



Reasons and Causes: the philosophical battle and the meta-philosophical war

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REASONS AND CAUSES: THE PHILOSOPHICAL BATTLE AND THE METAPHILOSOPHICAL WAR

Introduction

Since the publication of Davidson's "Actions, Reasons and Causes"¹ the philosophy of action has been dominated by the view that rational explanations are a species of causal explanations. Although there are dissenting voices,² anti-causalism is for the most part associated with a position that tended to be defended in the 1960s and that was successfully buried by Davidson's criticism of the logical connection argument. In the following I argue that the success of causalism cannot be fully accounted for by considering the outcome of first-order debates in the philosophy of action and that it is to be explained instead by a shift in meta-philosophical assumptions. It is the commitment to a certain second-order view of the role and character of philosophical analysis, rather than the conclusive nature of the arguments for causalism, that is largely responsible for the rise of the recent causalist consensus. I characterise the change in meta-philosophical assumptions in Strawsonian terms as a change from a descriptive to a revisionary conception of metaphysics and argue that since the disagreement between causalists and non-causalists cannot be settled at the level of first-order debates, causalists cannot win the philosophical battle against anti-causalists without fighting the meta-philosophical war.

Descriptive metaphysics and the action/event distinction

Strawson identified two fundamental features of descriptive metaphysics. First, descriptive metaphysics describes our conceptual scheme, and is a conceptual, not an ontological enquiry. Secondly, the fundamental categories of descriptive metaphysics are conceptually invariant because they capture some of the most fundamental judgments we make. As Strawson put it, the task of philosophy is to

¹ Davidson, "Actions, Reasons and Causes", *Journal of Philosophy* 60, 1963, pp. 685-700.

² See Tanney, J. "Reason-Explanation and the Contents of the Mind", *Ratio*, vol. XVIII, pp. 338-351, 2005 and "Why Reasons May Not Be Causes", *Mind & Language*, vol. 10, pp. 103-126, 1995; Hutto, D., "A Cause for Concern: Reasons, Causes and Explanations", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 59, 1999, pp. 381-401; Sehon, S., *Teleological Realism: Mind, Agency, and Explanation*, 2005. MIT Press, 2005.

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5 “lay bare the most general features of our conceptual scheme... a
6 massive central core of human thinking which has no history... the
7 commonplaces of the least refined thinking... the indispensable core of
8 the conceptual equipment of the most sophisticated human being.”³
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14 Revisionary metaphysics, by contrast, is concerned with existential structures
15 and the goal of revisionary metaphysics is to challenge and alter our
16 conception of what there is. Thus, as a revisionary metaphysician, Descartes
17 sought to alter the common sense conception of reality as made up of
18 macroscopic objects and show that what really exist are what would later be
19 called primary properties such as size, extension, motion or rest etc. As a
20 descriptive metaphysician, by contrast, Kant sought to defend the
21 consupponibility of theoretical and moral judgements rather than demand that
22 we revise our common sense belief in the possibility of moral action in line
23 with the demands of the theoretical standpoint. These different conceptions of
24 metaphysics, as a descriptive and revisionary science respectively, underpin
25 very different ways of understanding the nature of the action/event distinction.
26 For in the former case the task of philosophy is to provide a justification for the
27 distinction between practical and theoretical claims, whilst in the latter case
28 the task of philosophy is to discover what are the real relations holding
29 amongst particulars, not to construct a metaphysics around the common
30 sense distinction between (moral) actions and (natural) events. In the
31 following I intend to use the Strawsonian distinction between descriptive and
32 revisionary metaphysics to show how a commitment to these different
33 conceptions of the role and character of philosophical analysis underpins very
34 different views of what it means to draw a distinction between the concepts of
35 action and of event.
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53 The defence of the autonomy of action explanation from event
54 explanation that was articulated in the philosophy of action during the 1960s
55 was arguably underpinned by a conception of metaphysics as a descriptive
56 science. Many 1960s non-reductivists were united in the view that the
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³ Strawson, P.F., *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics*, London and New York: Routledge, 1959, p. 10.

