A PROBLEM FOR CAUSAL THEORIES OF REASONS AND RATIONALIZATIONS

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John says he punished his daughter to teach her the value of polite behavior, but we say that that is merely his rationalization, and not his real reason, the reason-for-which he did it. Is there some one feature that distinguishes rationalizations from one’s real reasons, the reasons-for-which one acts? A common, affirmative answer is that causation distinguishes reasons from rationalizations. On such a view, John’s real reasons were causally active in the production of his action, but his rationalization was not. According to this view, mere rationalizations do not explain (i.e., causally explain) the action.

In this paper I question whether this answer is right. At stake in our discussion is more than just the success of common accounts of how to distinguish between reasons and rationalizations. For the idea that causation effects a distinction between them provides a major argument in favor of causal accounts of reasons. Correspondingly, if we can question such accounts of the distinction, we can question whether our explanations of our actions are manifestations of a folk science which further research will either confirm or rightly discard.

Rationalization and Causation: Initial Problems

The thesis that causation characterizes reasons-for-which typically occurs within a particular account of the makeup of reasons we have for acting. According to the account, such a reason is a belief-desire pair related to an action, A, in the following way: The desire is the desire to bring about D (or to increase the chances of D’s occurring) and the belief is the belief that A-ing leads to D. Causation is brought in as what

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distinguishes motivating reasons which are actually reasons-for-which from those which are not:

[It] is essential to advert to the causal relation, since the belief and the desire might be present, and the action take place, and yet the belief and the desire not explain the action.⁴

This remark comes from a discussion of reasons, and in the context “the belief and the desire [do] not explain the action” means “the belief and the desire [are] not . . . his reason for doing it.”⁵ So understood, the remark says causation is a necessary condition; viz.,

N1. If it did not cause the action, then it was not his real reason

or

N2. If it was his real reason, then it caused the action.

But the remark strongly suggests another claim, since it suggests that causation solves the problem described, the problem that a belief and a desire might be present without being his reason. So understood, the remark suggests that causation is a sufficient condition; viz.,

S1. If it caused the action, then it was his real reason

or

S2. If it was not his real reason, then it did not cause the action.

Which view is the more promising for “an account” of rationalizations? Both the S’s and the N’s have considerable problems. Most of this paper will be a discussion of the problems, but let us start by considering the two alternatives superficially.

Suppose we say that if a belief-desire pair is a reason, then it is causally active in the production of the action. Applied to the Jones case, this says that if his desire for politeness is not causally active in the production of the action, it is not his reason-for-which. But this claim does not exclude the possibility that a rationalization is causally active; non-causation is merely sufficient, not necessary, for being a rationalization. As a consequence, it does not give us a “distinguishing mark” of a rationalization; we can be right in thinking Jones is giving us a rationalization even when he cites a causally active belief-desire pair.

While the N’s allow the possibility of causally active rationalizations, the S’s allow the possibility of causally inactive reasons. If we hold that not-being-a-cause is merely necessary for rationalizations, then we do not exclude the possibility of
there being a reason-for-which that was not causally active in
the production of the action for which it was a reason. In such
a case, the fact that the desire Jones cites was not causally
active does not mean that it was a rationalization.

The N’s and the S’s both allow possibilities that diminish
their ability to tell us what rationalizations are. But the trou-
blesome possibilities one allows are the very ones excluded by
the other. So should we combine them? The answer is no. For,
as we will see, the possibilities each allows are sometimes
actual. Of course, this means more than just that we cannot
combine them. It means that each is false, just because each
has false implications.

Why Causation Is Not Sufficient for Being a Reason

As we saw, adopting just the S’s gives us a very incomplete
account of the difference between a reason and a rationaliza-
tion. There is another well known and potentially very serious
problem for any causal account of reasons which even at-
tempts to give sufficient conditions in causal terms. The prob-
lem is the deviant causal chain problem. There are easily
obtained counterexamples to the view that if a belief-desire
pair of the sort specified above causes some behavior, then it
is the reason-for-which the agent acts. The counterexamples
draw on the possibility of a deviant causal pathway between
the belief-desire pair and an action. For example, a desire to
hit someone, and a corresponding belief about relevant be-
havior, might upset one to such an extent that one does hit
the person, but without its being the case that one was really
aiming at hitting or acting in order to hit.

