Intentions, Motives, and Causation

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We are all well aware that the concepts of intentions, reasons, purposes, and motives occupy essential positions in our descriptions of human behaviour and that we often need to use these terms in explanations of what we and others are doing or will do. The explanations are of the sort that 'throw light' on what they are supposed to explain by supplying certain contextual matters, as well as feelings, thoughts, and so forth, so they are unlike explanations that are supposed to tell us of the causes of behaviour or events. They draw on our knowledge and experience of the world.

I will point out some difficulties with views of understanding human action in causal terms, views which have been widely adopted despite the rather obvious problems they generate. I will be concerned with what proponents of these views say about desires, beliefs, intentions, and such things, and primarily, what they say about explanations of actions. But I will discuss these views apart from their view that desires, beliefs, motives, and the like, are physiological states. Since many have been persuaded to adopt the causal views by their discussions of desires, beliefs, reasons, explanations of actions and the like, it seems worthwhile to comment on those discussions.

Their basic idea, the 'Humean' view of reasons for acting, is that all we need to explain and understand any human action are desires and the related beliefs, broadly understood. These form the cause of the action. In the words of Smith and Jones:

> … the mental causes of those behavioural episodes which count as intentional actions are simply beliefs and desires.[1]

There is much in this remark that needs to be and has been disputed, but I will confine my remarks to the possibility of reducing explanations of human actions to such terms.

I will review the sorts of explanations that normally involve mention of intentions, motivations, and so forth, and then point out why Smith and Jones and others have not adequately dealt with the concept of intention. My message in section V is that what these

[1] Peter Smith and O. R. Jones, *The Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge University Press, 1986), 245. I will give page numbers in parentheses after the quotations from this book.

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authors speak of as explanations of human actions will not make very many actions comprehensible to everyone. For one reason, among many, a causal explanation is not able to incorporate or use the most common notions of intention, motivation, decision, and the like. And the *de facto* elimination of these concepts means, among other things, that many human actions are not explicable in their terms.

Intentions, reasons, purposes and motives are plainly different things, but they may all be goals or ends, aims or objectives, so they are sometimes difficult to distinguish. And, of course, in some contexts we may speak of one or the other. I should point out, though it is not directly relevant to the main discussion, that it is not plausible to suppose that these terms or concepts relate in some way to internal entities that have the functional role of causes. Which I use in my explanations of my actions will not depend on which 'internal entity' was behind my activity. It is not plausible that there are three or four different entities 'within me'—a reason, an intention, a motive or purpose—each of which explain why I did what I did.

I

A look at the nature of intentions, motives, and motivations will remind us how they 'throw light' on a person's actions.

An intention may be, or may be regarded, as a course of action that a person has adopted as well as an objective, end or goal. 'I intend to win [my goal], whatever it takes to do so. So I intend to practice every day [my course of action] in order to achieve my goal.' Or one might say, 'I intend to return the library book and then head home', simply telling someone where I am going, or 'I did not intend to hurt him' in answer to a question; the idea of a goal being absent. Such statements may tell us something about the person's circumstances, aims and determination to achieve them.

And, of course, a goal or end may also be the intention 'with which' something is done. 'I practice in order to win.' 'I brought flowers with the intention of mollifying Molly.' When I buy flowers with the intention of mollifying, I do so intentionally—that is, buying flowers was at one time my course of action. I decided to do so because I knew that the flowers would mollify. When someone says, 'He did it intentionally', we don't know, if we don't know the context, whether an 'intention with which' is involved or not. But Smith and Jones adopt a view in which intentional actions can always be described in terms of an 'intention with which'. We will discuss their view.

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The distinction between intentions as goals and as courses of action is not an absolute one. It is quite possible that my goal—e.g., winning—becomes my course of action when circumstances change. Perhaps I wish to teach little Freddie that he cannot always expect to win by winning a game from him. As in the above example about returning the library book, I often tell someone my course of action simply to inform him of it and I often tell him my goal or objective in order to explain, for example, why I am taking the course of action that I am taking.

