

## The problem of explaining human behaviour

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### Three intuitions about action:

1. Actions are explicable.
2. Actions are natural.
3. Actions are things we *do*. We are *active* agents with respect to our actions, not merely passive observers of things that happen.

Reasons explanations: We explain our actions by appealing to our reasons for doing them. Reasons explanations tend to make an action intelligible from the agent's point of view.

Donald Davidson: "A reason rationalizes [i.e. explains] an action only if it leads us to see something the agent saw, or thought he saw, in his action – some feature, consequence, or aspect of the action the agent wanted, desired, prized, held dear thought dutiful, beneficial, obligatory, or agreeable." (Davidson, "Actions, Reasons, and Causes", in Davidson 2001,3)

### Different uses of the term "reason":

- *Normative reasons:* Moral facts, social norms and conventions.
- *Justifying reasons:* Reasons an agent cites to *justify* her actions.
- *Motivating reasons:* Reasons that motivate an agent to act in a certain way.
- *Explanatory reasons:* Reasons that explain or cause an action (to be distinguished from *reasons explanations*).

Some questions and problems: What difference (if any) is there between justifying an action and explaining it? What difference (if any) is there between a reason motivating an agent to act, and a reason causing an agent to act? What are reasons – are they e.g. facts about the world and the agent, or (the contents of) mental states of the agent? Can reasons explanations give objective explanations for why an action occurs?

Explanations in science: To give objective, or value-neutral, explanations of phenomena.

Hempel & Oppenheim: "To explain the phenomena in the world of our experience, to answer the question 'why?' rather than only the question 'what?', is one of the foremost objectives of all rational inquiry; and especially, scientific research in its various branches strives to go beyond a mere description of its subject matter by providing an explanation of the phenomena it investigates. [...] [T]he question 'Why does the phenomenon happen?' is construed as meaning 'according to what general laws, and by virtue of what antecedent conditions does the phenomenon occur?'" (Hempel & Oppenheim 1948, 135-6, emphasis added)

Question: Can there be two different explanation for the same thing, such as an action?

Problem of Congruence: “[...] is to explain why what we do for a reason is congruent with the movements that occur because of neural processes. If this congruence is not mere coincidence or the result of some divinely instituted parallelism, there must, it would appear, be some underlying relationship between reasons and neural processes that explains it. To solve the problem of congruence would be to articulate this explanatory relationship.” (Frederick Stoutland, “The Problem of Congruence: Rational Explanation and Neuroscience”, 2005)

Some options:

- Accept that there can be no causal overdetermination. (Kim)
  - Some problems: Abandon the view that reasons can be causes; try and reduce reasons to physical events with causal efficacy; develop an account where reasons and physical events function as joint-causes.
- Adopt a different approach to explanation, to avoid the problem (von Wright)
  - Problems: Unity of science.

The Covering law-model of explanation: C explains E only if there is a law of nature L that includes or “covers” the terms/descriptions ‘C’ and ‘E’.

Hempel & Oppenheim on causal explanation: “If E describes a particular event, then the antecedent circumstances described in sentences  $C_1, C_2, \dots, C_k$ , may be said to jointly “cause” that event, in the sense that there are certain empirical regularities, expressed by the laws  $L_1, L_2, \dots, L_r$ , which imply that whenever conditions of the kind indicated by  $C_1, C_2, \dots, C_k$  occur, an event of the kind described in E will take place. Statements such as  $L_1, L_2, \dots, L_r$ , which assert general and unexceptional connections between specified characteristics of events, are customarily called causal, or deterministic laws.” (Hempel & Oppenheim 1948, 139)

Questions: Is causation just a matter of constant conjunction? Do all sciences aim at prediction? What relevance (if any) does the descriptions of the events or phenomena make to answering the question “why?” (cf. the earlier quote from Hempel & Oppenheim).

