

Donald Davidson & the “Standard Story” of Action

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“Standard Story” of Action: Actions are bodily movements that are caused (in the right kind of way) and rationalized by an agent's desire for something and her belief that moving her body in the relevant way will bring about what she desires.¹

Some questions: What is meant by the claim that actions *are* bodily movements? What notion of causation is involved here? What relation is there between causation and explanation/rationalization? How is the conjunct of a belief *and* desire supposed to function as a cause of action? What are beliefs and desires?

Davidson in “Actions, Reasons, and Causes”: “Giving the reason why an agent did something is often a matter of naming the pro attitude (a) or the related belief (b) or both; let me call this pair the *primary reason* why the agent performed the action. [...] The primary reason for an action is its cause.” (Davidson, “Actions, Reasons, and Causes”, p.4, reprinted in Davidson “Essays on Actions and Events”, OUP, 2001.)

The covering law-model: C explains/causes E only if there is a law of nature L that includes or “covers” the terms/descriptions ‘C’ and ‘E’. (See Lecture 1.)

Logical connection argument: Beliefs, desires, intentions, etc., are conceptually connected to actions, and hence not distinct, and thus cannot be said to be the causes of actions. (See Lecture 2.)

Davidson's reply: “To describe an event in terms of its cause is not to confuse the event with its cause, nor does explanation by redescription exclude causal explanation.” (Davidson, “Actions, Reasons, and Causes”, p.14)

Davidson on the “Nomological Character of Causality”: “where there is causality, there must be a law: events related as cause and effect fall under strict deterministic laws.” (Davidson “Mental Events”, p. 208, in Davidson 2001.)

¹ The “standard story” can be found in both proponents and critics of it. See e.g. Michael Smith “The Possibility of Philosophy of Action” in his *Ethics and the a priori* (CUP, 2004); Smith “Four objections to the Standard Story of action (and four replies)” in *Philosophical Issues*, 22, 2012; Smith “The structure of orthonomy” and Jennifer Hornsby “Agency and Actions” both in Hyman & Steward (eds.) *Agency and Action* (CUP, 2004); see also the exchange between Smith and Hornsby “The Standard Story of Action : An Exchange” in Aguilar & Buckareff (eds.) *Causing Human Actions* (MIT 2010); Stoutland 2011; David Velleman *The Possibility of Practical Reason* (2000, OUP).

No psychophysical laws: “I want to describe, and presently to argue for, a version of the identity theory that denies that there can be strict laws connecting the mental and the physical.” (Davidson, “Mental Events”, p. 212; compare with his “Thinking Causes”, p. 190, in Davidson “Language, Truth, and History”, OUP 2005.)

Causal relations and causal explanations: “Causal relations hold *only* between events [...] and they obtain no matter how the events are described, so that sentences describing them are *extensional*. Ascriptions of causal relation need not, therefore, *explain* phenomena [...]. An explanation relates not to events but sentences (propositions, facts), since to explain phenomena is always to explain them *as such* and such, that is, under a descriptions (so that explanation sentences are *intensional*). The point of an explanation is to render phenomena intelligible, and what does so under one description of the phenomena may not do so under another.” (Frederick Stoutland “Interpreting Davidson on Intentional Action”, p.288-9, in Malpas (ed.) *Dialogues with Davidson*, MIT, 2011.)

Causal explanation and primary reason:

An explanation is causal, if:

1. The object of explanation entails an event.

Example: The car skids on a slippery road; event = the car coming into contact with a slippery surface.

2. The explanation describes a causally related event (or a state with an associated event).

Example: The road is slippery (a state); event = the road becoming slippery.

3. The explanation depends on a generalization that connects a description of the cause with that of an effect.

Reasons-explanations meet these criteria because:

1. Actions are events,
2. Beliefs and desires are states that entail events (“coming to believe that ...”, “coming to have the desire to ...”).
3. “A want is, or entails, a certain disposition to act to obtain what one wants. That someone has a certain disposition may be expressed as a generalization [...] governing the behaviour of that person. [...] we can say of someone who has a desire that he will tend to behave in certain ways under specified circumstances.” (“Hempel on Explaining Action”, in Davidson 2001, p.263; compare with Anscombe’s claim that “the primitive sign of wanting is trying to get.” *Intention*, §36, p.68)

Some problems: Are actions token events, or types? Are actions events at all? Do all actions involve beliefs and desires? Are beliefs and desires states with associated

events?²

Davidson on Anscombe: “[Anscombe] raised the question how various actions are related to one another. If a man pays a bill by writing a check, how are his acts of writing a check and paying the bill related? Her answer was that they are identical: the writing of the check and the paying of the bill are one and the same act. This claim immediately raises a number of questions, the first of which is, what are the entities that are identical or different? Actions, we answer; but then, what sort of entities are actions? They would seem to be events.” (“Aristotle’s Action”, p. 283-4, in Davidson 2005).

On action descriptions: “Strictly speaking, all actions are intentional provided there is at least one description which reveals a feature of the action which prompted the agent to perform it. But of course all actions have unintended or non-intended features such as unwanted or unexpected consequences. The concept of intention does not directly modify acts, but rather whole propositions.” (“Aristotle’s Action”, p. 286-7, in Davidson 2005; compare with Anscombe’s thought that ‘intentional’ relates to “a form of descriptions of events”, *Intention*, §47)

Actions as a relation between two events: “So “John threw a stone” and “John broke the window” can involve just one *action*, but two events, because “John broke the window” just means John did something (in this case threw a stone) which caused the window to break. If I make someone sick by giving him a drink I don’t do two things (give him a drink and make him sick); all I do is give my friend a drink. But that event caused him to get sick later, so it becomes true of my action that it has an unwanted consequence.” (“Aristotle’s Action”, p. 287)

Problem: What are the two events in action sentences that seem to describe only one action?

Possible answer: basic, or, primitive actions. Actions by which we do other things.

- Davidson’s take: One event, different descriptions, (physical or mental, with intentional and unintentional descriptions).
 - An action is primitive if it is described as the action by some other action is done, and the primitive action is not described as being done by doing something else. (For this interpretation, see Stoutland 2011)
- A different take: two distinct events, both physical, one cause of the other.
 - But what is the cause event of a bodily motion? A mental cause? But how does the mental cause something physical to happen? A neurological event? What causes this? Another neurological one?

² For a critical view discussion on this last point, see Helen Steward’s “Ontology of Mind”, OUP, 1995.

Davidson on “primitive” actions: “Our primitive actions, the ones we do not do by doing something else, mere movements of the body—these are all the actions there are. We never do more than move our bodies: the rest is up to nature.” (“Agency”, p.59 in Davidson 2001.)

For different views on basic or primitive actions see e.g. Arthur Danto “Basic Actions” in *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 2, 1965; for a discussion on Danto’s views see Constantin Sandis “Basic Actions and Individuation” in O’Connor & Sandis (eds.) *Companion to Philosophy of Action* (Wiley, 2010); see Smith 2010 and 2012 for his understanding of “basic” or “primitive actions” (quoted in footnote 1); for a critical discussion of basic actions in the standard story, see Douglas Lavin “Must there be basic actions?” in *Noûs*, 47, 2013.