

PHIL 5983: Action Theory Seminar  
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1/17/07  
Davidson, "Actions, Reasons, and Causes"

- This article considers the relationship between rationalizations and actions:

What is the relation between a reason and an action when the reason explains the action by giving the agent's reason for doing what he did? We may call such explanations *rationalizations*, and say that the reason *rationalizes* the action. (3)

Davidson will defend the thesis that such reasons are causes. This was not the accepted position at this time (early 1960s) — see footnote 1.

#### I.

- A reason, in this sense, always refers to some *feature* of an action that drew the agent toward it. There are 2 components to reasons: beliefs and pro-attitudes. (The latter is intended to cover a broad category of motivational states.)

◦ primary reason: the belief/pro-attitude pair that rationalizes action.

◦ Davidson's central claim can now be reformulated: "The primary reason for an action is its cause." (4)

#### II.

- Davidson gives the example of one action described 4 ways: flipping the switch. He uses this example to make the point that reasons rationalize actions only under certain descriptions. Thus, C1 on p. 5.

- Davidson uses 'action' to refer to anything that an agent intentionally does (see footnote 2).

- Normally we do not need to cite both the relevant belief and pro-attitude in order to explain some action.

### III.

- All rationalizations justify in some sense:

Thus there is a certain irreducible — though somewhat anaemic — sense in which every rationalization justifies: from the agent's point of view there was, when he acted, something to be said for the action. (9)

- Q: What must be the case if an agent performs an action *because* he had a certain reason?

- Wittgensteinian points about reasons-explanations as *redescribing* actions so that they fit into patterns do not support the claim that reasons are not causes. Note Davidson's 2 responses on p. 10:

1. Effects are often described in terms of their causes. So, the fact that actions are described in terms of their reasons does not show that reasons are not causes.
2. Explaining an event by placing it into a pattern is certainly not incompatible with that explanation being causal.

### IV.

- C2: Primary reasons are causes. (12)

- The rest of the article defends C2 from 5 objections:

A. Beliefs and pro-attitudes are not events (but states or dispositions), so they cannot be causes.

Response: i) States and dispositions *can* be causes (e.g., the structural defect caused the bridge to collapse). ii) There are also mental events.

B. Reasons are not logically distinct from the actions they explain, but causes must be logically distinct from their effects.

Response: Many effects can be redescribed in terms of their causes, so that they are logically connected. This redescription does not take away the latter's status as cause.

C. Causation requires (exceptionless) regularities, and such regularities are not found between primary reasons and their actions.

Response: These causal relations *are* covered by exceptionless laws — just not laws formulated in psychological vocabulary. (Here, see Davidson's articles on Anomalous Monism.)

D. We have special (infallible) epistemic access to our reasons that we cannot have to any cause.

Response: No, we are not infallible here.

E. Actions simply cannot be caused.

Response: This claim is absurd and unmotivated. In its place, Davidson writes:

Why on earth should a cause turn an action into a mere happening and a person into a helpless victim? Is it because we tend to assume, at least in the arena of action, that a cause demands a causer, agency an agent? So we press the question; if my action is caused, what caused it? If I did, then there is the absurdity of an infinite regress; if I did not, I am a victim. But of course the alternatives are not exhaustive. Some causes have no agents. Among these agentless causes are the states and changes of state in persons which, because they are reasons as well as causes, constitute certain events free and intentional actions. (19)