

# CAUSATION AND DETERMINISM

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Determinists often maintain that we are usually unaware of the causes of our own actions. John Hospers, for example, argues that virtually all human behavior is motivated by hidden, subconscious factors.<sup>1</sup> Others, such as identity theorists, claim that our actions have physical causes that belie our conscious reasons.<sup>2</sup> Such deterministic theories are ill received by critics who insist that people sometimes are fully cognizant of their intentions and motivations.

However, some determinists have used the following argument to prove that even consciously intentional actions are causally determined:

- (1) Every intentional action has a reason.
- (2) A reason is a cause.
- (3) (From 1 and 2) Every intentional action has a cause.
- (4) (From 3) Every intentional action is causally determined.

This argument has been given in different forms by, among others, Jonathan Edwards,<sup>3</sup> Ledger Wood,<sup>4</sup> and P. H. Nowell-Smith.<sup>5</sup> I refer to it as the necessitarian argument in order to distinguish it from other deterministic arguments such as those of Hospers and identity theorists.

Critics of the necessitarian argument often maintain that reasons should not be classified as causes. These critics find support from H. L. A. Hart and A. M. Honore, who claim that a reason furnishes a significantly different kind of explanation from that implied by a cause.<sup>6</sup>

Donald Davidson attempts to answer Hart and Honore by showing that reasons, if appropriately stated, can be causes.<sup>7</sup> He argues, further, that if a reason for an action is not its cause, no intelligible explanation of the relation between a reason and an action can be given (pp. 692-3).

Nevertheless, the necessitarian argument fails, despite Davidson's characterization of reasons as causes. A causal explanation of an event need not entail its causal determination. Davidson's analysis only replaces a weakness in the second premise of the argument with a weakness in the fourth premise. I will attempt to reveal this weakness, along with some of its ramifications for motivational analysis, after summarizing the necessitarian argument, the analysis of Hart and Honore, and the response of Davidson.

## I. The Necessitarian Argument

The libertarian maintains that at least some human actions are not causally determined. Free actions, according to the libertarian, cannot be

predicted with unfailing accuracy, even if all influences on the agent are known. The agent chooses among different possible actions, and nothing causally determines his choice.

Libertarians generally agree that free actions are intentional. Although some intentional actions, such as the desert wanderer's stagger toward a spring, may be causally determined, the libertarian maintains that free acts are within the class of intentional acts. Reflex actions, inadvertent movements, neurological responses, etc., are not free acts.

The agent of an intentional act, according to the first premise of the necessitarian argument, must have a reason for performing the action. The truth of this premise may be granted despite the current philosophical confusion concerning the concept of intention. It is unlikely that under any interpretation of "intention" an intentional act would have no reason whatsoever.

However, according to the necessitarian argument, reasons are causes, and, therefore, intentional actions have determining causes. If the necessitarian argument is sound, actions that the libertarian considers to be free do not exist, even among intentional acts.

## II. Are Reasons Causes? Hart and Honore vs. Davidson

Hart and Honore contend that reasons are not causes because "reason" and "cause" are defined by different criteria (p. 52-3). According to Hart and Honore, "A causes B" can only be supported by repeated observations during which the occurrence of "A" is followed by the occurrence of "B." However, "A is the reason for B" does not require precedents but only a logical or *quasi* logical connection between "A" and "B." For example, a defendant might state, as his reason for robbing a bank, that he wanted money to buy a giraffe. His statement does not suggest that he had ever wanted a giraffe before or that, if ever he had wanted one, he stole in order to finance it.

The future implications of "A causes B" and "A is the reason for B" also differ. "A causes B" implies that "B" will continue to follow "A," but "A is the reason for B" bears no such implication. The defendant's confession of his reason for stealing does not indicate that his love of giraffes will ever again induce him into robbery. A cause implies lawlike repetition, but a reason may explain one action alone.

