

A NOTE ON ACTION AND CAUSAL EXPLANATION

If asked, "Why does your car's fender have a dent in it?" we can reply, "Because a branch fell on it." The question is a request for a causal explanation, and that is what the answer supplies. Similarly, if asked, "Why did John rush out of the building like that?" we can reply, "Because he thought it was on fire." In the second answer, as in the first, a certain event is explained by asserting that it happened because of something else, something which seems to be temporally prior to it. This fact raises the question: Does the second answer, like the first, supply a causal explanation of the event in question? More generally, we can ask: Do statements in which human acts are explained by identifying a belief, desire, or intention from which they spring give causal explanations of those acts?

Some philosophers would answer this more general question with a yes, while others would say no. I will offer some evidence to support those who would deny that such explanations are causal. I will do so by contrasting such explanations with explanations that *everyone* would agree are causal, showing that the controversial cases are unlike the uncontroversial ones in an interesting and important way. Although the difference between them does not indicate that it is contradictory, nonsensical, or otherwise absurd to call both sorts of cases "causal explanations," it does indicate that to do so blurs a distinction that ought to be preserved and examined.

I will use the somewhat anthropomorphic term "action" to mean, in the broadest sense, anything that something might be said "to do." "Actions" will include not only changes that a thing might undergo (growing, decaying, moving about, etc.) but also the act of radiating energy—for instance, giving off light or heat. They will not include being in states in which nothing necessarily happens, such as being wet or being heavy.

As I have characterized it so far, the notion of an action is a very vague one. Even so, it will serve my purposes well enough. Borrowing a pair of terms from the grammars, I divide actions into two types: transitive and intransitive. Transitive actions are what something does to something; they are actions with objects. Intransitive actions are all the rest. I hope some examples will show what I mean.

ACTIONS

Intransitive

moving

closing one's hand

sneezing

glowing

burning

giving off heat

Transitivemoving something,
knocking something over,
smashing something,
denting somethinggrasping something,
squeezing something

giving someone a cold

illuminating something

scorching something,
igniting something,
melting something

heating something up

Now I can make some very general remarks about explanations that everyone would regard as causal.

1. In offering such an explanation, one is always attempting to explain either a certain action or something's failure to act in a certain way. This is so even though the proffered explanation may be an answer to a question that only mentions a state something is in, and not an action at all—as in “Why is this thing wet?” In each case what is to be explained is either the thing's *coming to be* in that state or its failure to dry out.

This is a characteristic that all explanations of human acts share with explanations that are uncontroversially causal. Human acts are certainly instances of what I have called actions. So far, so good. Since explanations of failures to act seem to be irrelevant to my topic, I will ignore them henceforth for simplicity.

2. Usually, the action of a thing can be causally explained by describing it as the doing of something else, as the transitive action of some other thing. For instance, if we are asked, “How did this thing get wet?” we can reply by saying, “It was dampened by last night's rain.” The event described in the question as getting wet is redescribed in the answer as being dampened by the rain.

When we do not have a verb (such as “dampens”) for the transitive action involved, we must resort to highly general terms, such as “causes.” Other highly general locutions (many of them metaphors of coercion) can stand in for more specific ones in quite the

same way: "impels," "forces," "makes so-and-so do such-and-such," and so forth. In most attempts to explain something causally, we need not resort to such more general stand-ins, since there usually is a verb that names the transitive action involved. Whenever there is no such more specific verb, I suppose it is always possible to make one up.

When explaining a human action by identifying the belief, desire, or intention that is the source of the act, we sometimes do so by using one of the more general stand-in expressions. "Your Honor, it was the defendant's understandable and just indignation that made him do this terrible act." "Impelled by the rage that had finally overcome him, he searched feverishly for a weapon."¹ It is interesting, however, that there are no more specific verbs that do this sort of work. There is no name, for instance, for the transitive action in which the murderer's rage impels him to look for a weapon. The same is true of all the other beliefs, desires, and intentions that generate human actions. Moreover, it seems a safe bet that this is not a peculiarity of the English language and that *no* language has names for transitive actions in which such mental states or activities generate human actions—at any rate, it is difficult to imagine a language that does.

Even if explanations that illuminate a human action by identifying the belief, desire, or intention that generates it are causal explanations, they at least are a linguistically unusual kind of causal explanation.