Kenny says that '...reports of intentions give forward-looking reasons for action; reports of motives may either give a backward-looking reason, or exhibit the action as falling under some specific scheme of this general pattern'.[2] I take it that this means that if I say that I intend to go to church when I am leaving the house on the way to the garage, I am giving as a reason for my behaviour something which lies in the future. And when I point out that Fred sought revenge for an insult when he told the story about Eleanor, I am pointing to something past as a reason or motive for, or an explanation of, Fred's actions. Intentions, as we have seen, are more complicated than this, but motives are fairly well characterized in this quotation of Kenny.

The word 'motive' is used in various ways, usually by detectives and psychologists, but a motive is always a reason. (Psychologists have sometimes confused the issue by referring to motives as what are essentially desires or 'drives', but we need not consider this definition.) The difference between a reason and a motive lies in the context. If we are trying to find out who killed Robin we look for motives. If we are trying to figure out who sent him a large cheque we (usually) look for benevolent reasons. We usually speak of motives when the action is slightly or egregiously shady, but a suitor may have honourable intentions or motives

Revenge, jealousy and avarice are the paradigm motives for actions in our culture, perhaps because many crimes and other evil deeds are committed with these motives. These motives, and many others, are reasons for a man's actions which promote, or help promote, an understanding of those actions by indicating the context in which the actions took place. That is, of course, why they are so important in criminal investigations and, in general, understanding human behaviour. If I am investigating a shooting, and find that with one or more of his last breaths, the victim said, 'The motive was greed.' I would know that I should look at his will and question the legatees.

[2] Anthony Kenny, *The Metaphysics of Mind* (Oxford University Press, 1992), 63.

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The concept of motivation complicates the picture further because 'motivation' is used in an even less precise way than 'motive'. At the same time it offers another dimension for explaining human behaviour. Some psychologists define it as 'the desire to perform some act', and some speak of 'motivational force' and 'incentives'. We non-psychologists speak of motivation more often in the sense of what produces the desire. 'The pep talk by his brother motivated him.' 'The promise of great wealth motivated him.' A person may be motivated or encouraged by kind words or approval, or by success or failure, or by friendship, admiration, or spite, and the like. There are similarities with motives—revenge, greed and jealousy may be motivations—but there are obvious differences. For example, the word is often used in circumstances in which no motive exists, for what motivates a person is not usually a reason for his actions.

A motivation is closer to being a cause than a reason or motive, and this may be why some psychologists prefer to try to explain behaviour in terms of motivations rather than intentions or motives. A cause involves an invariable connection (whatever else it may involve), but one may have intentions, or motives or reasons for acting which are not acted on. 'They all had motives for killing her.' 'I intended to go, but didn't.' However, there is no such thing as a motivation which is not followed by action motivated by that motivation. It borders on nonsense to say 'He was motivated by his brother's example but did nothing to emulate him.' There is, one might say, no person who was motivated to do something but did not do it.

But a motivation is not a cause in any sense of the word. The link between what motivates someone and what they are motivated to do is purely conceptual. Still both motives and motivations are, conceptually, more *like* causes than intentions are. There is no motivation without a resulting behaviour and a motive may prove compelling, but this way of speaking is entirely out of order with intentions. An intention is not irresistible or compelling no matter how firm it is, nor is it resistible. An obsession or addiction may be irresistible, but the intention—to marry her, to drink, or whatever the obsession or addiction—only tells the nature of the obsession or the kind of addiction.

Anscombe's account of 'motives-in-general' seems to be an account of motivation rather than of motives. She describes them in this way:

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> To give a motive (of the sort I have labelled 'motive-in-general'...) is to say something like 'See the action in this light'. To explain one's own actions by an account indicating a motive is to put them in a certain light. ...The question whether the light in which one so puts one's action is a true light is a notoriously difficult one.[3]

Her example is that of a person signing a petition because of admiration for its promoter. 'Asked "Why did you sign it?" I might well say "Well, for one thing, X, who is promoting it, did ..." and describe what he did in an admiring way.'[4] This, I say, points to what motivated the signer, not a motive.

