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Introduction

Constantine Sandis

The essays collected here are new not only in the sense that they are previously unpublished but, more importantly, in representing the latest thoughts of a growing stream of philosophers whose recent work has challenged some of the most popular ways of thinking about action and its explanation. While many of these dominant conceptions have roots in ancient, medieval, and early modern philosophy, their most direct inspiration is Donald Davidson's groundbreaking 1963 article 'Actions, Reasons, Causes', itself strongly indebted to C.J. Ducasse's 'Explanation, Mechanism and Teleology' (1925) and Carl G. Hempel's 'Rational Action' (1961–62). The latter challenged the 'strong neo-Wittgensteinian current of small red books' and similar-minded works¹ by arguing that (a) actions are events, (b) the reasons that 'rationalize' action are *causes* of the events in question and (c) the explanation of action makes reference to known, strict, psychophysical laws. In proposing an account of action individuation (and to some extent also of intention) that was heavily indebted to G.E.M. Anscombe,² while also denying the truth of (c), Davidson may be seen as making a concession to the enemy. Be that as it may, his influential defense of (a) and (b) was so immense that it has come to represent a crucial turning point in philosophical history, as instructively captured by Julia Tanney in her contribution to this volume.

Notwithstanding a continued flux of books that denied these claims,³ the Davidsonian view prevailed. In due course it came to be modified and developed in a variety of conflicting directions by Davidson himself as well as by naturalist philosophers of mind as diverse as David Armstrong, Michael Bratman, Myles Brand, Berent Enç, Jerry Fodor, Alvin Goldman, Ernest LePore, Kirk Ludwig, Al Mele, Hilary Putnam, R. Jay Wallace, and what at some point began to seem like half the philosophical world,⁴ infiltrating moral philosophy with the help of Michael Smith's landmark 1987 paper 'The Humean Theory of Motivation' which would later play an important structural role in his *The Moral Problem* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).

Both Davidson's own thesis and the various views that it began rapidly evolved through rational selection to form what many (including Fred Dretske and Ralf Stoecker in their contributions to this volume) have come to call the 'Standard View'. The view in question has two distinct parts: a theory of *action* and a thesis concerning the *reasons* for which actions are performed. The first maintains that actions are events that are identical to movements of the body caused, in a 'non-deviant' way, by a combination of beliefs and so-called 'pro attitudes'; the second states that the primary reason for which an intentional action was performed is whichever combination caused the bodily movement in question.

Each of the essays collected here focuses on one or more aspects of the Standard View. Many of them represent the culmination of an important *fin de siècle* movement of dissent. This included Rowland Stout's *Things that Happen Because they Should* (1996), Bede Rundle's *Mind in Action* (1997), Helen Steward's *The Ontology of Mind* (1997), Jonathan Dancy's *Practical Reality* (2000), Timothy O' Connor's *Persons and Causes* (2000), Paul Pietroski's *Causing Actions* (2000), Rüdiger Bittner's *Doing Things for Reasons* (2001), Jennifer Hornsby's *Simple Mindedness* (2001), John Searle's *Rationality in Action* (2001), David-Hillel Ruben's *Action and Its Explanation* (2003), and G.F. Schueler's *Reasons and Purposes* (2003), as well as additional papers by Arthur Collins, Giuseppina D'Oro, Dan Hutto, Bill Pollard, Josep Lluís Prades, Severin Schroeder, David Velleman and most of the contributors to this book (at least four of which are currently working on related monographs).

Be that as it may, the essays are by no means the product of a single school of thought. Indeed, one cannot overemphasise the variety of backgrounds, stances, approaches, and methodologies that these contributors have brought with them. To give but a few examples, these include concerns relating to conceptual analysis and clarification (Alvarez, Everson, Hacker, Stoecker, Raz and Tanney), experimental philosophy (Knobe and Kelly, and Pigden), exegesis (Baier, Boulter, Moran and Stone, Price and Sandis), naturalism (Boulter, Dretske and Pigden), substance dualism (Lowe), and language use (Dancy, Dretske and Hacker). Nor are all of the contributors set on destroying the Standard View. Some merely wish to modify it, while others (such as Boulter and Pigden) defend aspects of it against criticism. Many bear testament to a recently revived interest in Anscombe's work on the subject.

The book divides into two named sections, each encompassing a further narrative of its own. The first deals primarily with the relation between actions and our reasons for performing them, the second with issues in moral psychology, focusing primarily on questions of control, agency and motivation. What follows is a brief overview demonstrating how these and other themes interrelate.

