
Until recently, the only real resistance to Davidson’s ruling influence over the Philosophy of Action has come from various Wittgensteinian camps, most prominently that of G.H. von Wright and his pupil Frederick Stoutland. The last few years, however, have seen an increasing number of dissidents come to the surface with a plethora of independently minded objections to Davidsonian accounts of both action individuation (e.g. Paul Pietroski, David-Hillel Ruben) and explanation (e.g. Jonathan Dancy, Rüdiger Bittner). G.F. Schueler’s new book places him in the latter group of philosophers, whose chief concern is to explicate the relation between our actions and our reasons for doing them, and who have a common target, namely, the following two Davidsonian theses:

*The Belief Desire Thesis* (BD): The reasons for which we act are (Humean) combinations of our desires and our beliefs about how to satisfy them.

*The Causal Thesis* (CT): Our reasons for acting are the causes of our actions.

Schueler’s aim is not so much to convince us that these theses are wrong as it is to show that the only defensible versions of them pose no threat at all to the views which they have been purported to repudiate (chs. 1-2). Nevertheless, as he himself notes early on in the book (p. 9), his intention is not to rescue any of those theories propounded in the (supposedly Wittgensteinian) ‘little red books’ which Davidson demolished in one fell swoop back in 1963. Indeed Schueler acknowledges the acuteness of Davidson’s criticisms of the then mainstream opposition. What he challenges is whether in doing so Davidson (perhaps unintentionally) gave birth to a theory of action explanation which is equally misguided in its own way (it being a moot question whether Davidson would actually endorse the standard interpretation of his work).

The key to Schueler’s criticism of both BD and CT is the idea that reasons-giving explanations of action are inherently *teleological* (ch. 3). That is to say, the agent’s reasons will always point to the purpose for which he acted (Schueler happens to believe that *all* intentional action is done for reasons but this plays no significant role in the general argument of the book). From this it follows, or so we are told, that the explanations in question are also inherently *normative*. The book’s overall strategy is to reject any version of either BD or CT which maintains that action explanation can do without either one of these two features. Just what it means to
say of an explanation that it is normative, however, is a matter of some contention (which I return to below).

According to Schueler, CT only goes astray when it declares that reasons explanations are completely analysable in terms of efficient causes that make no essential references to our purposes (p. 18). What is at stake, therefore, is the idea that when it comes to intentional action final causation cannot be reduced to efficient causation:

[T]he issue is whether in the end explanations of the sort cited in BD, reasons explanations of actions, must themselves be explained in terms of non-purposive notions of the sort that ‘direction of fit’ is supposed to be or, alternatively, whether unanalyzed purposive notions such as ‘having a goal’ or ‘having a purpose’ can do the required explanatory work. (p. 38)

On this account there is still a minimal sense in which CT is undeniable, namely the sense in which to say that one thing caused another is not to give a substantive explanation of the one in terms of the other, but merely to state that there is such an explanation to be had, and that the events in question will (under some description) figure in it (p. 16). Schueler thinks this is harmless because the explanatory power of such statements is not derived from any kind of law, but rather, from the inherent purposiveness included in the reasons which CT further identifies as causes. This point about there not needing to be any psychophysical laws for there to be a BD-style causal explanation of any given action is good as far as it goes. However, Schueler seems to overlook the fact that such explanations nevertheless entail that there must be (as indeed Davidson believed there to be) a strict physical law connecting some related mental event to the action. As we shall see, such laws would render the explanatory relation between reasons and actions which Schueler favours epiphenomenal. But to appreciate this we must first turn to his rejection of BD.

Schueler begins his argument by demonstrating that desires play no formal role in the kind of reasoning which either precedes action or is implied by it (ch. 4). He then suggests that we do not ever reason from our beliefs (in so far as we construe these as psychological states of the agent) either:

[I]t is just a mistake to think that desires are somehow used in any reasoning, any more than are hopes, fears, wishes, or cravings. For that matter, beliefs are not used in reasoning either, whether theoretical or practical. The sorts of things that give one reason to act are facts or, perhaps, ‘states of affairs’. It was the fact that a speeding car was about to hit me that gave me a reason to jump to the side. But one reasons with propositions (or sentences, if you like), the contents of beliefs, doubts, suspicions, hunches, and so forth, the things that can describe or refer to facts or states of affairs. (p. 112-13; original emphasis)

Schueler’s point that the things we deliberate from are not psychological states but alleged facts (things we take to be the case) seems to be both true and relevant. Since deliberation is all about treating the considerations we weigh up as potential reasons for acting, BD cannot be right in so far as it conceives of these reasons in either Humean or Psychologistic terms. So far so good. But now recall that Schueler also claims that there is an inherently normative element to any successful reason-giving explanation of action (ch. 5). He writes: