

THE PROBLEM OF DEVIANT CAUSAL CHAINS

Miguel Amen

Dept. of Philosophy, King's College London
Strand, London WC2R 2LS, UK
joao.oliveira_amen@kcl.ac.uk

In the following article I identify the source of Davidson's failure to provide an analysis of intentional action. It is shown that this failure should be seen as an instance of consistency within his overall theory of mind and action.

In *Actions, Reason and Causes* (1963) Davidson defended the causal theory of action, according to which the intentions for which a person acts are the reasons for which he acts and those reasons cause the action.

According to Davidson, a reason for an action A consists in the agent having a pro-attitude toward actions of a certain kind along with a belief that Aing is an action of that kind. Pro-attitudes can be seen¹ as desires and wantings, giving goals and motives for action.

Davidson calls such a pair, consisting of a pro-attitude and a belief, a primary reason and claims that by having a primary reason for which an agent acted we can explain, through a rationalization, why the agent proceeded as he did. Having established the primary reason, we can see what the agent wanted or desired and thus we can understand why he

¹ Davidson specifies that Pro-attitudes are "desires, wantings, urges, promptings, and a great variety of moral views, aesthetic principles, economic prejudices, social conventions, and public and private goals and values in so far as these can be interpreted as attitudes of an agent directed towards actions of a certain kind" (*Actions Reason and Causes*, p. 4)

would want to execute an action of that type.

The Causal Theory of Action goes further and distinguishes itself by saying that those reasons for which the agent acted are also the cause of his action. The main argument of Davidson for this view is that this seems to provide a way to make the distinction between a mere rationalization of the action and the operative reasons in virtue of which the act was done.

We can see this happening whenever one has at least two reasons, R1 and R2, that rationalize the same action A. Did he *Aed* because of R1 or because of R2? So, I might try to explain Carl's behaviour by pointing out that he went to vote because he thought voting was the right thing to do. Even supposing that that is right about Carl, it might be that he really went to vote *because* Sophie was to be there and he wanted to impress her. An agent might have a reason for doing something and not do it because of that reason. Therefore, pointing to the first reason might make his action intelligible, in the sense that it is the kind of thing that he might do taking into account the contents of his desire and belief, but in this case it does not really put the finger on the locus of his subsequent behaviour. As such, it does not really explain why he did go out to vote. Davidson's point is that only by pointing to the causal relevance of Carl's wanting to see Sophie can we make a distinction between the *real* reason for his action, and the mere rationalization of his action. Causation not only seems to provide a metaphysical way to connect reason and action, it seems to Davidson to be the only game in town.

Combining all this, we can see that actions are caused by reasons, and those reasons rationalize the action, by showing us why the agent did it.

So following Davidson, one might want to analyse intentional action this way:

A acts intentionally if and only if A acts for a reason and that reason caused the act.

However, Davidson says that the arguments he can muster for such a view only provide necessary conditions for action under a reason. If someone acts intentionally, then the right-hand side of the equivalence must be satisfied, but the reverse implication is not. We would want to say that every time an event is caused by an *appropriate* mental event,

then the event was done intentionally. However, this seems to be false. The problem is that those reasons have to be causes in the right way, since deviant causal chains seem to be possible. Davidson gives the following example of such causal deviance:

«A climber might want to rid himself of the weight and danger of holding another man on a rope, and he might know that by loosening his hold on the rope he could rid himself of the weight and danger. This belief and want might so unnerve him as to cause him to loosen his hold, and yet it might be the case that he never chose to loosen his hold, nor did he do it intentionally. (Freedom to act, p. 79)»

In such a case, the Climber had a reason to loosen his hold and that reason caused him to loosen the hold; however, he didn't do it intentionally. So the right-hand side of the analysis is satisfied, but it is pretty clear that the climber didn't make up his own mind.

