How Self-Narratives and Virtues Cause Actions

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1. **Introduction**

Virtue ethics provides an approach to understanding the moral value of actions that shifts focus to virtues away from the following of rules derived from our moral duties or from the consequences of actions. Virtues are part of the person’s character and includes the notion that one should foster virtues in oneself and others. They are often understood as a certain kind of disposition to act. If dispositions are understood conditionally, capturing how a person does or would behave in certain circumstances, then what we want to emphasize gets lost, that a person’s virtues causally contribute to how they act. There is another understanding of dispositions, which does allow them to be causes, though. A self-narrative, or maybe multiple self-narratives, plausibly contributes to, or reflects, a person’s character and indeed it has been argued that self-narratives define a person’s identity. Once again, it is natural to conceive of self-narratives causally contributing to the person’s actions.

Thus the main topic of our paper is how actions may causally flow from virtues and from self-narratives. Our expectation is that this pairing of topics is capable of generating insights and indeed we shall be showing some ways in which virtues and self-narratives are related, in particular through the notion of character. How we shall proceed is to first, in section 2, outline some ideas about narratives and how they have been regarded by some authors to be central to, or indeed constitutive of, the self. In section 3, we shall discuss some views about the nature of virtues with an emphasis on their influence on action, noting that they, too, form an integral part of the self. In section 4, we shall introduce some of the basic ideas in the causal theory of action, as an initial strategy in the development of an account of the causal power of virtues and self-narratives. In section 5, we shall address Elizabeth Anscombe’s opposition to causal theories of action. In section 6, we shall develop our own account of the way that self-narratives and virtues causally contribute to action, recognizing their position at the core of what it is to be a person.

1. **Self-narratives**

The notion of a narrative has a rich history going back to Aristotle with a focus on the structure of tragedies and epics. While the notion of a narrative remains an important one in literary theory, it appears also in many other academic disciplines, notably historiography (Mink 1974) and cognitive psychology (Bruner 1986, 1990). Oliver Sacks (1985: 105), a neurologist, viewed a person’s narrative as constituting their personal identity, saying, “Each of us *is* a singular narrative, which is constructed, continually, unconsciously, by, through, and in us - through our perceptions, our feelings, our thoughts, our actions; and not least, our discourse, our spoken narratives.” Such a notion of a self-narrative is central to the view we shall develop.[[1]](#endnote-1) In this section, we will argue that self-narratives are deeply ingrained and internalised structures that may play a contributory causal role in the formation of action.

We are therefore interested in a self-narrative as an internal structure. But couldn’t the life of a person as they live it also have a narrative structure? Alasdair MacIntyre (1984) developed a narrative notion of the self, in the context of an examination of the virtues, a connection which reflects our project here. He takes a firm position on the way that narratives are important for understanding persons.

It is because we live out narratives in our lives and because we understand our own lives in terms of the narratives that we live out that the form of narrative is appropriate for understanding the actions of others. Stories are lived before they are told. (MacIntyre 1984: 212)

He contrasts his view with that of Mink (1970), who says that stories are not lived but told. There is something of a false dichotomy here. Our focus is initially on self-narrative as an inner construction, for we are interested in the way it can causally affect behaviour. Because we see the character of the self-narrative being played out in action to some extent and as circumstances permit, it is reasonable to suggest that the life of the person may also take the form of a narrative. The previously withdrawn high school student who ‘reinvents’ herself as a fun-loving party animal upon going to university, and does so successfully, has both deliberately constructed an internal narrative and come to live it. We are not endorsing the priority MacIntyre places on the narrative as lived but we do allow that both the inner construction and the outer appearance may have a narrative form. This is to adopt a different position on the notion of a narrative from that found in Lumsden (2013, 2013/2014).

We need to consider the metaphysical status of the internal narrative. Daniel Dennett’s approach brings that to the fore. He employs the notion of a narrative to characterise the self, saying, for example, “Our tales are spun, but for the most part we don’t spin them; they spin us” (Dennett 1993: 418). This challenging view sits against the background of his antirealist, or as he would prefer to say ‘mild realist’, position on mental states. Dennett (1987) regards beliefs and desires to have a similar metaphysical status to the centre of gravity of an object: postulating them is useful practically speaking though they are not straightforwardly real. When he speaks of the tales spinning us, he is saying that the self is no more than the tales, or narrative, we tell of ourselves. But the tales too have a mild realist status. You might think that to accept that kind of metaphysical view of a self-narrative would remove it as a potential cause of action. In fact it may provide the very clue to the kind of causal relationship we need to identify, a point to which we shall return in due course.

What does the notion of a self-narrative bring to the table in developing a conception of the self? We can find one possible answer in Marya Schechtman (1990, 1996). One thread in her approach can be described as using the notion of a narrative to capture the holistic character of experience and memory. Schechtman (1990) employs an example from Casey (1987) of someone who recalls seeing a particular film with his family. That memory is not a discrete item that could be transported into the mind of someone else (in the manner of the *Venetian Memories* thought experiment of Parfit 1984: 220-1), for the memory is completely intertwined with other experiences of those family members and knowledge of all manner of things concerning the venue and the film. That a memory typically sits in a rich network of related memories does not require that they all be accurate. For example, a family member who would be typically present for “family movie night” was in fact absent for one but their presence had been mistakenly filled in the overall memory of that particular evening. The more that inaccuracies are involved that have no basis in reality the more that there is not a proper setting to sustain a memory. The person who ‘remembers’ seeing a certain Italian film sitting next to Luke Skywalker and Princess Leia in the Mos Eisley Cantina (a distinctively *Star Wars* setting) can barely be said to remember seeing the film. In Schechtman’s (1996: 119) narrative constitution view of selves, there is an explicit ‘reality constraint’ which requires that the self-narrative ‘fundamentally cohere with reality’, thus ruling out such cases.

