

Reasons, Causes, and Action Explanation

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To explain an intentional action one must exhibit the agent's reasons. Donald Davidson famously argued that the only clear way to understand action explanation is to hold that reasons are causes. Davidson's discussion conflated two issues: whether reasons are causes and whether reasons causally explain intentional action. Contemporary work on explanation and normativity help disentangle these issues and ground an argument that intentional action explanations cannot be a species of causal explanation. Interestingly, this conclusion is consistent with Davidson's conclusion that reasons are causes. In other words, reasons are causes, but rationalizing explanations are not causal explanations.

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Donald Davidson's "Actions, Reasons, and Causes" (1963; reprinted in Davidson 1980) is a landmark of the action theory literature. It responded to an influential line of argument concluding that the relationship between reasons and actions could not be understood in causal terms. Davidson's analysis of intentional action explanation began from the premise that such explanations "rationalize" the action. They exhibit the reason an agent acted as she did. Davidson's analysis proceeded to decompose reasons into beliefs and "pro-attitudes." This latter neologism is intended to cover the range of affective states that might be relevant to action, including desires, wants, or feelings of obligation. An action is explained when we come to see the agent's intention, and according to Davidson, the intention is composed of the agent's belief and pro-attitude. Davidson went on to argue that explaining an action by eliciting the intention with which it was done is a kind of causal explanation.

Davidson's argument has lasting interest because of the way it pulled together reasons and causes. The relationship between inten-

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tion and action is a normative one, yet nonteleological causal relationships are not normative. Davidson's analysis of a primary reason promises to embed intentionality in a causal worldview without eviscerating its normative character. In the light of subsequent work on explanation and normativity, however, we can see that Davidson's discussion conflated two issues. It confused the question of whether reasons are causes with the question of whether reasons causally explain intentional action. In this essay, I will use this distinction to argue that intentional action explanations cannot be a species of causal explanation. Interestingly, this conclusion is consistent with Davidson's conclusion that reasons are causes. In other words, reasons are causes, but rationalizing explanations are not causal explanations.

What does it mean to say that there is "a normative relationship" between an intention and action or that "reasons are normative"? I will use "norm" and "normativity" as categorical terms for all sorts of values and evaluative relationships. These terms cover what is intrinsically or extrinsically valuable, permissible or obligatory, appropriate or inappropriate, rational or irrational, justified or unjustified, and so on. Norms may be explicit or implicit. Rules and laws are codified, and are thereby explicit norms. Implicit norms include things like the norms of academic dress or behavior in a movie theater. Two caveats are important. This usage of "norm" does not indicate a statistical average or tendency. Something done by everybody can still be wrong; rules may be routinely violated. Second, the deployment of this category is neutral with respect to debates about the ontological status of norms and values. Values may be among the furniture of the universe, or they may have a naturalistic explication.

In thinking about the role of norms in the social sciences, it is essential to distinguish the description (expression, characterization) of norms from the evaluation of something as good, right, rational, justified, appropriate, permissible, and so on.¹ The distinction between description and evaluation can be difficult to see because norms and normativity may be linguistically expressed by both imperative and declarative sentences. For example, Rule 7.03 of the *Official Rules of Baseball* says, "Two runners may not occupy a base." This is a declara-

1. There may be a class of imperatives where this distinction collapses. These would be imperatives where their comprehension commands endorsement. The categorical imperative might have this character. Even if such imperatives exist, not all imperatives have this character. Hence, the distinction remains important.

tive sentence that expresses a norm. This same prohibition could be expressed in an imperative: “Do not occupy a base with another runner.” Expressing the rule this way, one may enjoin a player to act in accordance with the rule. Our ability to express norms with declarative sentences makes it possible to describe norms without thereby endorsing them or enjoining conformity. This is crucial both for the study of social norms and for our capacity to evaluate rules and laws. Norms can be held to critical scrutiny only because it is possible to describe them without thereby endorsing them. Similarly, the ability to describe norms with declarative sentences is central to the social sciences. Social relations are thickly normative, and an impartial investigator must be able to understand the norms without thereby endorsing or condemning them.

This point—that norms may be described without thereby endorsing them or enjoining conformity—is worth emphasizing because it is all too often lost in discussions of rules, rationality, and action explanation. The proponents of rationalizing explanation, such as Dray or von Wright, took the recognition of an intention to be sufficient for explaining the action and thereby collapsed the distinction between describing an action as rational and endorsing it as rational. Action explanations were thus supposed to have the following form (cf. von Wright 1971, 96):

A wants to bring about *p*.
A considers that she cannot bring about *p* unless she does *a*.
 Therefore, *A* does *a*.

