DAVIDSON ON EXPLAINING INTENTIONAL ACTION

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I start with a short account of two versions of the traditional empirist picture of causal explanation and their consequences for treating the explanation of intentional actions [I]. Then I set out Professor Donald Davidson’s critique thereof and his own new position [II]. Then a difficulty follows, set out by critics of Davidson’s view [III] and a short sketch of a way out of this difficulty [IV].

I

A recurring theme in the empirist tradition is that the genuine explanation of the occurrence of an event requires citing its cause and citing its real cause requires specifying a law that subsumes the explanandum-event and the explanans-event. Thus the quest for genuine explanation and understanding is the search for causes and the search for causes is ipso facto the search for laws. To assert that science is nomothetic therefore comes near to making a statement that is true alone in virtue of the meaning of its terms.

A rough account of the reasoning behind this view is: To provide a causal explanation of an event is to cite its cause under an appropriate description. Appropriate is a description specifying the causally relevant property of an event. A causally relevant property is one in virtue of which the event instantiates a law or a relatively near precursor of a law. The central tenet here is the thesis that causal connections obtain in virtue of laws that subsume events. Beside laws there is no general empirical mark whose presence could ensure that a certain event really is the cause of another event. Therefore to give a causal explanation in contrast to merely stating a true singular causal statement requires the citation of a law or a relatively near precursor of a law backing the assertion that a cited event is the cause of the event to be explained (the effect).
Actions being *events* this lesson applies to the explanation of intentional action too.

Now, *being a law or being a lawful generalization* admit of degrees. To use Davidson’s terms, there are *strict* or *homonomic*, exceptionless laws and *non-strict* or *heteronomic* laws shot-through with *ceteris paribus* clauses, which are not easily substituted by an exhaustive set of precisely stated conditions. Accordingly, one finds that the empirist tradition produced two main positions with regard to the question of the degree of lawfulness of those generalizations backing the explanation of individual intentional actions. The *first* position is taken by John Stuart Mill, Alfred Ayer and Jerry A. Fodor¹: The known laws that cover our explanations of actions are relatively low-grade, non-strict general statements of tendency, containing many *ceteris paribus* clauses. Mill, Ayer and Fodor consider it to be the task of future science to improve upon these laws. They expect that there will be a recognizable continuity between common sense psychology and the future scientific psychology. Both will use the intentional idiom of propositional attitude ascription. Our common sense psychological generalizations are relatively near precursors of the laws a mature science will come up with. Therefore we are justified in our view that by citing reasons, that is, specific belief-desire pairs in the explanation of individual intentional actions we are thereby citing the explanatorily appropriate factor, that is the relevant cause of the action.

The *second* position is taken by Carl Gustav Hempel, Alvin I. Goldman and Paul M. Churchland.² The known laws connecting reasons with actions are strict laws or laws which easily can be transformed in a systematic manner into strict laws by substituting precisely stated conditions for *ceteris paribus* clauses. These laws lie at the center of the common sense *theory* of the behavior of persons. This position too justifies the common sense view that citing reasons is to give causal explanations. Both positions see the *explanatory force* of providing reasons in explaining actions as consisting in the fact, that there are covering laws connecting reasons with actions.