Leaving such extreme cases aside, though, the moral is that there is a form of holism concerning memory: a particular memory cannot sit alone. How do we capture that kind of holism? One approach is to look to the notion of a narrative to describe the form of unity into which a particular memory or experience fits. Even though the notion of a narrative is a contested and open-ended one, it has the essential feature we need: it captures the way that represented events hang together in such a way as to create a larger unity, a unity that contributes to the significance of those individual events. The narrative structure not only provides a setting for individual experiences and makes sense of them but also can play the creative role of producing, that is causing, actions, something which is central to this paper.

J. David Velleman (2006, Chapter 9) agrees with Dennett that we invent ourselves but in contrast says (p. 206) “we really are the characters whom we invent,” thus denying Dennett’s mild realist position. Velleman’s realism may, at first sight, make those characters seem better candidates for being causes of actions but our position is that a mild realist approach better captures the nature of the relevant causal relationship. Consider the puzzle raised by Dennett’s claim that our tales spin us rather than vice versa. Don’t we need a self to construct the tales? Dennett’s view is that it is the *human being* that creates the narrative, where the human being is not treated as an agent. That it is not an agent is made manifest by Dennett’s parallel with a robot that has the capacity to construct a narrative, in fact an autobiography, which is introduced by saying “Call me Gilbert.” Dennett’s account of the construction of the autobiography is that it records what the robot sensed and did. Velleman raises the other direction: how the narrative guides what is done. A robot smart enough to do all that Dennett describes should be able to ‘narrate ahead of himself’ and then proceed to carry out that plan. In this way, “an autobiography and the behaviour that it narrates are mutually determining” (Velleman 2006: 211). This is an interesting way of articulating the role of a self-narrative in producing action. Velleman has further things to say about that causal relationship, to which we shall return in section 6.

1. **Virtues**

Having seen how narrative approaches to the self can take a variety of forms and how self-narratives may form a part of the causal story of human behaviour, we need to say something about the nature of virtues. A person’s character surely involves her virtues and vices and her self-narrative will surely also have points of contact with her character. It should be no surprise if the causal power of virtues and self-narratives to produce action runs in parallel.

The virtues, a central feature of moral philosophy for Aristotle, took a back seat in the modern period until a revival in the twentieth century, so that virtue ethics is once more part of the standard suite of approaches in moral philosophy. The Aristotelian virtue ethics position is a dominant one and is summarised by Liezl van Zyl (2018, 14-15) as having five characteristics: (1) virtue is a human excellence, (2) what makes a trait a virtue is that it allows its possessor to live a good (happy or flourishing) life, (3) a virtuous person is motivated by the right feelings and the right reasons, (4) practical wisdom is required for virtue, and (5) actions are to be evaluated in terms of virtue and vice.

When a person embodies all of the excellences of human character, that person is good and virtuous. That position reflects Aristotle’s claim that there is a unity of the virtues, which depends on his views about practical wisdom. “[T]he man who is capable of deliberating has practical wisdom. … [I]t is a true and reasoned state of capacity to act with regard to the things that are good or bad for man” (Aristotle 1140a30-1140b5). Van Zyl explains Aristotle’s reasoning for the unity of virtues thesis like this:

Practical wisdom is the same for each virtue for they all require a broad or general conception of the ends of action, that is about what is good or worthwhile for human beings. It follows from this that someone who has practical wisdom will have all the virtues. (Van Zyl 2018, 84)

Perhaps one of the most vigorous challenges to virtue ethics concerns the relationship between virtues and action. Virtuous character, so the critic may argue, fails to provide a clear *guide* to action. A response to that challenge is to be found in contemporary work in virtue ethics beginning with Elizabeth Anscombe (1958/2005). Her main aim in that work is to address a deficient moral view constructed from our zealousness for rules and obligations. In contrast to other ethical theories like utilitarianism and Kantian ethics, virtue ethics finds its theoretical seat in the cultivation of a character that disposes people to behave in certain ways, ways that we recognize as expressions of virtue. Right action is defined in terms of virtue rather than virtue being defined in terms of right action.

An action is right if and only if it is what a virtuous agent would, characteristically, do in the circumstances. (Hursthouse 1999, 79)

Action-guidance, therefore, may be derived from what the agent considers proper motivational structures. Rosalind Hursthouse (1999), taking a lesson from Anscombe, argues that we can get perfectly serviceable rules for virtue ethics, what she terms the “v-rules.” “Do what is honest; do not do what is uncharitable” (Hursthouse 1999, 37). Of course, one should not expect possession of the relevant virtues to provide a clear guide to action in the sense of sharp definitive rules. So, in this chapter, we want to avoid looking at the action from the outside in the manner of the Kantian or utilitarian and consider the issue from the perspective of the actor, one’s inner sense.

It is an advantage of virtue ethics that it grounds the virtuous person’s decisions to act in the full complexity of the situation. Here is an example of what we mean. Suppose that Jones is considering whether to tell the truth. Even if Jones has lived a life in which she has cultivated the virtue of *honesty*, the possession of that cultivated virtue may not absolutely compel her to tell the truth. Jones may, under the circumstances, remind herself: “Be honest!” Jones may even be compelled to ask herself, “What exactly is honesty and what are the circumstances under which I should be honest?” There is a trade-off between different virtues, such as being honest and being kind. If by telling the truth Jones must sacrifice being kind, such as when answering her friend’s question, “Do I look fat in this?” just before a significant social occasion, then maybe she spends time adjudicating between those virtues to uncover which should guide her action.

