

Explanatory Reasons, Actions, and the Right Fit

By Robert Reimer

In this talk, I am concerned with the nature of explanatory reasons for actions. Explanatory reasons are reasons that play the role of *explanantia* in *action explanations*. Their purpose is to make the agent's action intelligible and to let it appear rational from the agent's own perspective.

Many philosophers including Jonathan Dancy (2003) and Donald Davidson (2001) do not explicitly distinguish between explanatory reasons and motivating reasons – those reasons upon which the agent actually acted and which function as the premises in the agent's practical reasoning. They assume that explanatory reasons are just the agent's motivating reasons. And this makes sense insofar as explanatory reasons are supposed to let the action appear rational *from the agent's own perspective*. When Sarah calls the ambulance because John is bleeding, what motivates her action is also what explains it, namely *that John is bleeding*. Since both what motivates her action and what explains her action seems to be a *fact* – the fact that John is bleeding –, some philosophers including Joseph Raz (2009, 185) and Eric Marcus (2012, 72-73) conclude that motivating and explanatory reasons are *facts* – facts that the agent believed and acted on. This view on the nature of explanatory reasons is called 'factivism'.

Despite its intuitive appeal, factivism, faces a problem: It cannot explain cases in which the agent acted under the influence of an *epistemic error*. Assume that Sarah called the ambulance believing that John was bleeding whilst, in fact, he was just sullied with tomato juice. Cases like that are called '*error cases*'. In an error case, what seems to motivate the agent was not the case; and whatever is not the case, cannot be a fact. If, however, the agent's motivating reason was not the case, what, if anything, can explain her action?

For Dancy, the problem of error cases is not a problem, at all, because, according to him, sometimes "a nothing (something that is not the case) can explain a something (an action that was done)." (Dancy 2003, 427). To support this view, he introduces the notion of states-of-affairs – states that may or may not obtain. He argues that states-of-affairs (obtaining or not obtaining) explain and motivate actions *in any possible case*. In a veridical case (such as Sarah's calling the ambulance whilst John was actually bleeding), what explains the agent's action is a(n obtaining) state of affairs (that John was bleeding). In an error case (such as Sarah's calling the ambulance whilst John was not bleeding), what explains the agent's action is also a (non-obtaining) state-of-affairs (that John was bleeding). This view is called 'non-factivism'.

In contrast to Dancy, Maria Alvarez argues that proper action explanations require the truth of both the explanandum and the explanans (Alvarez 2018, 3300). She thinks that, in the case of an epistemic error, what explains the action cannot be *what* the agent believed and acted on but rather the agent's *belief* itself or a fact about it: "[I]n 'error cases' – cases when an agent acts on the basis of a falsehood that he believes – the explanans of a true explanation must be a psychological fact." (Ibid., 3300) So, what explains why Sarah called an ambulance cannot be that John was bleeding but rather the psychological fact that John was bleeding. This view is called 'psychologism', and it includes the positions of Davidson (2001) and Michael Smith (1994, 96; 2009) who argue that explanatory reasons are the agent's beliefs (and desires) themselves.

Prima facie, non-factivism and psychologism succeed in specifying explanatory reasons both for veridical cases and for error cases. The current stage of the debate on explanatory reasons, at least, suggests that. In my talk, however, I will show that this is not true. There is a group of error cases that neither factivism, non-factivism, nor psychologism can do justice to. The cases that I have in mind are cases in which the epistemic error concerns both the explanatory reason and the action itself. Consider the following situation: Jane discovers a basket full of fruits in the supermarket. She likes to eat peaches, and she thinks that these fruits in the basket are fresh and juicy peaches. However, the fruits in the basket are apples, and they are also old and wilted. Due to the dim light, however, she mistakes the apples for fresh and juicy peaches. Finally, she takes one of the old and wilted apples and puts it into her basket. Coming home, Paul asks her why she bought an old and wilted apple. Which reason could Jane explain her action?

To begin with, Jane cannot cite a fact to explain her action of taking an old and wilted apple because what she believed and acted on – that the fruits in the basket are fresh and juicy peaches – was not the case. But she can also not cite her beliefs themselves or the non-obtaining state-of-affairs, that she believed, to explain her action because these things do not *match* her action. How could her (false) belief or the nonobtaining state-of-affairs that the fruits in the basket are fresh and juicy peaches explain her action of taking an old and wilted apple? What is needed instead, it seems, is something that has both a factive and a psychological aspect. I am thinking of something along the following lines: the fact that Jane *mistook* the old and wilted apples for fresh and juicy peaches. This fact, at least, explains why Jane took an old and wilted apple. It makes her action intelligible, and it lets it appear rational from her own perspective. I call these facts – since they have both a factive and a psychological aspect – ‘hybrid facts’.

The point of my talk is to show that the currently dominant views on explanatory reasons – factivism, non-factivism, psychologism – cannot do justice to error cases such as Jane’s mistaken purchase and that a hybrid view with hybrid facts as explanatory reasons is needed. I first present those currently dominant views. Then, I introduce the case of Jane’s mistaken purchase and show why only a hybrid fact can play the role of an explanatory reason. Finally, if time permits, I consider and reject two possible attempts to save psychologism or non-factivism against my attack.

References

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