Donald Davidson – Actions, Reasons & Causes

Introduction

Davidson wants to know the relation between an action and an agent’s given reason for doing it (which Davidson calls a rationalisation). Davidson’s paper is to defend the ancient & commonsensical notion that rationalisations are causal explanations (in contrast to then recent writers such as Anscombe, Hampshire and Kenny).

Section I

We can only accept a rationalisation of an action if we can say just what seemed appealing (or obligatory) about the action to the agent. When someone does something for a reason he has (a) a pro attitude towards actions of a certain kind and (b) a belief that his action is of that kind¹. Pro attitudes include various categories – basic urges, moral or aesthetic views, economic or social prejudices or conventions. “Attitude” covers both permanent character traits and transient fancies. A pro attitude does not imply even a temporary conviction that actions of a certain kind are worth performing.

Giving a reason for an action often involves naming the agent’s pro attitude (a) and / or the belief (b). Together, these form the primary reason why the agent performed the action. Davidson reformulates the claim that rationalisations are causal explanations by stating two theses about primary reasons, for which he will argue in the rest of the paper.

1. We can understand how a reason rationalises an action iff we can see how to construct a primary reason.
2. The primary reason for an action is its cause.

Section II

Davidson gives an example of an action – I flip a light switch. This has three consequences – the light is turned on, the room illuminated and a prowler unintentionally alerted – yet I do not do four things, but only one, of which four descriptions² are given. I rationalise / explain my flipping of the switch by saying I wanted to turn on the light. However, I cannot rationalise my alerting the

¹ Note that (b) does not say, as might be expected, a belief that his action is likely to bring about the end result desired. This has to do with rational action, but not with rationalisations. I must say that this approach seems wrong right from the start. Don’t we normally explain an action by saying (a) that we had some end result in mind and (b) believed that the action had some possibility of bringing that end result about. That is, that we have pro-attitudes to possible future states of affairs rather than to actions per se. Most actions are means to an end. Davidson’s equation of the means (flipping the switch) and the end (illuminating the room) seems to be very important in his subsequent discussion. He often moves imperceptibly between desired ends and (supposedly) desired means, without seeming to note or care that we may desire certain ends (coming top in the exams, getting a grip on the subject) while hating the means (ploughing through impenetrable philosophical papers).
² Davidson provides a footnote to the effect that we don’t call unintentional outcomes actions, but still the alerting of the prowler isn’t something different from my flipping the switch (eg. its consequence). Davidson defines an action as anything an agent intentionally does, including intentional omissions. He admits that we are short of an appropriate word that covers all of (A) actions, (B) voluntary but unintentional doings and (C) involuntary unintentional doings, especially if these are the same “thing done” (ie. A=B=C, much as in the light-switch-flipping case). I’ll use “doings” where required.
prowler or illuminating the room in this way\textsuperscript{3}. Davidson says that, while flipping
the switch was identical\textsuperscript{4} with alerting the prowler, we cannot use these doings as
inter-substitutive terms, or we’d end up with nonsense such as “my reason for
alerting the prowler was that I wanted to turn on the light”. Action descriptions in
rationalisations have a quasi-intensional\textsuperscript{5} character. Hence, in defining primary
reasons, we need to refer to actions as under a particular description, leading to the
following more precise necessary condition for something being a primary reason:

\textbf{C1.} R is a primary reason why an agent performed the action A under
the description d only if (a) R consists of a pro attitude of an agent towards
actions with a certain property and (b) a belief of the agent that A, under
the description d, has that property.

- Davidson says that we may be confused by a verbal parallel into thinking that my
wanting to turn on the light is sufficiently general to be a pro attitude that partly
explains why I turned on the light. “I turned on the light” is not the (intensional)
object of “I wanted to turn on the light”, because “I turned on the light” refers to a
particular event, but my \textit{wanting to do so} does not refer to or entail this event. Any
of an indefinitely large number of events would satisfy my wanting (as each
particular “turnings on” is different). Davidson notes that wants and desires are
often directed at particular objects, but says that “I want that gold watch in the
window” is not a primary reason for going into the store, but only suggests a
primary reason (eg. “I wanted to buy the watch”\textsuperscript{6}).