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3 explanation of actions differs in kind from the explanation of events and that
4 rational explanations are a species of justification, *not* of causal explanations.⁴
5 This non-reductivism was grounded in the view that there is a different kind of
6 connection holding between the *explanans* and the *explanandum* in action
7 and event explanations. In event explanation the connection between the
8 *explanans* and the *explanandum* is an empirical connection that is established
9 through observation and inductive generalisation; in the case of action
10 explanation, on the other hand, the connection between the *explanans* and
11 the *explanandum* is conceptual or rational.⁵ Whilst one may say that an agent
12 acted in a particular way on account of certain beliefs and desires of hers,
13 such beliefs and desires do not explain the action in the manner in which the
14 dropping of the temperature below 0°C explains the cracking of the radiator in
15 a car left out on a freezing cold night.⁶ For beliefs and desires explain action
16 in so far as they feature as epistemic and motivational premises in practical
17 arguments that are ascribed to agents in order to make sense of what they
18 do. As premises in practical arguments beliefs and desires do their
19 explanatory work *not* as antecedent conditions of an inner nature, such as
20 brain states, but rather as propositional contents. It is the propositional
21 content of beliefs and desires ascribed to an agent that explains their actions
22 as the rational conclusion of a train of thought. It is precisely because 1960s
23 non-reductivists held that to explain action is to understand it as the
24 conclusion of a practical argument, that they claimed the explanation of action
25 to be a species of justification, not of causal explanation. Action explanations
26 are a species of justification because to understand something as the rational
27 thing to do, is to understand why one ought to have inferred a conclusion from
28 certain epistemic and motivational premises. The normativity at work in action
29 explanations was deemed to be of a purely instrumental kind because what is
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53 ⁴ Melden, A. I., *Free Action*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961, Von Wright, G. H.,
54 *Explanation and Understanding*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971, Wittgenstein, L.
55 *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953 and *The Blue and Brown Books*,
56 Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958.

57 ⁵ See Dray, W. H. (1957). *Laws and Explanations in History*, London: Oxford University Press,
58 1957 and "The Historical Explanation of Action Reconsidered", in S. Hook (ed.). *Philosophy*
59 *and History*, New York: New York University Press, 1963.

60 ⁶ The example was used by Hempel to illustrate the structure of scientific explanation. See
Hempel, C. "The function of general laws in history" *Journal of Philosophy* 39, 1942, pp. 35-
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3 at stake in the explanation of action is neither the truth value of the epistemic
4 premises (are the beliefs of the agents true/false?) nor the moral status of
5 what they desire (are the agent's goals morally acceptable/reprehensible?)
6 but the validity of the inference from premises to conclusion.⁷ 1960s non-
7 reductivists thus rejected the view that beliefs and desires are internal causes
8 of action on the grounds that the relation one tries to establish when
9 explaining an action is conceptual or rational, *not* empirical. This view was
10 canvassed by W. H. Dray who argued against Hempel's revival of Mill's claim⁸
11 that action explanations are a species of nomological explanations that differ
12 from the explanation of events only on account of their poor predictive power.
13 The Millian and Hempelian view simply missed the point that action
14 explanations are normative and that even in those cases in which practical
15 arguments are used predictively (in order to anticipate what an agent might do
16 in the future), rather than retrospectively (to explain why they acted as they
17 did in the past), anticipations based on practical arguments rely on
18 expectations of how rational agents *ought* to act in response to norms of
19 instrumental reasoning, not on expectations of how they *will* act based on
20 empirical generalisations. Even when directed towards the future, action
21 explanations are not inductively based generalizations premised upon the
22 principle of the uniformity of nature. The Millian and Hempelian view takes the
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41 ⁷ The account of action explanation defended by 1960s non-reductivists is Humean in the
42 sense that the interpreter need not assume that agents desire something only under an
43 aspect of the good or *sub specie boni*. In this respect the notion of normativity at work here is
44 much weaker than that defended by philosophers who endorse an Aristotelian account of
45 practical reasoning, such as Maria Alvarez (See her *Kinds of Reasons: an essay in the*
46 *philosophy of action*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). But their defence of the
47 autonomy of action explanation is *not* Humean in the sense that is most relevant to a
48 discussion of the autonomy of action explanations because they denied that the *explanans*
49 (belief and desire pairs) and the *explanandum* (the action) are spatio-temporally distinct
50 events and asserted instead that the connection between an action and the reasons which
51 explain it is conceptual or rational. Further this account of action explanation is not
52 psychologistic because beliefs and desires do their explanatory work as premises in practical
53 arguments that are ascribed to the agent by the interpreter in order to make sense of their
54 actions, *not* qua psychological states of agents (i.e. qua believings and desiring). 1960s non-
55 reductivists explicitly denied that agents need to consciously recite a practical argument in
56 order to be deemed to be acting. But by the same token, this account is not externalist (like
57 the one defended by Jonathan Dancy in *Practical Reality*, Oxford: Oxford University Press,
58 2000) because the facts cited in the explanation of action (e.g. she took the umbrella because
59 *it was raining*) do their explanatory work as epistemic premises, not as empirical facts. 1960s
60 non-reductivism allowed for the possibility that unsound but valid practical arguments could
be genuinely explanatory precisely because propositions, unlike facts, can be true or false.

⁸ See J. S. Mill, *System of logic: ratiocinative and inductive*. In *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, ed. J. M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963-1991 [1843]).

