Reasons and Causes: the philosophical battle and the meta-philosophical war

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Journal:</th>
<th>Australasian Journal of Philosophy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Manuscript ID:</td>
<td>RAJP-2010-0387</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manuscript Type:</td>
<td>Original Article</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keywords:</td>
<td>Reasons, Causes, explanation of action, causalism, anti-causalism, meta-philosophy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

URL: http://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/rajp
REASONS AND CAUSES: THE PHILOSOPHICAL BATTLE AND THE METAPHILOSOPHICAL WAR

Introduction
Since the publication of Davidson’s “Actions, Reasons and Causes”\(^1\) the philosophy of action has been dominated by the view that rational explanations are a species of causal explanations. Although there are dissenting voices,\(^2\) anti-causalism is for the most part associated with a position that tended to be defended in the 1960s and that was successfully buried by Davidson’s criticism of the logical connection argument. In the following I argue that the success of causalism cannot be fully accounted for by considering the outcome of first-order debates in the philosophy of action and that it is to be explained instead by a shift in meta-philosophical assumptions. It is the commitment to a certain second-order view of the role and character of philosophical analysis, rather than the conclusive nature of the arguments for causalism, that is largely responsible for the rise of the recent causalist consensus. I characterise the change in meta-philosophical assumptions in Strawsonian terms as a change from a descriptive to a revisionary conception of metaphysics and argue that since the disagreement between causalists and non-causalists cannot be settled at the level of first-order debates, causalists cannot win the philosophical battle against anti-causalists without fighting the meta-philosophical war.

Descriptive metaphysics and the action/event distinction
Strawson identified two fundamental features of descriptive metaphysics. First, descriptive metaphysics describes our conceptual scheme, and is a conceptual, not an ontological enquiry. Secondly, the fundamental categories of descriptive metaphysics are conceptually invariant because they capture some of the most fundamental judgments we make. As Strawson put it, the task of philosophy is to


“lay bare the most general features of our conceptual scheme... a massive central core of human thinking which has no history... the commonplaces of the least refined thinking... the indispensabe core of the conceptual equipment of the most sophisticated human being.”

Revisionary metaphysics, by contrast, is concerned with existential structures and the goal of revisionary metaphysics is to challenge and alter our conception of what there is. Thus, as a revisionary metaphysician, Descartes sought to alter the common sense conception of reality as made up of macroscopic objects and show that what really exist are what would later be called primary properties such as size, extension, motion or rest etc. As a descriptive metaphysician, by contrast, Kant sought to defend the consupponibility of theoretical and moral judgements rather than demand that we revise our common sense belief in the possibility of moral action in line with the demands of the theoretical standpoint. These different conceptions of metaphysics, as a descriptive and revisionary science respectively, underpin very different ways of understanding the nature of the action/event distinction. For in the former case the task of philosophy is to provide a justification for the distinction between practical and theoretical claims, whilst in the latter case the task of philosophy is to discover what are the real relations holding amongst particulars, not to construct a metaphysics around the common sense distinction between (moral) actions and (natural) events. In the following I intend to use the Strawsonian distinction between descriptive and revisionary metaphysics to show how a commitment to these different conceptions of the role and character of philosophical analysis underpins very different views of what it means to draw a distinction between the concepts of action and of event.

The defence of the autonomy of action explanation from event explanation that was articulated in the philosophy of action during the 1960s was arguably underpinned by a conception of metaphysics as a descriptive science. Many 1960s non-reductivists were united in the view that the