The analysis needs to be improved in a way that the causal relation between the reason and the piece of behaviour satisfies certain conditions upon which deviancy is ruled out. It is noteworthy to see that Davidson's problem is not so much that he cannot give sufficient conditions to solve this problem. The difficulty rests in the *kind* of condition that can be given. He says that:

«Beliefs and desires that would rationalize an action if they caused it in the right way- through a course of practical reasoning, as we might try saying – may cause it in other ways. If so, the action was not performed with the intention that we could have read off from the attitudes that caused it. What I despair of spelling out is the way in which attitudes must cause actions if they are to rationalize the action. (Freedom to act, p. 79)»

In this passage it seems to me that Davidson puts in quite explicit terms what the difficulties that he faces are. In a way, he does not face a problem about the specification of the condition for intentional action, since he has already provided a clarification for intentional action by saying that intentional actions are events that are caused by

the agent's reason for performing the action. Moreover, in this passage he seems to further identify the right way for such causality to be performed – “through a course of practical reasoning”. In such a case, we can specify how the causal relation that begins in those reasons follow through the practical reasoning or process of deliberation and cause the behaviour, can cause in the right way, because we just have followed the logic of reasons, i.e. their normative implications².

However, the problem that Davidson is mentioning in the citation and would want to solve is a way to specify, in causal terms, sufficient conditions for intentional action – mentioning a “course of practical reasoning”, for example, is not giving causal conditions that show us and explain the right way the causal chain should go. The solution just presented is not satisfactory because it is an artefact of the form of explanation; the causal terms that it gives us do not present conditions of satisfaction of the appropriate form. If we take Davidson's theory of mind at face value, we know that each mental event is identical to some physical event, and so we are sure that the causal relations between reason, the course of deliberation and the action provide a description of the causal chain in purely physical terms.

However, what Davidson is looking for are conditions that do not make use of the intentional idiom, in a way that would permit to go from the right side to the left in the analysis of intentional action. The fact that we can go from the existence of some intentional action to the existence of a causal chain that begins in some event in the brain to movements of the body does not give us causal conditions that are independent of the intentional idiom in such a way that the equivalence would follow.

The discussion so far suggests the following improvement:

Δ acts intentionally if and only if Δ acts for a reason and that reason caused the action *in the right way*. (Where *the right way* specifies causal conditions that are sufficient for the event to be an intentional action, without the use of the intentional idiom.)

² He says in *Psychology as Philosophy* that the right way is “perhaps through a chain or process of reasoning that meets the standard of rationality” (p. 232)

So, the problem for Davidson is not that he cannot specify the right way for reason to cause actions, but to specify non-normatively how the causal chain should go about.

Now, it is my view that Davidson cannot be expected to solve this problem if we take into consideration his overall position on the mind, particularly his insistence that there aren't any psychophysical laws. So his pessimism about solving this problem, "what I despair of spelling out", should be taken with a pinch of salt, as it seems to be in keeping with his view of the irreducibility of the mental idiom. His failure is an instance of coherence in his overall position.

In order to substantiate my claim, let us take a more detailed look at the example of the climber and try a way, that seems to me to be cautionary, of an attempt to give causal conditions.

It is useful to see why the case described is not intentional. The relation of causality goes like this:

Reasons (R) to loosen the rope CAUSE State of nervousness (N)
CAUSE loosening of the rope (B).

The climber has a reason R to loosen his hold; however, it would seem that for this to be the reason in virtue of which the climber loosened the rope, it has to be causally connected with the ensuing action in the appropriate way. Now, one way that is *not* appropriate is if R brings about a mental state that hinders the executive control of the agent in such a way that his behaviour is not seen as under his control anymore. A nervous state of mind might bring such a diminishing of executive control. In such a case, his behaviour would not be an action, since it would not be something that he decided or wanted to do.

The problem seems to be that while there is a normative implication from the reasons of the agent and the subsequent action, there is none between those reasons and the intermediate state (N), and between that state and the subsequent behaviour. The solution to the problem would have to specify, without using intentional terms and normative conditions, what is about this causal chain that makes the subsequent behaviour unintentional.