The deviant causal chain problem has in fact created
difficulties for causal theories in a wide range of subjects. It
has led many philosophers to disavow officially the aim of giv-
ing sufficient conditions in many areas, including that of
action theory. Nonetheless, other philosophers still use the
idea that a reason-for-which one acts is a causally active
belief-desire pair. Thus, as we saw above, Davidson himself
still treats causation as though it does distinguish between
those belief-desire pairs which explain as reasons do and those
which do not. Another example: though Dretske, in Explain-
ing Behavior, speaks carefully of the belief-desire pair as only
a necessary part of a causally sufficient condition, there is no
suggestion that there is any problem in principle in giving the
full, causally sufficient conditions. But, again, the deviant
causal chain problem appears to show that a belief-desire pair
can be causally active without being a reason-for-which.
Why has the deviant causal chain problem failed to put an end to causal accounts of reasons-for-which? A large part of the answer to this question may well be discernible in another remark of Davidson's. According to this remark, the deviant causal chain problem shows that we cannot give a semantical reduction to causes, but it leaves in place the possibility of an ontological reduction:

We end up, then, with this incomplete and unsatisfactory account of acting with an intention: an action is performed with a certain intention if it is caused in the right way by attitudes and beliefs that rationalize it... If this account is correct... [w]e would not, it is true, have shown how to define the concept of acting with an intention; the reduction is not definitional but ontological. But the ontological reduction, if it succeeds, is enough to answer many puzzles.8

The problem of deviant causal chains does not really challenge, Davidson seems to say, the idea that reasons are parts of causal chains. There's nothing in the problem which really throws into doubt what we might take as an insight into the ontology of reasons and actions. Rather, it is implied, the problem shows at most that it is in principle not possible to describe non-circularly the difference between reasons and some deviant causes. But we can still specify the difference; reasons cause "in the right way," or normally and non-deviantly.

In the rest of this section, I will do two things. First of all, I will describe a problem which shares some of the implications of the deviant causal chain problem, but which makes it clear that the idea of normal or non-deviant causing is even less robust than we might have thought. Secondly, I will describe two considerations which place in question the appropriateness of the model of reasons as parts of causal chains.

The problem which carries some of the implications of the deviant causal chain problem is one I have elsewhere called "the problem of pure facilitators."9 Pure facilitators of action facilitate an action, making it easier or more probable, without giving the reason-for-which the action is performed. A pure facilitator may function in the way a thought that one will soon get some coffee may enable one to keep going on a difficult task. Such a thought may enable one to endure an unpleasant situation without providing a goal for one's endurance. (One might, of course, think of the coffee as a reward to be given only if the task is done; this is not the sort of case I am thinking of. Suppose instead that coffee will be served in thirty minutes whatever one does and the thought that it will keeps one going.) However, pure facilitators for action are structurally more complicated than a thought; they are

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structurally identical to reasons-for-which. But like the thought of coffee, they enter as causes of actions without being reasons-for-which one acts. They do not give us one’s goals in acting. An example: Smith is a manager of a plant, and Brown, who has been with the firm for twenty-five years, has recently become one of the less productive workers. Brown has also been aggressively rude in his behavior toward Smith, who has found their interactions very unpleasant. Smith is told by her boss that she should fire less productive workers. She has two relevant belief-desire pairs: (i) a desire to do her job well and a belief that this means she should fire Brown; and (ii) a desire to hurt Brown and the belief that firing him will do it. She in fact fires Brown in order to meet her managerial responsibilities, but she would not have been able to do this had she not disliked Brown a great deal. Indeed, she normally would have found it impossible to fire a worker since she is very soft-hearted. But in this case, her belief and desire saw her through the action. Nonetheless, she did not fire Brown in order to hurt him; that was not one of her goals, however glad she was that the firing had that effect.

I claim that the story I have just told is in fact intelligible. I claim it is entirely possible for a belief-desire pair to operate like an expectation of coffee does without turning into one’s goal-giving reason and without being part of one’s practical reasoning. But if causation were sufficient for a belief-desire pair’s being a reason-for-which, the story would not make sense.