Our interest in virtues, though, is not primarily as the basis of moral evaluation but as the inner cause of behaviour. To talk of virtues as causes deviates sharply from Anscombe’s picture.[[2]](#endnote-2) These inner causes of which we speak ought not to be understood as identifying specific physical structures that exemplify causal relations and we are proposing a mild realist metaphysical status for these inner causes. A central focus for us in this paper is to uncover their nature.

Reason to doubt that virtues are inner causes may stem from our understanding of virtues as dispositions. Dispositions can be understood merely in terms of conditional truths, counterfactual conditionals associated with a degree of probability. Being thirsty on this understanding is to be such that if offered a drink one is likely to accept it. Similarly being generous is to be such that where someone is in need and one has the means to help one is likely to help.

But we should not assume that this exhausts a proper understanding of dispositions. David Armstrong (1968 / 1993, Crane, et al. 1996/2002, 4) argues that dispositional statements are not made true by counterfactual states of affairs, for having a dispositional property needs to be explained in terms of a non-dispositional, categorical property. For example, if we say a glass is brittle, we know this implies what is likely to happen if it is dropped on a hard surface but we assume that there is some property of its microstructure that underpins those counterfactual properties. Armstrong takes a similar view of mental states in his functionalist-physicalist theory of mind. He considers them states ‘apt for bringing about a certain sort of behaviour’, which makes them dispositions but that as a matter of empirical fact the state is always a brain state. The details of Armstrong’s view are controversial and U.T. Place challenges the distinction Armstrong makes between dispositional and categorical properties. Our moral for the moment, though, is simply that to identify virtues as dispositions is not to exclude them as inner causes.

We have seen that the Aristotelian view of virtuous action involves motivation by the right feelings and the right reasons. It is natural to think of that motivation as causal: those feelings and reasons causally contribute to action. Other views of virtues give us different accounts of motivation but they mostly involve inner states that are best regarded as causes of action. The Kantian is motivated by a sense of duty such that feelings, other than feelings that are centered on carrying out one’s duty, are not what makes the actions of the virtuous person right. Michael Slote, a sentimentalist, thinks that “virtue consists in having and acting on warm motivating sentiments such as benevolence, gratitude, compassion and love” (Frazer and Slote 2015, 197, quoted in Van Zyl 2019, 25). Michael Slote (2001) has placed in the foreground an agent’s motivations and has argued that we need to look at what motivates a person’s actions to determine the action’s moral quality. Acting on motivating sentiments is best understood as those sentiments causally contributing to action. At first sight it would appear that the consequentialist would avoid any inner components of virtue that could be causal, for the virtuous person is the one whose actions tend to produce good consequences. But a consequentialist can opt for an internalist version in which a right action is one that arises out of the motivation to bring about good consequences and, correspondingly, a virtuous person is one who is motivated by a desire to bring about good consequences. In summary, most conceptions of virtue involve inner states that could causally contribute to action. Our focus, though, will not be primarily on the immediate motivating inner states but more on virtues as standing features of a person’s character, in line with the Aristotelian picture.

1. **The Causal Theory of Action**

While there is not a well-developed literature on how virtues and self-narratives cause actions, there is a significant body of literature concerning the way certain mental states describable in folk psychological terms may cause actions. On Donald Davidson’s view, we act from reasons, which is what makes us rational, and those reasons are causes of our actions.[[3]](#endnote-3) To provide a little more detail, a reason is composed of a belief and a desire, specifically the belief is that the action will bring about the fulfillment of the desire. Thus the causal theory of action specifies the connection between the desire and bodily movement when the latter is an intentional action that aims at the satisfaction of the person’s desire.[[4]](#endnote-4) For example, suppose I want to attract your attention and I believe that waving at you will attract your attention. This shows my reason for waving at you. Clearly, there could be various means to achieve the same end. If I had believed that lighting a flare would attract your attention, then the combination of my belief that lighting the flare attracts another person’s attention and my desire to attract your attention is my reason for lighting the flare to attract your attention. The causal theory allows us to distinguish between such an intentional action and a mere tic or indeed breathing (in normal circumstances). Tics and breathing are also caused internally, but not by a reason, so on Davidson’s account they are not intentional actions.

The waving example is a simple example for which we would not normally bother to provide a reason. But there are more complex cases where we seek the *real* reason. Why did the President’s press secretary resign? Various reasons may be offered by the person in question, for health reasons or to spend more time with family, and various others suggested by commentators, involving a conflict with a co-worker or as a result of pressure from the President. The causal theory allows us to ask the question, what really made him or her do it?

Our topic is the nature of the causal relationship between virtues and self-narratives and action and it is useful to refer to the causal theory of action for guidance. Just as beliefs and desires can be causes of action so can virtues and self-narratives. The difference is that, while beliefs and desires may well be changeable aspects of a person, virtues and self-narratives are more subtle, complex and enduring features of a person and thus the causal powers of those things warrant special attention. At the time that Davidson first developed the causal theory of action, philosophical accounts of causation had not developed in the way they have since. We might say Davidson’s task was to reconcile a notion of causation based on a deterministic deductive-nomological account of scientific explanation with the intuitive idea that reasons are causes. In the deductive-nomological account, singular causal statements are taken to require the existence of a covering law of nature, so that the presence of the effect can be deduced from the law and the presence of the cause. This approach to causation has considerable merits, not least of which is the way that it grounds the popular notion of cause in an underlying scientific account of the world. But there are alternative ways of thinking about cause.