This suggests a way to go forward - by eliminating from the causal chain all events that lead the subject to lose control of his actions. Sup-

pose that a state of nervousness were a specific kind of mental state of a family *S* (finite, it would seem) of mental states that had the property of making the agent lose control of his behaviour; such as certain forms of stress, anxiety, etc. In such a case, we might be able to give quite specific conditions that would rule out cases of deviant causation³⁴. This could be done if we were able to identify neurological states that would subserve those mental states that belong to family *S*. So, provided that the causal chain specified in the right-hand side of the analysis does not mention such neurological states, we would not have a case of deviance. Therefore, ruling out those neurological states as links in the chain of causation could be a means to specify the right way for reason to cause action⁵.

However, if we understand the form of this causal condition, we can see that it cannot be specified by Davidson's theory of mind - because such condition would have to be stated in finite terms and support counterfactuals; and would depend on the existence of types of neurological events that are not merely correlated with those types of mental events, but if we are ever to be able to specify with any guarantee that

³ It might seem that I am assuming that all cases of deviant causation are of this form, viz. that there are intermediate states of mind that cause subsequent behaviour without the control of the agent. However, I don't have to assume this at all. I think however that the strategy developed here seems to be of a general form, applicable to other attempts as well, such as to give a plausible way to ensure that causation goes in the right way. And so the same form of argument against it would apply. For example, it seems to me that the same argument would apply in the same form if we tried to specify positive aspects of decision-making or of intention formation that could (and this is a big could since cases of deviance could be devised there) be said to lead reliably to the desired consequences. Once again, the problem would be about specifying non-normatively those states. And the point developed in the text would apply.

⁴ Another problem is that it is plausible that certain states in some occasion might lead the agent to lose control whereas in other cases might be actually part of the chain of causation in a bona fide intentional action. For example, the approaching of a deadline might induce someone in a state of stress, and such a state might actually help the agent to take control of the situation and be a causal factor in his subsequent actions. However, since the point I am making is negative, this does not matter so much, since what I want to bring out is a principled reason why Davidson, taking into account his overall theory, cannot have sufficient condition for intentional action based on causal conditions.

⁵ I am here trying to eliminate those kinds of situations where the agent is said to lose control.

our causal chain does not degenerate, the relation between mental and physical (neurological) types has to take the form of a law, e.g. have to be nomologically connected, something that Davidson is quite explicit in denying.

The problem of deviant causal chains is that they do not keep up, *all the way* (since in a way the problem is that they fit all too well when we think of the extremities of the causal chains, sustaining the logical connection between reason and action, e.g. the agent's reason is a reason for such action) with what would be the normative implication of mental states and action.

But the problem for Davidson is that his theory precludes a nomological connection between the normative force of reasons and the causal chain of events that leads to the effect. What we see in the case of causal deviance is a case where the chain of causation does not parallel the demands of the normative. The problem is that anomalous monism shows us how mental events could be causes but anomalous monism itself is indifferent to the normative force of mental events. Davidson tells us that where there is causality there must be a physical law. As such, we can, in principle, give causal explanations where mental events are concerned, but since causal relations are blind to the normative character of the mental, we cannot complete the analysis.

His failure to give sufficient conditions for intentional action non-normatively does not introduce a failure to naturalize the intentional, at least in the sense of giving him a type of object that demands its own new ontology, because it would seem that his overall theory of mind is self-made to accommodate the normative (after all, the mental is so constituted!) and already predicts a failure of reduction, by asserting the anomalism of the mental.

This might be troubling if what one really means by naturalizing the mind is a science of the mind that is constituted by strict laws. However, as one of Davidson's essay adverts, psychology is more like philosophy than physical science. According to Davidson, there is no prospect of a rigorous scientific psychology⁶. The necessity of the addition "cause in the right way" in the analysis of intentional action is a reflection of the *ceteris paribus* nature of the psychological realm.

⁶ In 'Davidson on psychophysical laws', in the previous issue of this journal, I show that as far as this applies to the mental it applies to the special sciences as well.

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