- Davidson thinks that \textit{wanting} can be thought of as generic for all pro attitudes,
though he notes that it can exclude some other pro attitudes such as duty or
obligation. Saying that I did something because I wanted to says little beyond that
the action was intentional, and, because the wanting and the doing are logically
independent, provides a reason why I performed the action. Saying that I did
something for \textit{no reason} is equivalent to saying there was no \textit{further} reason than
that I wanted to. This helps defend the definition of an intentional action as one
done for a reason.

- It is usually otiose to mention \textit{both} the belief and the attitude that combine to form
the primary reason for an action. Either can be omitted. If I explain why I’m
performing some nautical manoeuvre by saying that I think it’s lead to some
favourable result (the belief), I don’t need to add that I want this favourable result\textsuperscript{7}.

\textsuperscript{3} The form of the rationalisation is that I rationalise the flipping of the switch by saying I wanted to
turn on the light. Could I rationalise my illuminating the room in this way? The form would be that I
rationalise the illuminating of the room by saying I wanted to turn on the light, which has things the
wrong way round – I would rationalise my turning on of the light by saying I wanted to illuminate the
room. I can say the reason I flipped the switch was to illuminate the room, but this is another
rationalisation of flipping the switch. Clearly, as alerting the prowler was unintentional, I had no reason
for doing it, so there is no rationalisation required, even if saying that the reason I alerted the prowler
was that I wanted to turn on the light made any sense (as Davidson later notes).

\textsuperscript{4} The \textit{results} of the actions aren’t identical, just the actions themselves.

\textsuperscript{5} Note the “s”! Intension : the properties that define a word or concept. An \textbf{intensional}
definition of a class specifies the properties that something must have to be a member of it, whereas an \textbf{extensional}
definition simply specifies the members. Davidson’s use of “quasi-” is because an action must have
been performed for us to rationalise it, so the description of the action must have an extension as well
as being intensional (ie. defining the type of doing).

\textsuperscript{6} Presumably because the want could be satisfied in numerous ways – eg. by my executing a smash and
grab. The primary reason was my pro attitude to buying watches and my belief that my walking into
the shop to buy the watch was an action of this kind.

\textsuperscript{7} This seems to refer to the result of an action, not the action itself, contrary to Davidson’s definition of
a primary reason.
(the pro-attitude). Similarly, if I say that I’m making an insulting gesture because I want to insult you (the pro attitude) I don’t need to mention that I believe this gesture will insult you (the belief). Davidson now makes an interesting remark about ends and means. We don’t need to mention the primary reason when explaining an action in terms of non-primary reasons. The example he gives is that I might explain why I’m weeding the lawn by saying that I want a beautiful lawn. This is an explanation in terms of ends, not in terms of a primary reason. The primary reason is (a) that I see something desirable in any action that has a good chance of making the lawn beautiful (the pro attitude) and (b) a belief that weeding is such an action\(^8\), but, it would be “fatuous” to mention the primary reason. Davidson suggests there is no logical or psychological step in transferring desire from an end (which isn’t an action) to the action conceived as means. It is necessary that the desired end explains the action only if the agent desires what he believes to be the means\(^9\).

• We don’t need to analyse the emotions that explain why someone did something in order to see how a primary reason is involved when the mention of such an emotion rationalises an action. Claustrophobia gives the reason why someone left the party and jealousy provides a motive for a poisoning. We know the way these emotions connect to primary reasons, eg. that the poisoner believes his action will harm his rival (the belief), which is the sort of thing jealous people want to do (the pro attitude). Even where we don’t know the primary reason, we know there was one and what was its general nature. If someone boasts from vanity, this is because he had a pro attitude towards producing admiration & envy in others, and a belief that his action would produce this\(^10\).

