).

⁵⁷Cf. Davidson (2004a).

⁵⁸See Davidson (2004a).

imperative to follow a Principle of Charity: we must assume that the agent is largely correct and largely rational – by our own lights. In other words, we must assume that there is a large measure of agreement on rational structures, beliefs and values between ourselves and the agent we are interpreting. Factual or logical errors occur only in the margins. We thus try to come up with a holistic account of the agent's beliefs, desires and meanings that are at once the best possible fit with her behaviour, as it reveals which propositions she prefers to be true, and with our own assumptions about the world, our own values, and above all our own standards of rationality.⁵⁹ Trade-offs between simplicity and agreement are, of course, possible. Moreover, Davidson thinks that, in principle, the evidence will not determine a unique account.⁶⁰ An important background assumption in radical interpretation is that the agent knows her own mind, i.e. her own meanings, beliefs and desires.⁶¹ She need not interpret herself.

The reason I rehearse these claims is the following. In my view, all a Davidsonian radical interpreter makes use of in constructing a unified theory of belief, desire and meaning for a given agent at a given time are the kinds of criteria we encountered in Anscombe and von Wright. All the interpreter does is try to come up with a coherent rational story about the agent into which a given piece of behaviour fits optimally well. And causation plays no role in the story because, as radical interpreters, we only care about rational or justificatory relations and not about whether causal relations obtain as well. Here is how Geert Keil puts the point:

The next thing we can expect the causal theorist to do is to *specify* [the] effective reason, or to tell us how it can be identified. But, Davidson disappoints us here. He does not take any further steps to specify the effective reason. Among the reasons the agent had, he picks out the one which yields the most plausible explanation, but instead of specifying its position in the causal network of the physical world, he just *calls* it the cause, which is not particularly informative. The only principle Davidson employs here is the rule of thumb *best reason = strongest cause*.⁶²

As Keil points out, the identification of the motivating reason with a cause is just an afterthought. The causal hypothesis plays no role in determining which reason is the one that actually explains the action. Only *after* having determined the most plausible explanation by coming up with a maximally coherent story about the action and its context, in which a belief-desire

⁵⁹Cf. Davidson (1984a: 135–136).

⁶⁰Cf. Davidson (1984c).

⁶¹Cf. Davidson (2001).

⁶²Keil (2007: 79).

pair plays the role of motivating reason, can we say that there must be some causal relation in the background, and thus a cause that is somehow associated with the belief-desire pair that we have identified as the reason. The only reason for making this identification is the abstract philosophical claim that reasons are causes.

I conclude that Davidson's own account of interpretation actually gives us no reason to believe in his causalist claim. On the contrary, the causalist claim is needed in order to make particular claims about particular reasons, namely, that *they* are also causes of actions.⁶³

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