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3 fact that rational explanations can be put to the same use as causal
4 explanations (that they can be used predictively) to imply that they are not
5 different in kind from causal explanations. But action explanations are
6 rationalizations whether they are offered as *ex post facto* explanations of past
7 actions or as anticipations of future ones. The use to which action
8 explanations are put does not change their logical structure. Action
9 explanations are rationalizations (they are normative rather than nomological)
10 whether they are applied to the past or to the future.
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18 In fact, for 1960s non-reductivists such as Dray the folk-psychological
19 view that actions and events belong to different ontological categories could
20 be vindicated only on the assumption that there is a difference in kind
21 between causal and rational explanations and that the latter are not merely a
22 species of the former. For if rationalizations were a species of causal
23 explanations then the relation holding between actions and events would be
24 rather like the one holding between a species and its kind, between, say,
25 Siamese cats and cats in general. And this understanding of the relation is far
26 too weak to support the widely held common sense view that agents are free
27 to disregard rational considerations. Vindicating the folk-psychological
28 distinction between things which happen and things agents do requires
29 understanding actions as responses to rational norms (even if only norms of
30 instrumental reasoning) since norms prescribe how one ought to act in
31 response to commands or imperatives, rather than determine what will
32 happen in conformity to causal laws. From Dray's perspective, not only does
33 the covering law model miss the point of action explanation, which is to
34 understand or clarify in the hermeneutic sense. It also fails to vindicate the
35 common sense distinction between actions and events. For such a distinction
36 implies that the concept of action is a logically independent genus, not a
37 species of the genus "event".⁹
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53 Since 1960s non-reductivists such as Dray took the logical forms of
54 rational and causal explanations to be implicit in the folk-psychological
55 distinction between actions and events, they saw themselves as being
56 engaged *not* in the task of revising, but in that of corroborating common sense
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⁹ For a defence of the view that actions and events are logically independent *genera* see Carlos Moya, *The Philosophy of Action: an introduction*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990, chapter 1.

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3 ontological categories. They worked in the manner of descriptive
4 metaphysicians because they proceeded regressively from the fact that
5 certain distinctions are made to the condition of their possibility. In their view,
6 to vindicate the folk-psychological distinction between actions and events
7 required no less and no more than making explicit the hidden semantic
8 implicature holding between rational explanation and the concept of action on
9 the one hand and causal explanations and the concept of event on the other.
10 This vindication consisted in showing not *that* the distinction between actions
11 and events is possible, but rather, given that it is made, *how* it is possible. And
12 to show *how* the distinction is possible, rather than showing *that* it is possible,
13 does not require going beyond the way in which we think and speak about the
14 world. On the contrary, such a task presupposes precisely that there is no
15 non-circular relation holding between method and subject matter, one's
16 explanatory goals and the nature of one's ontological categories. Since, on
17 this account, the distinction between actions and events is made possible by
18 the employment of different forms of judgment (rational and causal judgments
19 respectively), it follows that the expressions "rational explanation" and "causal
20 explanation" are short hand respectively for "rational explanation of actions"
21 and "causal explanation of events".

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A number of important implications follow from the ways in which
1960s non-reductivists articulated the argument for the autonomy of action
explanation. First, since actions are explained rationally and events are
explained causally, and since rational explanations appeal to normative
considerations that agents may disregard, actions and events are not
descriptions than can be conjoined or listed alongside one another. Whilst we
may say that something is both yellow and square, we cannot coherently
describe something as being *both* an action *and* an event because to do so
would be tantamount to claiming that it is both rationally motivated and
causally determined. Secondly, whilst it is not possible, for the reasons just
given, to conjoin actions and events in one and the same description, there is
no conflict between rational and causal explanation because, as reflection on
the semantic implicature holding between method and subject matter reveals,
rational and causal explanations have a different *explanandum*. Rational and
causal explanations appear to conflict only in so far as the implicature holding

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3 between a judgment and its corresponding ontological category is not properly
4 grasped. Thus for example, whilst it may look as if a physician's and a political
5 historian's explanation of Alexander Litvinenko's death are competing with
6 one another, such conflict arises only to the extent that one assumes that the
7 physician and the political historian mean the same thing when they speak
8 about "Litvinenko's death". But this is not the case, for by "Litvinenko's death"
9 the physician means the causal consequence of a physiological phenomenon,
10 such as the failure of a vital organ, whilst by "Litvinenko's death" the political
11 historian means the preventable consequence of political conspiracy which
12 led to his poisoning. Once the *explanandum* is sufficiently disambiguated it is
13 clear that the physician and the historian are concerned with different things.
14 The view that there is a conflict between their respective explanations arises
15 only if one assumes that there is a sense of "thing" which is independent of
16 the explanatory goals of medical science and of political history. But the very
17 idea that one could identify an *explanandum* independently of the goals of a
18 particular form of enquiry would have been anathema to 1960s style non-
19 reductivists for their form of non-reductivism was articulated against the
20 backdrop of a descriptive conception of metaphysics which denied the
21 existence of a non-circular relation holding between the *explanans* and the
22 *explanandum*. The expressions "causal explanation" and "rational
23 explanation", as we have seen, are truncated forms of "causal explanation of
24 events" and "rational explanation of actions".

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1960s style non-reductivists were thus descriptive metaphysicians
intent on explaining both the incompatibility and the consupponibility of
practical and theoretical judgments. Explanations of actions and of events are
incompatible because they imply freedom and determinism respectively. They
are consupponible because they do not refer to the same (category neutral)
"thing". And since within a descriptive conception of metaphysics there is no
category neutral description, there is no causal rivalry between folk-
psychological explanations (of actions) and scientific explanations (of events).