• Knowing a primary reason for an action means knowing the intention with which the action was performed; but, conversely, knowing the intention is not necessarily to know the primary reason in full detail. Going to church with the intention of pleasing one’s mother implies a pro attitude towards pleasing one’s mother, but the outsider doesn’t know whether the reason is enjoyment in pleasing her, duty or an obligation. Davidson asks us to consider the expression “the intention with which (I) went to church”. While this has the form of a description, he denies that it refers to any entity, state, disposition or event. He says that it is syncategatorematic\(^11\), with a contextual function of generating new descriptions of actions in terms of their reasons. So, “going to church with the intention of pleasing one’s mother” is just a fuller description of “going to church”. He claims the same process goes on when I answer the question “why are you bobbing around” with “I’m exercising” (or whatever).

• It is often better to explain an action by describing the intended result than by stating that this result was intended. Eg. It is more effective to say “it will soothe your nerves” when pouring someone a stiff drink since this, in the context of explanation, implies that I want to soothe your nerves, and if it is true that it will, it will justify my action. Justifying and explaining an action often go hand in hand,

\(^8\) This seems to show the weakness in Davidson’s case. It’s quite likely that I have an anti-attitude to weeding but a pro-attitude to having a beautiful lawn, which exceeds by distaste at weeding.

\(^9\) This is an interpretation of what Davidson says. Why can’t he write plain English? This narrowing of the gap between the desirability of ends and means is highly dubious to my mind.

\(^10\) Davidson quotes enthusiastically from Ryle’s *Concept of Mind*, because of his reliance on primary reasons, despite noting that Ryle’s behaviourist approach can justly be criticised because someone may boast from vanity just once, so describing universal tendencies, as Ryle does, won’t quite fit.

\(^11\) What does this mean?
so we often indicate the primary reason for an action by making a claim which, if true, would justify the relevant belief or attitude of the agent. Davidson gives three examples with little explanation. Eg. “The paper said it was going to snow”, in an appropriate reason-giving context, performs this familiar dual function. What he means is that this is a claim which, if true, will justify a belief. What belief? Presumably that it will snow. What was the action? Presumably something like wearing hat, coat and gloves? Another example – “you stepped on my toes” - is substantially explained below.

- The justifying role of a reason depends on its explanatory role, but not vice versa. As Davidson says, if I believe you stepped on my toes this explains why I stepped on yours even if my belief is false, but my stepping on your toes isn’t explained or justified by your stepping on mine unless I believe that you did.

**Section III**

- A primary reason shows the agent is shown in his role as Rational Animal by the way his action coheres with his traits, whether these be characteristic or not, and whether short- or long-termed. With a little ingenuity we can construct from the belief and pro attitude of the primary reason the premises of a syllogism from which it will follow that the action has some desirability characteristic. Hence, there is an irreducible, if anaemic, sense in which every rationalisation justifies an action, because at the time there was something to be said for it from the agent’s perspective.

- Davidson now starts to address his second primary thesis – that of primary reasons being causes of action. Only teleological causal explanations display the element of justification provided by reasons. Consequently, some philosophers have concluded that the relation between reasons and actions cannot be causal, but that it is justication that provides the explanation – that the role of the reason is that it justifies rather than causes the action. However, Davidson thinks that even if we grant that the role of reasons is to justify actions, it doesn’t stop the explanatory role of reasons is not also necessarily causal. Davidson’s first condition for primary reasons (C1) was intended to distinguish rationalisations from other kinds of explanation, justification in the sense of Č1 being one. Davidson now turns to “the other claim”, that since justifying is a kind of explaining we have no need of the ordinary notion of cause. We need to decide what’s being included under justification. It may mean simply that the agent has certain beliefs and attitudes that make the action seem reasonable. But this misses out something essential, because an agent can have a reason for an action, and yet not perform it for this reason but for another one. For a reason to explain an action, it must be that the

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12 This expression is due to Anscombe. Davidson says that Anscombe denies that the practical syllogism is deductive. This is because she, along with Aristotle, considers it to correspond to a piece of practical reasoning and so is bound to think of the conclusion of the syllogism as corresponding to a judgement that the action is reasonable, and not just desirable. That is, presumably, that the conclusion of the syllogism can be overridden by reason. This is important to note when reviewing Pink’s thoughts. Davidson says that, for him, the practical syllogism is only part of the analysis of the concept of a reason.