---

explanation of actions differs in kind from the explanation of events and that rational explanations are a species of justification, not of causal explanations. This non-reductivism was grounded in the view that there is a different kind of connection holding between the explanans and the explanandum in action and event explanations. In event explanation the connection between the explanans and the explanandum is an empirical connection that is established through observation and inductive generalisation; in the case of action explanation, on the other hand, the connection between the explanans and the explanandum is conceptual or rational. Whilst one may say that an agent acted in a particular way on account of certain beliefs and desires of hers, such beliefs and desires do not explain the action in the manner in which the dropping of the temperature below 0°C explains the cracking of the radiator in a car left out on a freezing cold night. For beliefs and desires explain action in so far as they feature as epistemic and motivational premises in practical arguments that are ascribed to agents in order to make sense of what they do. As premises in practical arguments beliefs and desires do their explanatory work not as antecedent conditions of an inner nature, such as brain states, but rather as propositional contents. It is the propositional content of beliefs and desires ascribed to an agent that explains their actions as the rational conclusion of a train of thought. It is precisely because 1960s non-reductivists held that to explain action is to understand it as the conclusion of a practical argument, that they claimed the explanation of action to be a species of justification, not of causal explanation. Action explanations are a species of justification because to understand something as the rational thing to do, is to understand why one ought to have inferred a conclusion from certain epistemic and motivational premises. The normativity at work in action explanations was deemed to be of a purely instrumental kind because what is

---


6 The example was used by Hempel to illustrate the structure of scientific explanation. See Hempel, C. “The function of general laws in history” *Journal of Philosophy* 39, 1942, pp. 35-48.
at stake in the explanation of action is neither the truth value of the epistemic premises (are the beliefs of the agents true/false?) nor the moral status of what they desire (are the agent’s goals morally acceptable/reprehensible?) but the validity of the inference from premises to conclusion.\(^7\) 1960s non-reductivists thus rejected the view that beliefs and desires are internal causes of action on the grounds that the relation one tries to establish when explaining an action is conceptual or rational, not empirical. This view was canvassed by W. H. Dray who argued against Hempel’s revival of Mill’s claim\(^8\) that action explanations are a species of nomological explanations that differ from the explanation of events only on account of their poor predictive power. The Millian and Hempelian view simply missed the point that action explanations are normative and that even in those cases in which practical arguments are used predictively (in order to anticipate what an agent might do in the future), rather than retrospectively (to explain why they acted as they did in the past), anticipations based on practical arguments rely on expectations of how rational agents ought to act in response to norms of instrumental reasoning, not on expectations of how they will act based on empirical generalisations. Even when directed towards the future, action explanations are not inductively based generalizations premised upon the principle of the uniformity of nature. The Millian and Hempelian view takes the

---

\(^7\) The account of action explanation defended by 1960s non-reductivists is Humean in the sense that the interpreter need not assume that agents desire something only under an aspect of the good or sub specie boni. In this respect the notion of normativity at work here is much weaker than that defended by philosophers who endorse an Aristotelian account of practical reasoning, such as Maria Alvarez (See her *Kinds of Reasons: an essay in the philosophy of action*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). But their defence of the autonomy of action explanation is not Humean in the sense that is most relevant to a discussion of the autonomy of action explanations because they denied that the explanans (belief and desire pairs) and the explanandum (the action) are spatio-temporally distinct events and asserted instead that the connection between an action and the reasons which explain it is conceptual or rational. Further this account of action explanation is not psychologistic because beliefs and desires do their explanatory work as premises in practical arguments that are ascribed to the agent by the interpreter in order to make sense of their actions, not qua psychological states of agents (i.e. qua believing and desiring). 1960s non-reductivists explicitly denied that agents need to consciously recite a practical argument in order to be deemed to be acting. But by the same token, this account is not externalist (like the one defended by Jonathan Dancy in *Practical Reality*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) because the facts cited in the explanation of action (e.g. she took the umbrella because it was raining) do their explanatory work as epistemic premises, not as empirical facts. 1960s non-reductivism allowed for the possibility that unsound but valid practical arguments could be genuinely explanatory precisely because propositions, unlike facts, can be true or false.\(^8\) See J. S. Mill, *System of logic: ratiocinative and inductive*. In *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, ed. J. M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963-1991 [1843]).
fact that rational explanations can be put to the same use as causal explanations (that they can be used predictively) to imply that they are not different in kind from causal explanations. But action explanations are rationalizations whether they are offered as *ex post facto* explanations of past actions or as anticipations of future ones. The use to which action explanations are put does not change their logical structure. Action explanations are rationalizations (they are normative rather than nomological) whether they are applied to the past or to the future.