But the important thing is that knowing a person's motive, his motivation, intention, and the like, does help promote a deeper understanding of a person's behaviour because it tells us in what context to view his behaviour, and the spirit, as Anscombe puts it, in which the deed was done. This is especially true of the paradigm motives of revenge, greed, and jealousy. However, this type of explanation of someone's behaviour—'See his behaviour in this light: he is desperate for money [is madly in love, frantic with worry]'—may cite friendship, admiration, devotion, or something of the sort, without any motive being involved. Unlike the thirst for revenge, or jealousy, and the other motives for which particular patterns of behaviour are characteristic because the person has specific goals, things that motivate people do not prompt such well defined patterns of behaviour. But knowing what did motivate a person may also give us a great deal of insight into his state of mind when he did what he did.

II

Let us look at a long standing and widely accepted account of what makes actions 'comprehensible', to use the word that Smith and Jones use, to see how causal explanations differ from those referring to motives, motivations and intentions. I will examine the argument of Smith and Jones, who present a relatively coherent and detailed account of the causal view first outlined by Davidson.[5] And then I

[3] G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1957), 20.

[4] Ibid., 20.

[5] Donald Davidson, 'Actions, Reasons, And Causes', in *The Journal of Philosophy*, **LX**, No. 23 (Nov. 1963), 685–700, reprinted in *Essays on Action and Events* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980). I will cite page numbers from the latter and will give them in the text preceded by a D. I cannot do justice to Davidson's extensive writings about intention, causes, actions, and related matters, so I will not try. I will concentrate on the more manageable account of a similar view by Smith and Jones.

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will give examples of the difficulties they face in trying to reconcile the idea of intentional action with the idea that such actions are caused.

They call the following a Fundamental Principle (FP).

> … specifying the agent's reasons for acting is a question of mentioning a desire together with a belief to the effect that the action in question was the appropriate way of satisfying the desire: we render the behaviour comprehensible by seeing the agent as pursuing his or her aims in an intelligible way. (130)
>
> … Jill opened the window because she wanted fresh air and believed that she would get fresh air by opening the window. (245)

The beliefs and desires—the reasons for acting—are mental causes of actions.

The FP 'encapsulates a bit of common-sense folk wisdom' (166), the authors say, and they add numerous qualifications to make it more plausible, including other 'common-sensical general principles about how beliefs and desires interact to produce action.' (166) And 'desire' and 'belief' are to be understood as including an 'extended family of related concepts.' (167) 'We have an extensive range of finely differentiated mental concepts, and we can cope with a multitude of interrelations between them.' (168) And Davidson says, without argument, that:

> … it is not necessary to classify and analyse the many varieties of emotions, sentiments, moods, motives, passions, and hungers whose mention may answer the question 'Why did you do it?' in order to see how, when such mention rationalizes the action, a primary reason is involved. (D7)

His three sketchy examples include this one: 'Jealousy is the motive in a poisoning because, among other things, the poisoner believes his action will harm his rival (*sic*), remove the cause of his agony, or redress an injustice, and these are the sorts of things a jealous man wants to do.' (D7) He means to be pointing to the cause of the poisoner's action, but he fails to do so since there is none given or suggested in the example. However, his references to jealousy, greed, motive, and things such as emotions, sentiments, moods, are supposed to be references to physiological states, so causality is introduced into such explanations by the identification of mental states with physiological states.

In the account of Smith and Jones, the role of the resources of the language—the 'extensive range of finely differentiated mental

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concepts' and the 'many varieties of emotions, sentiments, moods, motives'—which we use in describing human behaviour is not clear. Perhaps they are supposed to be a kind of measure of the many ways we determine the nature of the desires and beliefs which are the cause of the action in question. My view is that the 'extensive range of finely differentiated mental concepts', and so forth, offers much more than different ways in which our desires and beliefs may be expressed, so one cannot suppose that we only need to specify a desire and belief when replacing a description of complex behaviour that uses finely differentiated concepts of our language.