The explanans and explanandum are mediated by the rationality shared by the agent and the inquirer. That is, we consumers of the explanation take the premises to be explanatory because we judge that the conclusion is rational in the light of the premises. In this case, the persons giving and accepting the explanation endorse the rationality of the action. To accept the explanation is to agree that the action was rational (given the beliefs and desires). Hempel (1963) argued that this form of explanation is incomplete. It needs a law relating the conclusion to the premises. Dray (1963) responded that a causal law explicitly relating the action to the beliefs and pro-attitude expunged the rationality from the explanation. Both sides of this dispute suppose that normative relationships cannot be expressed without being endorsed. For Dray, this means that a causal law would efface the normative relationship between explanans and explanandum. Hempel

agrees, and simply discounts the importance of normativity in action explanation. Once we recognize that norms can be expressed in declarative sentences and thereby described without being endorsed, reasons can be described and made available to causal explanation without losing their normativity. Davidson's entry into the debate exploited this distinction between evaluation and description.

Davidson analyzed a reason for acting into a belief and a pro-attitude. The latter expresses what it was about the action that was attractive to the agent. Hence, the normativity of the reason is packed into the *description* of the pro-attitude, and the investigator can describe what the agent values without thereby endorsing it. Davidson could thus hold both that reasons have a normative relationship to action and that they cause action. However, as Davidson himself quickly realized, this compound of causality and normativity is unstable. The normativity threatens to collapse into something nonnormative.² In Davidson's initial treatment, a pro-attitude is a psychological state. The problem is that the occurrence of such a psychological state is not a *reason*, even in the presence of the relevant belief. Thus, one might recognize the fact that one wants a pack of gum (and believe that the only way to get one is to buy one) and yet not have a reason for buying a pack of gum. What is missing is the normative relationship between the pro-attitude, belief, and the action—the relationship in virtue of which the belief and pro-attitude form a reason for action. Davidson explicitly takes up this issue in the essay "Intending" (in Davidson 1980, ch. 5; see p. 86). There, he argues that the pro-attitude has to be understood, not as a psychological state to be described, but as a kind of value judgment that the agent makes. The difference between description and evaluation corresponds to a difference in perspective. From the first person point of view, to have a pro-attitude is to undertake a commitment. When saying what she aims to do, the agent is not describing her desires; she is evaluating the goal as desirable. The desires may be described from a third person point of view without the inquirer sharing the evaluation. Pro-attitudes thus have a normative relationship to the action that is expressed by agents as a first-person commitment and by inquirers as a third-person description of what the agent values.

The problem with Davidson's resolution of the difficulty is that it simply redescribes the phenomenon to be explained. We began with

2. The problem here is very close to the one David Henderson recognizes in rationalizing explanations. See Henderson (1993, sec. 6.2).

the question: In virtue of what is there a normative relationship between a pro-attitude and an action? The answer is that the pro-attitude is an evaluation of the action as desirable (obligatory, etc.). This only leads back to the question: What is the relationship of the evaluation to the action in virtue of which the first is a reason for the second? Here we come face to face with the central problems of value theory. The main watershed between kinds of value theory is ontological. Some value theories treat value as a distinct ontological category. Other value theories take value to be a part of the natural, causal order. It is clear that if we are to adopt the “reasons are causes” slogan in any sense at all, then we will have to adopt some kind of naturalistic value theory. Twentieth-century work on naturalistic views of norms has one result that is crucial to the current argument. Any value theory must be able to distinguish between *being* correct and *seeming* correct. Without this distinction there is no possibility of mistake or error, and without the possibility of being wrong one has no intelligible conception of normativity at all. This point is particularly pressing for naturalistic value theories, for there is always the danger of “ought” collapsing into “is” and the distinction between seeming right and being right collapsing with it. A consequence of the distinction between being right and seeming right is that values cannot be conceived in individualistic terms. If what is correct is identified with any fact about an individual—say, her intuition, feeling, or thought—then what seems right to that individual will be right. This presses naturalistic value theories in a social direction. The correctness of an individual’s inference, her adherence to the rules of a game, or the rationality of her action in light of her beliefs and desires are a matter of the relationship between the individual to a larger community. Work in this vein³ is concerned to articulate the relationship among individuals that would constitute normativity, but the consequences for action explanation do not turn on the details.