In fact, for 1960s non-reductivists such as Dray the folk-psychological view that actions and events belong to different ontological categories could be vindicated only on the assumption that there is a difference in kind between causal and rational explanations and that the latter are not merely a species of the former. For if rationalizations were a species of causal explanations then the relation holding between actions and events would be rather like the one holding between a species and its kind, between, say, Siamese cats and cats in general. And this understanding of the relation is far too weak to support the widely held common sense view that agents are free to disregard rational considerations. Vindicating the folk-psychological distinction between things which happen and things agents do requires understanding actions as responses to rational norms (even if only norms of instrumental reasoning) since norms prescribe how one ought to act in response to commands or imperatives, rather than determine what will happen in conformity to causal laws. From Dray’s perspective, not only does the covering law model miss the point of action explanation, which is to understand or clarify in the hermeneutic sense. It also fails to vindicate the common sense distinction between actions and events. For such a distinction implies that the concept of action is a logically independent genus, not a species of the genus “event”.

Since 1960s non-reductivists such as Dray took the logical forms of rational and causal explanations to be implicit in the folk-psychological distinction between actions and events, they saw themselves as being engaged not in the task of revising, but in that of corroborating common sense.

---

ontological categories. They worked in the manner of descriptive
metaphysicians because they proceeded reggressively from the fact that
certain distinctions are made to the condition of their possibility. In their view,
to vindicate the folk-psychological distinction between actions and events
required no less and no more than making explicit the hidden semantic
implicature holding between rational explanation and the concept of action on
the one hand and causal explanations and the concept of event on the other.
This vindication consisted in showing not that the distinction between actions
and events is possible, but rather, given that it is made, how it is possible. And
to show how the distinction is possible, rather than showing that it is possible,
does not require going beyond the way in which we think and speak about the
world. On the contrary, such a task presupposes precisely that there is no
non-circular relation holding between method and subject matter, one’s
explanatory goals and the nature of one’s ontological categories. Since, on
this account, the distinction between actions and events is made possible by
the employment of different forms of judgment (rational and causal judgments
respectively), it follows that the expressions “rational explanation” and “causal
explanation” are short hand respectively for “rational explanation of actions”
and “causal explanation of events”.

A number of important implications follow from the ways in which
1960s non-reductivists articulated the argument for the autonomy of action
explanation. First, since actions are explained rationally and events are
explained causally, and since rational explanations appeal to normative
considerations that agents may disregard, actions and events are not
descriptions than can be conjoined or listed alongside one another. Whilst we
may say that something is both yellow and square, we cannot coherently
describe something as being both an action and an event because to do so
would be tantamount to claiming that it is both rationally motivated and
causally determined. Secondly, whilst it is not possible, for the reasons just
given, to conjoin actions and events in one and the same description, there is
no conflict between rational and causal explanation because, as reflection on
the semantic implicature holding between method and subject matter reveals,
rational and causal explanations have a different explanandum. Rational and
causal explanations appear to conflict only in so far as the implicature holding
between a judgment and its corresponding ontological category is not properly grasped. Thus for example, whilst it may look as if a physician’s and a political historian’s explanation of Alexander Litvinenko’s death are competing with one another, such conflict arises only to the extent that one assumes that the physician and the political historian mean the same thing when they speak about “Litvinenko’s death”. But this is not the case, for by “Litvinenko’s death” the physician means the causal consequence of a physiological phenomenon, such as the failure of a vital organ, whilst by “Litvinenko’s death” the political historian means the preventable consequence of political conspiracy which led to his poisoning. Once the *explanandum is sufficiently disambiguated* it is clear that the physician and the historian are concerned with different things. The view that there is a conflict between their respective explanations arises only if one assumes that there is a sense of “thing” which is independent of the explanatory goals of medical science and of political history. But the very idea that one could identify an *explanandum* independently of the goals of a particular form of enquiry would have been anathema to 1960s style non-reductivists for their form of non-reductivism was articulated against the backdrop of a descriptive conception of metaphysics which denied the existence of a non-circular relation holding between the *explanans* and the *explanandum*. The expressions “causal explanation” and “rational explanation”, as we have seen, are truncated forms of “causal explanation of events” and “rational explanation of actions”.

1960s style non-reductivists were thus descriptive metaphysicians intent on explaining both the incompatibility and the consupponibility of practical and theoretical judgments. Explanations of actions and of events are incompatible because they imply freedom and determinism respectively. They are consupponible because they do not refer to the same (category neutral) “thing”. And since within a descriptive conception of metaphysics there is no category neutral description, there is no causal rivalry between folk-psychological explanations (of actions) and scientific explanations (of events).