13 Davidson is trying to show the explanatory nature of reasons doesn’t prevent them from being causal. I’m not at this stage clear how Davidson makes out that the explanation does differ from the usual sense.

14 By whom, and what was the first claim?
agent performed the action *because* he had the reason, though we need to explain the “because”.

- If someone’s behaviour seems odd or out of character, maybe even such that we can't recognise an action in it, we seek an *interpretation*. This is given by his reason, which provides an interpretation – a new description of the behaviour that fits it into a picture more familiar for that agent. This picture includes the agent’s beliefs, goals, character traits, virtues and vices, but also the reason places the action in a wider socio-economic, linguistic or evaluative context. The point of the action in its social setting of rules, practices, conventions and expectations can be grasped if we learn the agent’s reason - what the agent intended by it and what he conceived it to be (eg. the repayment of a debt).

- Such remarks, inspired by the later Wittgenstein, contain much truth. By giving the reason for an action, we redescribe it and place it in a pattern, so explaining it. However, it is tempting to make two non-sequiturs. (1) We cannot infer that reasons are not causes from the facts that causes are separate from effects and that giving reasons merely redescribes the action. Reasons are not identical with actions, since they are beliefs and attitudes, but more importantly, events are often redescribed in terms of their causes. (2) We don’t understand the sort of explanation involved when we place an action into a larger pattern. Because the relevant context contains both reason and action, talk of reason and patterns does not explain how reasons explain actions. One way of explaining an event is to place it in the context of its cause, so that cause and effect form a pattern that explains the effect. If reason and action illustrate a different pattern of explanation, that pattern must be identified.

- Davidson explains using an example due to Melden, that of hand-signals while driving. (1) The first analysis that Davidson gives is that the man raises his hand in order to signal; his intention is to signal, and this explains his action – raising his arm – by redescribing it as signalling. What is the pattern that explains the action? If it is only the pattern of an action done for a reason, then it only explains the action by assuming the relation between reason and action that we wanted to analyse. (2) Alternatively, we might try this approach; a man is driving and approaching a turning, knows he ought to signal and knows how, by raising his arm, which he does. In this context, he does indeed signal. However, Davidson doesn't think this touches the question of why he raised his arm. He did have a reason for doing so, but we haven’t demonstrated that this is why he did it. Given that the description *signalling* explains the action by giving the reason, the signalling must have been intentional, which may not be the case on the account just given.

- Davidson says that Melden, in claiming that causal explanations are wholly irrelevant to explaining human actions, has no analysis of *because* in “he did it *because* … (of a reason)”. Hampshire thought the connection between reasons and actions wholly mysterious. He denied that wanting had to enter every full statement of reasons for acting; consequently he rejected Aristotle’s attempt to solve the mystery of the connection by taking wanting to be a causal factor.

15 Davidson’s example is that someone could redescribe the event of his being burned in terms of a cause by saying he was burned.

16 This sentence is Davidson verbatim. What is its relevance?

17 Melden’s *Free Action* was one of the works Davidson cited at the start of the essay as abandoning the view espoused by Davidson that rationalisation is a species of ordinary causal explanation.

18 I’m not clear why this is the case. Re-read later.
Davidson agrees that the concept of wanting is too narrow, but has argued that, at least typically, a pro attitude must be assumed to be present if an agent’s stated reasons for acting are to be intelligible. Hampshire doubts there is a way of assessing Aristotle’s scheme, and hence of knowing whether it is true or false. Davidson claims that the best argument for a scheme like Aristotle’s (in the absence of any rivals) is that it alone promises to account for this mysterious connection between reasons and actions.

Section IV

• Davidson asks how we can convert the and into a because in “He exercised and he wanted to lose weight and thought exercise would do it”. The basic move\(^{19}\) is to augment C1 with:

  **C2.** A primary reason for an action is its cause.

Davidson thinks the considerations in favour of this move are obvious, and will spend the rest of the paper clarifying the notion of causal explanation by defending C2 against a variety of attacks.

