

Reasons, causes, desires, and dispositions

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Reasons, Causes, Desires, and Dispositions

Severin Schroeder (*University of Reading*)

Abstract:

Revisiting the Wittgenstein/Davidson debate on whether reason explanations are a type of causal explanations, and considering in particular John Hyman's recent reassessment and attempt to defend a causalist account of desires (2015), I argue for the following claims. First, the deviant-causal-connection problem remains an insurmountable objection to causalism. Secondly, using words in their ordinary senses, intentions are not desires, nor are desires dispositions; but more importantly (granting for argument's sake that intentions are desires of sorts, and desires are dispositions of sorts), dispositions are neither causes nor 'causal factors'. Finally, Hyman's reassessment of the debate leaves out what is most crucial in Wittgenstein's view, namely the observation that statements of one's own reasons for acting are covered by first-person authority.

In his recent book *Action, Knowledge, and Will*, John Hyman offers a thoughtful and astute reassessment of the philosophical debate between Wittgenstein, who holds that explanations of human actions in terms of reasons are not causal explanations, and Davidson, who insists that they are (Hyman 2015, ch.5). Hyman argues that both sides are mistaken in their commitment to a Humean account of causation.¹ Only against such an unduly narrow account of causality — as a *law-governed* relation between *events* — are Wittgensteinian objections to a causal construal of reasons successful. Once we accept (a) that one can be immediately aware of causation, without having to observe regularities, and (b) that desires are dispositions, and dispositions can be causal factors too, causalism is safe from Wittgensteinian objections. Moreover, Hyman tries to defuse the problem of deviant causal connections by arguing (a) that it is just a special case of the general difficulty of distinguishing between manifestations of dispositions and mere side effects, and (b) that it doesn't undermine the causalist construal: for whether its effects are deviant or not, citing a disposition explains them causally in either case (Hyman 2015, 116).

¹ A similar position has been taken by Carlos Moya (2014, 200-4).

I find Hyman's account unconvincing for three reasons. I shall argue, first, that the deviant-causal-connection problem cannot be defused as easily as he suggests. Secondly, using words in their ordinary senses, intentions are not desires, nor are desires dispositions; but more importantly (granting for argument's sake that intentions are desires of sorts, and desires are dispositions of sorts), dispositions are neither causes nor 'causal factors'. Finally, Hyman's account leaves out what is most crucial in Wittgenstein's view, namely the observation that statements of one's own reasons for acting are covered by first-person authority.

1. The deviant-causal-connection problem

A few days ago I bought a bike: a hybrid with alloy frame and 18 speed gear shifter. Why did I buy it?

(R1) Because when it gets warmer I'd like to go on weekend cycling tours.

So I say, but perhaps you suspect that the real reason why I bought the bike was this:

(R2) I wanted to support our local bicycle shop (from which I bought the bike).

Or perhaps:

(R3) I wanted to be seen as a bike owner by my neighbours in order to appear sporting and active.

Davidson claims (and Hyman seems to agree (114)) that the 'because', picking out one of those reasons as the motivating reason, can only be given a causalist construal: The motivating reason must be the one that causes the action (Davidson 1963, 4, 9-12). However, it seems that we can easily imagine a case where such a reason is causally responsible for the action while *not* being the reason why I acted. For example, I casually mention my half-hearted intention to go on bike rides during the summer to an acquaintance who thereupon tells me of the economic difficulties of the local bike shop and persuades me to do something for that poor shop owner by buying a bike from him. Thus, my intention to go on bike rides, as mentioned in

conversation, triggered a pitiful description of a shop owner's plight, which then caused me, out of sympathy, to buy a bike. So my intention to go on weekend bike rides did cause the purchase, albeit indirectly. Hence, for an action to be done *with a certain intention* it is not sufficient that the intention *cause* the action. Clearly then, Davidson's original question: 'What makes *a* reason to do something *the* reason why it is done?' cannot be answered, or at least not fully answered, by saying that the reason must cause the action (since that can also be true when the action was *not* done for that reason). As far as this argument is concerned, it may still be held that the explanation 'I bought the bike *because* I wanted to go on weekend cycling tours' identifies a cause of the action, but it cannot be said that that is all it does. There must be another element in acting for a reason than being caused to act by that reason.