Notice, further, that in such a case, the pure facilitator may have the counterfactual properties we might expect the goal-bearing reason to have. For example, if she were to discover that his unpleasant behavior was an excusable result of illness, she might be as quick to rethink her decision as she would be were she to discover someone else had been sabotaging his output.10 Further, the story can be elaborated in such a way that we could attribute to the pure facilitator any of the general semantical, syntactical, and counterfactual features a reason-for-which is claimed to have.11

In the story, then, the belief-desire pair labeled “(ii)” is causally active in the production of her action, but it does not give us her reason-for-which, why she did it in the sense of what her goal was. Hence, like deviant causes, it gives us a counterexample to the sufficiency of causation in the characterization of reasons-for-which. But it is not a deviant sort of causing. This is a kind of common, ordinary causing. Belief-desire pairs may facilitate actions without giving us something which is aimed at.
Pure facilitators, it might be objected, can easily be distinguished from reasons-for-which in that they obviously operate by different processes. This objection is far from clearly true. It is true, we can agree with the objector, that there are differences between pure facilitators and reasons-for-which; nonetheless, there are serious questions regarding what resources a theory must have in order to be able to articulate the differences non-circularly. That is, what does a theory need in order to be able to give a specification of the difference between reasons-for-which and pure facilitators without directly invoking the notion of a reason-for-which? Secondly, terms at the level of generality of "process" really are remarkably lacking in content, as recent discussion in epistemology testifies. Hence, the remark that reasons-for-which operate by a different sort of process may be vacuous; certainly more work needs to be done before we have a philosophical position with informative content.

Once we see the possibility of pure facilitators we can see that of course rationalizations may be causally active in producing the action they rationalize. For example, religious fervor may facilitate without its being the case that one's goal is to keep the commandments of one's church. The belief that one's religion licenses an action may facilitate an action by keeping at bay one's softheartedness or one's fears of social censure. And in such a case, "I was merely being a good . . ." may give us a rationalization, not a reason-for-which.

The existence of pure facilitators has two important implications for our present concerns. First of all, pure facilitators are not deviant or abnormal. This means that even if we solve the deviant causal chain problem by arriving at a characterization of the deviancy, a problem with the sufficiency of causation in characterizing reasons remains. Secondly, the distinction between what is a pure facilitator and what is a reason is relevant to our moral assessments of actions. At least on the face of it, the doctor whose damaging action was merely facilitated by beliefs and desires about a troublesome patient is morally quite different from the doctor who aimed at harming such a patient. What this suggests is that the distinction between reasons-for-which and pure facilitators cannot be reduced to some purely causal distinction; rather, the distinction needs to be explained in terms which make sense of its role in our normative discourse. This point is a specific instance of a general claim made by Davidson:

The reason mental concepts cannot be reduced to physical concepts is the normative character of mental concepts.
(If we put this claim together with some others of Davidson's, we can start to construct an alternative to his causal account of action explanation. I describe some of the features of this alternative below.)  

There is a second feature of reasons-for-which that is also not explained by the picture of them as elements in a causal chain producing the action. This feature is the fact that reasons-for-which must be time-sharing or contemporaneous with the action. Before I explain just what this consists in, let me stress that I am not saying that causes cannot be contemporaneous with their effects. On the contrary, my point is merely that the picture of reasons-for-which as belief-desire pairs in a causal chain ending with the action, even if correct, would leave entirely unexplained why only contemporaneous elements can be reasons-for-which. Hence, at best, the causal theory fails to account for a very important feature of reason-for-which explanations.

Is it true that reasons-for-which must be time-sharing? A little reflection supports this idea. Consider the following: Driving down Route One you think you see a gas station ahead and you plan to pull over into the right lane in order to be able to exit at the gas station. You want to be able to stop for gas and you believe that pulling into the right lane will make you able to stop for gas. As you start to switch lanes, you see that the gas station is out of business and abandoned. At the same time, having seen your signaling and slight turn to the right, the drivers around you are adjusting their positions and you decide it is more safe for you to move on into the right lane. In such a case, the earlier belief-desire for gas can certainly be part of an explanation of why you are in the right lane; asked why you are where you are, part of a correct answer can mention that you originally thought the gas station was still in business and wanted to stop for gas. But that belief-desire pair cannot provide your goal in completing that lane change. To be the reason-for-which, it has to be contemporaneous with the action.