Whether a person mentions his intention, motive, motivation, emotion, or something else in response to the question 'Why did you do it?' depends, among other things, on the kind of answer he wishes to give in reply to the particular question asked in those particular circumstances. And that all such different explanations are to be translated into explanations mentioning only desires and beliefs without alluding to motives, intentions and the circumstances, does not appear to be possible. Consider, for example, the following exchanges:

(1) A. Why are you in the candy store? I thought you were going to give her a book.
B. I did intend to give her a book, but she had the one I wanted to give her. Now I intend to give her chocolates.

The questions is whether B's explanation can be expressed in terms of desires and beliefs. To say that 'I intend to give her chocolates' , 'I will give her ...', 'I have decided to give her...', or the like, is not the same as saying 'I want to give her chocolates'. I may intend to give her candy even though I do not want to, and I may want to even though I do not intend to. B mentions his purpose in going to the candy store, so it may be suggested that a translation into the causal language might be, 'I came to the candy store with the intention of buying her some candy.' Or: 'I bought candy with the intention of giving it to her'. Usually one of these statements would suffice as an explanation, but in both cases, B may add, '...but I may not', so in neither case is he committed to a course of action. He still has not said that he intends to give it to her.

(2) A. Why are you calling Fred? B. I intend to persuade him to join us whether he wants to or not.
(3) A. Why are you refusing to talk to her? B. I do not intend to argue about the matter with her.

Sometimes one could say, 'I do not wish to argue with her', but to

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make it definite, he would have to add, '...and I won't', meaning, 'I do not intend to'.

(4) A. Why is Fred trying to earn tuition money? B. He will enroll this fall. He is motivated by his brother's example in graduating from the University.

What is said is something more than 'Fred has a desire to emulate his brother's example and believed that (such and such)' To say, in this context, that 'he is motivated by his brother's example' is to say that he was inspired by his brother's example and is trying to do the same. To be inspired is to acquire certain desires, but it also is to acquire a determination to satisfy those desires. I don't know whether such a determination, or a commitment (2) can be part of the causal vocabulary. They are not merely objects of desire.

And then there are explanations as these.

(5) A. Why did you do that? B. I had no choice, it was the only thing I could do.

No doubt, there are many such explanations that have little to do with desires and beliefs, especially those in which I do not want to do what I do.

It is not clear what the authors (including Davidson) would say about these explanations of actions which cannot, as far as I can see, be translated into desires and beliefs. They do not discuss what can be admitted to explanations of actions except in the broad outlines already mentioned, so one assumes that the explanations are restricted to desires and beliefs in their various forms. In (IV) I will discuss the reason why the authors do not wish to consider such examples as (5). And there are more serious difficulties connected to the concept of intention in the accounts of Smith and Jones, and Davidson, as we will see in the next section.

III

Smith and Jones say that we act *because* of reasons, the desires and beliefs, what Davidson calls primary reasons. And '...an action is intentional if there is an answer to the question "Why did the agent do that?" which explains the action by giving the agent's *reasons* for acting.' (130) So, '...the mental causes of those behavioural episodes which count as intentional actions are simply beliefs and desires.' (134) For example, '...the difference between your arm going up and your raising your arm is a matter of appropriate causation by beliefs

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and desires.' (134) In short, if I carry out an intentional action, I have a desire to obtain some goal, and a belief that doing what I am doing is the way to obtain that goal. I act with the intention of obtaining that goal and my action is caused by the desire and belief.

There are obvious difficulties, however, in supposing that a person's action was caused *and* intentional in addition to those serious difficulties raised by speaking of actions as being caused, unless, of course, one just accepts the idea that intentional actions are caused. But accepting that idea means that one has simply changed the meaning of 'intentional action'. There are important things to say about intentional actions which have nothing to do with goals or desires or beliefs.