Fred Dretske's 'What Must Actions be for Reasons to Explain Them?' opens the volume with the important, but often neglected question, of what kinds of things actions must be if reasons are to explain them. He

discuss various linguistic reasons for identifying actions with causal processes that (typically) have bodily movements as their result, contrasting it with the Davidsonian view (defended by Enç among others) that actions are these bodily movements, and concluding that this is the only way to give reasons explanatory purchase, thus also emphasising the dependence of a theory of action explanation on a theory of action: ‘if philosophers cannot agree about what action is, they cannot hope to understand the power of reasons to explain it’. Dretske’s analysis leads him to conclude that the reasons for which we act are to be identified with what we believe and desire, as opposed to our believing and desiring. In so doing he joins Raz, Dancy, Everson and others who form part of what the latter calls the ‘growing trend amongst philosophers of action to recognise that a reason for action is something that favours or makes valuable an action of the relevant kind, and that an action is not made valuable by the agent’s merely wanting to do it or believing that it would be good to do it’.

This insight (whose flipside is Bernard Williams’ claim that ‘if there are reasons for action, it must be that people sometimes act for those reasons, and if they do their reasons must figure in some correct explanation of their action’⁵) invites questions regarding the ontological status of the so-called ‘contents’ of our beliefs and desires. It is with this in mind that in his essay ‘What Kind of Things are Reasons for Action?’ Everson revisits the debate between J.L. Austin and Peter Strawson on the differences and similarities between propositions, facts and states of affairs. He concludes that while ‘the concern to determine what reasons there are for some course of action is the concern to make sure that all relevant facts are taken into account’ which should not let this mislead us into thinking that the aim here is ‘to know how many reasons there are’. To think otherwise is to conflate two different notions of reason: a mass-notion and a count-notion.

Stout’s ‘Was Sally’s Reason for Running from the Bear that She Thought it was Chasing Her?’ addresses a related worry concerning false belief that cuts across these ontological matters: if Sally believes *falsely* that the bear is chasing her, in what sense can the ‘content’ of her belief, *however* we wish to characterize it, be said to be her reason for running from it? Stout’s answer is that in such cases Sally is mistaken to think that she ran for the reason that she thought she had but that this does not imply that she did not run for a related explanatory reason, for example, because there was a noise in the undergrowth (which she rightly took as *evidence* for the belief that a bear was chasing her). This answers may be contrasted to Raz’s suggestion (in his contribution to this volume) that ‘when the belief is false...as there is no reason making that belief true, no reason can be part of the explanation’.

The issues that Everson and Stout’s essay devote themselves to are further discussed in the essays by Dancy, Hacker, Raz, and Stoecker. Another question one might ask about the reasons for which we act is whether or not these are best conceived of as *causes* of action. Peter Hacker, David-Hillel

Ruben, G.F. Schueler and Julia Tanney all answer this question negatively. In ‘Con-reasons as Causes’ Ruben does so by introducing the concept of a ‘con-reason’ (a reason we have but which we do not act upon), persuasively arguing that if such reasons have no relevant causal effects then, given that they are ontologically identical to pro-reasons (reasons we act upon), the latter cannot have any either. The essays by Hacker, Tanney, and Schueler complement Ruben’s by offering various non-causal accounts of how action-explanation works. These invariably revolve around the practice of placing action in *intelligible* contexts, but resist the notion that such context-placement is in any way nomological. Thus, explanations of human behaviour in terms of agential reasons (Hacker outlines five other varieties) are what Tanney, in an essay which like Hacker’s also defends Wittgensteinian non-causalism, calls ‘non-causal context-placing explanations’. Likewise, Schueler maintains that such ‘interpretive explanations’ (to use his own term for them, which is also the title of his essay) ‘are both central to explanations of human action and irreducibly different in form from other commonsense explanations of events, as well as from explanations found in paradigm ‘hard’ sciences such as physics’, concluding that it is consequently ‘a mistake to think that interpretative explanations are somehow reducible to (or explicable in terms of) causal explanations’.