Nothing in the causal chain model of reasons and actions explains this feature. Of course, the following argument is not sound:

Reasons must be time-sharing.
Causes need not be time-sharing.
Therefore, reasons are not causes.

Nonetheless, it reflects a genuine philosophical problem which causal accounts fail to address, still less solve. The fact that reasons-for-which must be contemporaneous puts into question
the idea that explanations of actions in terms of reasons are simply small essays in natural history, ones describing a kind of causal history. It puts the idea into question because that idea makes a central feature very puzzling. Hence, we should doubt whether Davidson is right in thinking that an ontological reduction to causes is really secure.

What would an explanation of the time-sharing requirement be like? An answer to this question should take account of the fact that explanations of beliefs and emotions share the time-sharing feature. Genuine explanations in terms of reasons in the domain of belief—for example, explanations of why one thinks something true or probable; explanations of why one is assuming such-and-such, etc.—must also be time-sharing. Similarly, genuine explanations of why such-and-such is the object of one’s emotion must cite time-sharing features. It is true that many emotions (perhaps all) can outlast their reasons; if one gets angry, excited, anxious, or depressed because of a misunderstanding, the anger, excitement, anxiety, or depression may survive one’s discovery of the mistake. But if one was angry at Bill because, one thought, he had stolen the book and the anger survives the realization that he is innocent, the anger is no longer at Bill, or, if it is, one no longer has a reason for being angry at him (given, of course, that one did not and does not have another reason).

If these reason-based explanations are not causal diagnoses, what are they? We can see ascriptions of reasons-for-which as evaluations of the action, belief, or emotion which purport to be from the agent’s, believer’s, or feeler’s point of view. Enlarging on another suggestion of Davidson’s, we can take reason explanations to present an action, belief, or emotion as the conclusion of an argument. In this case, the “because” of a reason-based explanation could be a transferred modality, the original modality being the “hence” or “therefore” of an argument. Thus there is a resource additional to causation to explain the “because” of explanations which give reasons-for-which. Such an account would challenge the pervasive idea that explanations in terms of reasons are a manifestation of a folk science aiming at a literal truth about causes; rather, they may involve some idealizing.

Many philosophers over the last two decades have found it very plausible to think of reasons-for-which as causally active belief-desire pairs. As beliefs-and-desires, they seem to provide an explanation of what the agent was after, why, given the agent’s beliefs and desires, that was a rational thing to do. As causes, they seem to get connected to the action. But we have just seen two ways in which reasons-for-which are unlike...
many ordinary, causally active belief-desire pairs which can enter into an explanation of an action.

The Necessity of Causation: A Problem

One common reaction to the arguments I have just given has been to agree with them, but to maintain that still causation is necessary for reasons. It is necessary, I have heard philosophers say on a number of occasions, in order to distinguish reasons-for-which from rationalizations. One way of hearing the remark takes it to be very like an earlier comment of Davidson's given above. On such a hearing, the remark says that a job can be performed—we can make a theoretical distinction between reasons and rationalizations—and causation is a necessary part of it. In a context in which agreement with the above arguments is conceded, the situation is puzzling. If we now lack a successful theoretical distinction between reasons-for-which and rationalizations, how can one be sure that causation is required? Nonetheless, the idea that reasons-for-which, whatever they are, must be causes has a strong hold on many people. In this section I hope to make it seem less compelling than it may now seem.

There are methodological considerations which need to be addressed first. I am going to describe a range of cases in which it seems at least intuitively acceptable to describe R as a reason-for-which but not a cause. I am then going to sketch a general approach to the distinction between reasons-for-which and rationalizations which is a competitor to the causal theory. However, I am not claiming that the causal theorist cannot account for the cases I present and I am not claiming to show that the alternative is true. My arguments are meant to be burden-of-proof arguments, not refutations. I intend to raise serious questions regarding the idea that reasons-for-which, whatever they are, must be causes because something which is not a cause cannot be a reason-for-which.