The commitment to a particular conception of the task of philosophical
enquiry was not explicitly at the forefront of the debate between reductivists
and non-reductivists, but it was nonetheless lurking in the background of this
dispute. Both non-reductivists such as Dray and reductivists such as Hempel

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3 assumed the reasons/causes debate to be methodological in nature. What
4 Hempel tried to show was that action explanations are methodologically
5 reducible to the causal explanation of events, whilst Dray argued no such
6 methodological reduction to be possible. But that the problem was
7 methodological in the first instance was an assumption shared by reductivists
8 and non-reductivists alike. Thus for the generation of non-reductivists prior to
9 Davidson, once the relevant differences between the explanatory practices of
10 the human and natural sciences had been pointed out, there were no residual
11 questions to be addressed about how can mind fit in the natural world.¹⁰
12 Questions such as, “how can reasons, which at best rationally necessitate the
13 conclusion of a practical argument, be causally responsible for the occurrence
14 of the event/bodily movement which we describe as an action?” are ill formed
15 because they mix and match categories and forms of inference in an
16 inadmissible way. There simply is no such thing as a causal explanation of
17 action because to explain an action is to explain it rationally and to explain an
18 event is to explain it causally. To ask the question “how can beliefs and
19 desires cause actions?” is simply to have failed to grasp the concept of an
20 action. Within the context of this essentially methodological debate the
21 attempt to defend the autonomy of action explanations simply required
22 showing that they are rational, *not* nomological, and failure to accomplish a
23 methodological reduction was failure to accomplish any reduction *tout court*.
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42 ***Davidson’s master argument***

43 Why did the anti-causalist views that dominated in the 1960s fall into
44 disrepute? The official story is that anti-causalism was successfully disposed
45 of by Davidson, who offered a knockout argument for disconnecting non-
46 reductivism from anti-causalism.
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51 Davidson agreed with the previous generation of non-reductivists that
52 action explanations are normative but he also argued that a defence of the
53 autonomy of action explanations must be disconnected from a rejection of
54 causalism. There is a distinction, Davidson argued, between mere
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¹⁰ How does mind fit in the natural world is on the other hand the central question of the philosophy of mind according to philosophers such as J. Kim, as the title of his book *Mind in a Physical World*, suggests (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998).

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3 rationalizations or *reasons for* acting in a particular way, and rationalisations
4 which form part of the agent's process of deliberation leading to action, or the
5 *reasons why* the agent acts. Suppose that on returning home a person (Sally)
6 switches the light on. Sally could have switched the light on to alert a burglar
7 in her property. Or she could have switched on the light to illuminate the room.
8 Both reasons justify the action but Sally acted only on one of those reasons.
9 Davidson argues that the causalist can easily account for the distinction
10 between the reasons on which Sally acted (let's call these *reasons why*) and
11 other reasons on which Sally could have acted (let's call these *reasons for*) by
12 identifying the reasons why the agent acts with the reasons that are causally
13 responsible for her acting.¹¹ But such a distinction is not available to the kind
14 of non-reductivist who is *also* an anti-causalist. Consequently, the previous
15 generation of non-reductivists was unable to distinguish the *reasons why* an
16 agent acts from mere *reasons for* acting. The inability to make such a
17 distinction provides the motivation for disconnecting non-reductivism from
18 anti-causalism.

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Davidson's claim that the *reasons why* an agent acts are the causes of her actions marks a genuine departure from the way in which previous generations of non-reductivists had argued. What was assumed prior to Davidson is that the ascription of a practical argument to an agent must conform to public and intersubjectively valid criteria of what could count as reason-giving and that even first person reports must conform to these standards if they are to be accepted as explanatory in the relevant sense of "explanatory". For that generation of non-reductivists, as we have seen, beliefs and desires explain actions *not* in so far as they fulfil the role of hidden/internal causes of external/observable bodily movements *but* in so far as they feature as premises in practical arguments. Explaining an action requires initiating a search for beliefs and desires with the appropriate propositional contents to act as premises in a practical syllogism. Establishing rational harmony between premises and conclusions does not require any insight into the inner world of the agent. The question to be asked is "why anyone who is presumed to be rational (in the minimal instrumental sense)

¹¹ Davidson, "Actions, Reasons and Causes", *Journal of Philosophy* 60, 1963, pp. 685-700.