One of the most common methods of rendering action intelligible is by redescribing it in a way that reveals the agent’s intention(s). This naturally leads to the task, famously associated with G.E.M. Anscombe, of providing an analysis of how to best capture the relation between action and intention. In ‘Anscombe on the Expression of Intention: An Exegesis’ Richard Moran and Martin J. Stone focus on some cryptic yet highly influential remarks by Anscombe. They work through various possible interpretations of what Anscombe might have had in mind, comparing her insights to those of Wittgenstein, Ryle, Davidson and Bratman, before settling for an account according to which Anscombe does not make the traditional behaviourist move of denying that intention is a mental state but rather denies only ‘that we understand how to apply the notion of a “state” here, on the basis of its application in other contexts like those of belief and desire’. In stressing, instead, the conceptual unity of ‘pure’ intending, intentional action, and intention-in-action, her achievement was to demonstrate that ‘no psychology will afford the right materials for explaining action which does not make use of a concept which applies throughout the spectrum of unfolding action, and which thus has same internal complexity as actions themselves’.

Accordingly, Anscombe claimed that all action performed for a reason was intentional under some description (*Intention*, § 5) thus influencing Davidson⁶ who characteristically went further, adding that (conversely) all intentional action was done for reasons (a claim rejected by Anscombe and later also by Rosalind Hursthouse⁷). In ‘Can One Act for a Reason Without Acting Intentionally?’ Joshua Knobe and Sean D. Kelly apply the method of

experimental philosophy with the aim of demonstrating that people's intuitions do not conform to Anscombe's thesis (that a behaviour cannot be performed for a reason unless that behaviour is performed intentionally). They next propose a system of principles that provides a better match for people's intuitions. While they refrain from judging whether or not people's intuitions in all these cases are actually correct they nonetheless take this to shift the burden of proof against Anscombe's thesis.

The somewhat weaker claim that 'acting with an intention or a purpose is acting (as things appear to one) for a reason' is defended by Joseph Raz in 'Reasons: Explanatory and Normative'. As Raz notes, 'while all actions with a purpose or intention are intentional actions, not all intentional actions can sensibly be said to be actions done with an intention'. In his essay he also argues that the *normative* reasons *for which* we act (which he identifies with facts) are also *explanatory*, their possession of the latter property being enabled by their possession of the former.

In 'Reasons, Desires and Intentional Actions' Maria Alvarez distinguishes both normative *and* explanatory reasons from the reasons for which one acts (which, following Smith, Dancy, *et al.*, she calls 'motivating reasons'). Alvarez allows that a motivating reason may be both normative and explanatory, but argues that it *need not* be so. On her account, a reason *for which* I act need not explain *why* I act, nor need it be a reason for which I *ought* to act. She also denies, contra Raz, that a reason for which one acts that explains why the person acted need do so in virtue of (also) being a normative reason. Her main target, however, is the Humean view that 'wanting something is part of the reason for which one acts'. While desire, on her view, is capable of explaining and/or motivating action, it cannot do so in virtue of being (even part of) a motivating *reason* for action since in all such cases the latter will be what she calls the desirability characterization of the action (*viz.* my reason for desiring to perform it), a point she traces back, through Anscombe, to the ancient and mediaeval view that what is wanted is always wanted under the aspect of the good.

The weaker thesis that at least *some* desires are held for reasons forms part of Thomas Nagel's famous argument for the view that beliefs can motivate *alone* (by producing 'motivated desires'). In his 'A Niggle at Nagel: Causally Active Desires and the Explanation of Action' Charles Pigden defends a standard Humean position (not unlike the one attacked by Alvarez) from Nagel's argument and the various uses it has been put to by Foot, McDowell, Cullity and Gaut, and Dancy. He does so by rejecting the suggestion that the alleged (conceptual) truth that 'if I do X because I believe that it is likely to bring about Y, then I am acting out of a desire for Y' is incompatible with the claim that the desire in question is causally efficacious.

A separate question is whether Hume was himself a Humean about motivation (in any interesting sense). In her essay 'Acting in Character' Annette Baier describes a tension between Hume's official account of

action explanation and the numerous explanations of actual actions that he offers in his *Histories*. Its resolution, she maintains, lies in the realization that Hume's conceptions of a 'sentiments' and 'passions' are far more inclusive than the modern notion of a pro-attitude 'since they cannot all be characterized as "pro" or "con" something'. Baier also demonstrates that Hume interpreters have underestimated the explanatory role played by *character* in his overall system, arguing 'that explanations that cite character to explain action do not necessarily reduce to belief-desire explanations'. So it is that she concludes that we would do best to abandon proto-Davidsonian readings of Hume, a far better modern counterpart being someone like (the non-reductive) David Velleman.