For example, the counterfactual theory of causation claims that for *a* to cause *b* means that if it weren’t the case that *a* then *b* would not occur (Lewis 1973). This is a much broader notion that can be applied in situations that are not so obviously describable in the language of physical science. Thus we need not be tied to Davidson’s theory as a whole to propose that virtues and self-narratives cause actions. It is not our purpose here to endorse or develop a particular account of causation. Rather we want to paint a descriptive picture of the ways in which virtues and self-narratives may be thought to exert their causal power.

Virtues and self-narratives may well exert their influence on action by influencing beliefs and desires. A virtuous person, on seeing a little girl drowning, will form the desire to save her and believe he can do so by swimming out to her. He will very likely be displaying benevolence and courage, mediated by that belief and that desire.

1. **Anscombe Against Causal Theories of Action**

Elizabeth Anscombe, in her disgust at modern moral theories and views, has called for the proper view of ethics, virtue theory, to be informed by a *philosophy of psychology.* She writes:

In present-day philosophy an explanation is now required how an unjust man is a bad man, or an unjust action a bad one; to give such an explanation belongs to ethics; but it cannot even be begun until we are equipped with a sound philosophy of psychology. For the proof that an unjust man is a bad man would require a positive account of justice as a ‘virtue’. This part of the subject-matter of ethics is, however, completely closed to us until we have an account of what *type of characteristic* a virtue is... (Anscombe 1958/2005, 174)

Anscombe continues:

[I]s it not clear that there are several concepts that need investigating simply as part of the philosophy of psychology and - as I should recommend - *banishing ethics totally* from our minds? Namely - to begin with: ‘action’, ‘intention’, ‘pleasure’, ‘wanting’. More will probably turn up if we start with these. (Anscombe 1958/2005, 188)

She sees ethics, virtue ethics in particular, as continuous with a philosophy of psychology, though her proposed order of investigation is to ‘banish ethics totally from our mind’ when we explore intention.

Anscombe rejects the causal theory of action because, for her account, intentions need not always be prior to action. In contrast, on Davidson’s account, intention, which is comprised of the belief and conative states of an agent, must be fully formed for an action to be performed. She believes that intention and action sometimes overlap and an intention must come with a fully-formed mental act. As we have already mentioned, there have been numerous improvements upon or amendments to a theory of causation, whether in action theory or in philosophy of science, and our aim is to endorse Anscombe’s emphasis on the importance of the virtues while seeing them as causal in a way that need not entail a nomological account of causation.

A second argument of Anscombe’s against the causal theory of action depends upon there not being a need for a strong introspective view of a felt desire to determine that one’s intention leads to action. She writes:

The mistake is to think that the relation of *being done in execution* *of a certain intention,* or *being done intentionally*, is a causal relation between act and intention. We see this to be a mistake if we note that an intention does not have to be a distinct psychological state which exists either prior to or even contemporaneously with the intentional action whose intention it is. [...] But there was, we *can* suppose no prior formation of intention, nor is the intention a mental state that accompanies the action. *That* the action under this description, `applying a bit of force’, was intentional, comes out in his explanation, in what he says if someone asks him why. [...] So the application of the extra force was a means to the end which he mentions. But that this was so was formulated *after* the event. Was what was formulated not there before? All introspection or observation can tell him, we may suppose, is that *it seemed jammed* and then he acted. (Anscombe 2005, 95)

On Anscombe’s account, there is no distinct mental state that exists prior to an action for which it is said to be a part of an intention that cause the action to occur. One may act intentionally without also having a *felt* or *strong* desire to do the act. We agree that there need not be a suitable distinct mental state prior to the action *of which the actor is introspectively aware.* But that leaves room for there being some kinds of prior mental states of the person, perhaps broader long-standing states, that cause the action and account for its intentional nature which are *not* open to introspection, or not always so.

Anscombe’s view suggests that there is no state of an agent from which that person’s actions spring (*cf*. Anscombe 1957/2001, 1975; Hursthouse 2000; Thompson 2008). This is the point of one of the most vexing sections of her *Intention*: §19. Any feature which is supposed to be the defining or fundamental feature on the basis of which what someone does is an intentional action must have a particular content which relates suitably to the action, determining which intentional action is performed. Yet, nothing about the agent considered by the agent herself at the moment of acting could possibly determine that content. Perhaps a *post hoc* analysis may be deployed, but that would be an arbitrary assignment at best.

The best possible explanation of our reasons for action, however, is that they are the agent’s own mental states. Antipsychologistic practical justifications adduce the structure of actions (Thompson 2008, Part II). Why am I buying this book? Well, because I am writing my PhD thesis on Kahlil Gilbran. But the actions they gesture at are often to occur in the future. After all, I have three years to go before I am required to submit my PhD thesis for examination. The future is necessarily hidden from us, and “the best laid schemes o’ mice an’ men gang aft aglay” (Burns 1785). So, actually, my PhD thesis will turn out to be on the philosophical insignificance of Ayn Rand and Libertarian enthusiasts. Thus, antipsychologistic practical justifications invoke something we do not necessarily know a lot about, and should feel very tentative and insecure about. In contrast, in some situations we are very much consciously aware of our reasons for action. It can be that I have a clear *conscious thought* that my thesis will be about Kahlil Gilbran and that the book purchase will contribute to that plan. Granted, that conscious thought is sometimes unreliable, for we do sometimes deceive ourselves. Maybe, I am really buying this book to procrastinate. But our best hope for uncovering a coherent reason for action lies in my thinking at the time, in this case about my thesis topic, rather than what actually occurred later. Our reasons for action cannot really be the structures of our actual actions. Even so, the approach we shall develop does, in a certain way, depsychologise causal theories of action, much in line with the calculative view of reasons in the structure of action that Candace Vogler proffers in her landmark work, *Reasonably Vicious* (2003). In the next section, we shift our focus from reasons for action to virtues and narratives as causes of action, while allowing that those causes may operate through the medium of reasons.[[5]](#endnote-5)

# **Causation by Virtue and Narratives**

A person's virtues are part of her character and her self-narrative is bound to embody aspects or manifestations of virtuous character, for virtues make themselves known in behaviour and the self-narrative will reflect prevailing patterns of behaviour to a significant extent, albeit that the narrative may introduce inaccuracies and distortions. The full relationship between virtues and self-narratives is a subtle matter, for different people will have different levels of awareness of their own virtues, or indeed vices. Our theme, though, is to elaborate on the common sense view that virtues and self-narratives, which are interrelated, causally contribute to actions.