Here is a familiar sort of example of one of the ways in which the causal account of Smith and Jones, and, one would think, many others, proves to be unsatisfactory with respect to intentional action. As everyone knows, the validity of a claim that a person is morally responsible for his action rests on whether he did what he did freely and intentionally; that is, whether he adopted that course of action of his own free will. In matters of accountability, we are only interested in whether a person adopted murder, for example, as a course of action. We often do not care, within this context, what his purpose was, what he desired, that is, the intention with which he did it. And clearly, to say that he killed her with malice aforethought is to say something significantly different than that he desired (or whatever) her death and 'believed' that a bullet through her brain would do it.[6]

As everyone knows, the reconciliation of the idea of actions being caused, in the sense in which we understand this idea (killing when in a psychotic rage, e.g.) with the idea of being accountable for one's actions is, to say the least, difficult. In fact, when it is clear that a causal sequence of events leads to someone's death—perhaps a person had a heart attack while driving and lost control of his car—it

[6] One would think that the concept of knowledge would occupy a central and immensely important place in any general explanation of action since human actions are guided by, and grounded in, our knowledge of the world, ourselves and others. Smith and Jones, however, avoid the word 'know' when speaking of human action and how to explain it. In their standard example, the authors refuse to say that Jill knew she could get fresh air by opening the window even though we assume that she does when we say, for example, 'Jill opened the window because it was stuffy in here.' The idea that Jill opened the window because she believed that that is the way to get fresh air would only make sense if Jill lived near a slaughter house, and thought that the wind was favourable, or something of the sort. Of course, this is a curiosity of much contemporary writing.

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means very often that he was *not* responsible. Smith and Jones attempt to solve the general problem by saying that:

> ...the complex of desires which lie behind an action is itself, by and large, something for which the agent has some degree of responsibility: so the consequent action will also be to some extent something for which the agent can be held to account. (133)

This clearly won't do. We hold a person accountable for his action, not because he had certain desires, but because he did what he did intentionally, whether or not he had a purpose in doing what he did. And we often hold him fully accountable for what he did. Smith and Jones are not able to express the simple truth that an agent can be held to account because he intended to do what he did, e.g., bring about the death of someone. They could say that the agent 'desired' (or whatever) the death of this person and thought that such and such was the way to bring it about. Or they could say, when the deed is done, 'He pointed the gun and pulled the trigger with the intention of killing his competitor', but this still does not say that he intentionally killed his competitor.

And Davidson, to digress for a moment, wrestles with what is essentially the same difficulty—the problem of how to account for someone actually doing something (intentionally) when only desires are involved. In trying to deal with the matter, he ignores an important aspect of our linguistic practices, namely the fact that we understand, when reading a newspaper account, or listening to a story about someone's (intentional) actions, that what is done, unless otherwise indicated, is done intentionally. It is in this sense that, as Anscombe put it, some 'happenings' can only be intentional.[7]

The question Davidson addresses is 'How do we know that a driver who appears to signal intended to raise his arm?' He is referring to the 'intention with which he raises his arm'. Here is the pattern of description which requires a causal interpretation according to Davidson: '...the man is driving, he is approaching a turn; he knows he ought to signal; he knows how to signal, by raising his arm.' (D11) Suppose then, someone says, 'If he raises his arm in these circumstances, he signals.' Davidson claims that '...this explanation does not touch the question of why he raised his arm.' (D11) He means, of course, that the explanation does not give the cause of his action and if we do not know whether there was a cause, we don't know whether he signalled or just raised his arm. 'If the description "signalling"

[7] G. E. M. Anscombe, op. cit., 84.

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explains his action by giving his reason, then the signalling must be intentional; but, on the account just given, it may not be.' (D11)

There may be curious and rare circumstances in which a man in such a situation inadvertently raises (is caused to raise) his arm, even though he had decided to signal, and in which the raising of his arm is wrongly understood as a signal. In such circumstances a person describing what happened would say that he raised his arm unintentionally. However, in an ordinary account of such matters, when it is said that someone raised his arm we would *understand* his action to be intentional unless indicated otherwise. And in the circumstances, intentionally raising one's arm would be intentionally signalling.

I should say that I am assuming that Davidson is referring to ordinary accounts of such things. One of the most puzzling things about these claims is how our language—its conventions and its concepts—are supposed to be related to those entities which have causal connections, the physiological states. All one can say is that if Davidson is talking about beliefs and desires, and speaking about the matter as we all do, then he is mistaken.