A problem with events and the agent’s activity: “[The event-causal view] implies that all human actions, as natural phenomena, must also be part of the flux of events and, as such, ‘happenings’; and the only way in which it allows that this happening can essentially involve the agent, as actions do, is as something that happens *to* the agent or is connect to other events that happen *to* him, but not as something of which he is the active source.” (Erasmus Mayr 2011, 9)

*Some suggested reading*

*Lecture 1.*

- Alvarez, M. “Reasons for Action: Justification, Motivation, Explanation” (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2016).
- Davidson, D. *Essays on Actions and Events* (OUP, 2001)
- Mayr, E. “The Problem of Human Agency” (Chapter 1 from *Understanding Human Agency*, Oxford: OUP, 2011).
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  - “Rational Action” (in *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, Vol. 35, 1962, pp. 5-23.).
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- Kim, J. *Mind in a Physical World*, MIT Press, 1998.
- Stoutland, F. “Three Conceptions of Action” (in H. Stachowiak (ed.) *Pragmatik*. Vol 3, Meiner, 1989).
  - “Anscombe's Intention in Context” (in *Essays on Anscombe's Intention*, HUP, 2011).
  - “The Problem of Congruence: Rational Explanation and Neuroscience” in Niiniluoto & Vilkkio (eds. ) *Philosophical Essays in Memoriam: Georg Henrik von Wright*, Helsinki : Philosophical Society of Finland, 2005.

*Lecture 2.*

- Anscombe, G.E.M. *Intention* (Blackwell, 1957).
- – “Causality and Determinism” (in *Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Mind*, UMP, 1981).
- Hornsby, J. “Actions in Their Circumstances” (in *Essays on Anscombe's Intention*, HUP, 2011).
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- Taylor, C. *The Explanation of Behaviour* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964).
- Teichmann, R. “Anscombe” (in C. Sandis & T. O'Connor (eds.) *Companion to Philosophy of Action*, Wiley, 2010).
- Thompson, M. “Anscombe's *Intention* and Practical Knowledge” (in *Essays on Anscombe's Intention*, HUP, 2011).

## Lecture 3.

- Bratman, M. “Reflection, Planning, and Temporally Extended Agency” and “Two Problems about Human Agency” (both in *Structure of Agency*, OUP, 2007).
- Danto, A. “Basic Actions” (in *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol.2, 1965, pp.141-148). Davidson, D. “Actions, Reasons, and Causes” and “The Logical Form of Action Sentences” (both in *Essays on Actions and Events*, OUP, 1980).
- Hempel, C. “Rational Action” (in *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, Vol. 35, 1962, pp. 5-23.).
- C. Sandis “Basic Actions and Individuation” (in C. Sandis & T. O'Connor (eds.) *Companion to Philosophy of Action*, Wiley, 2010).
- Smith, M. “The Humean Theory of Motivation” (in *Mind*, Vol. 96, 1987, pp.36-61).
- – “The Possibility of Philosophy of Action” (in J. Bransen & S.E. Cuypers (eds.) *Human Action, Deliberation and Causation*, London: Kluwer, 1998).
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- – “Interpreting Davidson on Intentional Action” (in J. Malpas (ed.) *Dialogues with Davidson*, MIT, 2011).
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## Lecture 4.

- Alvarez, M. and Hyman, J. “Agents and their Actions” (in *Philosophy*, Vol.73, 1998, pp-219-245).
- Boyle, M. & Lavin, D. “Goodness and Desire” (in Tennenbaum, S. (ed.) *Desire, Practical Reason, and the Good*, OUP, 2010).
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- – “Action and Passion” (in *Philosophical Topics*, Vol.42, 2014, pp.13-42).
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- – “The Standard Story of Action : An Exchange (2)” (in Aguilar, J.H. & Buckareff, A.A. (eds.) *Causing Human Actions : New Perspectives on the Causal Theory of Action*, MIT, 2010).
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- – “Four Objections to the Standard Story (and Four Replies)” (in *Philosophical Issues*, Vol.22, 2012, pp.387-401).
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- – “Deviant Causal Chains” (in C. Sandis & T. O'Connor (eds.) *Companion to Philosophy of Action*, Wiley, 2010).

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- Zimmerman M.J. “Chisholm” (in C. Sandis & T. O'Connor (eds.) *Companion to Philosophy*)