

Explanatory Reasons, Actions, and the Right Fit

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1. Action Explanations

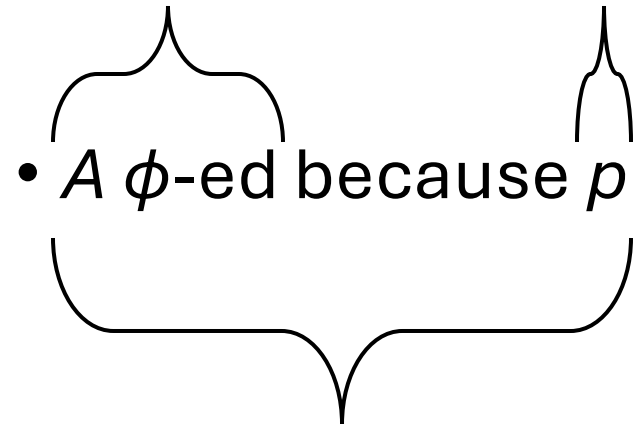
“Alison called the ambulance because John was bleeding.”

“I bought the chocolate cake because I thought that it is super delicious.”

“He set up the camera on the other side of the street because Marilyn
Monroe will pass by soon.”

1. Action Explanations

Explanandum (Action?) Explanans (Reason)



Action Explanation

2. Explanatory Reasons – Narrowing the scope

➤ A (Scientific) explanation of events also gives reasons.

“The reason the car radiator broke was that it froze overnight and water expands when it freezes.”

Stoutland 2007, 29-30

➤ The explanatory reason of an **action** explanation makes the *action* **intelligible** (see Alvarez 2010, 35).

2. Explanatory Reasons – Narrowing the scope

➤ An Explanation of an Action in terms of the agent's *character traits, moods, psychological diseases or disfunctions* also makes the action intelligible.

“Peter drank more beer again than he should have because he is an alcoholic.”

2. Explanatory Reasons – Narrowing the scope

“A reason **rationalizes** an action only if it leads us to see something the agent saw, or thought he saw, in his action [...].”

Davidson 2001a, 3

“[W]e explain an action by seeking the best possible **fit** between [...] what the agent believes, what his purposes, aims, and desires are, what he means by what he says, and what he actually does. [...] [W]e reveal the agent as approaching an **ideal of rationality.**”

Dancy 2000, 95

2. Explanatory Reasons – Narrowing the scope

- Explanatory reasons let an action appear rational from the agent's point of view. They provide the best possible fit between what the agent did and what she desired, believed in, aimed at, etc.

3. Popular Accounts

- **Factivism:** Explanatory reasons are *facts* that the agent believed (*enabling condition*) or *states and events* that she was aware of. (Bittner 2001; Beaulieu 2013; Raz 2002, 2009; Marcus 2012)
- **Error Cases:** Cases in which the agent acted under the influence of an epistemic error: Things were not as she thought.

What if Alison called the ambulance, but John was not actually bleeding?

3. Popular Accounts

- **Non-Factivism:** Explanatory reasons are *obtaining or non-obtaining states-of-affairs* that the agent believed (enabling condition) (Dancy 2000, 2003, 2004; Stoutland 2001, 2007)
- **Psychologism:** Explanatory reasons are – at least in the case of an epistemic error) beliefs (psychological states) of the agent or facts about those beliefs. (Alvarez 2007, 2009, 2010, 2018; Hornsby 2008)

3. Popular Accounts

- **Non-Factivism:** “Alison called the ambulance because (as she believed) John was bleeding (even though that was not the case).”
- **Psychologism:** “Alison called the ambulance because she believed (had the belief) that John is bleeding (even though that was not the case).”

4. An Error Case that is Hard to Deal with

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 explanation can best explain her action?

4. An Error Case that is Hard to Deal with

Factivism fails to provide an explanatory reason because the explanatory relevant thing that Jane believed – that there are fresh and juicy apples in the basket – was not the case.

Non-factivism and **psychologism** fail because the belief/believed state-of-affairs – that there are fresh and juicy apples in the basket – does not match with what Jane did – buying an old and wilted apple.

4. An Error Case that is Hard to Deal with

Objection 1: “Jane’s action is misdescribed. Instead of saying that she bought an old and wilted apple, we can say that *she bought a fruit*. Her belief *that these fruits look like fresh and juicy peaches* explains why she bought fruit.”

Reply: This move is unacceptable. A reason explanation is a response to a question and must, therefore, adopt the same action description.