The importance of all this is that much of the authors' discussion of intentional action relies for its sense on the conventions governing intentional actions that Anscombe described. When they say that Jill opened the window, for example, they have thereby introduced the concept of intention into the discussion since we understand that opening a window is an intentional action. That is, 'Jill opened the window' means that Jill adopted that course of action, or had that intention. It is not the existence of a desire and belief that legitimizes the introduction of intentions of this sort, so the mere existence of a desire and a belief will not enable us to speak of 'the intention with which...'. To put it crudely; desires and beliefs—'Jill wanted fresh air and believed that opening the window would let some in'—only allow us to speak of the 'intention with which' when we already have the concept of the intention which is a course of action. The 'intention with which' presupposes we understand the concept of intention which I described by the phrase 'having a course of action'. It is in English that the opening of a window is intentional, not in the proposed causal language.

IV

I will comment on several of the ways the authors, deliberately or not, simplify their subject matter to make their view of understanding actions more plausible. These simplifications help in

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promulgating the idea that human behaviour is understandable in causal terms; in particular, the idea that desires and beliefs are sufficient to account for action.

The FP is supposed to be true because it is 'folk wisdom'. (163 ff.) Given this reliance on folk wisdom to establish principles, one would think we could take into account such common sense 'folk wisdom' as the fact that people sometimes do what they do not want to do. They have contra-attitudes, one might say, toward what they are doing, so the explanation of their actions cannot be couched simply in terms of desires and beliefs. Consider: 'Why I went with Karla, whom I didn't know, when it was my adamant wish not to go with her, I could not have said.' (Joyce Carol Oates *Secret; Silent)* The reason why Kathryn did go with Karla is clear in light of the characterizations of Kathryn—a kind, rather submissive person—and Karla—domineering and selfish—and some of the preceding events in the story. Surely, we, like Kathryn, sometimes do things, not because we want to, but because of obligation, love, necessity, fear, and many other reasons. Sometimes we have to force ourselves to do painful or distasteful things which are, nevertheless, necessary. One has to suppose that the authors mean for us to take it as axiomatic that a person who does something *always* has a pro-attitude toward doing it, whether he wants to do it or not. But then it is unclear just what a 'pro-attitude' is.

This would appear to be a minor objection, as far as the authors are concerned. Since they mean to be referring to the physiological states of a person that, they say, can be identified as attitudes, no doubt they can regard a contra-attitude as a cause, or part of one, as well as a pro-attitude. And if a person does something simply because he enjoys it, or is interested in it, and so on, his pro-attitude, without any beliefs about a goal, presumably, is cause enough.

But they are interested in an argument showing that a reason is, in fact, a sufficient condition for action, and to do this they apparently need 'pro-attitudes'. Speaking of the difficulty in stating a connection between desires and actions, Smith and Jones tell us that

> ... the best we can hope for is some general truth relating reasons to actions which is qualified by the vague clause *barring unusual physiological or psychological mishaps*; ... [or] *so long as nothing untoward happens*. 246

There is, they say, '...a logical connection (and not merely an empirical one) between beliefs, desires and the appropriate actions.' (246) What they mean (and say) is that the logical connection exists between the beliefs, a person's *strongest* desires and the appropriate

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actions. The idea is that we always act so as to satisfy our strongest desires. We can tell what a person's strongest desires are by his actions, on this view, but, apparently, only by his actions. The authors give us no clearer idea as to what our 'strongest desire' is, than what a 'pro-attitude' is. It is, for a plausible counter example, often the case that a person's strongest desires are accompanied by intolerable consequences or by the impossibility of fulfilling those desires. So we often have to do what we can do rather than what we really want to do. We have to control our temper and stifle our strongest desire and not shout at a disobedient child.

They then suggest (134) that '...by specifying a necessary condition of action: actions have mental causes' and refining this condition, '....we seem to have ended up with something which is plausibly also a *sufficient* condition for action' (134), at least in 'the normal kind of way', as they put it. If our actions are the result of a pro-attitude and we always act to satisfy our strongest desire, then we will act whenever these conditions are satisfied.