3. In events that are the subjects of noncontroversial causal explanations, the thing that accomplishes the transitive action involved always does so *by* doing something else. The action-by-which (as I will call it) may be some further transitive action—"He detonated the bomb by lighting the fuse"—or it may be intransitive, as in "It detonated the bomb by flaring up." Whenever a noncontroversially causal explanation is being proffered, we can ask how so-and-so was detonated, moved, dented, given a cold, and so forth. And there is always an answer, although we may not know what it is.²

On the other hand, I can think of no actions by which a person's beliefs, desires, and intentions generate his actions. Further, if we are told something like, "He ran from the building because he thought it was on fire," it does not seem to make sense to ask something like, "Okay, but *how* did his belief that the building was on fire make him run out of it?" These are interesting facts because in a noncontroversially causal explanation the action-by-which must either be given in the explanation or already understood by the

audience at which it is aimed. If both these conditions are unfulfilled, the explanation will be, in an important way, incomplete. Suppose that I am a member of a lynch-mob because I believe a certain very brief and simple causal explanation of John's death: that John died because Paul killed him. I may be quite satisfied with this explanation, in spite of its brevity and simplicity: I may not care to know whether Paul did it by shooting John, by pushing him out a window, by putting cyanide in his coffee, etc. But as a member of a lynch-mob, my interest is not in understanding the event, but in doing something about it: if my interest is in understanding what happened, the case is quite different. If I am a criminologist or I am reading an account of the event in a newspaper, and I am told only that John died because Paul killed him, I feel that I am told almost nothing about the event. It is obscure to me; I am in the dark about it. Among other things, I want to know how it was done. In such circumstances, we feel that we have been told the very beginning of a story that has not been finished, and finishing the story would include giving the action by which the event was brought about. Suppose, on the other hand, that we are told that a certain act was done because of a certain belief, desire, or intention of the agent's and are told no more than that. The explanation does not necessarily leave that act a mystery, even if our only interest is in understanding it. We may well feel that we have been told quite enough, and it seems nonsensical to ask that the explanation be completed by giving the action by which the agent's belief, etc., made him act as he did.

These facts do not refute the theory that such explanations are causal in nature, but a philosopher who holds this theory must take account of them. I can imagine two ways in which this might be done.

First, one might say that such explanations are simply a special sort of causal explanation: in giving *this* sort of causal explanation, supplying the action-by-which is neither possible nor in any way necessary. This position is not an absurd one, but it is not a completely comfortable one, either. The difference between this special sort of causal explanation—if that is what it is—and the noncontroversial kind is by no means a trivial difference. In the noncontroversial cases, giving the action-by-which plays an essential role in carrying out what seems to be the most distinctive function of an explanation: that of *satisfying our desire to understand*. Without it, this desire is not satisfied. A sort of explanation that can satisfy our desire to understand without resorting to this

device is a very different sort of explanation. If the controversial cases are really causal explanations, they are anomalous ones; and this position must live with the haunting possibility that what seems an anomalous example of one thing may be a quite straightforward instance of something else.

The second position is bolder and more interesting than the first. One might say that, in the controversial cases, requests that the action-by-which be given are really not nonsensical requests at all—if we do not take them seriously, that is, because they clearly require us to do the impossible. We simply *do not know* the actions by which intentions and the like move us to act. On this view, the controversial cases are just like noncontroversial causal explanations, except that we happen to be unable to consummate them because we are crippled by ignorance. This position is not an impossible one to hold; Descartes, for instance, held a roughly similar view for roughly similar reasons.³ In its own way, it does reconcile the theory that the controversial cases are causal explanations with the facts I have pointed out. It does so, however, by paying a price—namely, by admitting that the theory makes the connection between beliefs, desires, and intentions on the one hand and human actions on the other seem mysterious. Part of the point of any theory is to make things intelligible and therefore to eliminate mysteries. If a theory *creates* mysteries, that is hardly a mark in its favor.

LESTER H. HUNT

Carnegie-Mellon University

1. It may be worth noting in passing that most of the more general expressions are only used in special contexts: cases in which the source of what the agent did is something especially powerful, such as jealousy and rage. This is obviously true of the ones that are metaphors of coercion, and to a slighter extent, it is also true of "causes." The question "What causes you to do that?" is somewhat more ominous than the question "Why do you do that?" The former suggests, while the latter ordinarily does not, that there is something anomalous about what you do, something that could only be explained (and perhaps only justified) by some stronger-than-usual motive force.

2. Notice that I am only speaking of those transitive actions that represent causal connections—that is, those in which some change is brought about in the object of the action. It is not obvious that all *other* transitive actions can only be accomplished by doing something else. The action of denting something is always

accomplished by doing something else, like hitting it. But hitting something does not, as such, include any change in the object of the act. Is this action necessarily accomplished by doing something else: for instance, does my car hit a tree *by* doing some other thing? Fortunately, I need not answer these questions.

3. See *Descartes: Philosophical Writings*, ed. Anscombe and Geach (New York, 1971), pp. 274-82.