Hyman's reply to this is that the relation between a *desire* and an *action done because of that desire* is just a special case of the relation between a *disposition* and a *manifestation of that disposition*. Thus, the 'deviant' case described above (buying a bike) is like the following case:

A man might take a soporific drug before driving, and the drowsiness induced by the drug might make him crash the car and knock himself unconscious.
[Hyman 2015, 116]

Here we can say that the drug caused him to lose consciousness, though not in the way it is supposed to do it.

Hyman seems to agree with Davidson that the 'right' way for a reason to cause an action cannot be specified, but he insists that that does not undermine the causalist approach:

there is no need to show how to eliminate the deviant causal chains between desires and acts in order to defend the claim that explanations of intentional action are causal explanations ... I conclude that Davidson's view that desires are causal factors is not cast into doubt by the impossibility of eliminating the 'deviant' causal chains ...
[Hyman 2015, 127]

The latter sentence may well be true. (In the following section I shall argue against the claim that desires are causal factors, but that has nothing to do with the phenomenon of deviant causal connections.) If *A* causes *B* only indirectly, via *X* and *Y*, it remains nonetheless true that *A* is a cause of *B*. However, that is not the issue. Rather, we want to know whether the meaning of the word 'because' in 'He ϕ -ed

because of his intention to ψ ’ is entirely causal, or whether there is something else not captured by the causal claim. In the latter case it is not clear whether we should speak (as Hyman does in the first sentence quoted) of a causal *explanation*.

In short, Hyman’s idea seems to be that although the ‘right way’ for a desire to cause an action cannot be informatively defined, it can be understood to be the way in which a disposition causes its manifestation, which is just a particular causal pathway, but does not involve anything distinct from causation.

Apart from the fact that I don’t agree with Hyman’s dispositional analysis of desires (see below), there remain two problems for this proposed solution:

First, it covers only one type of Davidsonian ‘primary reasons’: desires, but not beliefs. We may be persuaded that the desire to go on bicycle tours is a disposition, amongst other things, to buy a bicycle, but it does not follow that the same can be said about beliefs.²

Secondly, and more importantly, our understanding of the ways in which desires can cause actions is far too hazy to provide a useful analysis of the concept of a motivating reason. In particular, typically we are not really able to tell what the causal pathway was. But if, in fact, we are unable to tell whether a desire caused an action deviantly or directly, the causal analysis fails to provide a criterion by which to identify the motivating reason.

The insufficiency of our knowledge of the causal impact of desires tends to be disguised by the fact that we focus on a few examples where the causal pathways, and the strength or weakness of particular desires are simply assumed to be obvious. Above, I characterised my desire to go on cycling tours as half-hearted, but its verbal expression led to my being given another desire (to help a struggling retailer) that we just assumed to be operative in my action. But what if there is no such linear narrative leading from a patently weak to a patently strong desire, but instead two or three equally serious desires co-existing? I want to go on cycling tours, I want to support my local bicycle shop, and I also want to cut a dash with my neighbours. Suppose I can honestly name the first desire as my reason for buying the bike —: does that mean that I know it to be the one that caused my action in the appropriate way? No. I can’t observe the causal pathways of my long-term wishes and preferences. For all I know, I might never have bought the bike had it not been for one of the other

² For reasons not to regard beliefs as dispositions, see Hacker 2004, 202-19.

two considerations, even though I don't regard them as weighty or respectable reasons. Suppose then that my desire to look sporting in front of the neighbours caused the purchase —: did it cause it in a deviant way, just triggering what then became the main cause: my desire to go on weekend trips? Or was it the other way round: was my desire to look sporting the main factor and the weekend trip idea just a necessary pretext, such that if for some reason weekend trips had not been an option I would have thought of some other respectable use for my bike? — Who knows. How am I to know?