But this is not plausible even in the normal kind of way. Either every 'strongest desire' is acted on, which is impossible because at every moment, presumably, we have such a desire if we have any desires at all, or we have 'strongest desires' which are not acted on. In that case the conditions are not sufficient. And if Jill wants fresh air and believes that opening the window will result in fresh air, there is still the problem of being motivated to do so, or of deciding to do so when faced with other things that need doing when there is no 'strongest desire'. Davidson's notion of 'pure intending'[8]—the judgment that an action is 'desirable in light of all my reasons' (D10)—serves a purpose in an explanation of why an action would have been selected by a rational person, but as a 'theory' of action, which is what it is supposed to be part of, it won't do because there is no indication of why a person does, or does not do, what he 'purely intends' to do. In a recent article R. Hursthouse has laid out the difficulties, on a causalist view, of explaining why a person does a particular thing at a particular time, in view of the 'vast sea of causal potential from which intentional actions [are supposed to] spring.'[9] Though

[8] Davidson, 'Intending', op. cit.

[9] Rosalind Hursthouse, 'Intention', in *Royal Institute of Philosophy: Supplement* **46**, *Logic, Cause, and Action*, Essays in honour of Elizabeth Anscombe, ed. by Roger Teichmann. (Cambridge University Press, 2000) Her interests are different from mine, however. I am interested in the claims about explanations of actions in causal terms. She is interested, as is indicated above, in what, in addition to beliefs and desires, is necessary to account for an intentional action being carried out.

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she does not use this term, Hursthouse has shown that there are formidable difficulties in finding 'sufficient conditions' for intentional actions.

At any rate, we need to keep in mind that the usual sorts of explanations of human actions often require a reference to intentions, decisions, motivations, emotions, and the other things that have enabled us to understand the transition between reasons and action. To understand the reason a person does something *is* to understand the 'connection' between his reason and his action, so there is no need, in explaining his action, to add anything or regard the reason as a sufficient cause.[10] In normal conversation there is seldom an occasion on which a person does not understand why an explanation *is* an explanation. To ask why a reason is a reason, or an explanation is an explanation, may, in certain circumstances be legitimate, but in philosophical discussions, it could betray a misunderstanding which leads to an infinite regress. Or, as in this case, result in the attribution of foreign powers to the reason. One may have a burning desire to buy a certain car but no intention of spending so much money; and then, on impulse, he may buy it because he becomes envious of a friend who has such a car. We understand how this might happen because we have felt the strong pull of envy, not because the action has been 'rationalized'. A more detailed explanation may involve envy, desire, and many other factors, perhaps self pity (calculations about what one deserves in life) and self deception, family pressure, and much else. The fuller explanation may illuminate the 'connection'.

We know that unless the person who has a reason to buy a new car is motivated to do it, unless he gives in to pressure, or persuasion, or self pity, or the like, unless, in the end, he decides to do it, he will not do it. If a theorist does not have 'motivation', 'decision', 'choice', and the like, in his vocabulary, he requires reasons to be causes in order to understand why people do anything. At any rate, the ideas of 'pro-attitudes' and 'always acting to fulfil the strongest desire' fail to explain what is normally satisfactorily explained in terms of the concepts of motivations, decisions and the like.

Finally, it should be noted that neither the authors nor Davidson, so far as I know, consider, or consider at any length, utterances as actions or non actions. It is not obvious, to say the least, whether the

[10] After writing this I found a similar remark in an article by Richard Norman; *Philosophical Investigations*, October 2000, 310. Norman says, 'What is the practical force of reasons? In a sense I think that no further answer can be given; it is *sui generis*, it is just the force of *reasons*.

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Fundamental Principle is plausible with respect to them; not obvious, for example, whether an utterance is an effect, if this is the right terminology, of a desire and belief. Not every utterance is something we have a desire to utter. Something that is said without thinking, or something blurted out, for example, may be the last thing one wants to say. If utterances were regarded as actions—and in some ways it seems clear that they should—it is only in a trivial sense that the sentence 'I wanted him to understand that [such and such] and I believed that saying [what I did] would accomplish that' explains my saying what I did.

V

I turn to our next concern. Is the FP really a principle which enables us to 'comprehend' all human actions? There are obviously many situations in which the FP (or something like it) would explain someone's actions—to most readers.