The commitment to a particular conception of the task of philosophical enquiry was not explicitly at the forefront of the debate between reductivists and non-reductivists, but it was nonetheless lurking in the background of this dispute. Both non-reductivists such as Dray and reductivists such as Hempel
assumed the reasons/causes debate to be methodological in nature. What Hempel tried to show was that action explanations are methodologically reducible to the causal explanation of events, whilst Dray argued no such methodological reduction to be possible. But that the problem was methodological in the first instance was an assumption shared by reductivists and non-reductivists alike. Thus for the generation of non-reductivists prior to Davidson, once the relevant differences between the explanatory practices of the human and natural sciences had been pointed out, there were no residual questions to be addressed about how can mind fit in the natural world. Questions such as, “how can reasons, which at best rationally necessitate the conclusion of a practical argument, be causally responsible for the occurrence of the event/bodily movement which we describe as an action?” are ill formed because they mix and match categories and forms of inference in an inadmissible way. There simply is no such thing as a causal explanation of action because to explain an action is to explain it rationally and to explain an event is to explain it causally. To ask the question “how can beliefs and desires cause actions?” is simply to have failed to grasp the concept of an action. Within the context of this essentially methodological debate the attempt to defend the autonomy of action explanations simply required showing that they are rational, not nomological, and failure to accomplish a methodological reduction was failure to accomplish any reduction tout court.

Davidson’s master argument

Why did the anti-causalist views that dominated in the 1960s fall into disrepute? The official story is that anti-causalism was successfully disposed of by Davidson, who offered a knockout argument for disconnecting non-reductivism from anti-causalism.

Davidson agreed with the previous generation of non-reductivists that action explanations are normative but he also argued that a defence of the autonomy of action explanations must be disconnected from a rejection of causalism. There is a distinction, Davidson argued, between mere

---

10 How does mind fit in the natural world is on the other hand the central question of the philosophy of mind according to philosophers such as J. Kim, as the title of his book *Mind in a Physical World*, suggests (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998).
rationalizations or reasons for acting in a particular way, and rationalisations which form part of the agent’s process of deliberation leading to action, or the reasons why the agent acts. Suppose that on returning home a person (Sally) switches the light on. Sally could have switched the light on to alert a burglar in her property. Or she could have switched on the light to illuminate the room. Both reasons justify the action but Sally acted only on one of those reasons. Davidson argues that the causalist can easily account for the distinction between the reasons on which Sally acted (let’s call these reasons why) and other reasons on which Sally could have acted (let’s call these reasons for) by identifying the reasons why the agent acts with the reasons that are causally responsible for her acting. But such a distinction is not available to the kind of non-reductivist who is also an anti-causalist. Consequently, the previous generation of non-reductivists was unable to distinguish the reasons why an agent acts from mere reasons for acting. The inability to make such a distinction provides the motivation for disconnecting non-reductivism from anti-causalism.

Davidson’s claim that the reasons why an agent acts are the causes of her actions marks a genuine departure from the way in which previous generations of non-reductivists had argued. What was assumed prior to Davidson is that the ascription of a practical argument to an agent must conform to public and intersubjectively valid criteria of what could count as reason-giving and that even first person reports must conform to these standards if they are to be accepted as explanatory in the relevant sense of “explanatory”. For that generation of non-reductivists, as we have seen, beliefs and desires explain actions not in so far as they fulfil the role of hidden/internal causes of external/observable bodily movements but in so far as they feature as premises in practical arguments. Explaining an action requires initiating a search for beliefs and desires with the appropriate propositional contents to act as premises in a practical syllogism. Establishing rational harmony between premises and conclusions does not require any insight into the inner world of the agent. The question to be asked is “why anyone who is presumed to be rational (in the minimal instrumental sense)