Davidson answers that the relation of a cause to its effect need not be understood as lawlike (pp. 698-99). One need not rely on laws to determine that a rock broke a window, if the breaking itself was observed. Even a child who is ignorant of the properties of glass or the laws of physics could infer the cause of the window's shattering. The fact that laws are involved in the breaking of the window does not damage Davidson's claim

that it is possible to apply causal connections without laws; the laws are unknown, yet causal connections are still asserted.

His claim can be supported by another example. If an artist paints one masterpiece in his otherwise entirely mediocre life, he is still credited for his single admirable work. It is not necessary to cite laws or to make predictions in order to establish that the painter's talent, however fleeting, was the cause of the artistry evident in the painting.

Davidson argues, further, that causal explanations of an event need not imply laws, even if laws are implied by other causal explanations of the same event:

Suppose a hurricane, which is reported on page 5 of Tuesday's *Times*, causes a catastrophe, which is reported on page 13 of Wednesday's *Tribune*. Then the event reported on page 5 of Tuesday's *Times* caused the event reported on page 13 of Wednesday's *Tribune*. Should we look for a law relating events of these *kinds*? It is only slightly less ridiculous to look for a law relating hurricanes to catastrophes. The laws needed to predict the catastrophe with precision would, of course, have no use for concepts like hurricane and catastrophe (Davidson, p. 698).

A reason might thus cause an action, although the reason may not adapt well to lawlike formulations. Nevertheless, causal laws might apply to neurological, chemical, or physical descriptions of the action (Davidson, p. 699).

Davidson maintains that unless reasons are understood as causes, reasons cannot adequately explain actions (pp. 692–3). Consider, for example, the relation between a driver's intention to signal a turn and the raising of his arm. Unless a causal connection between the intention and the arm raising is posited, only a sequence of two events, e.g., "The driver intends to signal," and "the driver raised his arm," occurs; the first event precedes but does not explain the second. An explanation is possible only if the driver can be said to have raised his arm because of his intention to signal.

Although it may be possible to discover a connection between reason and action other than the causal connection, Davidson doubts that a better can be found. In the absence of any better pattern of explanation, the cause and effect relation should, he asserts, be employed (Davidson, p. 692).

He maintains, however, that only "primary reasons" can be considered causes: "R is a primary reason why an agent performed the action A under the description *d* only if R consists of a pro attitude of the agent toward actions with a certain property, and a belief of the agent that A, under the description *d*, has that property" (Davidson, p. 687).

The concept of "pro attitude" is, by Davidson's own admission, imprecise. A pro attitude can be a permanent character trait, a temporary urge, a brief impulse, or a passing fancy (Davidson, p. 686). He avoids more specific concepts like "want," "drive," or "need" because they limit unnecessarily. Whatever motivates an action may be considered a pro attitude.

Davidson's concept of primary reason is evident in motivational analyses to be found in literary works. As Theodore Mischel points out in the essay, "Psychology and Explanations of Human Behavior," novelists and playwrights attempt to reveal, in their characters, personality traits and motives that produce noteworthy behavior.<sup>8</sup> Although these motivations—pro attitudes, in Davidson's terminology—explain the actions of the character, no lawlike relation between motivation and action need be supposed. The motivations render the actions intelligible, expectable, and consistent with the agent's personality, but need not be formulated in laws.

Mischel uses Shakespeare's Iago as an example. Iago is motivated by damaged pride, vindictiveness, and hunger for power to betray and to destroy Othello. But, while displaying how someone like Iago might behave, Shakespeare does not imply that all proud, vindictive, and power hungry people will generally betray their closest acquaintances. The actions of Shakespeare's characters are not instances of lawlike behavior.

Mischel argues that psychoanalytic studies of human motivation also explain without use of general laws (p. 589). The psychoanalyst examines seemingly unintelligible behavior and attempts to make sense of it by revealing hidden purposes and intentions. He attempts to find purposes and intentions that are consistent with and best applicable to the behavior, but his analysis need not rely upon or imply psychological laws.