We have used Davidson’s causal theory of action as a starting point to look at the way that psychological characteristics of a person may cause action. Davidson’s account rests on his theory of *event* causation. Applying that account to reasons requires acknowledgement that the beliefs and desires that make them up are often not momentary events; both beliefs and desires can be of long standing. That is not in itself a problem if you consider that the first world war is an extended event and certain beliefs and desires about it are long standing. When we look at the causal role of virtues and self-narratives, though, we are not merely dealing with extended events but with something more complex. We are dealing with the way that behaviour is a result of a complex system. Davidson’s thesis that reasons can be causes relied on a token identity between the reason and its underlying physical character, for it is only under that physical description that it will be covered by a law of nature. Our focus, though, is not on a single state, even a complex one, but a complex *system*, whose outputs will be sensitive to numerous inputs and internal states. While we endorse Davidson’s thesis that psychological states can cause actions without a reduction of the psychological to the physical, we do not rely in the same way on a token identity between a psychological state and a physical state.

Recall Dennett’s mild realism about self-narratives, as well as about mental states generally. That position about self-narratives, which we wish to apply to virtues too, removes the expectation that there will be some physical description of those things that connects with laws of nature which explain the action under its physical description. Rather, virtues and self-narratives sit within explanatory models that are justified by their usefulness. Virtues and self-narratives are part of a complex system, but not one whose parts systematically match up with physically definable features of the human body. The nature and level of description is not reducible to the language of physical science. Our thesis is that this need not prevent us from applying the notion of cause when employing the conceptual vocabulary of self-narratives and virtues.

Consider a simpler system: a motor vehicle. How did Jack manage to avoid the oncoming truck by quickly pulling over, at speed, onto the gravel shoulder of the road and still return quickly to the roadway to avoid the upcoming power pole? While Jack’s driving skill is relevant, in this example if it had not been for the excellent handling qualities of the vehicle there would have been a serious, if not fatal, accident. With a cruder vehicle he would have spun off the road, but it is a subtle feature of his vehicle that it could be controlled in such a high pressure situation. It is natural to say that the *good handling* of the vehicle causally contributed to Jack successfully avoiding a crash. Think of it as a motor vehicle virtue. ‘Good handling’ is a handy descriptor that relates to vehicle performance but yet suggests a complex of internal characteristics of the vehicle that produce such performance. It presumably involves such things as: weight distribution, steering geometry, suspension, tyres and braking systems. Even without knowing about all that, our use of the phrase ‘good handling’ rests on there being some such complex of physical characteristics. As such it can be viewed as causally contributing to the success of the driving maneuver, even though good handling’s metaphysical status is very much mild realist. We have not returned to Davidson’s postulation of a token identity.

A human being is a much more complex system than a motor vehicle. When we speak of self-narratives or virtues, we speak of subtle features of an extraordinarily complex system. Self narratives and virtues are not mental states on a par with beliefs and desires but rather are high level features of the whole system. Further, we are taking a mild realist approach to such features. Speaking of them is reaching for an available descriptive terminology that assists explanation and prediction, the best we can do.

Let us think of a case where the focus is on human action and capabilities. Consider a fast bowler in cricket, Tim Southee, who manages to bowl out an opposition batsman, Moeen Ali. Perhaps Southee was bowling well and took a number of other wickets, but what was the explanation of the success on that very ball? It will be a combination of Southee’s skill and temperament, Ali’s skill and temperament plus atmospheric and lighting conditions, and even the support of the crowd. Explaining that particular success will be elusive, to say the least, unless Ali made an uncharacteristic batting error or the umpires made a particularly bad call. We are a long way from causal relationships being grounded in underlying supporting laws, but this does not prevent commentators from pointing to aspects of the delivery and batsman’s shot choice as contributing causes of the loss of the wicket.

Given that there are multiple explanations of contingent states of affairs that fail to provide us with *the* cause of an occurrence, we shouldn’t believe that any one of them would be a satisfactory account of causation. The truth of the matter is likely to lie in a nexus of causal connections. When we consider the messy causal nexus of human activity, the singular relationship we are interested in is unlikely to reflect a general pattern. If we attribute Southee’s skill as a bowler as the cause of the loss of the wicket, that may single out a salient contributing cause, without that as such being supported by an underlying law. The full scientific account of the event may be intractable in its complexity. We are used to the full explanation being elusive, which does not undermine the interest in, and viability of, a partial explanation such as cricket commentators (or, in another setting, political pundits) can provide. With the source of action in virtues and in narratives we are in much the same situation.