In describing cases in which it seems intuitively acceptable to claim that reasons-for-which are not causes, I am going to start with the case of reasons for belief. The reason for starting here is that there is relevant empirical evidence. The relevant evidence concerns the phenomenon of belief perseverance. Belief perseverance came to the attention of psychologists when they tried to debrief people who had been lied to in psychological experiments. People who had been told that tests showed they were good at, for example, distinguishing authentic suicide notes from fictitious ones, and who came to believe it, tended to retain faith in their discriminatory powers.
even when they were debriefed and told the tests were fakes.\textsuperscript{19} People may and sometimes do retain conclusions they have drawn from evidence that is now discredited.\textsuperscript{20}

There is a phenomenon, related to this, which may seem more familiar. An example: Suppose you live in New York and are flying to England. Such a trip can put considerable stress on one's beliefs. Unless you are careful, once in England, you will have all sorts of false beliefs about, for example, which money you can use, when shops are open and what can be bought at a newsstand. Without considerable systematic monitoring of one's beliefs, one can end up in the following sort of situation: Your friends say, "Let's see what we can find in the way of a restaurant for dinner," and you, looking at your watch, say falsely, "But it's only 3:30; no one will be thinking of serving dinner yet."

Let us consider the suicide letter case and the trip to London case together. What is interesting in them is what they can lead us to say about the cases in which there is no need for belief revision. How about the subject who is not told that the tests were rigged? How about our beliefs about the time and the availability of dinner when we have not been traveling? Does not belief perseverance suggest that, in cases of reason-survival, beliefs may become causally independent of the reason-for-which they are held? By "cases of reason-survival" we will mean cases like the belief perseverance cases except that the original supporting belief is still held.

An example we will discuss: Rebecca travels often from country to country, but she has been home for several weeks. In the situation to be considered, she has the following beliefs: (i) I am living in New York City; (ii) I've set my watch to New York time and I've checked daily that it reliably reads New York time; (iii) my watch tells the local time accurately; (iv) my watch reads 4:30 and (v) it is 4:30. Further (i) and (ii) together form the reason-for-which she believes (iii), and (iii) and (iv) form the reason-for-which she believes (v). Does the coherence of this story require the supposition that if she no longer believes (i), then she will no longer believe (v)? If causation is required for being a reason-for-which, then non-existence should transmit through the chain.

Let us remind ourselves of the general terms of the debate: It is certainly intuitively acceptable to describe the example of belief perseverance as a case in which a belief has become causally independent of the evidence which led one to form the belief originally; after all, the once-supported belief is surviving the demise of the originally supporting belief. But the causal theorist insists that, if such independence is achieved,
the belief in the original evidence, if one still has it, is no longer playing its reason-for-which role. Thus, the causal theorist maintains that in cases of reason-survival, either there is a causal relation between the original evidence and the originally supported belief or the first cannot be the reason-for-which one now believes the originally supported belief.

There are grounds for doubting the accuracy of this response. Even if Rebecca’s belief in (v) becomes causally independent of (i), it may be that her justification in her belief in (v) is still sensitive to the justification status of her belief in (i). In the sort of case above, were Rebecca’s belief in (i) to become irrational, and she had no other support for her belief that her watch tells the local time, she would no longer be justified in so believing.21 And this fact is significant support for thinking that a belief can retain its reason-for-which role even when it is causally detached from the belief for which it was playing this role.

I take it we have just seen some support for saying that, in the case of reason-survival, a reason-for-which may not be a cause. That is, some beliefs can be causally independent of beliefs to the justification of which they are highly sensitive, and that is a reason for thinking that some beliefs may become causally independent of their reasons-for-which.

Does anything comparable ever arise in the case of actions? It certainly seems to. Consider, then, Robert, whose son David has very recently become a vegetarian, as Robert knows. In the past, when they had been traveling together and wanted to eat, they had often gone to a fast-food restaurant since David had been happy to eat meat in any of its fast-food forms. Suppose now that they are driving together, David has said he’s hungry and a McDonald’s is coming up. Even though Robert really does not now think David will eat meat, he may well pull into the McDonald’s, just as the fact that one is very conscious one is now in London may not deter one from reading the time off a watch which, as one knows, was set in New York. The case is the action analog of belief-perseverance. But, here again, our main question is not about the case of a discarded belief. Rather, we want to look at what we should say about his pulling into a McDonald’s when he still believed David would want to eat meat. That is, let us focus on a case of reason-survival.

