

Making Something Happen – Where Causation and Agency Meet

Davidson's and von Wright's Contributions Reconsidered

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1. Introduction: a look back at the reasons vs. causes debate
 2. The interventionist account of causation
 3. Four objections to interventionism
 4. The counterfactual analysis of event causation
 5. The role of free agency
 6. Causality in the human sciences
- References

1. Introduction: a look back at the reasons vs. causes debate

About forty years ago the *reasons vs. causes* debate reached its peak. Hempel and Dray had debated the nature of historical explanation and the broader issue of whether explanations that cite an agent's reasons are causal or not. Melden, Peters, Winch, Kenny and Anscombe had contributed their anticausal conceptions. The Neo-Wittgensteinians seemed to be winning the day when in 1963 Donald Davidson published his seminal paper "Actions, Reasons, and Causes". Davidson's paper devastated the Wittgensteinian camp. It contained, among other things, a powerful attack on the logical connection argument. Davidson argued that the existence of a logical or conceptual connection between descriptions can never eliminate a causal relation, which holds between events *simpliciter*, not between events under certain descriptions.

Davidson maintained that in a way, reasons can be causes. When somebody acts for a certain reason, his intentional attitudes, or rather changes in his attitudes, cause his bodily movements. As regards explanation, Davidson argued that rationalization is a species of causal explanation. For the definition of action, he argued that intentional actions are bodily movements caused in the right way by beliefs and desires that rationalize them. Davidson's paper paved the way for causal theories of action, which superseded Neowittgensteinian analyses in the following decades. The causal theory was rapidly adopted by Alvin Goldman, David Armstrong, Paul Churchland, Myles Brand and many others, entering the mainstream and dominating the philosophy of action to this very day.

In 1971 Georg Henrik von Wright published his book *Explanation and Understanding*. The second chapter of that book did not deal with agency, but with causation. It developed a new account of causation, the *interventionist* or experimentalist account. Focusing on causation, von Wright remedied a major shortcoming of the reasons vs. causes debate. In this debate, the concept of causality, and the nature of the causal relation, received little atten-

tion, and this holds true for both camps. Mostly it was simply taken for granted that, as Hempel had declared, “causal explanation is a special type of deductive-nomological explanation” (Hempel 1965, 300). One camp then aligned intentional explanations with D-N explanations, while the other camp insisted on their disparity. So strictly speaking, the label “reasons/causes debate” was a misnomer. The controversy dealt primarily with the question as to whether intentional explanations can take the form of D-N explanations, while the notion of causation, and the metaphysics of the causal relation, were left obscured.

With von Wright’s new approach, the situation changed. Von Wright was primarily concerned with causation, but his approach contained an implicit attack on the causal theory of action as well. His core idea was that the notion of causality is intimately linked with, or even derived from, the notion of intentionally making something happen. Other philosophers, even Hume, had considered such a connection before, but often enough they had done so just to reject this view, regarding it as a kind of myth belonging to the infancy of the human mind. Von Wright took the idea seriously. He submitted the analysis that p is the cause of q if and only if by doing p we could bring about q (see von Wright 1971, 70).

The causal theory of action was also concerned with the relation between causation and agency, to which its name bears witness. The causal theory of action holds that actions are bodily movements with a certain causal history. This is why von Wright’s account constituted a momentous challenge to the causal theory: it *reversed* the direction of conceptual dependency between both notions. Davidson and his followers tried to define what an intentional action is by using the notion of causation. The causal condition which the causal theory sets is part of the definition of “doing something intentionally”. Von Wright claims that the conceptual dependency is the other way round. He uses the notions of doing, and bringing about, to explain what causal relations are. So, instead of a *causal theory of action*, he advocates an *agency theory of causation*, as it may be dubbed.

It is remarkable how seldom this clash of opinions about conceptual primacy is reflected in the literature. There are few exceptions: Fred Stoutland noticed the conflict, and he published a number of papers in which he compared Davidson’s and von Wright’s views (Stoutland 1976; 1982; 1985). It is true that von Wright’s book *Explanation and Understanding* was widely read and discussed in the seventies, especially in Europe. But it strikes me that especially in North America, where the causal theory of action became the orthodoxy of the day, von Wright’s challenge went largely unnoticed. Even Davidson did not seem to take it seriously. He nowhere takes notice of the interventionist theory of causation, while he does discuss von Wright’s earlier book *Norm and Action*. As is well-known, Davidson favoured an alternative account of causation, based on “the principle of the nomological character of causality”, as he somewhat clumsily called it, or, later and less clumsily, “the cause-law thesis” (Davidson 1970 and 1995). Davidson’s firm adherence to a nomological theory of causality may explain why he did not take much interest in alternative accounts.

2. The interventionist account of causation

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