We are not alone in wanting to go beyond immediate motivations as causes of actions by identifying some broader, higher level characteristics as the causes. David Velleman (1989) claims that, while human actions are often explained by motivation, they are sometimes explained by habit, by the agent’s character, or by emotion, and those other explanations do not need to always reduce to motivation. Annette Baier (2009) elaborates on that theme with particular reference to character.[[6]](#endnote-6) She points us to occasions where the motivations or beliefs themselves demand explanation. She puts it nicely when she writes, in the context of Hume’s discussion of Charles I’s actions, “The kind of person one is helps determine both the sort of desires one has and acts on, and the way one selects advisors and forms one’s beliefs” (Baier 2009, 246). This is not to regard character as fundamental in the explanation of behaviour. For one thing, she allows that character can also be explained, and indeed people will sometimes act out of character, which directs our attention back to particular beliefs and desires. Certainly, she sees a person’s character, while always present, as not the sole source of the action, even where the person is acting in character. A common human nature is also always present, such that often it does not need to be remarked upon to provide an explanation. Also, the different situations that people find themselves in play a major role in producing different life stories (p. 250).

Elsewhere, Velleman (2006, Chapter 10) has had things to say about the causal relationship between self-narratives and action which draws on work by cognitive psychologists, with additional discussion in another context (Chapter 11). His starting point is Prescott Lecky’s (1945) posthumous volume *Self-Consistency: A Theory of Personality.* In short, Lecky’s view is that the fundamental principle guiding psychology is consistency, a principle that provides a theory of personality. In order to feel secure, a person needs to build an organized, consistent picture of the world, and central to that is her or his own self image. This self-image, which captures a conception of the person’s place in the world, can be thought of as a self-narrative. An experience that challenges one’s own self image needs to be accommodated in such a way as to maintain consistency. Velleman discusses the influence of Lecky’s ideas in subsequent cognitive psychology work concerning, notably, the notion of cognitive dissonance and different accounts of the effects that were found. Experimenters set participants a task they found boring, but then offered them $1 to tell others that it was enjoyable. Those who accepted the offer came to believe it was indeed enjoyable, for who would think of themselves willing to lie for $1? Where the offer is larger the outcome is different. We can say that participants who ‘sold out’ for $1 needed to retrospectively attribute a feeling of enjoyment to make it consistent with what they did. Having made that attribution, it is likely that such a participant would be more inclined to undertake the task in the future. This is merely a suggestive example of how self narratives might operate in a person’s cognitive structure.

Lisa Grover (2013) shares a broadly similar position to ours, although with different emphases and a different presentation. She argues that character traits, virtues and vices are not dispositions to behave but are constituted by narratives. She further endorses the idea that they cause behaviour, citing Flanagan’s (1991: 279) support for the causal role of character traits in producing behaviour. Our reservations mainly concern the way Grover argues for her position. It is puzzling that she appears to cheerfully accept that dispositions can cause behaviour while her strategy for supporting a narrative constitution view of virtues is that it avoids two accounts of dispositions that could be applied to virtues. The first is a conditional view of dispositions and the second is Stuart Hampshire’s (1953) view of dispositions of *persons* as an indeterminate summary of past behaviour plus the assumption that it will continue into the future. Neither of those options seem to allow for a causal role for dispositions. Our perspective is that we can attribute causal power to dispositions by taking Armstrong’s view of them that they rest on underlying categorical properties. We don’t need to move to a thesis of the narrative constitution of virtue in order to allow for the causal role of virtues. But, we see both virtues and self-narratives as causally contributing to behaviour and we are interested in the way that virtues are caught up in a person’s self-narrative.

A person’s virtues and her self-narrative are bound to be related to some extent, and their status as causes of action show a strong parallelism, but there are still things to be said separately about the causal power of those two things. The relevance for us is that if we consider that a self-image can take the form of a self-narrative, then we have an illustration of how self-narratives may cause behaviour. We saw in Lecky’s experiment how our self-image can affect one’s beliefs and actions, in that case over a rather trivial matter. At a more serious level, our commitments motivate us to act from beliefs that have become firmly embedded in us, either by habituation or by sheer mental force. Virtues and self-narratives, which are closely bound up with such commitments, are standing features of the person that we wish to highlight on occasion as the source of an action, even though they are unlikely to contain within them the full explanation of the action at that particular moment. In his recent book, Michael Lynch (2019) has described a connection between self-narratives and conviction when he writes:

Many of our beliefs become convictions because they have already been woven into the larger narrative of a tribe we aspire to remain a part of. They become morally entangled because those beliefs reflect who we think we want to be; and our emotional commitment remains, no matter what challenges come down the pike. Indeed, *we take such challenges personally--literally, because we’ve expanded our self-identity, our self-narrative, to include the belief*. (Lynch 2019, 71-72)

Our own focus is on the more general character of such causal relationships. Whereas Lynch considers the narrative of a tribe dictating the actions of individuals, our focus has been how the self-narrative arises from the convictions of the individual, perhaps sometimes, though not always, independent of any tribe or community. Likewise, we believe that if we consider that a disposition or some inner sense can take the form of a character trait, we have an illustration of how virtues cause behaviour. Our job in this section is to defend a causal account of action that accommodates self-narratives and virtues.

Let’s take a look at an example where virtue explicitly does bring about action. Suppose a U.S. Special Forces unit happens upon a terrorist compound in Mali where it is believed that people are being held against their will. While not their primary objective, the unit has to decide whether to engage the enemy and how to do so. The least risky option available to them is to not engage, to make observations of the compound, and to report back to their superiors what it is that they witnessed in the field. Or, following an initial and quick assessment, they may mount a rescue operation, either a stealthy one or an overt one engaging the enemy in a surprise attack. The unit commander has a tricky decision to make and one that will very likely reflect his judgement of risks based on training and it will also reflect his character, including such virtues as courage and compassion. It is unlikely that the most enlightening account of the causes of his decision will be some explicit reasons.