---

would act in such and such a way?” To pinpoint the reasons that motivated the agent (the reasons why) amidst the array of valid practical arguments which could justify (instrumentally justify) the action, requires taking into account the specific circumstances in which the agent acted, including her beliefs and desires. But taking into account the perspective of the agent is simply a matter of determining which amongst the array of available valid practical argument it makes sense to ascribe to an agent, not to discover a secret causal connection between a brain state and a bodily movement. For 1960s style non-reductivists, altering the logical structure of action explanation in order to account for the distinction between reasons why and reasons for exacted too high a price, a price they were not willing to pay. For if beliefs and desires were internal causes of external bodily movements, then the folk-psychological distinction between actions and events would be a mere mistake premised on a failure to grasp the entailment relations holding between the species (action) and the genus (event), just as the act of counting washing machines alongside electrical appliances is based on the failure to discern the entailment relation holding between the species (washing machine) and its genus (electrical appliances).

Given that Davidson’s solution exacts such a high price, the question must be asked: is it really necessary, as Davidson argues, to identify the reasons why an agent acts with the causes of her action in order to provide explanations that are agent-centered? Arguably not. Scott Sehon has recently suggested that what is required in order to distinguish reasons why from reasons for is an appeal to counterfactuals: “agents act in ways that are appropriate for achieving their goals, given the agents’ circumstances, epistemic situations, and intentional states… this means that a wide variety of counterfactual conditions will hold of an agent.”\textsuperscript{12} He gives the following example: “suppose that Sally is faced with a sad situation: Her elderly father is terminally ill and comatose, and the doctors say there is no hope he will ever revive. He can be kept alive with machines, or Sally can decide to end the life support and he will die naturally. Sally desires that her father be allowed to die with dignity, and she believes that withdrawing life support will allow him to do

that. At the same time Sally wants to buy a new boat, and she will be able to
do that if she pulls the plug on her father, for she will then be relieved of the
enormous hospital bills.”¹³ Sehon argues that the following counterfactual
conditionals holds: if Sally withdrew the life support because she wanted her
father to die with dignity she would have acted in the same way even if her
financial position would not have altered as a result of taking that decision.

The problem one faces in determining the reasons why Sally acted
may be usefully compared to the question: how do we know that a person
acted out of duty rather than from some other non-moral motive? Kant
suggested that we have such epistemic certainty in cases in which all
empirical incentives are removed and a person still acts as duty requires. In
such cases it is possible to say with certainty that an action was motivated by
duty, and is not merely in accordance with duty. One might of course point out
that unlike hypothetical scenarios, real life situations are ambiguous and that
an agent’s actions are compatible with a plurality of rationalizations. But even
if we grant that is hard to know whether an agent really acted out of duty, the
epistemic difficulties that stand in the way of ascertaining what an agent’s true
motives are should not be allowed to undermine the distinction between
acting out of duty and acting in accordance with duty. For this distinction is an
intensional distinction that is independent of the ability to determine, with
absolute certainty, the extension of such concepts. In fact, one might argue
that mastery of the conceptual distinction is logically required in order for
those epistemic claims to be made in the first instance. By the same token,
the fact that appeal to counterfactuals may not always conclusively show that
a person acted on certain reasons rather than others, provides no
argumentative basis for denying that the distinction between reasons and
causes is a distinction in kind between logically independent genera rather
than a distinction in degree between a species and its genus. So even if
appeal to counterfactuals failed conclusively to establish the reasons why an
agent acts, this affords no basis for undermining the distinction between
reasons and causes, because such a distinction explicates what we mean
when we speak about actions and about events just as Kant’s distinction


URL: http://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/rajp
between acting *in accordance with duty* and acting *out of duty* is not an attempt to determine the extension of such concepts by establishing who is pure of heart and who is not, but an attempt to explicate what we mean by moral action.