Equally striking is Stephen Boulter's account of 'Aquinas on the Explanation of Action'. According to Boulter, Aquinas was a sophisticated causalist with a sufficiently rich account of the production of action to respond to the contemporary challenges to causalism raised by 'deviant causal chains' (discussed by Jonathan Lowe in his contribution to this volume) and the 'normative constraint' introduced above in relation to Dretske. Indeed, the overall account of action and its explanation presented here is not dissimilar to that of Dretske, although Aquinas' hylomorphism also hints at the more 'naïve' naturalism of Jennifer Hornsby and John McDowell.

Having explored a variety of issues and views relating to reasons and causes the first (and largest) half of the volume closes with a 'back to basics' contribution, Ralf Stoecker's 'Acting for Reasons – A Grass Root Approach'. Stoecker invites us to abandon our philosophical preconceptions and return to the questions we began with namely (1) what is it to act? and (2) what is it to act for reasons? Like Dretske, Stoecker rejects the Standard View of agency. He replaces it with the following, tentative, proposal: 'To say that a person acts is to claim that a particular fact can be explained with recourse (i) to the person's ability to behave as if she were constantly engaged in a public practical deliberation about what to do, and moreover (ii) by giving some of the reasons for which she acts, i.e. by mentioning arguments the person could have put forward in the virtual deliberation that she is acting on'. In so doing he paves the way for the discussions of agency, deliberation and responsibility that constitute the second half of the volume.

The first of these, Helen Steward's 'Sub-intentional Actions and the Over-mentalization of Agency' denies 'that it is a necessary condition of something's being an action that it be associated with a reason-giving explanation' or indeed with any kind of *psychological* explanation. To think otherwise, Steward maintains, is to *over-intellectualize* agency, typically by over-mentalizing it. Doing so runs the dual risk of underestimating the extent to which it should be conceived of as an *animal* power and overestimating our understanding of how it is that we have this basic ability to control certain movements of our bodies, a phenomenon with regard to which she wishes to remain agnostic.

Rational explanation of those bodily movements involved in intentional action is, according to Frederick Stoutland, *prior* to neurophysiological explanation (of the same movements). In 'Determinism, Intentional Action, and Bodily Movements' he argues that we must consequently reject the thesis of *the completeness of physics* which states that all situations are governed by precise laws (be they deterministic or probabilistic). While this thesis is irrelevant to rational explanation *per se*, it is ruled out by Stoutland's account of the relation between rational and neuroscientific explanation.

In contrast to Stoutland, who sees *intentional* action as the fundamental issue here, in his essay 'Free Agency, Causation, and Action Explanation', Jonathan Lowe focuses on a threat which he takes the so-called 'scientific world-view' to pose to *free* agency. In response, he argues that intentional actions are '*neither* mere chance occurrences *nor* events that are wholly causally determined by prior events', offering instead an account of free agency that relies on a notion of human intervention that is irreducible to event causation. Rejecting *classical* agent causalism as 'an unstable half-way house' Lowe favours the view that 'all causation is fundamentally substance causation'. My own essay, 'Gods and Mental States: The Causation of Action in Ancient Tragedy and Modern Philosophy of Mind' also rejects the 'scientific world-view' typically found in naturalist philosophy. In it I argue that ancient tragedy presents us with an alternative understanding of human agency that, contrary to popular opinion, is preferable to both the Standard View and the various accounts of identification put forward by Frankfurt *et al.*

Aristotle's understanding of the relation of thought to action is the theme of Anthony Price's essay 'Aristotle's Conception of Practical Thinking'. Price begins by outlining what Aristotle meant by an 'intellect which reasons for the sake of something and is practical' before asking whether we should conceive of deliberation as a kind of reasoning that is *inherently* practical and investigating how an action can stand as the conclusion of practical thinking. His interpretative aim is to demonstrate the plausibility of Aristotle's work, thus motivating the conclusion that 'there would be more reason to regret what he got wrong if philosophers had not often lost sight of what he got right'.

An important subset of practical evaluation is *moral* evaluation. In 'Action in Moral Metaphysics' Jonathan Dancy brings action explanation to territory typically occupied by philosophers working in moral psychology. He asks what kinds of things actions must be if we are to at least be capable of relating to them morally, turning next to the question of what this tells us about explanation of both moral and non-moral action. Dancy defends a 'deflationary' account of actions, according to which actions, unlike events, 'should not have identity criteria'. This is not to say, however, that there are no such things called 'actions' which people do for reasons (moral or otherwise), but only that these are not independent bearers of evaluative and explanatory properties.