It can be useful to consider cases of bad behaviour too. Consider an athlete behaving badly caught on camera fighting in a bar or a famous director assaulting young women. Again, it is unlikely that such behaviour is best explained in terms of some explicit contemporaneous reasons. Perhaps the explanation can be approached in terms of character, the presence of vice or absence of virtue. Also it is striking how such behaviour contradicts popular narratives about such people. We’ve come to expect that the narrative one tells of the athlete or the Hollywood director concerns greatness, with respect to one’s athleticism or with respect to one’s being able to entertain the masses. Maybe there is an explanatory route to the behaviour in terms of those individuals’ self-narratives. Their own self-conception as important could be expressed as a sense of self-entitlement. They consider that they do not have to be bound by the rules that govern others.

Virtues or a self-narrative, on our account, play a contributing role in the causal nexus of action. It would not be wrong to point to a soldier’s courage as a causal contributor to the soldier who, under fire, rescues a wounded comrade. The soldier’s heroism, so we might say, may have been partly generated by his relationship with the wounded soldier, by his sense of honour for his country, or (perhaps more pessimistically) by his not wanting to witness someone else’s death. Indeed one might talk of various character traits such as loyalty, resolution and so forth that may be highlighted in an explanation of the soldier’s acting so selflessly. This makes us recall Aristotle’s thesis that the virtues form a unity. We can still think of courage as an internal state and suggest that state as a causal contributor to the action even while imagining a fuller and more complete explanation, albeit one that in practical terms is beyond our reach.

A similar account applies to self-narratives as causes of actions. Any example is likely to be simplistic as it will be hard to convey a sufficiently rich flavour of the self-narrative in a short space. But consider a person, George, whose self-narrative involves being someone with burgeoning musical talent but who is a victim of ethnic discrimination. When stopped by the police along a relatively desolate part of a Connecticut freeway, he answers all of the questions the officer has for him and adds that the large rectangular case in the car’s back seat contains his beloved vintage guitar, a 1958 Fender Stratocaster Sunburst. Under different circumstances, George may not have believed it important to volunteer such information; however, given that police action may have been guided by discriminatory attitudes or implicit biases that they may harbour toward ethnic minorities, such as George’s, he felt it necessary to alert them to the presence of the Stratocaster, thus establishing himself as a credible musician. Those two features of George’s self-narrative: being a credible musician and one subject to ethnic discrimination, are likely to have contributed to his reaction in those circumstances.[[7]](#endnote-7)

When we seek to explain actions as flowing from virtues or from narratives, we need to explore a space unlike both the Davidsonian account of the rationalisation of actions and the purely scientific, neural level, description. To exhibit a virtue in action is not to be persuaded by a practical syllogism, although no doubt virtuous people will from time to time consider such syllogisms. The virtue is a source of the action in a way that reaches down below the level of immediate awareness. What enters consciousness may be simply a gut feel about what should be done. While virtues are graspable by the human mind, that is not what is effective in acting virtuously.

When it comes to acting virtuously, conscious thinking about acting virtuously seems at least inessential and possibly a distraction. Acting in a virtuous way is distinct from following a rule, such as in the deontological approach, in which I consciously follow some moral rule. Acting virtuously is something typically done without conscious thought, though that does not rule out some conscious reflection on what one is doing as a side commentary or *post hoc* explanation. When I treat someone in trouble or distress with concern and compassion, I will be acting virtuously if that flows from my virtuous character without the need for conscious resolve to act that way. This is notwithstanding that a virtuous agent is bound to be an entity capable of conscious awareness and will almost certainly be consciously aware of what is happening and indeed what she is doing when acting virtuously. It is merely our conscious awareness of the virtuous nature of the action that is likely to be missing.

The point concerning our lack of conscious awareness of acting virtuously suggests another option where one’s actions may be derived from habit. In this sense, one acts not from a sense of being compelled to do something or even having specific reasons for performing the action; rather, the action flows from one being habituated into doing it. Finding a lost wallet without yielding to the temptation of stealing its contents is something that has been ingrained in one’s mind. To steal lost property would not only be acting against one’s better interest but also be acting viciously. The person would have to part company from the ways in which she has been habituated to act. The action of returning property to its rightful owner is one of a mindless routine. Aristotle, in *Nicomachean Ethics*, for example, writes

[I]t makes no small difference to be habituated this way or that way straight from childhood, but an enormous difference, or rather *all* the difference. (1103b, 23-25)

The causal influence of a virtue may indeed have the nature of a habit, generally speaking, but it is important to recall that the habit is making itself felt in a complex mental system which includes various kinds of conscious awareness. Thus the nature and effectiveness of a virtue must be seen against that background.

The capacity to narrativise is characteristic of the way that humans can see themselves and others as persons. But self-narratives are tricky beasts, particularly when seen as sources of action. One significant aspect of narratives is that they often involve emotional colouring, though the nature of that involvement can be complex. To take the example of anger, someone contemplating their own life story may always or typically feel angry about the events as they see them. There also can be a meta-level awareness that they are angry about those matters, which may or may not lead to a calming of the anger. When the angry self-narrative leads to a certain action it is unlikely that it is the more detached meta-level awareness that is doing the work. Rather, the action just springs from the anger, much the way that the virtuous action just springs from the virtue. And, further, one can act out of anger without being aware of that source.