An argument similar to Sehon has been developed by Julia Tanney. She suggests that to identify the reasons why an agent acts requires calibrating practical arguments in the light of additional information about the agent and the circumstances of their action rather than taking the draconian step of altering the logical structure of action explanation in order to account for the distinction between the reasons which motivated the agent from more generic reasons for acting.\(^\text{14}\) Tanney\(^\text{15}\) considers the case of a woman running out of a building. Her action could be rationalized by stating that the woman ran out of the building because the building was on fire. This would be short hand for “the woman believed the building was on fire, she wanted to stay alive and therefore she exited the building”. This rationalization, however, may provide a reason for running out of the building and yet not be the woman’s reason for doing so, because the woman is a fire fighter. In this case the initial rationalization will not do and one will have to look for another one. The woman may have run out to fetch a ladder to rescue an occupant trapped on the roof. Which is to say “the woman wanted to save a person trapped on the top floor of a burning building and since she believed that she could not have done this without fetching a ladder she left the burning building”. But talk of the woman’s wants and beliefs is in the second case, as in the first, an attempt to make sense of her action by establishing a relation of rational fit between the premises and conclusions of a practical argument. It is not a

\(^{14}\) This distinction is sometimes referred to as the distinction between normative and motivating reasons. But couching the distinction in this way is misleading in so far as it suggests that motivating reasons may not be normative. This is certainly not the view held by 1960s non-reductivists who claimed rational explanations to be species of justification. Though, as we have seen the normativity at stake was minimal as it required neither that agents can desire an object only under an aspect of the good nor that in order to be normative arguments must be sound or have true premises. For the goal is to establish whether a particular course of action would be mandatory not in the absolute but in the light of the agent’s epistemic situation and of their preferences.

question of “homing in something inner or hidden” that is accessible from the first person perspective only. Describing an action from an agent’s point of view requires altering the premises of the practical argument in the light of what we know about the circumstances of an agent, but in trying to discover what reasons might have motivated the agent to act we do not change the nature of the activity in which we are engaged. What we do is to construct multiple practical arguments with different beliefs and desires as epistemic and motivational premises and different actions as their conclusions.

Tanney’s example of the woman fleeing from the building shows that different practical arguments support different explanations of an action and we choose from amongst these on the basis of our knowledge of the agent’s circumstances, including beliefs that it seems plausible to ascribe to them. We can rule out that what would normally count as a reason for fleeing the building (that it was on fire) was not the reason why the woman fled the building if we ascribe her the goal of saving lives in her role as a fire-fighter. But what we cannot do is to give up on the idea that there must be a rational fit between the epistemic and motivational premises and the action. And this is clear from the fact that if, when consulted, the woman suggested that she fled the building because she believed there areMartians on the moon, we could not accept her statement as an explanation of her action even if it may be truthful to her psychological processes. The epistemic consideration that agents have greater authority over the narrative which explains their actions should not be allowed neither to override the conceptual point that action explanations are normative nor to blur the distinction between logic and psychology.

A solution to a problem must be proportionate to the problem it tries to solve but Davidson’s proposal to draw the distinction between reasons why and reasons for by identifying the reasons why an agent acts with the causes of her actions uses a sledgehammer to crack a nut. For such a distinction could be drawn without severing the link between non-reductivism and non-causalism. If it is possible to draw the distinction between reasons why and reasons for by considering different logical antecedents (things that the agent

---

was/was not likely to know/believe, things that the agent was/was not likely to desire) there is no need to take the momentous step of altering the logical structure of action explanation in order to account for the distinction.

The unofficial story about the rise of the new causalist consensus

While Davidson’s argument is not conclusive, it was largely responsible for establishing a new causalist consensus. For after Davidson’s seminal essay what was far from obvious in the 1960s suddenly became obvious in the 1970s. It is uncontroversial to Fodor, for example, that the folk-psychological view of action is causal:

… if it isn’t literally true that my wanting is causally responsible for my reaching… and my believing is causally responsible for my saying..., if none of that is literally true, then practically everything I believe about anything is false and it’s the end of the world.¹⁷

Remarks such as these would not have appeared obvious to philosophers such as Dray, who took a rather different view of the nature of the folk-psychological explanations of action. Dray would have claimed that what the ordinary folk does is to make a distinction between actions and events, but that it is the task of the philosopher to decide whether the folk-psychological distinction between actions and events is just a difference in degree between explanations whose causes are internal and those whose causes are external or whether it is a difference in kind between causal and rational explanations. Whilst Dray began from an examination of the common sense claim that person S did x because they believed y, he did not assume common sense to have a prior commitment to causalism.¹⁸ So why is it that what was not obvious prior to the publication of Davidson’s “Actions, Reasons and Causes”, became obvious afterwards? Arguably what is obvious to Fodor is not obvious to Dray’s because Dray’s argument against methodological unity in the sciences was largely an attempt to present, in the idiom of analytic

¹⁷ Fodor, J., A Theory of Content and Other Essays, MIT Press, p. 156
philosophy, a defence of the autonomy of the human sciences inspired by Collingwood’s conception of metaphysics as a science of absolute presuppositions. Since Collingwood’s conception of metaphysics as a descriptive rather than revisionary enterprise provided the backdrop against which Dray’s defence of anti-causalism was articulated, it is worth spelling it out in some detail.