Psychological causes are not like inner billiard balls whose paths can be followed by introspection. This may to some extent be the case with mental occurrences: I can fairly reliably report a succession of ideas: how hearing a familiar tune on the radio reminded me of an old friend — which memory in turn brings up a mental image of my school built by Arne Jacobsen — which then reminds me of the book on architecture I just bought — which then makes me pick up that book. But Hyman's concern is with dispositional desires, which are not mental occurrences and whose effects, therefore, cannot be read off their temporal position. Hence, if the criterion for something's being a motivating reason were its causal role — not just that it caused the action, but that it caused it in a certain way — then that concept would be virtually inapplicable, at least where the candidates for the role of such a motivating reason are not conscious occurrences. In other words, the account in question turns the concept of a motivating reason into a philosophers' pseudo concept: — useless for real-life considerations and assessment of people's reasons.

2. Intentions, desires, and dispositions

According to Hyman, intentions are desires, desires are dispositions (2015, 107), and dispositions are causes or causal factors (120). I find all three claims problematic.

(i) My neighbour at table asks me to pass the salt and I do so. The Davidsonian analysis would be that my action was caused by a pair of primary reasons: the *belief* that my neighbour would like me to pass him the salt and the *desire* to do what he would like me to do. To anybody whose linguistic sensitivity has not been blunted by reading too much philosophical prose this sounds slightly ridiculous, as the term 'desire' is obviously a few sizes too big for the occasion. It is as if I described a mild dissatisfaction at seeing a pencil lying on the floor as 'agony'. Hyman acknowledges that he and other philosophers use the word 'desire' in an

artificially broad sense (107), but he seems to regard that as a harmless extension of ordinary usage. It isn't. For it neglects a crucial logical difference between desires (in the ordinary sense of the word) and philosophers' desires. Desires proper are felt episodes, datable occurrences, and hence suitable items for a causal explanation of an action. But normally, when I politely pass the salt to my neighbour I have not experienced any desire or craving to oblige him. The only event that can plausibly be cited as a cause of my action is the utterance of his request.

(ii) It is for that reason, of course, that Hyman proceeds to construe the desire in question as a disposition. But that is not quite right either. Politeness may well be a disposition of mine that manifests itself in my passing the salt to anybody who asks for it, but such a disposition cannot be identified with the intention (in philosophers' jargon: the 'desire') to oblige this particular person on this occasion. Moreover, I need not have a disposition of politeness in order to pass the salt on this occasion. Even ill-mannered people can be seen passing the salt when asked to do so. In civilised society, everybody passes the salt when asked to do so, so that it is not much of a manifestation of politeness. At most one could speak of a disposition not to be perversely rude or unco-operative.

But even that won't do, for an intentional action may well be out of character: not a manifestation of the person's dispositions or character traits. An extremely selfish and stingy person may one day see a beggar and reach for his wallet to give away £50. The intention is to do something generous, but it is not the manifestation of a generous disposition.

Again, Hyman is not unaware of this objection, but he doesn't take it seriously. Perhaps, he wonders, such a specific intention (or 'desire') is too fleeting to be called a 'disposition' in ordinary parlance (as it is not a character trait), but why should there not be 'fleeting dispositions' (110)? Could one not be altruistic and generous for two minutes? — Again, we can certainly decide to use the word 'disposition' in an extended sense, but the price for that is explanatory emptiness. The point of explaining something by reference to a disposition is to present it as an instance of a regular pattern. When someone's elaborate and old-fashioned politeness surprises you and makes you wonder whether he is being ironic or trying to flatter you before going to ask you for a favour — it can be a useful explanation to be told that this is just his normal kind of behaviour: no hidden agenda, he is just an exceptionally polite kind of person. That is the explanatory point of identifying an action as an

expression of a disposition. And therefore dispositions (in order to have this explanatory value) must have a certain duration. To say that a one-off action (generously giving to a beggar) manifests a one-off disposition (momentary generousness) is not saying anything. In other words, invoking non-occurrent ‘desires’, construed as ad hoc ‘dispositions’, is a pseudo-explanation.

Davidson, as is well known, discussed and rightly rejected the so-called ‘logical connection argument’ (1963, 13-14): the claim that *A* cannot cause *B* if they are not logically independent. That an event can be described as ‘fatally wounding *X*’ logically implies that *X* was going to die, and yet it is perfectly true (though uninformative) to say that that event *caused X’s* death. The important point is that there are two distinct events, which could also be identified independently. The event of fatally wounding *X* could also be described, say, as ‘stabbing *X* with a pen knife’.