Davidson’s account is therefore misleading insofar as it suggests that pro-attitudes are individualistic. The psychological states described by pro-attitude words are indeed facts about individuals. But if normativity is constituted socially, then these psychological states can count as reasons only insofar as they are taken up in communal norms of action. The normativity of reasons for action is a matter of those reasons entitling or committing the agent to a course of action. It is the norms of a community that determine whether the

3. For example, Brandom (1994), Wright (1980), Sellars (1963), and Kripke (1982).

desires and beliefs of an agent can count as reasons for action. It follows that whether an agent has a reason for acting does not depend solely on facts about that agent. The agent must also have a social status, an entitlement or commitment, and it is this social status that turns the facts about the agent into reasons.

The point that psychological states become reasons only in a social context is obscured if we think only of those desires or actions with which we are intimately familiar. To make it vivid, one needs to attend to cases where the status of a psychological state as a reason is problematic. In ethnography, we find descriptions of action that are sufficiently foreign to raise the empirical question of whether the purported beliefs and desires could possibly be reasons for action. One such example can be drawn from Renato Rosaldo's *Ilongot Headhunting 1883-1974: A Study in Society and History* (1980).

The Ilongot are a highland people of the Philippines. They engaged in the practice of "headhunting," which here means an organized raid on another (typically lowland) tribe. The older, experienced men would lead the group of novices. They would choose an ambush site and an unsuspecting victim. Having killed the victim, one of the novices would decapitate him and throw the head into the forest. Once a young man has "taken a head," he is entitled to wear red hornbill earrings. "To wear such earrings, they say, is to gain the admiration of young women and to be able to answer back when other men taunt" (Rosaldo 1980, 140). Now, gaining the admiration of young women has led plenty of young men to do ill-considered things, including murder. The story of the Ilongot, however, is not about sudden passions. The actions are cool and calculated. In the culture of 21st-century America, gaining the admiration of women is not the sort of thing that can count as a reason for murdering a complete stranger. Those who would do such actions and give such reasons are not just punished; they are also put in asylums for the criminally insane. Rosaldo's description of the Ilongot, then, is a real case where we want to explain the intentional actions of the agents, but it is difficult to see how their avowed motivations could provide reasons for the action.

Like the good anthropologist he is, Rosaldo embeds the practice of headhunting in the larger social picture. Headhunting is part of the process by which young men achieve the status of adults. This is finally achieved by marriage, and headhunting (ideally) is a step toward marriage. The Ilongot are matrilineal, which means that a man resides with his wife's family after marriage. During courtship, a

suitor will go to the home of his intended and help with the gardening and hunting. By doing so, he demonstrates what a good and useful son-in-law he will be. However, while helping around the house, he is subjected to taunts, insults, and even deadly threats from the woman's brothers and father. If he has "taken a head" and is wearing the red hornbill earrings, he has partially attained adult status. With it, he is permitted to answer back; without it, he has to endure the insults in silence. This sketch of the larger story is significant for the way in which it portrays a system of largely implicit, socially constituted norms. In the context of this system, it is easier to see how wanting to impress a young woman and to be able to answer back to insults could be a reason for murdering a stranger in cold blood.

There is a difference, then, between having a pro-attitude and having a reason for action. Pro-attitudes are psychological states and as such are facts about individual human beings. Having a reason for action requires the pro-attitudes to stand in a normative relationship to the action. If we adopt a naturalistic value theory, then we have to treat these normative relationships as socially constituted. Hence, a pro-attitude (like desiring to impress a young woman) can count as a reason for an action (like the cold-blooded murder of a stranger) in one social context and not another. This social character of reasons has profound consequences for our explanation of intentional action. In particular, we cannot follow Davidson's assimilation of explanation by reasons to causal explanation. Davidson argued that the explanation of an action by appeal to a belief and pro-attitude has the same form and force as explaining why a window broke by appeal to the rock that hit it (Davidson 1980, 16). The upshot of the foregoing reflections on the normativity of reasons shows that intentional action explanations cannot be causal explanations in this sense.

To see why action explanations and causal explanations must be different, let us turn to the latter. There is at least one theme common to the main theories of causal explanation (e.g., Salmon 1984; Humphreys 1989; Lipton 1991; Lewis 1986). It may be expressed as a necessary condition for causal explanations:

X causally explains Y only if X is an event (or, pace Salmon, process) in the causal history of Y.⁴

4. This is expressed in what has come to be called the "ontic" mode. That is, explanations are relationships among events or other entities, not among sentences. The argument here is intended to apply to both ontic and epistemic theories of causal explanation.

While this condition is rather trivial, once it is made explicit, it becomes immediately clear that the social statuses that constitute the normativity of reasons cannot figure among the explanans of a causal explanation. The social status of having a reason is not an event (or a process). Yet, the explanantia of intentional actions have to be reasons. For beliefs and pro-attitudes to be reasons, they have to be embedded in a social context wherein they have the status of reasons for that sort of action. Hence, an intentional action explanation must mention something—the social status of having a reason—that cannot be among the explananda of a causal explanation. Therefore, intentional action explanations are not a kind of causal explanation. Beliefs and pro-attitudes may be cause of action, but contra Davidson, a causal relationship between the action and the reason is not sufficient for explanation.