Does the conjecture that his pulling into McDonald’s was causally independent of his belief that his son would eat a full, meaty meal there mean that the belief cannot figure as part of a reason-for-which the action was performed? The causal theorist’s deliverance is in an even weaker position than it
was in the case of belief, for there are two considerations which suggest it can figure as part of a reason-for-which. First of all, saying that it cannot still be a reason-for-which implausibly restricts what goals we can ascribe to Robert. Surely, he can have pulled in with the intention of getting David a full, meaty meal. (Remember, we are now considering a case of reason-survival, a case in which he does believe David eats meat.) Secondly, the justificational status of his belief in his son's willingness to eat meat affects how his action should be evaluated. Suppose that at an earlier time Robert was unjustified in his belief that his son would eat meat; perhaps the son had been trying for some time to tell him about a switch to vegetarianism and he refused to believe it. In such a case, the lack of his justification in his belief affects, among other things, the prudential quality of his pulling into McDonald's. In the context, given that he's unjustified in believing that his son will eat such a meal at McDonald's, pulling into McDonald's is not a particularly prudent thing to do.

It is, then, not undeniably true that the reasons-for-which one acts are always causes of the action. We have seen some grounds for thinking that beliefs which are causally inert with respect to an action can still figure in the ascription of goals to the agent and in an assessment of the moral or prudential quality of the action. And such conclusions in turn give us reason to think that the beliefs are parts of the reasons-for-which the action was done.

How, then, can we distinguish between reasons-for-which and rationalizations? If there is anything like an "ordinary" or folk distinction and if we are interested in how the folk do really think, then it is unclear that we should expect the distinction to have the single-minded systematicity the causal theorist appears to think it does. Rather than there being an ontological distinction regarding roles in production, perhaps the distinction is contextual. What counts as one's reason-for-which may depend sometimes on what else is competing for that role.

The phenomenon of pure facilitators, if my descriptions are correct, shows that beliefs and desires can facilitate an action without being a reason-for-which. As a consequence, some of the kinds of causation possessed by pure facilitators—for example, they may help keep one's eye clear and on the goal—do not as such typify reasons-for-which. Both reasons-for-which and pure facilitators may perform such roles. Perhaps what would count as a reason-for-which in one context is demoted to mere rationalization if it gets paired with a reason which is doing a lot of facilitating. An attribution of a rationalization,
as ordinarily understood, may invoke, at least in some contexts, little more than a distinction between reasons-for-
which that possess the kind of causation typical of pure facilitators and the rest.

We should notice that if one is acting with two (partial) goals, and only one of them possesses some facilitating causal properties, then it may also possess counterfactual properties that one might think shows the other goal is not really a goal at all. For example, if facilitating is needed and only one reason is doing it, then it will be true that if one did not have the facilitating goal, one would not perform the action. In addition, the facilitating activity might be enough to promote the partial goal into a full goal in the absence of the non-facilitating goal. In this case, one would perform the action (sooner or later) even if one did not possess the other goal.

Conclusion

If one thinks of ordinary explanations of action as manifestations of an attempt to provide a systematic, quasi-scientific theory of human behavior, it will seem natural to think of attributions of rationalizing as attempts, at the least, to describe a kind of a single, ontological divide. Equally, if it seems less than obvious that the notion of a rationalization marks an ontological divide, it may seem less than obvious that folk explanations of action issue from a folk psychology that may—or, perhaps more probably, will—be disconfirmed by further research in the areas now said to constitute cognitive science.

I am not claiming in this paper to have established conclusively that causal accounts of rationalizing are completely wrong. But I do hope that their supposed truth will seem less than obvious. If so, it should seem less than obvious that further research will either confirm or rightly discard our ordinary explanations of action.

NOTES

1 A rationalization may be a reason one has, but it is not (or is largely not) one's real reason, the reason which motivated one, the one on account of which one acts. Following Robert Audi, I call the latter "reasons-for-


3 For simplicity's sake, I will confine my attention to the basic causal account provided by Davidson. For a good categorization of various causal


5 Without such a reading, the passage merely trivially connects causes and causal explanations.


8 “Intending,” pp. 87-88.