However, as Bede Rundle argued persuasively, the kind of ‘desire’ or ad hoc ‘disposition’ invoked to explain a humdrum intentional action, such as passing the salt, is not a distinct, independently identifiable event or factor (Rundle 1997, 12, 168). As the want (or ‘desire’) to do as asked is attributed to the agent *solely* on the strength of the action itself (which under the circumstances we easily recognize as intentional), there is no real basis for construing it as an independent mental entity and causal factor. It is simply a *description* of my action to say that I passed the salt in response to my neighbour’s request.

In so far as such descriptions are justified solely on the strength of the observed pattern of behaviour, it is clear that the want does not figure as a hypothesized cause; we are speaking only of the character of the behaviour itself, not of a ‘distinct existence’. [Rundle 1997, 12]

That is not to deny that my neighbour’s utterance (and my hearing it with understanding) may be said to have caused my action. What is to be rejected is only the idea that between (my perception of) the utterance — the obvious trigger of my action —, and the action we need to postulate another cause (or causal factor): a ‘desire’ or ‘disposition’. To think so — to invoke a ‘fleeting disposition’ as a causal link between perceived request and action —, is to mistake the causal efficacy of the cause for a second cause. When a storm blows down a fence, the falling of the fence is caused by the storm. We don’t add anything to this causal explanation by saying that the fence was such that the storm would blow it down. This phrase (‘the fence

was such that the storm would blow it down') simply repeats the causal explanation (that the storm caused the fence to fall), but doesn't specify a second causal factor (cf. Rundle 1997, 208).

Of course such a second causal factor *could* be specified by an independent description of the fence: as ramshackle or partly rotten. Similarly, it is perhaps possible to identify as a contributing causal factor in my passing the salt a desire to please my neighbour: perhaps I want him to lend me some money and so I'm particularly anxious to make a good impression on him, to put him in a good mood over dinner etc. But here the desire is not just a philosophical postulate, but an independently identifiable psychological circumstance. I am very much aware of my eagerness to please my neighbour even before he asks for the salt.

So, a *desire* (in the ordinary sense of the word) can indeed be a causal factor,³ beside the triggering event, but a '*desire*', a postulated ad hoc 'disposition' is not. It is simply a confused way of reiterating the fact that the triggering event did indeed have the causal efficacy to make me carry out this intentional action.

(iii) Finally, let us consider the case of a real disposition (not just a postulated 'desire' misconstrued as an ad hoc 'disposition'). As first pointed out by Gilbert Ryle (1949, 117), to explain an action by reference to a disposition towards that kind of action is not a causal explanation. To say that somebody *frequently* scratches his chin is, obviously, not to give a cause of his chin scratching. Similarly, if somebody responds to some grave news with a silly joke, the comment that he just is a flippant and immature character does not name a *cause* of his frivolous remark, but merely describes it as part of a recurring pattern. He *frequently* responds to serious matters with a frivolous remark. It amounts to saying that one thing (grave news) *regularly*

³ It has been objected that an action caused by a desire could no longer be described as voluntary, let alone intentional (Melden 1961, 128-9; White 1967, 148; Hacker 1996, 580). However, on this point I am inclined to side with Davidson, who queries: 'Why on earth should a cause turn an action into a mere happening and a person into a helpless victim?' (1963, 19). There is nothing in our concept of a voluntary action that would exclude the idea of its having causes. Besides, it is far from obvious that a cause must always necessitate its effect. As Elizabeth Anscombe has pointed out (1971), we frequently make causal statements without any implication of necessity. Likewise, we might describe someone's action as brought on by a sudden desire without denying that he might have resisted that desire. A red traffic light causes me to stop, but my stopping does not on that account cease to be a voluntary action. Even if my decision to stop is the result of rational considerations, a pedestrian who pushed a button to make the lights change may still observe with gratification that his action *caused* me to stop.

causes another (that person's frivolous response); but the reliability of a causal link is not an additional cause.