This conclusion seems to show that there is a deep conflict among three plausible ideas that are central to Davidson's essay: (1) reasons have a place in the causal picture of the world (this is one sense of the slogan "reasons are causes"), (2) "X is a reason for Y" describes a normative relationship between X and Y, and (3) intentional actions are explained by giving reasons. If (1) and (3) are true, then action explanations are causal explanations. But we have seen that (2) precludes treating action explanations as causal explanations. Each proposition is intuitively plausible on its own, yet they are inconsistent. There is one way out of this tri-lemma that preserves all three propositions. It requires that we rethink the logical form of explanation in terms of why-questions. One of the strengths of the erotetic theory is that it provides a fine-grained analysis of explanation. The tri-lemma arises because distinct forms of explanation are lumped together as "causal explanations." Using the erotetic model, we can articulate the special features of intentional action explanation. In particular, the normative relationship between reason and action can be given an appropriate place in the explanation. Intentional action explanations will not satisfy the necessary condition articulated above, and hence will not be causal explanations. Beliefs and pro-attitudes can thus be causes, but their explanatory role as reasons is not exhausted by this fact.

The erotetic model of explanation holds that explanations are answers to why-questions, and that why-questions have a particular

tion. Since it is a trivial matter to convert the above necessary condition from the ontic to the epistemic mode, I will not burden the discussion with unnecessary qualifications.

logical form.⁵ Why-questions ask, “Why *P* rather than *Q*?” and thus contrast (perhaps implicitly) the topic, *P*, with a foil, *Q*. (There may be more than one foil.) Why-questions are further specified by relevance criteria. A relevance criterion identifies the set of possible answers by specifying the respect in which a proposition must discriminate between fact and foil, thereby answering the question. For example, the question “Why did the *Challenger* space shuttle explode?” might be answered in two ways. One answer might describe the efficient cause: the heat of reentry melted the airframe. This is not the answer for which the NASA investigative team was searching. Rather, they were looking for structural facts about the shuttle that permitted the heat to melt the airframe. Since both are good answers, the original why-question was ambiguous. The erotetic model analyzes this ambiguity as a difference in relevance criteria. The two why-questions share a topic (the *Challenger* exploded) and a foil (the *Challenger* landed safely), but have different relevance criteria. One relevance criterion specifies that a relevant answer must be an efficient cause; the other specifies that it must be a structural condition. The complete specification of a why-question thus includes its topic, foil(s), and relevance criteria.

Topics, foils, and relevance criteria have presuppositions, and a why-question can be asked and answered only if its presuppositions are true. Some presuppositions are universal, while others are domain specific. For example, it is a presupposition of an explanation in any domain that the topic is true and the foils are false. It makes no sense to ask, “Why did the butcher lose his job, rather than the baker or the candlestick maker?” if either the butcher did not lose his job (false topic) or the baker did (true foil). Presuppositions thus amount to restrictions on what will count as legitimate topics, foils, and relevance criteria. Specific differences among forms of explanation arise from different presuppositions. To apply the logical form of why-questions to a domain and thus identify the differences between, say, causal explanation and intentional action explanation, we need to identify the presuppositions of why-questions in that domain.

Identifying the presuppositions of intentional action why-questions is no trivial matter.⁶ For our purposes here, we need to recognize

5. Detailed discussions of the erotetic model can be found in van Fraassen (1980), Garfinkel (1981), Lipton (1991), and Risjord (2000).

6. In *Woodcutters and Witchcraft* (Risjord 2000), I began, but only began, such an analysis.

only one central feature. In an intentional action explanation, the explananda must amount to a reason for the action. In terms of the erotetic model of explanation, this requirement is a relevance criterion. Relevant answers to intentional action why-questions must be reasons for the action. Intentional action why-questions thus presuppose a normative relationship between the psychological states described by the explanantia and the action. Consider a simple example. Suppose Jones buys a pack of gum and we try to explain why. The question "Why did Jones buy a pack of gum?" has "Jones bought a pack of gum" as a topic and, say, "Jones bought a candy bar" and "Jones bought a magazine" as foils. On one natural understanding of this question, it is asking for Jones's reason.⁷ The question thus restricts the class of possible answers to things that might provide reasons for action. This means that there must be a normative relationship between the states described by the answer and the action described by the topic. The answer "Jones wanted a pack of gum (more than she wanted candy or a magazine)" satisfies this relevance criterion. In early 21st-century America, wanting a pack of gum is the sort of thing that can count (*ceteris paribus*) as a reason for buying one. That is to say, in our community, there is a normative relationship between the psychological state of wanting gum and the action of buying a pack. This social fact, along with the psychological state of the agent, satisfies the relevance criterion of the why-question.