**Attack A:** Since primary reasons consist of attitudes and beliefs, which are not events but states or dispositions, they cannot be causes.

• The immediate response is that states, dispositions & conditions are often rightly cited as the causes of physical events (eg. the bridge collapsed because of a structural defect). However, this may miss the point, which is that the dispositional cause only satisfies as an explanation if there was also a preceding event\(^ {20}\). So, what is the preceding event that causes an action?

• Davidson responds by saying that, while states or dispositions are not events, their onsets are. Desires spring up in response to circumstances (seeing the tasty melon) and beliefs may arise at the moment when we notice, remember, perceive or learn something. Objectors have missed the obvious fact that mental events need not be observed or noticed, but can themselves be observations or noticings, and hence can be the causes of action. There is no need for the causal mental event to be like a mysterious prod of conscience or act of will. Melden challenges those who wish to explain actions causally to identify the particular feeling or experience that caused the driver to signal by raising his arm. Davidson can do this – it was at the moment that the driver noticed the turning coming up that he signalled. During continuous activities like driving there are effectively fixed purposes, standards and so on that give form to the entire exercise but we also have continuous information from the environment and about what we are doing in terms of which we regulate our actions. While it may be an exaggeration to dignify a driver’s realisation that the turning is coming up with the label experience, it is certainly the reason he raises his arm. It is clear that general purposes or motives, like wanting to arrive safely, aren’t events; nor is the intention with which the driver raises his hand an event, for it is no thing at all\(^{21}\). Davidson admits that no event can be produced by the causal theorist that is common to all cases of the

\(^{19}\) Davidson doesn’t claim that C1 and C2 are **sufficient** to define the relation between reasons and the actions they explain, though he thinks that C2 can easily be strengthened to do this. He does, however, claim that they are, as they stand, **necessary**.

\(^{20}\) Davidson doesn’t say what this is in the case of his examples – maybe a failure of some part of the bridge in the case of the bridge collapse?

\(^{21}\) What’s the relevance of these observations?
intentional raising of the arm, but this is no problem, because a common and unique cause of all bridge failures cannot be produced either.

- The car-driver can answer why he raised his arm when he did, and this enables us to identify the event that caused the action. Davidson asks whether an actor\(^{22}\) can always answer such a question. Sometimes the answer will answer will mention a mental event – such as “I made up my mind” – that doesn’t supply a reason. Davidson thinks there are also cases of intentional action where we cannot explain why someone acted as they did, but in these cases we have a parallel in the case of the collapsed bridge. We explain the collapse as being due to a structural defect, and, while we are ignorant of just what particular chain of events led to the collapse, we are sure that there was one.

**Attack B**: A cause must be logically distinct from the effect; but, this is not the case for reasons and actions, so a reason cannot be the cause of an action. As we have already said, a reason makes an action intelligible by redescribing it; so, we don’t have two events but only one under two descriptions – but causal relations require two events.

- My flipping of the switch caused the light to go on; it didn’t cause my turning on of the light. But we can still say that “My reason for flipping the switch was that I wanted to turn on the light” entails “I flipped the switch, and this action is further describable as having been caused by my wanting to turn on the light”. Describing an event in terms of its cause doesn’t identify event and cause, nor does explanation by redescription exclude causal explanation.

- The above example shows that we can describe an action without using words linking it to the alleged cause. There is no possible logical connection between the two phrases (action) “my flipping the switch” and (alleged cause) “my wanting to turn on the light”. We might see a logical link between “my turning on the light” and “my wanting to turn on the light”, but even here the link is grammatical rather than logical.

- What could it mean to say that causal relations are empirical rather than logical – surely not that all true causal statements are empirical? Suppose “A caused B” is true, then the cause of B = A; so, by substitution, we have “the cause of B caused B”, which is analytic. The *truth* of a causal statement depends on *what* events are described, while its status as analytic or synthetic depends on *how* they are described. Davidson maintains that a reason rationalises an action only when the descriptions are appropriately fixed\(^{23}\) and aren’t logically independent.

- If saying that a man wanted to turn on the light meant that he would perform any action he would accomplish his end, then stating the primary reason for his flipping of the switch would entail that he flipped the switch\(^{24}\). This would imply a logical connection between reason and action much as between “soluble and placed in water” and “dissolved”. This is still informative because of the asymmetry in the implication – it goes from description of cause to description of effect, but not conversely, for “placing it in water caused it to dissolve” doesn’t entail “it is water soluble”\(^{25}\). Even so, the explanation would be more interesting if, instead of the obviously definitional “soluble”, we could refer to some property

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\(^{22}\) Does he mean agent?  
\(^{23}\) I presume this is equivalent to “made” or “stated”.  
\(^{24}\) Davidson quotes Aristotle “straightway he acts”.  
\(^{25}\) I accept this point, but it would be nice to have an alternative reason for the dissolution other than water-solubility.
say crystalline structure – whose connection with dissolution is known only through experiment. It should now be clear why desires don’t explain actions in the trivial way that solubility explains dissolution. Solubility is a pure dispositional property, defined in terms of a single test, whereas desires cannot be defined in terms of the actions they rationalise, even though this relation isn’t purely empirical. The reason for the difference, says Davidson, is that there are other, equally essential criteria for desires, such as their expression in feelings and actions they don’t rationalise. A person with a desire usually knows what he desires, and so has no need of criteria; and the same goes for wants and beliefs. Such logical features of primary reasons show why we don’t define them as dispositions to act for these reasons.

Attack C: Hume’s definition of a cause is the constant conjunction of two kinds of objects. Hart and Honoré, however, claim that, were a situation of human action repeated, the supposed causal link between reason and action would imply or even covertly assert that the same action would follow, whereas this is not the case. Hart and Honoré agree that Hume is right to say that ordinary singular causal statements imply generalisations, but consequently wrong to suppose that desires are ordinary causes of actions. Laws, while essentially involved in ordinary causal explanations, are not involved in rationalisations.

- The usual response is that we do have rough corrigible laws connecting reasons and actions. While threatened people don’t always react in the same way, this is due to differences of threat and differences between agents as far as their beliefs and attitudes go.

- Davidson thinks this response is a mistake because we cannot sharpen such generalisations connecting reasons and actions into laws sufficient to make accurate predictions, and we can see why this must be so when we consider how reasons determine choice, decision & behaviour. What was to the agent at the time merely a reason is discovered ex post facto as the reason. Any serious theory for predicting action based on reasons must be capable of evaluating the relative force of the competing desires an beliefs in the matrix of decision, rather than starting by backing the winner. The practical syllogism will take us no further than explaining action falling under one reason, and cannot help us to weigh competing reasons. It provides us with models neither for a predictive science of action nor for a normative account of evaluative reasoning.

- However, if casual explanation depended on competent predicative laws, few could be made. I cannot predict which blows by which rocks will break which windows, yet I’m sure this window broke because it was struck by a rock. Generalisations that speak blandly about the likelihood of fragile windows breaking when struck hard enough are not proto-laws because they are not quantitative. Such generalisations, like those about behaviour, have a different function – of providing evidence for the existence of causal laws appropriate to the case in hand.

- We’re usually more certain of singular causal connections than of any associated causal law, so was Hume wrong to claim that singular causal statements entail laws? Davidson thinks that Hume’s claim as previously quoted is ambiguous, in that it may mean one of two things. (1) that “A caused B” entails some particular law involving the predicates used in the descriptions “A” and “B” or (2) it may mean that “A caused B” entails a causal law instantiated by true descriptions of A
and B. Though both versions make sense of the claim that singular causal statement entail laws and support the view that causal explanations involve laws, version (2) is much weaker, in that no particular law is entailed by a singular causal claim and a singular causal claim that requires defence can receive it without the need to defend any law. Davidson claims that only the second formulation of Hume’s doctrine fits most causal explanations, and that this version suits rationalisations equally well.