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3 would act in such and such a way?" To pinpoint the reasons that motivated
4 the agent (the *reasons why*) amidst the array of valid practical arguments
5 which could justify (instrumentally justify) the action, requires taking into
6 account the specific circumstances in which the agent acted, including her
7 beliefs and desires. But taking into account the perspective of the agent is
8 simply a matter of determining which amongst the array of available valid
9 practical argument it makes sense to ascribe to an agent, *not* to discover a
10 secret causal connection between a brain state and a bodily movement. For
11 1960s style non-reductivists, altering the logical structure of action explanation
12 in order to account for the distinction between *reasons why* and *reasons for*
13 exacted too high a price, a price they were not willing to pay. For if beliefs and
14 desires were internal causes of external bodily movements, then the folk-
15 psychological distinction between actions and events would be a mere
16 mistake premised on a failure to grasp the entailment relations holding
17 between the species (action) and the genus (event), just as the act of
18 counting washing machines alongside electrical appliances is based on the
19 failure to discern the entailment relation holding between the species
20 (washing machine) and its genus (electrical appliances).
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35 Given that Davidson's solution exacts such a high price, the question
36 must be asked: is it really necessary, as Davidson argues, to identify the
37 reasons why an agent acts with the causes of her action in order to provide
38 explanations that are agent-centered? Arguably not. Scott Sehon has recently
39 suggested that what is required in order to distinguish *reasons why* from
40 *reasons for* is an appeal to counterfactuals: "agents act in ways that are
41 appropriate for achieving their goals, given the agents' circumstances,
42 epistemic situations, and intentional states... this means that a wide variety of
43 counterfactual conditions will hold of an agent."¹² He gives the following
44 example: "suppose that Sally is faced with a sad situation: Her elderly father is
45 terminally ill and comatose, and the doctors say there is no hope he will ever
46 revive. He can be kept alive with machines, or Sally can decide to end the life
47 support and he will die naturally. Sally desires that her father be allowed to die
48 with dignity, and she believes that withdrawing life support will allow him to do
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¹² Sehon, S., *Teleological Realism: Mind, Agency, and Explanation*, 2005. MIT Press, 2005, p. 157.

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3 that. At the same time Sally wants to buy a new boat, and she will be able to
4 do that if she pulls the plug on her father, for she will then be relieved of the
5 enormous hospital bills.”¹³ Sehon argues that the following counterfactual
6 conditionals holds: if Sally withdrew the life support because she wanted her
7 father to die with dignity she would have acted in the same way even if her
8 financial position would not have altered as a result of taking that decision.
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14 The problem one faces in determining the *reasons why* Sally acted
15 may be usefully compared to the question: how do we know that a person
16 acted *out of duty* rather than from some other non-moral motive? Kant
17 suggested that we have such epistemic certainty in cases in which all
18 empirical incentives are removed and a person still acts as duty requires. In
19 such cases it is possible to say with certainty that an action was motivated by
20 duty, and is not merely *in accordance with duty*. One might of course point out
21 that unlike hypothetical scenarios, real life situations are ambiguous and that
22 an agent’s actions are compatible with a plurality of rationalizations. But even
23 if we grant that is hard to know whether an agent really acted *out of duty*, the
24 epistemic difficulties that stand in the way of ascertaining what an agent’s true
25 motives are should not be allowed to undermine the distinction between
26 *acting out of duty* and acting *in accordance with duty*. For this distinction is an
27 intensional distinction that is independent of the ability to determine, with
28 absolute certainty, the extension of such concepts. In fact, one might argue
29 that mastery of the conceptual distinction is logically required in order for
30 those epistemic claims to be made in the first instance. By the same token,
31 the fact that appeal to counterfactuals may not always conclusively show that
32 a person acted on certain reasons rather than others, provides no
33 argumentative basis for denying that the distinction between reasons and
34 causes is a distinction in kind between logically independent *genera* rather
35 than a distinction in degree between a species and its genus. So even if
36 appeal to counterfactuals failed conclusively to establish the reasons why an
37 agent acts, this affords no basis for undermining the distinction between
38 reasons and causes, because such a distinction explicates what we mean
39 when we speak about actions and about events just as Kant’s distinction
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¹³ Sehon, S., *Teleological Realism: Mind, Agency, and Explanation*, 2005. MIT Press, 2005, p. 157.

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3 between acting *in accordance with duty* and acting *out of duty* is not an
4 attempt to determine the extension of such concepts by establishing who is
5 pure of heart and who is not, but an attempt to explicate what we mean by
6 moral action.
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10 An argument similar to Sehon has been developed by Julia Tanney.
11 She suggests that to identify the reasons why an agent acts requires
12 calibrating practical arguments in the light of additional information about the
13 agent and the circumstances of their action rather than taking the draconian
14 step of altering the logical structure of action explanation in order to account
15 for the distinction between the reasons which motivated the agent from more
16 generic reasons for acting.¹⁴ Tanney¹⁵ considers the case of a woman running
17 out of a building. Her action could be rationalized by stating that the woman
18 ran out of the building because the building was on fire. This would be short
19 hand for “the woman believed the building was on fire, she wanted to stay
20 alive and therefore she exited the building”. This rationalization, however, may
21 provide a reason for running out of the building and yet not be the woman’s
22 reason for doing so, because the woman is a fire fighter. In this case the initial
23 rationalization will not do and one will have to look for another one. The
24 woman may have run out to fetch a ladder to rescue an occupant trapped on
25 the roof. Which is to say “the woman wanted to save a person trapped on the
26 top floor of a burning building and since she believed that she could not have
27 done this without fetching a ladder she left the burning building”. But talk of
28 the woman’s wants and beliefs is in the second case, as in the first, an
29 attempt to make sense of her action by establishing a relation of rational fit
30 between the premises and conclusions of a practical argument. It is not a
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52 ¹⁴ This distinction is sometimes referred to as the distinction between normative and
53 motivating reasons. But couching the distinction in this way is misleading in so far as it
54 suggests that motivating reasons may not be normative. This is certainly not the view held by
55 1960s non-reductivists who claimed rational explanations to be species of justification.
56 Though, as we have seen the normativity at stake was minimal as it required neither that
57 agents can desire an object only under an aspect of the good nor that in order to be
58 normative arguments must be sound or have true premises. For the goal is to establish
59 whether a particular course of action would be mandatory not in the absolute but in the light of
60 the agent’s epistemic situation and of their preferences.