According to Collingwood, the practitioners of different sciences absolutely presuppose different conceptions of causation that match up with the nature of their subject-specific *explanandum*. Historians are committed to what Collingwood refers to as “sense I” of the term “cause”. In history “that which is caused is the free and deliberate act of a conscious and responsible agent, and causing him to do it means affording him a motive for so doing.”¹⁹ The word is used in this sense in expressions such as “Mr Baldwin’s speech compelled the speaker to adjourn the house” or “a solicitor’s letter causes a man to pay his debt”. Sense I captures Collingwood view that history is a hermeneutic science concerned with the understanding of action. The term cause has a different meaning in the practical sciences of nature, sciences such as medicine and engineering. In the practical sciences of nature the term cause is used in “sense II” to mean “an event or state of things by producing or preventing which we can produce or prevent that whose cause it is said to be.”²⁰ For a medical practitioner the bite of a mosquito would qualify as a possible cause (in sense II) of malaria, for the primary concern of the medical doctor is to prevent or cure diseases. The term cause has a different meaning (“sense III”) in the theoretical sciences of nature where the term cause signifies an “event or state of things such that (a) if the cause happens or exists, the effect must happen or exist even if no further conditions are fulfilled (b) the effect cannot happen or exist unless the cause happens or exists.”²¹ The term “cause” acquires this deterministic meaning in sciences such as physics, which abstract from human interests in the manipulation of nature. The presupposition that the cause (sense I) of an action is the motive which explains it, is analytic for the historian because actions are the subject matter

of history. By the same token, that the cause (sense II) of an event is a state of affairs that may be either produced or prevented by human intervention is analytic for the practical sciences of nature. Absolute presuppositions thus express conceptual truths which cannot be denied without questioning the form of enquiry which presupposes them. These different conceptions of causation supply the verification conditions at work in different domains of enquiry. Causation, for Collingwood, is thus not a real relation but a form of explanation that is absolutely presupposed by a practitioner of a science and which supplies the verification conditions at work in a given domain of enquiry. Since there are no true or false claims that can be made independently of the verification conditions at work in a particular domain of enquiry, no form of explanation wears the ontological trousers precisely because all senses of causation capture explanatory, not real relations. There is no problem of explanatory exclusion precisely because it is not possible to break through the analytic entailment that holds between the \textit{explanandum} and its \textit{explanans}.

In so far as Dray’s defence of the autonomy of action explanation was articulated against the background of a descriptive conception of metaphysics, Dray’s anti-causalism had two distinctive features. Firstly, it rejected the view that the concept of explanation is a monolithic concept and that causal explanation (which was standardly identified with nomological explanation) is the only kind of explanation. This was the main bone of contention between Dray and Hempel. Secondly, it rejected the view that causation is a real or extensional relation that holds amongst events independently of how they are identified within a given explanatory context. This is a view defended by Davidson as part of an attempt to clarify the nature of his Anomalous Monism.\textsuperscript{22} Whilst Davidson sided with Dray and against Hempel on the normative character of action explanation, unlike Dray he believed causation to be more than a form of explanation.

Dray rejected the view that there is more to causation than causal explanation because he developed his defence of the autonomy of action explanation against the backdrop of a descriptive conception of metaphysics.

Accepting this descriptive conception of metaphysics implied that the task of the philosopher is to make explicit the presuppositions at work in different explanatory practices, not to solve the problem of mental causation. The fundamental problem of the philosophy of mind and action after Davidson, the problem of how can mind make an impact onto the physical world, arises only against the backdrop of a revisionary conception of metaphysics that was alien both to Dray and to many other 1960s style non-reductivists. It is only if the term causation is taken to be a category of revisionary metaphysics denoting a real relation holding amongst events independently of how they are described, that the problem of causal rivalry between folk-psychological explanations of actions and naturalistic explanation of events can arise. The problem of explanatory exclusion simply does not arise within a descriptive conception of metaphysics precisely because within such a conception of the role and character of philosophical analysis causal relations are intensional relations that are not logically independent of the explanatory goal of a science.