The volume closes with Nick Zangwill's 'Non-cognitivism and Motivation', written in the Humean tradition of bridging the gap between moral psychology and meta-ethics. Zangwill, however, is no Humean. Indeed, he appeals to the phenomenon of '*variable motivation*' – namely the fact that 'the same moral judgements move different people differently, and they move the same person differently on different occasions' – in support (through an inference to the best explanation) of cognitivist externalism with regard to moral motivation. In so doing, he also demonstrates just how far reaching the philosophical significance of work on action explanation can be.

I would like to express the deepest of thanks to my co-contributors for their wonderful work, their enthusiasm and their helpful suggestions. In addition, I would like to thank Daniel Bunyard, Priyanka Pathak and Melanie Blair at Palgrave Macmillan: Dan for commissioning this volume and encouraging me to go ahead with it; Pri and Melanie for their subsequent patience and explanatory assistance. Thanks also to the three anonymous referees who read my original proposal and made numerous invaluable points and recommendations, and to Nafsika Athanassoulis, David Oderberg and John Shand for sound advice based on their own editing experiences. I'm also extremely grateful to Robert Vinten for preparing such a wonderful index and to Vidhya Jayaprakash and her team for all their hard work in production.

Finally, I would like to thank The National Gallery of Ireland (and especially Camille Lynch) for the permission to reproduce Vermeer's *Woman Writing a Letter, with her Maid* on the front cover. Never sold during Vermeer's lifetime, it has apparently been stolen twice over the past thirty-five years, once by the IRA. Art critic Mark Harden writes that 'the placid scene with its muted colours suggests no activity or hint of interruption', but I prefer to think that the maid is observing someone through the window who has either just departed or is expected to arrive at any moment, as indicated by the empty seat. Perhaps this person is the cause and/or recipient of the letter that the woman is writing, no doubt with the intention of communicating reasons of some kind (an enigmatic still-life on the floor).

CS

Oxford, February 2008

Notes

1. 'Hempel on Explaining Action' (1976), reprinted in Davidson's *Essays on Actions and Events* (Clarendon Press, 1980, p. 261). Most of the works in question are referred to in the first footnote of 'Actions, Reasons, Causes' (op. cit., p. 4). Some (most notably William Dray's) were inspired by R.G. Collingwood as much as by Wittgenstein.
2. Cf. 'Agency' (1971) reprinted in Davidson 1980 (op. cit. p. 59, fn. 19) for the account of action individuation upon which the claim that whether or not an action is

intentional is a matter of description – as defended in ‘The logical Form of Action Sentences’ (1967, in op. cit., p. 121) – is based and ‘Actions, Reasons, Causes’ (op. cit., p. 5), for the related claim that all action done for reasons is intentional (under some description), discussed further below in relation to Knobe and Kelly’s essay. Davidson held on to these beliefs, all inherited from Anscombe, even after he came to reject her account of what it is to have an intention in 1978’s ‘Intending’ (1978, in op. cit., p. 83ff).

3. Cf. Charles Taylor’s *The Explanation of Behaviour* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964), A.R. Louch’s *Explanation and Human Action* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1966), Richard Taylor’s *Action and Purpose* (Prentice-Hall, 1966), R.S. Peters’ *The Concept of Motivation* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), Paul D.G. Brown’s *Action* (1968), G.H. von Wright’s *Explanation and Understanding* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), Rom Harré and Paul F. Secord’s *The Explanation of Social Behaviour* (Blackwell, 1972), as well as papers by G.E.M. Anscombe (whose complex work had also influenced Davidson), Roderick Chisholm, Anthony Kenny, Keith Lehrer, A.C. MacIntyre, Norman Malcolm, John McDowell, A.R. White, and many others.
4. See, for example, Jerry Fodor’s *Psychological Explanation: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Psychology* (New York: Random House, 1968), Alvin Goldman’s *A Theory of Human Action* (Princeton, 1970), Myles Brand’s *Intending and Acting: Toward a Naturalized Action Theory* (MIT, 1984), Michael Bratman’s *Intention, Plans, and Practical Reason* (Harvard, 1988), Al Mele’s *Springs of Action* (OUP, 1992), and Berent Enç’s posthumous *How We Act: Causes, Reasons, Intentions* (OUP, 2003).
5. Bernard Williams, ‘Internal and External Reasons’, reprinted in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: CUP 1981) p. 102; quoted in Joseph Raz’s essay in this volume.
6. See note 2 above (and all related passages).
7. G.E.M. Ancombe, *Intention* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1957, § 17) and R. Hursthouse, ‘Arational Actions’, *Journal of Philosophy*, 1991, LXXXVIII, 2, pp. 57–68.

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