¹⁵ See Tanney, J. "Reason-Explanation and the Contents of the Mind", *Ratio*, vol. XVIII, 2005, pp. 338-351.

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3 question of "homing in something inner or hidden"¹⁶ that is accessible from the
4 first person perspective only. Describing an action from an agent's point of
5 view requires altering the premises of the practical argument in the light of
6 what we know about the circumstances of an agent, but in trying to discover
7 what reasons might have motivated the agent to act we do not change the
8 nature of the activity in which we are engaged. What we do is to construct
9 multiple practical arguments with different beliefs and desires as epistemic
10 and motivational premises and different actions as their conclusions.
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18 Tanney's example of the woman fleeing from the building shows that
19 different practical arguments support different explanations of an action and
20 we choose from amongst these on the basis of our knowledge of the agent's
21 circumstances, including beliefs that it seems plausible to ascribe to them. We
22 can rule out that what would normally count as a *reason for* fleeing the
23 building (that it was on fire) was not the *reason why* the woman fled the
24 building if we ascribe her the goal of saving lives in her role as a fire-fighter.
25 But what we cannot do is to give up on the idea that there must be a rational
26 fit between the epistemic and motivational premises and the action. And this
27 is clear from the fact that if, when consulted, the woman suggested that she
28 fled the building because she believed there are Martians on the moon, we
29 could not accept her statement as an explanation of her action even if it may
30 be truthful to her psychological processes. The epistemic consideration that
31 agents have greater authority over the narrative which explains their actions
32 should not be allowed neither to override the conceptual point that action
33 explanations are normative nor to blur the distinction between logic and
34 psychology.
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48 A solution to a problem must be proportionate to the problem it tries to
49 solve but Davidson's proposal to draw the distinction between *reasons why*
50 and *reasons for* by identifying the *reasons why* an agent acts with the causes
51 of her actions uses a sledgehammer to crack a nut. For such a distinction
52 could be drawn without severing the link between non-reductism and non-
53 causalism. If it is possible to draw the distinction between *reasons why* and
54 *reasons for* by considering different logical antecedents (things that the agent
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¹⁶ See Tanney, J. "Reason-Explanation and the Contents of the Mind", *Ratio*, vol. XVIII, 2005, p. 341.

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3 was/was not likely to know/believe, things that the agent was/was not likely to
4 desire) there is no need to take the momentous step of altering the logical
5 structure of action explanation in order to account for the distinction.
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10 ***The unofficial story about the rise of the new causalist consensus***

11 While Davidson's argument is not conclusive, it was largely responsible for
12 establishing a new causalist consensus. For after Davidson's seminal essay
13 what was far from obvious in the 1960s suddenly became obvious in the
14 1970s. It is uncontroversial to Fodor, for example, that the folk-psychological
15 view of action is causal:
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23 ... if it isn't literally true that my wanting is causally responsible for my
24 reaching... and my believing is causally responsible for my saying..., if
25 none of that is literally true, then practically everything I believe about
26 anything is false and it's the end of the world.¹⁷
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32 Remarks such as these would not have appeared obvious to philosophers
33 such as Dray, who took a rather different view of the nature of the folk-
34 psychological explanations of action. Dray would have claimed that what the
35 ordinary folk does is to make a distinction between actions and events, but
36 that it is the task of the philosopher to decide whether the folk-psychological
37 distinction between actions and events is just a difference in degree between
38 explanations whose causes are internal and those whose causes are external
39 or whether it is a difference in kind between causal and rational explanations.
40 Whilst Dray began from an examination of the common sense claim that
41 person S did x because they believed y, he did not assume common sense to
42 have a prior commitment to causalism.¹⁸ So why is it that what was not
43 obvious prior to the publication of Davidson's "Actions, Reasons and Causes",
44 became obvious afterwards? Arguably what is obvious to Fodor is not obvious
45 to Dray's because Dray's argument against methodological unity in the
46 sciences was largely an attempt to present, in the idiom of analytic
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¹⁷ Fodor, J., *A Theory of Content and Other Essays*, MIT Press, p. 156

¹⁸ On this point see Hutto, D., "Presumptuous Naturalism: a cautionary tale", forthcoming in *American Philosophical Quarterly*.

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3 philosophy, a defence of the autonomy of the human sciences inspired by
4 Collingwood's conception of metaphysics as a science of absolute
5 presuppositions. Since Collingwood's conception of metaphysics as a
6 descriptive rather than revisionary enterprise provided the backdrop against
7 which Dray's defence of anti-causalism was articulated, it is worth spelling it
8 out in some detail.
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14 According to Collingwood, the practitioners of different sciences
15 absolutely presuppose different conceptions of causation that match up with
16 the nature of their subject-specific *explanandum*. Historians are committed to
17 what Collingwood refers to as "sense I" of the term "cause". In history "that
18 which is caused is the free and deliberate act of a conscious and responsible
19 agent, and causing him to do it means affording him a motive for so doing."¹⁹
20 The word is used in this sense in expressions such as "Mr Baldwin's speech
21 compelled the speaker to adjourn the house" or "a solicitor's letter causes a
22 man to pay his debt". Sense I captures Collingwood view that history is a
23 hermeneutic science concerned with the understanding of action. The term
24 cause has a different meaning in the practical sciences of nature, sciences
25 such as medicine and engineering. In the practical sciences of nature the term
26 cause is used in "sense II" to mean "an event or state of things by producing
27 or preventing which we can produce or prevent that whose cause it is said to
28 be".²⁰ For a medical practitioner the bite of a mosquito would qualify as a
29 possible cause (in sense II) of malaria, for the primary concern of the medical
30 doctor is to prevent or cure diseases. The term cause has a different meaning
31 ("sense III") in the theoretical sciences of nature where the term cause
32 signifies an "event or state of things such that (a) if the cause happens or
33 exists, the effect must happen or exist even if no further conditions are fulfilled
34 (b) the effect cannot happen or exist unless the cause happens or exists."²¹
35 The term "cause" acquires this deterministic meaning in sciences such as
36 physics, which abstract from human interests in the manipulation of nature.
37 The presupposition that the cause (sense I) of an action is the motive which
38 explains it, is analytic for the historian because actions are the subject matter
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¹⁹ Collingwood, R.G., *An Essay on Metaphysics*, pp. 285.

²⁰ Collingwood, R.G., *An Essay on Metaphysics*, pp. 296-7.

²¹ Collingwood, R.G., *An Essay on Metaphysics*, pp. 285-6.

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3 of history. By the same token, that the cause (sense II) of an event is a state
4 of affairs that may be either produced or prevented by human intervention is
5 analytic for the practical sciences of nature. Absolute presuppositions thus
6 express conceptual truths which cannot be denied without questioning the
7 form of enquiry which presupposes them. These different conceptions of
8 causation supply the verification conditions at work in different domains of
9 enquiry. Causation, for Collingwood, is thus not a real relation but a form of
10 explanation that is absolutely presupposed by a practitioner of a science and
11 which supplies the verification conditions at work in a given domain of enquiry.
12 Since there are no true or false claims that can be made independently of the
13 verification conditions at work in a particular domain of enquiry, no form of
14 explanation wears the ontological trousers precisely because all senses of
15 causation capture explanatory, not real relations. There is no problem of
16 explanatory exclusion precisely because it is not possible to break through the
17 analytic entailment that holds between the *explanandum* and its *explanans*.
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30 In so far as Dray's defence of the autonomy of action explanation was
31 articulated against the background of a descriptive conception of
32 metaphysics, Dray's anti-causalism had two distinctive features. Firstly, it
33 rejected the view that the concept of explanation is a monolithic concept and
34 that causal explanation (which was standardly identified with nomological
35 explanation) is the only kind of explanation. This was the main bone of
36 contention between Dray and Hempel. Secondly, it rejected the view that
37 causation is a real or extensional relation that holds amongst events
38 independently of how they are identified within a given explanatory context.
39 This is a view defended by Davidson as part of an attempt to clarify the nature
40 of his Anomalous Monism.²² Whilst Davidson sided with Dray and against
41 Hempel on the normative character of action explanation, unlike Dray he
42 believed causation to be more than a form of explanation.
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53 Dray rejected the view that there is more to causation than causal
54 explanation because he developed his defence of the autonomy of action
55 explanation against the backdrop of a descriptive conception of metaphysics.
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59 ²² Davidson, D., (1970), "Mental Events," in *Essays on Actions and Events*, pp. 207-25.
60 Davidson's explicit statement concerning the extensional nature of the causal relation is to be found in his "Thinking Causes" in *Truth, Language, and History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), pp.188-9.