> Why did Jill call her old boyfriend? Answer; She wanted to make her new boyfriend jealous and thought this was a way to do it.
> Why did you cash these bonds? Answer; I wanted to get even with the owner and believed that cashing them would do it.

But there are some things to remember about these explanations. First, as everyone would agree, even these simple examples involve more or less complicated assumptions or understandings about the context of the activity and the actor's intentions and motivations. The reader, in effect, supplies these. If he cannot, and one can think of many reasons why someone could not, nothing would be explained to him. If someone unversed in the ways of love did not know why calling the previous boyfriend should make the new boyfriend jealous, this attempt to make Jill's action comprehensible would fail. 'She wanted to make her new boyfriend jealous' is the minimal explanation of her call, one might say, one that would only suffice for a knowledgeable person. If a fuller explanation is needed, one would have to add information, perhaps about her motivation, her doubts, and anxieties.

Second, explanations of human actions have a purpose, and the purpose serves human interests. Sometimes the reason for giving the explanation is trivial and sometimes not, but there is always a reason. Explanations of actions, e.g., in a newspaper, or novel, or in conversation, whether they are justificatory or purely explanatory, explain things in a way that the average reader can understand

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them, by drawing upon his knowledge and understanding of human customs and wordly ways. Compare the text book explanation of Jill's action—the example of Smith and Jones—to an explanation of someone's actions that we might find in a news article or story.

> Jill was attending a tea at which several people were smoking. She knew that prolonged exposure to the smoke might trigger an asthma attack, but she observed the niceties of the situation, and refrained from snatching the offender's cigarettes and berating her hostess or simply leaving. But when her asthma began bothering her, she had to take action. She walked over to a window but saw that it opened onto a pollen producing clump of goldenrod. Beginning to feel apprehensive, she tried another window and, as it appeared to open on to an open area, she decided to take a chance. She opened it and breathed deeply. Unfortunately, that window had been painted recently, so Jill had to explain her actions to her hostess.

Whether any part of this explanation of why Jill opened the window is irrelevant *or* important depends on the purpose of the explanation, whether it is intended to display the manners, guilt or virtues of the actor, or to enlighten the reader about the predicaments of asthma sufferers; and depends on who is supposed to be enlightened by it, in what way and to what extent they are to be enlightened, and so on.

And third, there are the problems which have been discussed. It does not appear that certain kinds of explanations, e.g., some involving mention of intentions and motivations, can be reformulated as reasons, in the sense in which the authors speak of them.

Given all that, the idea that there is such a thing as a simple generic pattern of explanation which when filled in with particulars will make every actual human action comprehensible to everyone is implausible on the face of it. In fact, we know that it might not be possible to explain Hamlet's actions, or Abraham's, or even that of Kathryn, who cannot explain why she went with Karla, or a friend's divorce, to someone unaware of, or insensitive to, the enormously complicated emotional and social life of human beings.

Anscombe speaks of the 'causal history' of the behaviour of a person. Her example is this: The actions of Henry VIII, his longing for a son, his intention to marry Anne Boleyn, and other factors, '...led to, helped produce, the Act of Supremacy...'[11] Historical writ-

[11] G. E. M. Anscombe, 'The Causation of Action' in *Knowledge and Action*, ed. by C. Ginet and S. Shoemaker (Oxford University Press, 1983), 184.

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ing, and other writing, has many such speculative explanations. The knowledgeable person will have some idea, more or less detailed, as to why one thing led to another—why a monarch would want a son, for example.

The idea behind the causal explanation of action is, of course, quite different. Some have regarded the causal explanations of science and mechanics as the paradigms, one might say, of explanations; explanations which explain independently of context, of explainee, and, in an obvious way, human interest. Such explanations only occur in rigorous scientific theories. The proponents of causal explanations of human action argue that such explanations will involve, basically, only physiological states, those which are, presumably, desires and beliefs in one of their many varieties and they will fully explain, presumably, all human actions, public or private, individual or *en masse*, historical, present or future, whether or not anyone is at all interested in such explanations. The fact is, however, that although the events in physical nature can only be explained causally, there have always been satisfactory means of explaining human actions which do not involve causal notions.

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