10 As Philippa Foot has pointed out to me, a different story could have Smith’s belief and desire entering into her practical reasoning in a way which puts them in the domain of reasons-for-which even though they do not determine her goal. Thus, “He’s thoroughly nasty and deserves some misery” might give Smith’s reason for rejecting a countervailing reason such as “No one in the present economic climate can deserve to be fired.” This very interesting role is quite different from that performed by pure facilitators. Pure facilitators are factors that, for example, keep one from raising such questions or taking them as worth serious thought; they are not the topics of one’s practical reasoning. Nonetheless, Foot’s reading of the case is very interesting because it shows that not everything in the domain of reasons actually gives us the intention with which the agent acted. (It should be noted that appeals to practical reasoning are also not going to effect a distinction between reasons and pure facilitators. More exactly, I have argued that pure facilitators in the case of theoretical reasoning create a problem for causal accounts of theoretical reasoning, and my conclusion transfers quite easily to the case of practical reasoning. See my “A Problem for Naturalizing Epistemologies.”)

11 I have given a long and rigorous argument for a corresonding conclusion in the case of reasons for belief in “A Problem for Naturalizing Epistemologies.” However, the point is really quite easy to see. Just specify any such feature and add “it was still a pure facilitator.” Only a little imagination will be needed to see how the story can be filled out to make the claim that it’s a pure facilitator very plausible.

12 The discussion centers around what is called “the generality problem,” which is encountered by theorists who attempt to ground a theory of epistemic evaluation on a notion of reliable method or process. See Richard Feldman, “Reliability and Justification,” The Monist 68 (1985), pp. 159-174, and John Pollock, “Reliability and Justified Belief,” The Canadian Journal of Philosophy 14 (1984), pp. 103-114. (Not everyone believes the problem to be insoluble; Alvin I. Goldman, in Epistemology and Cognition [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986], pp. 49-51, offers what he thinks is a promising line to pursue in investigating this problem.)

13 Cases of racism provide another area in which pure facilitators do common, ordinary causing. Managers who view members of a certain race as worth less than they (the managers) may well find it easier to fire them. In such a case, the firing need not be done in order to get rid of members of that race, though it has that effect. The widespread “glass ceiling” effect minorities and women experience need not be due to anyone’s aiming to keep them out of the top jobs. The dean who claims that the fact that the
female graduate students systematically received lesser grants was not part of his plans may be speaking truthfully, even though the fact that they are female was part of what caused his assignments of grants.


15 At a recent seminar at Rutgers University, Davidson agreed with my suggestion that his writings contain some of the basic ingredients for an alternative to his causal account. He commented further that many readers had exaggerated the role given to causation in his early work.

16 Some writers have given an explanation of very limited time-sharing. Thus Carl Ginet provides an account of time-sharing for some reasons for which one acted. Concentrating on action, Ginet sees one (the basic?) sort of reason explanation to require that the action be explained in terms of an intention with an indexical reference to the action in a way which requires that the intention be contemporaneous with the action. Ginet claims,

This means that we have a factor, the agent’s concurrently intending something of the action, that is sufficient to verify a reason explanation of the action and that not only does not but could not precede the action. We have a sufficient condition that entails nothing about what happened before the action that is relevant to explaining it. We have a reason explanation that is entirely in terms of a concurrent state or process and not at all in terms of any antecedent one.

Carl Ginet, On Action (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 139. It is certainly unclear how this account, which invokes intentions, could be extended to beliefs and emotions.


18 I have elaborated this account in papers presented to various meetings (see my acknowledgement below).


21 A possible example: Rebecca is kidnapped and moved around for several hours in a helicopter; she irrationally tells herself that the movement in the helicopter is just a ruse to mislead her and that she is still in the New York City area.


23 Several of the arguments in this paper have been presented at an Eastern Division APA Conference, a Pacific Division APA Conference, a meeting of the Canadian Philosophical Association, a New Jersey Regional Philosophical Association Conference, and colloquia at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, UCLA, and Rutgers University. I have learned a great deal from the comments and criticisms of a large number of people. I am especially indebted to Robert Audi, Philippa Foot, Rosalind Hursthouse, Gavin Lawrence, and Brian McLaughlin. Brede Johnsen’s comments on the penultimate draft of this paper were very helpful.

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