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Accepting this descriptive conception of metaphysics implied that the task of the philosopher is to make explicit the presuppositions at work in different explanatory practices, *not* to solve the problem of mental causation. The fundamental problem of the philosophy of mind and action after Davidson, the problem of how can mind make an impact onto the physical world, arises only against the backdrop of a revisionary conception of metaphysics that was alien both to Dray and to many other 1960s style non-reductivists. It is only if the term causation is taken to be a category of revisionary metaphysics denoting a real relation holding amongst events independently of how they are described, that the problem of causal rivalry between folk-psychological explanations of actions and naturalistic explanation of events can arise. The problem of explanatory exclusion simply does not arise within a descriptive conception of metaphysics precisely because within such a conception of the role and character of philosophical analysis causal relations are intensional relations that are not logically independent of the explanatory goal of a science.

It is this extensional view of the causal relation that has resonated with Davidson's supporters who were quick to identify Davidson's extensionalism about causation with a rejection of a meta-philosophical view that had underpinned the non-reductivism of the 1960s. E. Lepore and B. Lower, for example, have pooh-poohed 1960s style anti-causalism as exemplifying the views which dominated in the era of 'little red books':

During the heyday of neo-Wittgenstenian and Rylean philosophy of mind, the era of little red books, it was said that propositional attitude explanations are not causal explanations and that beliefs, intendings, imaginings, and the like are not even candidates to be causes. Indeed, to treat mentalistic language as describing causes or causal processes is, it was said, a logical error. We have come a long way since then. The work of Davidson, Armstrong, Putnam, and Fodor (among others) has reversed what was once the orthodoxy and it is now widely agreed that propositional attitude

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3 attributions describe states and episodes which enter into causal
4 relations.²³
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9 And Kim has accused methodological non-reductivists of evading the real
10 (and in his view ontological) challenges posed by the problem of mental
11 causation:
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15 One sort of reaction on the part of some philosophers to the re-
16 emergence of mental causation as a philosophical problem is to try to
17 dissipate it by arguing that there is in fact no such “problem”... It has
18 been argued that worries about mental causation arise out of our
19 misplaced philosophical priorities; that overindulgence in unmotivated
20 metaphysical assumptions and arguments is the source of the
21 unnecessary worries; that a misunderstanding of the logic and
22 metaphysics of causation is at the core of the apparent troubles; that
23 we should look to explanations and explanatory practices, not to
24 metaphysics, for guidance on the matter of mental causation...
25 These are what we might call “free lunch” solutions – or, if not free, at
26 least pretty cheap ones.²⁴
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39 It is the association of 1960s style non-reductivism with an intensionalist view
40 of causation, rather than its inability to account for the distinction between
41 *reasons why* and *reasons for*, that is troublesome for Kim, Lepore, Lower and
42 others. But if 1960s style non-reductivism has been scorned primarily on
43 account of its unwillingness to distinguish between causation and causal
44 explanation, rather than on account of its alleged inability to make the
45 distinction between *reasons why* and *reasons for*, the meta-philosophical
46 burden of proof lies with the causalist. We are owed an argument which
47 explains why it is worth living with the problem of explanatory exclusion and
48 blurring the boundaries between logic and psychology in order to introduce
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²³ Lepore, E., and B. Lower, “More on Making Mind Matter” *Philosophical Topics* XVII (1), pp. 175-191, 1989.

²⁴ Kim, J., *Mind in a Physical World*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1998, p. 59.

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3 the distinction between causation and causal explanation required by a
4 revisionary conception of metaphysics.
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7 To summarize: why is it that causalism became the new orthodoxy in
8 the philosophy of action? The official story is that Davidson's master argument
9 conclusively showed that severing the link between non-reductivism and anti-
10 causalism was necessary in order to explain the distinction between *reasons*
11 *why* and *reasons for*. The suggestion made here is that Davidson's argument
12 succeeded not because it spelled out, in a quasi-transcendental fashion, the
13 necessary conditions for making a distinction between the reasons that
14 motivated an agent from other reasons, but because its message chimed with
15 a return of a revisionary conception of metaphysics and the view that
16 causation cannot be a mere form of explanation. If so, the first order
17 philosophical battle between causalists and non-causalists in the philosophy
18 of action cannot be won without fighting a meta-philosophical war about the
19 very role and character of philosophical analysis. And fighting this war should
20 involve much more than dismissing 1960s style non-reductivism as belonging
21 to the era of little red books and their proponents as seeking a free ontological
22 lunch. Since what distinguishes philosophy from other forms of enquiry is the
23 fact that reflection on the nature of philosophy is an intrinsic part of philosophy
24 itself, not a distinct second-order discipline,²⁵ the identification of metaphysics
25 with an ontological investigation into mind-independent structures cannot
26 simply be taken for granted. And if meta-philosophy is an intrinsic part of
27 philosophy, the question concerning the nature of philosophical problems -
28 are they conceptual or are they ontological? - is itself a proper object of
29 philosophical discussion. The endorsement of a particular conception of
30 philosophical enquiry, in other words, cannot be deemed to be philosophically
31 non-negotiable. Yet, it is precisely a tendency to take a particular conception
32 of the role and character of philosophical analysis as read that is largely
33 responsible for the success of causalism.
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²⁵ Tugendhat, E. (1976), *Traditional and Analytical Philosophy*, trans. P Garner, Cambridge University Press, 1982.