The closest Hyman comes to considering this Rylean objection is the following passage:

it is sometimes said that explanations that refer to dispositions are vacuous or uninformative ... The complaint has some merit when the disposition mentioned is to produce the effect whose cause we want to know. Molière's joke about the student who is congratulated for explaining that taking opium makes one fall asleep because of its *virtus dormitiva* — i.e. its soporific power — is a case in point. ... But explanations that refer to dispositions are not all alike. For example, 'Lead is poisonous because it is a neurotoxin' is a much better explanation than the one Molière lampooned because it excludes a larger range of alternatives. [Hyman 2015, 110-11]

However, this is not a reply to the Rylean concern at all. For one thing, the concern is not that explanations that refer to dispositions are *uninformative*, but merely that they are not *causal* explanations. More importantly, Hyman's examples are not just explanations *by* dispositions, but also (proposed) explanations *of* dispositions. The causalist thesis he tries to defend is that dispositions can be cited in the *explanans* of the causal explanation of an action, whereas in these examples the *explanandum* is not an action, but is itself a disposition. To answer the question why Jones's taking opium made him fall asleep by saying that opium has a soporific disposition, can be a perfectly respectable explanation. Molière's question, however, is not about a particular event, but about a disposition: Why has opium a soporific disposition? — to which the answer 'Because of its *virtus dormitiva*' is indeed vacuous — hence a joke —, as it merely repeats the explanandum in Latin. The explanation 'Lead is poisonous because it is a neurotoxin' is of course more informative, but it is not a causal explanation either. It is informative by replacing a determinable predicate by a (more) determinate one, like 'Smith is a member of the legal profession because he's a barrister'. The explanatory link is not causal, but conceptual: being a barrister doesn't *cause* you to be a member of the legal profession, it *means* that you are a member of the legal profession. Likewise, being a neurotoxin just *means* being a certain type of poison.

A dispositional explanation is, roughly speaking, of the form:

A ϕ -ed on this occasion, because A has a general tendency to ϕ .

It is not a causal explanation: it does clearly not identify a cause of *A*'s ϕ -ing. Why then is it so often mistaken for a causal explanation?

It seems to me that the main reason for that mistake is a failure to distinguish carefully between a disposition and its material basis; or perhaps an overhasty assumption that by naming a disposition one has implicitly identified its material basis (cf. Alvarez 2014, 86). The falsity of this assumption is the point of Molière's joke. It is further facilitated by the fact that a disposition may be a disposition to *cause* something (e.g., being poisonous is a disposition to cause harm), so that an explanation naming such a disposition seems to imply causation and so may easily be mistaken for a causal explanation; especially when one uses the weasel word 'causal factor', instead of 'cause'.

One may be tempted to think that talk of a person's general *tendency* to ϕ somehow refers to something that repeatedly *makes* that person ϕ . But that is not so. Although it is natural to think that a general tendency must *have* a cause, that is not implied (and the cause is certainly not identified) by mentioning the tendency. Observing that somebody tends to respond frivolously to serious matters is not the same as identifying — or even asserting the existence of — a (single) cause of that frivolous disposition.

Non-psychological dispositions are often *known* to result from a certain material basis. For instance, glass is well known to be fragile, petrol is combustible, and aspirin is analgesic. Here we often switch from one to the other, or combine a dispositional with a causal explanation. For instance, when it is reported that:

(1) The vase broke when dropped because being made of glass it was fragile.

— the dispositional explanation is combined with a reference to its material basis (glass), which is appropriately regarded as a causal condition. If, however, all we are told is that:

(2) The vase broke because it was fragile.

—no causal explanation has been given. (2) only says that the thing did what things like that tend to do. And yet, even then it is natural to assume that a causal

explanation is in the offing: in order to identify the relevant causal factor, underlying the disposition, we only have to inspect the object's material or construction.

Psychological dispositions, however, are very different. What is the material basis of frivolity, politeness, stinginess? *We have no idea*. We may speculate that there may be something in a person's brain or genes causing the behavioural patterns in question, or perhaps, further back, a series of childhood experiences forming such character traits — but we don't really know. With psychological dispositions, the material basis that might figure in a suitable causal explanation is not only not referred to nor implied by talk of dispositions, it is moreover something that currently we are entirely unable to discover or identify. Therefore, a dispositional explanation of human behaviour is not only not itself a causal explanation; it is also, for the time being, utterly unrealistic to regard it as a signpost referring us to a corresponding causal explanation.

3. *Reasons and first-person authority*

At the core of Wittgenstein's distinction between reasons and causes lies the idea that the grammar of the former is characterised by first-person authority:

a person does not generally know the *causes* of his activities. ... he will frequently be mistaken in specifying the cause. Strangely enough, he cannot be mistaken in specifying his *reason*. ... That is, we *call* the reason that which he gives as his reason. The cause of an action is established by observation, namely *hypothetically*, i.e., in such a way that further experiences can confirm it or contradict it. [VW 109-11]

Hyman sees in this (or a related passage in the *Blue Book* (BB 15)) only the claim that causal explanations are *conjectures*, whereas we are immediately certain of our reasons,— to which he rightly objects that causal statements can be certain and immediate too (2015, 118). In fact, that is something Wittgenstein himself remarked and illustrated by the example of being startled by suddenly seeing a light: in which case one does not *hypothesise* on the basis of repeated observations about the cause of one's bodily movement, but is immediately aware of that cause (CE 408). So it is indeed inaccurate to say that 'one can only *conjecture*' the cause (as Wittgenstein does in BB 15), but that is not his main point.

The crucial contrast is not between immediate knowledge and mere conjecture based on repeated observation, but between, on the one hand, an *authority conferred*

by *our concepts* (hence not really a matter of knowledge at all) and, on the other hand, any kind of *empirical finding*, be it immediate perception or a tentative conjecture. In the latter case there is an independent state of affairs of which I come to know, be it step by step through repeated observation or immediately. Either way, my cognition is fallible. Error may be highly unlikely, practically impossible, but extraordinary circumstances that would prove my judgement erroneous are at least conceivable. Thus, it is at least imaginable that the car I see right in front of me in broad daylight proves to be an ingeniously constructed hologram. Similarly, when I suddenly see a light or a face and startle, it is conceivable (however far-fetched and unlikely) that my startling reflex was triggered by some electrodes in my brain quite independently of what I happened to see at that moment.

By contrast, first-person authority does not underwrite reports about independent occurrences, but marks certain kinds of sincere avowals of a person's impression as constitutive of a certain concept. Thus, when I can sincerely complain that something feels painful to me, then — by definition or by grammar — *it is* painful. This concept of feeling does not allow any room to a distinction between appearance and reality; that is, error in this case is logically impossible. (Not because I know so reliably whether I'm in pain, but simply because this is not really a case of knowledge at all (cf. *PI* §246).)

Similarly, according to Wittgenstein, there is a concept of a person's reason that is simply *defined*, or constituted, by that person's sincere avowal of his reason. Not because we take people to be so reliable at finding out what their reasons are, but because a 'reason' (in this sense), unlike a cause, is not an independent occurrence at all: it is simply defined to be what an agent can honestly say in response to the question: 'Why are you doing it?' or (with regard to the recent past) 'Why did you do it?'

The point of such a concept is easy to see. An agent's proffered reason will give us an insight into his character. It tells us what considerations he regards as justifying the action in question (at least in a weak sense of 'justify': as making the action understandable from the agent's point of view), or would so regard, given the information and interests he had at the time. Assuming that people's general views and dispositions remain fairly stable over short periods of time, we can generally trust people to be reliable in expressing subsequently what they *would* have been able to say at the time of action. Anyway, the justificatory aspect of explanations in terms of

reasons is of paramount importance to us. By asking people to give reasons for their behaviour, we challenge them to justify it; to tell us (if they can) why it wasn't a bad (or silly) thing. The question of when this justification was (or would have been) thought of for the first time may be quite irrelevant.⁴

Wittgenstein's account of the concept of a person's reason for acting is simply an abstraction from the language game of *giving one's reason*, that is, of justifying one's behaviour. So it is not surprising that it offers a straightforward solution to the problem that defeated Davidson: the problem of finding criteria by which to identify the reason for which somebody has done something.⁵

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⁴ For a further discussion of Wittgenstein's account of a reason see Schroeder 2017.

⁵ I am grateful to Gunnar Schumann for his comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

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