If Davidson is correct, the motivational analyses that Mischel finds in literary works and in psychoanalysis express primary reasons. These primary reasons are, according to Davidson, causes of behavior. But causal analyses can take different forms; the forms of causal explanation should be analyzed before any conclusions concerning determinism are drawn from Davidson's theory.

### III. Causes That Do Not Determine Their Effects

Under one interpretation of the concept of cause, the characterization of reasons as causes would justify the necessitarian argument. If causes are regarded as compelling irresistible determinants, it would follow that causes would render their effects certain and necessary. But this interpretation is not the only one that is consistent with Davidson's account.

Often, explanations of why an event occurred are entirely satisfactory

when they show only that the event was likely or probable, but not necessary. Explanations of this kind succeed by showing that an event was not surprising or unexpected but was, instead, consistent with the conditions under which it took place.

Consider, for example, the deceptive game of chance. My friend and I are among fifty guests at a party. My friend offers to bet me that at least two of the guests have the same birth date. Wrongly assuming that such a coincidence of birthdays would be unlikely, I accept his offer. When I lose my bet, I accuse him of prior knowledge of the birthdays of the guests, but he assures me that he has never met any of the partygoers but me. I then blame bad luck for my fate, but here, too, I am wrong. My friend explains the probabilities involved and shows me that my defeat is not really improbable but likely. My loss is now intelligible; it was not a result of mere chance, but of mathematical probability. Although my defeat was not shown to be inevitable, it was adequately explained.

Similar examples are easy enough to imagine. A habitually careless driver is judged to be the victim of several accidents; however, his driving record indicates that his recklessness leads him into situations in which accidents are likely to occur. He is, despite appearances, the true cause of his dismal record. His driving habits do not necessitate any one, or even all, of his mishaps but explain why his record is not really accidental.

Motivations can explain behavior in the same probabilistic manner. Iago's pride, vindictiveness, and hunger for power render his behavior intelligible, unsurprising, and likely, but not inevitable. His personality traits can be understood as the causes of his behavior but not necessarily as determining causes. Davidson's primary reasons may be regarded as causes if they relate a person's behavior to his character traits or personal whims, but causes of this kind need not determine behavior.

"But," one might respond, "are explanations that leave nothing to chance not better than those that only establish likelihood?" I answer that explanations must be true to whatever they purport to explain; if an event is no more than likely, an explanation that renders the event necessary is inaccurate. To accept only explanations that imply necessity is to presuppose determinism and to beg the question.

The necessitarian argument is not saved by Davidson's analyzing of primary reasons as causes. His analysis strengthens the second premise, "A reason is a cause," at the expense of the fourth, "Every intentional action is causally determined." Causal explanation does not necessarily entail causal determination. Psychologists may someday establish determinism by discovering inviolable psychological laws or by predicting human behavior with unflinching accuracy, but the necessitarian argument, unaided by external support, proves nothing.

## NOTES

1. John Hospers, "What Means This Freedom?," in *Determinism and Freedom in an Age of Modern Science*, ed. Sidney Hook (New York: New York University Press, 1961), pp. 126-7.
2. J. J. C. Smart, "Sensations and Brain Processes," *Philosophical Review*, 58 (1959), 142-3.
3. Jonathan Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, ed. Paul Ramsey (rpt. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), pp. 235-7.
4. Ledger Wood, "The Free Will Controversy," *Philosophy*, No. 16 (1941), 396.
5. P. H. Nowell-Smith, "Freewill and Moral Responsibility," *Mind*, 52 (Jan., 1948), 46-7, 48.
6. H. L. A. Hart and A. M. Honore, *Causation in the Law* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), 52-3.
7. Donald Davidson, "Actions, Reasons, and Causes," *Journal of Philosophy*, 50 (Nov. 7, 1963), 686.
8. Theodore Mischel, "Psychology and Explanations of Human Behavior," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 23 (June, 1963), 578-80.