4. An Error Case that is Hard to Deal with

“Dancy takes it as obvious that the explanandum is the action itself.”

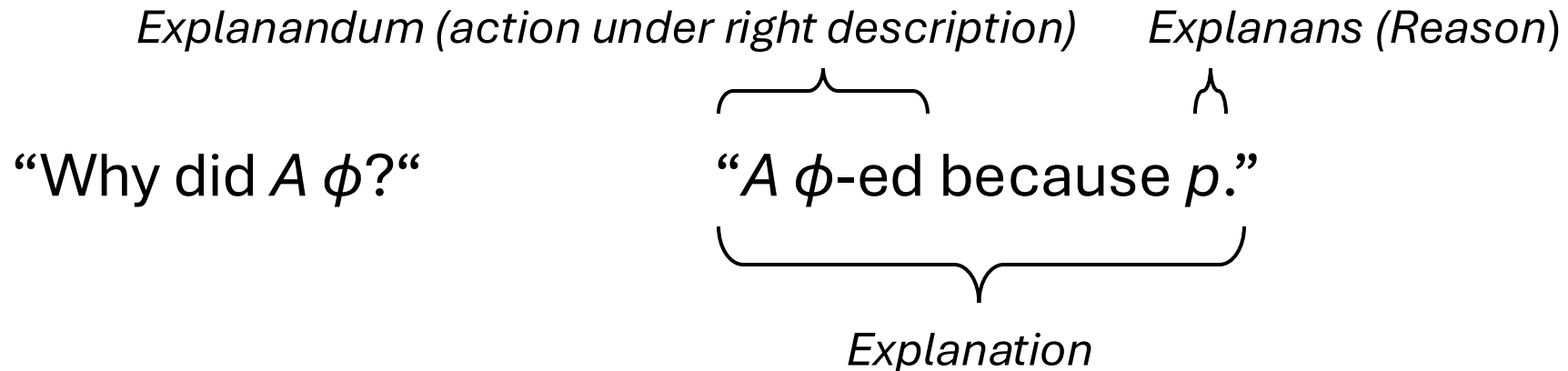
Sandis 2013, 34

But Sandis correctly asks why should that be so?

- Instead, action explanations explain features of actions including “why or how the agent ϕ -ed, or perhaps why or how he ϕ -ed in such and such a way, at a certain time rather than another [...]” (Ibid., 35)

4. An Error Case that is Hard to Deal with

- Action explanations explain actions under the description that the questioner chose.



4. An Error Case that is Hard to Deal with

Objection 2: “Jane did not buy the old and wilted apples intentionally.

Therefore, no explanation is required by her. In fact, no explanation can be given casting her action under a rational light.”

Reply: Jane still bought an old and wilted apple.

4. An Error Case that is Hard to Deal with

➤ As Anscombe (2000, §6, §19) and Davidson (2001b, 46-47) famously remarked, actions are intentional (or intended) – not *per se* – but *under certain descriptions*. So, Jane still bought an old and wilted apple but not intentionally under this description.

“If [...] I intentionally spill the contents of my cup, mistakenly thinking it is tea when it is coffee, then spilling the coffee is something I do, it is an action of mine, though I do not do it intentionally.”

Davidson 2000, 47

4. An Error Case that is Hard to Deal with

Objection 3: But Anscombe also says that the applicability of the “Why?”-question (“Why did A ϕ ?”) depends on the description under which the agent performed the action intentionally (Anscombe 2000, §19)

“Where the why-question doesn’t get a grip or is refused application by the addressee, the process is thereby shown to be unintentional under the description employed in the question.”

Kiezmann 2020, 15-16

4. An Error Case that is Hard to Deal with

Reply: As long as the addressee of the question “Why did A ϕ ?” knows that A performed their action under the description ‘ ϕ -ing’, she is able to give an explanation.

Also, the addressee of the question need not be A .

5. An alternative Account

To explain Jane's action under the description of buying an old and wilted apple, the explanatory reason must fit both that description and her desires.

➤ **A hybrid account:**

The fact that Jane (*mis*)took the old and wilted apples for fresh and juicy peaches.

A mistook b for c

Jane's *belief of* the old and wilted apples *as* peaches *that* they are fresh and juicy.

A believed of x as b that $F(b)$

5. An alternative Account

My hybrid account does not rely only on beliefs as mental states (psychologism) or on real states and events in the world (factivism).

A **hybrid explanatory reason** captures both the agent's (erroneous) point of view and the questioner's point of view to provide the right fit.