A narrative theory of the self has the tendency to operate in an overly simple picture of the mind as a source of action. The importance of emotional colour in the explanation of action has already been mentioned. We need to avoid a too bland conception of narrative as a kind of merely descriptive chronology. That would be to miss the explanatory power that is latent in the narrative approach. Also there is a tendency to consider that a human life is governed by a singular narrative, such as the one alluded to by Sacks at the outset of this chapter. The better model is as a bundle of narrative threads. This is a view we have argued elsewhere (Lumsden and Ulatowski 2017, 2019), but we are not alone in seeing some kind of complexity along those lines. See Flanagan (1991) for his notion of the multiplex self. To briefly illustrate the theme of multiple narrative threads, consider the father who is a tyrant at work but is putty in the hands of his daughter at home. The work life and the home life have their largely separate descriptive narratives for the events from one day to the next at work tend to cohere and similarly the events from one day to the next at home tend to cohere. There are, of course, points of contact between the two, but there are fundamentally two narrative unities: one for home and one for work. But there is not merely a bland description of events in each case. There are different goals, ambitions, emotions, and senses of self in the two settings and these are integrated into the two narrative threads. And indeed there are likely to be different character traits associated with the two narrative threads.

We now see that just as there is a danger in narrative theory of the self operating with a simplistic model so there is a danger with virtue theory operating with a simplistic model of the self. Virtues may not always be wholly centrally located within a person. Rather, it is plausible that a certain narrative thread is imbued with a certain virtue, while it is absent from other narrative threads within the person. The generosity of spirit that the father displays at home is absent from his work life. A narrative thread model is helpful here too. Different character traits, including virtues or vices, can be associated with different narrative threads. Of course, some traits can be held in common. A father might exhibit patience both at work and at home. And even when there are largely different traits, there could be some bleeding of a virtue or vice from one thread to another. The father’s imperious manner from work may rear its head for a moment at home. Even so, it is often of explanatory value to align character traits with narrative threads. The guy out with his mates may not display the same restraint and consideration that he does at home. Or, conversely, the guy out with his mates may be amiable and generous, while taciturn and ungenerous at home.

1. **Conclusion**

The central theme of this chapter is to show how self-narratives and virtues cause actions. We have noted that the cultivation of virtues amongst people, such as soldiers, may yield courageous action like saving the life of his comrade under the most horrendous conditions of war. We have also noted that the story that one tells of oneself may lead the person to perform or to avoid an action. The contributing role virtues and self-narratives play, however, is different from the role of intentions. Davidson, remember, believed that the pair of beliefs and desires form a reason for someone to take action, and he argued that only after that intention has been fully formed will an agent be able to complete the action. To a certain extent, our view further de-psychologises causal theories of action, much in line with the calculative view of reasons in the structure of action. We have noted that intentions need not precede action for our account of a causal view of action, something that many notable virtue ethicists, such as Anscombe (1957/2001), Hursthouse (1999), have thought seriously problematic. Moreover, there need not be a token identity between mental and physical events, a la Davidson. This is not how virtues and self-narratives may be in the service of one’s actions; instead, virtues and self-narratives are latent in the causal nexus of action and need not be fully formed and known to the agent. To understand the nature of the causal relationship we need to acknowledge that virtues and self narratives are high level properties of a highly complex system. We need to take a mild realist stance to virtues and self narratives, which allows us to provide an explanatory account of their influence on action .[[8]](#endnote-8)

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**Notes**

1. While we are broadly sympathetic with Sacks’ views about the role of a self-narrative, we disagree with his emphasis on a *singular* narrative. We (2017) argue for a plurality of self-narratives, based largely in the notion of parallel hyperspecialisation, a position we refer to here in section 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Virtues as inner causes of action are also not a current focus of attention in the literature in virtue ethics and virtue epistemology. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The causal theory of action, sometimes referred to as ‘causalism’, is very likely the most popular view in the philosophy of action. Davidson’s causal account (1963, 2001a, 2001b), originally written in response to the non-causal account of Melden (1961), served to fill a lacunae in the action theory literature. For good places to start reading on the causal account, see also Davidson (2004), Enç (2003), Mele (1992, 2003) and a recent anthology on it: Aguilar and Buckareff (2010). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. A challenge for Davidson’s causal account of action is whether the intentional action has to be guided continuously for the duration of the bodily movement. Waving to a friend is an intentional action that takes little time to perform, but making a cocktail takes a little while longer. If the belief-desire pair merely initiates bodily movement but does nothing to guide that movement once it has begun, then it’s unclear that an intentional action is being performed in that bodily movement. The belief-desire pair *may be* available to guide the bodily movement, but at most we should say that the movements are congenial to the causal account, rather than being a consequence entailed by the belief-desire pair. For more on the challenge, see Bishop (1989). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. The argument appearing in this paragraph stems from a conversation that Ulatowski had in a graduate seminar nearly a decade ago with Austin Booth, Meg Bowman, Dale Clark, Marissa Lelanuja, Elijah Millgram, Lex Newman, Matt Shockey, and Shelley VerSteeg. While it happened long ago, we are grateful for their discussion. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Incidentally, while David Hume is typically seen as an early source of the kind of causal theory of action that we have discussed, Baier argues that his discussions of character are in tune with Velleman’s claim. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. In another work of ours, we explained how this suggests agents are parallel hyperspecialisers, in addition to being what Millgram (2015) called serial hyperspecialisers (see Lumsden and Ulatowski 2017, 2019). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. We are grateful for constructive feedback from Paul Bloomfield, Damian Cox, Garrett Cullity, Tim Dare, Ramon Das, Richard Hamilton, Jeanette Kennett, Justine Kingsbury, Cei Maslen, Elijah Millgram, Christine Swanton, Martin Thursby, and Liezl van Zyl. Moreover, we appreciate the generous financial support of the University of Waikato’s Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences Dean’s Office to allow the Philosophy Programme to host a conference in 2017, and Joseph is especially grateful for the support provided by the University of Connecticut Humanities Institute to complete this project. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)