It is this extensional view of the causal relation that has resonated with Davidson’s supporters who were quick to identify Davidson’s extensionalism about causation with a rejection of a meta-philosophical view that had underpinned the non-reductivism of the 1960s. E. Lepore and B. Lower, for example, have pooh-poohed 1960s style anti-causalism as exemplifying the views which dominated in the era of ‘little red books’:

During the heyday of neo-Wittgenstenian and Rylean philosophy of mind, the era of little red books, it was said that propositional attitude explanations are not causal explanations and that beliefs, intendings, imaginings, and the like are not even candidates to be causes. Indeed, to treat mentalistic language as describing causes or causal processes is, it was said, a logical error. We have come a long way since then. The work of Davidson, Armstrong, Putnam, and Fodor (among others) has reversed what was once the orthodoxy and it is now widely agreed that propositional attitude
attributions describe states and episodes which enter into causal relations.\textsuperscript{23}

And Kim has accused methodological non-reductivists of evading the real (and in his view ontological) challenges posed by the problem of mental causation:

One sort of reaction on the part of some philosophers to the re-emergence of mental causation as a philosophical problem is to try to dissipate it by arguing that there is in fact no such “problem”… It has been argued that worries about mental causation arise out of our misplaced philosophical priorities; that overindulgence in unmotivated metaphysical assumptions and arguments is the source of the unnecessary worries; that a misunderstanding of the logic and metaphysics of causation is at the core of the apparent troubles; that we should look to explanations and explanatory practices, not to metaphysics, for guidance on the matter of mental causation… These are what we might call “free lunch” solutions – or, if not free, at least pretty cheap ones.\textsuperscript{24}

It is the association of 1960s style non-reductivism with an intensionalist view of causation, rather than its inability to account for the distinction between reasons why and reasons for, that is troublesome for Kim, Lepore, Lower and others. But if 1960s style non-reductivism has been scorned primarily on account of its unwillingness to distinguish between causation and causal explanation, rather than on account of its alleged inability to make the distinction between reasons why and reasons for, the meta-philosophical burden of proof lies with the causalist. We are owed an argument which explains why it is worth living with the problem of explanatory exclusion and blurring the boundaries between logic and psychology in order to introduce

the distinction between causation and causal explanation required by a revisionary conception of metaphysics.

To summarize: why is it that causalism became the new orthodoxy in the philosophy of action? The official story is that Davidson’s master argument conclusively showed that severing the link between non-reductivism and anti-causalism was necessary in order to explain the distinction between reasons why and reasons for. The suggestion made here is that Davidson’s argument succeeded not because it spelled out, in a quasi-transcendental fashion, the necessary conditions for making a distinction between the reasons that motivated an agent from other reasons, but because its message chimed with a return of a revisionary conception of metaphysics and the view that causation cannot be a mere form of explanation. If so, the first order philosophical battle between causalists and non-causalists in the philosophy of action cannot be won without fighting a meta-philosophical war about the very role and character of philosophical analysis. And fighting this war should involve much more than dismissing 1960s style non-reductivism as belonging to the era of little red books and their proponents as seeking a free ontological lunch. Since what distinguishes philosophy from other forms of enquiry is the fact that reflection on the nature of philosophy is an intrinsic part of philosophy itself, not a distinct second-order discipline, the identification of metaphysics with an ontological investigation into mind-independent structures cannot simply be taken for granted. And if meta-philosophy is an intrinsic part of philosophy, the question concerning the nature of philosophical problems - are they conceptual or are they ontological? - is itself a proper object of philosophical discussion. The endorsement of a particular conception of philosophical enquiry, in other words, cannot be deemed to be philosophically non-negotiable. Yet, it is precisely a tendency to take a particular conception of the role and character of philosophical analysis as read that is largely responsible for the success of causalism.