

## Agency and “Mental States”

Overture

“The Golden Age of Female Philosophy”

Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, Mary Midgley, Iris Murdoch, Mary Warnock

## The Standard Story

(1) The primary reason why an agent performed the action *A* under the description *d* consists of a **pro-attitude**\* of the agent towards actions with a certain property, and a belief of the agent that *A* under the description *d* has that property. **Davidson (1963)**

\* [I.e.] 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 toward actions of a certain kind.

(2) When desires<sup>†</sup> for ends and **means-end beliefs** combine to cause and rationalize bodily movements, .. then those bodily movements count as actions of that agent. **Smith (2012)**

<sup>†</sup> The desires in question [in the standard story] can be a desire for *anything* ..

The agent’s desire [in the standard story] is the desires that the world be a certain way.

Actions are those bodily movements which are caused by desire-belief pairs. “Slogan”

## Davidson and Smith: two differences

i. Davidson has ‘pro attitudes’, Smith ‘desires’.

Because justifying and explaining an action so often go hand in hand, we frequently indicate the primary reason for an action by making a claim which, if true, would also .. vindicate .. the relevant .. attitude of the agent. **Davidson (1963)**

(F) You poured a shot because it would soothe his nerves.

(A) You poured a shot because you wanted to soothe his nerves.

DAVIDSON. Pro-attitudes take their place in explanations *via* a generic notion of wanting.

SMITH. (A) Implausible that desires of Smith’s sort always explain.

A man knows he will go hungry tomorrow unless he goes shopping today.  
He has a reason to go to the shops. **Foot (1972)**.

(B) When considerations make it desirable that one do something, one may desire to do it but the desire not provide one’s reason for doing it.

## Prioritizing the Facts

My claim: the kind of understanding yielded by explanations which adduce attitudes (e.g. (A)) depends upon the kind of understanding got from explanations which adduce facts (e.g. (F)).

ii. Davidson has beliefs simply, Smith ‘means-end beliefs’.

From Davidson’s (1): The primary reason why X performed a certain action (under the description ‘flipping of that switch’) consists of a pro-attitude of X towards actions which are illuminating of the room and a belief of X that the action A which X performed (under the description ‘flipping of the switch’) has the property of being an illuminating of the room.

Problems (a) “Primary”? More beliefs needed when other descriptions are introduced.

(b) The various beliefs relate to a certain “performed” action, not in existence at the time the beliefs are held.

(c) Would someone who didn’t know how to turn on a light be likely to have these beliefs?

Smith (2012): If John's flicking the switch is an action, then *this bodily movement has to be one that John knows how to perform* and his knowledge how to perform it must not be explained by his knowledge how to do something else.

Causal roles are played not just by [desires and beliefs] but also by the agent's possession and exercise of her rational capacities. We need to posit this last as an additional causal factor, because the agent's possession and exercise of the capacity to be instrumentally rational is needed if he is to put his desire and belief together in the way in which they need to be put together if they are to cause an action. [Smith, contd.]

- Problems (a) Even if we think we understand how states "interact", there may be a further difficulty about understanding how they could interact with a capacity.  
(b) If John's bodily movement is one that John knows how to perform might there not be other ("non-bodily") things that he knows how to do.?

One must doubt, both in the case of Davidson and of Smith (if for slightly different reasons), whether they have any right to call their reason-explanations *teleological*.

Davidson and Smith: a further difference, and a commonality

### Motivating reason and normative reasons

Common ground: By providing a reason why someone did something one may explain why she did it and/or one may serve to show something good (from her point of view) about her doing it.

'and/or' masks a controversy.

For Smith, these are two different kinds of reasons; for Davidson, a single kind.

Smith: It is widely accepted that there is a distinction between *motivating* and *normative* reasons

Davidson: The justifying role of a reason .. depends upon the explanatory role, but the converse does not hold.

### The (rational) mind and the causal workings of the world

Smith's functionalism ensures that his story of action must be an account just of motivation.

Davidson, though not a functionalist, thinks that mental states are what cause actions, and that it cannot be assumed that agents know anything, or know how to do anything.

Davidson's claim to have accommodated reason in a world of causes is made when he says:

In the light of a primary reason, an action is revealed as coherent with certain traits .. of the agent, and the agent is shown in his role of Rational Animal.

Reason is supposed to be seen to be at work from the perspective of one who gives explanations.

In Davidson's account of human agency, it is only from the detached perspective, from which states are attributed to someone, that reason is introduced..

There was a difficulty about how we might be supposed to think of "an action" (an "individual" one) given that our active lives don't come in series of punctate pieces. A related difficulty is how we might think of any person's life as if it were intelligible only from a third-personal point of view.

The reason-seeking *Why?*-question may use the second person: 'Why are you doing that?'

One relates to one's own activity from a practical perspective: in considering what to do, one confronts questions about how things are (not how one believes them to be), how things might be (not necessarily how one desires them to be) and what difference one might make oneself.