- It is an error to think that no explanation has been given until a law has been produced. The simplest explanation of an event gives its cause, though a more elaborate one may defend the singular causal claim by producing a law or giving evidence for believing that one exists. A related error is to suppose that singular causal statements necessarily indicate, by the concepts they themselves employ, the concepts that will occur in the entailed law. Suppose a hurricane, reported on one page of a newspaper, caused a disaster, reported on another page. Then the event reported on one page caused that reported on the other, but we shouldn’t look for a law connecting events of these kinds, or even a law connecting hurricanes and disasters. Laws required to predict disasters precisely would have no use for concepts like disaster and hurricane. The problem with weather-prediction is that the descriptions under which events interest us (cloudy day) have only remote connections to the concepts employed precise known laws.

- We can be certain that the laws required for reasons to be causes of actions do not deal in the concepts dealt with by rationalisations. Even if the causes of the class of actions belong to the class of reasons, it doesn’t follow that there is any law connecting events from these two classes, since the classifications may be neurological, chemical or physical.

Attack D: It is suggested that the sort of knowledge one has of one’s own reasons for acting is inconsistent with there being a causal link between reasons and actions, in that one knows infallibly one’s own intentions in acting, without the need for induction or observation, and no ordinary causal relation is known in this way.

- Davidson admits that our knowledge of our own intentions in acting will indeed show many of the oddities peculiar to first-person knowledge; but, the question is whether these oddities prove that reasons do not cause (in the normal way of speaking) the actions they rationalise.

- Davidson points out that one may be wrong for two reasons about the truth of a statement such as “I am poisoning Charles because I want to save him pain”. (1) I may not be poisoning Charles at all, having just drunk the poison myself by mistake! (2) You may err about your reasons, especially if you have two reasons, one pleasing and the other not, for you may be mistaken about which motive made you do it (eg. if you also wanted Charles out of the way).

- The fact that one may on occasion be wrong about one’s reasons (and will accept public or private evidence as showing this) doesn’t mean that it generally makes sense to ask for evidence how you know what your reasons were, because you usually have no evidence. As the objector pointed out, our knowledge of your own reasons for action is indeed not inductive, for we cannot have induction without

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26 Davidson notes that causal laws are distinguished from true generalisations by being inductively confirmed by their instances and by their supporting counterfactual and subjunctive singular causal statements (as we’ve seen elsewhere in Ep & Meth).

27 What does he mean here?
evidence. However, Davidson doesn’t think this shows the knowledge is not causal.

- Causal laws differ from true but non-law-like generalisations in that their instances confirm them; consequently, induction is therefore a good way – but not the only way – of learning the truth of a law. In any case, to know that a singular causal statement is true it is only necessary to know that some law covering the events at hand exists, and it is far from clear that induction will provide this. As Hume said, one case is often enough to convince us that such a law exists; which means that we are often persuaded without inductive evidence that a causal relation exists.

**Attack E:** Finally, some philosophers feel uneasy about talking about actions having causes at all. Melden admits that bodily movements have causes, and that sometimes actions are identical to these, yet denies that these causes cause the actions.

- Davidson thinks this a contradiction, but one arrived at by the following considerations, which would, if the argument were valid, show that actions don’t have causes at all, which Davidson thinks would lead to “obvious difficulties”. Melden’s claim is that it is futile to explain conduct by the causal efficacy of desire, for all that can explain is further happenings and not actions performed by agents. The agent would be the helpless victim of all that occurs in and to him if he was confronted with such a causal nexus. Davidson asks why this should be the case – is it because we assume that in the area of action, a cause demands a causer and agency demands an agent? If we ask who caused my action, if it is caused, we seem to get two possibilities – either I did, in which case we have the absurdity of infinite regress, and if I didn’t, then I’m a victim. But the alternatives aren’t exhaustive, because some causes have no agents. The prime examples are those states and their changes within persons, which make persons voluntary agents because they are reasons as well as causes.

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28 The point seems to be that actions are performed freely, intentionally, and such a causal nexus would undermine free will.

29 The punch-line, like much of what Davidson says, could be expressed more clearly!