The relevance criterion of intentional action explanations is not always satisfied. If my neighbor decided to stalk and kill a complete stranger for the "reason" that it would impress his fiancée and let him answer back to insults from her brother, he would be judged insane. In my neighborhood, this is not the sort of pro-attitude that can stand as a reason for action. To judge someone criminally insane is to hold him not fully responsible for his actions. This means that we cannot give full-blooded intentional action explanations. His action can be explained in terms of the desire, but it becomes a straightforward causal explanation. The difference between a causal explanation of an action and an intentional action explanation turns on the status of the pro-attitude as a reason. In the community in which I live, wanting to impress one's fiancée cannot stand as a reason for murdering a

7. It is not the only understanding of this question. It could, of course, be answered by a detailed description of Jones's neurology. Such a reading of the question would impute a different relevance criterion, and the explanation would not be an intentional action explanation.

stranger. If we transport the same pro-attitudes and actions to another community, say the 19th-century Illongot, where the norms of action are different, then this pro-attitude may be a reason. Because the norms exhibited by the culture satisfy the presuppositions of the relevance criterion, a question like "Why did this young man kill that one?" can arise, and it can be answered as Rosaldo answers it.

If a pro-attitude is to count as a reason for action, the individual must be in a social context wherein there is a norm relating those pro-attitudes with actions of that type. The existence of the norm satisfies the presupposition of an intentional action why-question. This way of capturing the normativity of reasons shows us how to resolve the apparent contradiction between (1), (2), and (3), above. The erotetic model of explanation distinguishes between intentional action explanations and causal explanations. Since the distinction is based on the form of the explanation, it does not conflict with (1), the claim that beliefs and pro-attitudes are causes. Quite the contrary: the account of normativity presupposed here is broadly naturalistic. To talk of norms is to talk of certain kinds of social relationships, not to refer to supernatural and causally impotent entities called "values." Norms and normativity have a place in a fully causal understanding of the world. Beliefs and pro-attitudes can be causes of action and satisfy the socially constituted norms of action, and this is the sense in which reasons are causes. Moreover, proposition (2) is satisfied: being a reason for action is a normative relationship. Finally, the erotetic analysis of intentional action explanations satisfies (3). Since the normative status of the motive is a presupposition of the relevance criterion, it is only in virtue of their socially instituted normative status as reasons that the beliefs and pro-attitudes can explain the action as an intentional action. Reasons might be causes, but the explanation of intentional action is not a form of causal explanation.

The Illongot example highlights once again the crucial difference between describing norms and committing oneself to them. The relevance criterion of an intentional action why-question presupposes a description of a norm. That norm entitles the agent to act rationally on the basis of the motive. The agent who so acts thereby expresses his commitment to the norm, but the interpreter who explains the action need not. The interpreter is free to adopt the opposite commitment, thus holding that the norms of the Illongot are wrong. This point can be used to sharpen the conclusion of a recent essay by David Henderson on this topic (Henderson 2002). There, he argues that norms (neither "normative principles" nor "norms *qua* normative")

can be explanatory on the erotetic model.⁸ By “norms *qua* normative,” he means norms that are taken to constitute what is correct, and he argues that the interpreter’s judgment that the agent’s action is appropriate or rational is irrelevant to explanation. In the terms developed here, we can express this by saying that the interpreter’s commitment to the normative relationship between the agent’s motive and action is neither an answer nor a presupposition of a why-question. Answers and presuppositions are true or false, and commitments are neither. It is nonetheless important that the *agent* undertake a commitment to the appropriateness or rationality of the action, given the motives, and that the agent be a part of a community that endows the beliefs and pro-attitudes with the normative status of being reasons for the action. The explanation of an action as intentional presupposes a description of this normativity. So, while neither the description of norms nor commitment to them counts as the answer to an intentional action why-question, it overstates the conclusion to say that the description of norms plays no role in explanation. On the contrary, the truth of the description of such norms is a necessary condition for asking intentional action why-questions.

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8. In his discussion of “normative principles” and erotetic explanation, Henderson exclusively considers descriptions of norms as possible answers to why-questions. I agree that descriptions of norms are not answers to intentional action why-questions, so there is no conflict between these essays on that point. I do continue to think that there are social-level why-questions to which descriptions of norms can be answers, but that discussion will have to await another day.

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