

CONCLUSION

I have addressed two issues in the philosophy of action: Wittgenstein's question how to understand the distinction between actions and mere happenings, and Davidson's challenge to give an account of the explanatory relation between reasons and actions. I have followed an old-fashioned strategy in answering the first question, seeking clues to the answer not by searching for the conditions that render actions actions (thought of as reasons or intentions on the intentionalist approach) but rather by searching for the conditions that render mere happenings mere happenings (defeating conditions like spasms, coma, sleep, handicap, etc.). More systematically, I have argued that a performance is an action just in case there is some description under which it would have been reasonable_A to expect of the agent that he perform it (Chapters III-V have explained the special sense assigned to the technical terms invoked). In Chapter VI, I have shown that the proposed account captures all the cases captured by the intentionalist view, and straightforwardly excludes cases of basic wayward causal chains from qualifying as actions. Moreover, it is able to qualify some unintentional omissions as actions. In this way, the nonintentionalist view I have sketched gives an account of our conduct, including our agentic voice and silence.

The concept that figures crucially in the answer to the first question is the concept of a normative expectation. In Chapter I, I have suggested that, contrary to first impressions, that concept is not unrelated to the way in which we explain actions. In fact, I have shown that the concept of normative expectation may be thought to play just the double role that the concept of intention has been thought to play on the intentionalist account. For the concept of intention is usually thought to be important in answering both of the above questions. Insofar as the idea of a performance being intentional under a description presupposes some concept of intention, it figures in the intentionalist answer to the question what actions are. It also plays a role in the causalist answer to the question how reasons, intentions, etc., relate to actions, viz. causally. The concept of

normative expectation figures not only in the answer to the first question, but also in the answer to the second question.

In Chapter VII, I have argued that we can think of reasons as justifying the normative expectations on which the agent acts. I have sketched a selectional model of what it means to say that an agent acts on one expectation rather than another (acts for one reason rather than another). The model relies on, among others, causal relations but not on the causal relation between the reason or the expectation and the action. I have suggested that it illuminates what we mean when we suppose that there is a “causal” relation between the reason and the action.

In Chapter VII, I have also argued that the selectional model allows us to understand how it is possible for an agent to act on another person’s expectation of him. I have also shown that there is no reason, internal to that model, to suppose that the agent’s acting on another person’s desire must be mediated by her acting on her own desire that is suitably related to that person’s desire. In Chapter I, I have demonstrated that many external arguments also fail to establish this conclusion. I have thus defended the position of explanatory nonindividualism, whose distinctive claim is that aside from being sometimes moved by our desire to satisfy another person’s desire, we are also sometimes moved by that person’s desire without thereby being moved by our desire to satisfy that person’s desire.

I should emphasize, as I have been doing throughout, that though the answers to the two questions, the problem of action and the problem of the explanatory force of reasons, sound common notes (both employ the notion of normative expectation, for example), they are really different answers to different questions. The question of how to explain an action is a question about which of the normative expectations, to which the agent is *actually* held, has been operative in the agent’s acting. The question of whether a performance is an action depends on whether or not it *would be* reasonable_A to expect the performance of the agent under some description. The answer to the second question is independent of any actual expectations to which the agent is held.

The theme that reverberates in the answers to both questions, however, is the need to look to the social nature of our agency. The answer to Wittgenstein’s question appeals to a social criterion of what it would be reasonable_A for *us* to expect of the agent.

Whether or not the agent's performance lives up to the standard is largely a question of whether or not untoward circumstances (defeating conditions) have interfered. The focus is thus removed from the agent's inner life, from the practical reasoning in which she is sometimes involved, and shifts toward the way in which her performance affects the social fabric of normative expectations. An agent's habitual, unreflective, spontaneous actions as well as unintentional omissions intuitively require no mental involvement on the agent's part, and yet they do form a part of the agent's conduct, they can affect others in ways which would be agentively traceable to the agent. Likewise the selectional nonindividualist answer to Davidson's challenge opens a new way of looking at the interactions between others and the agent. In allowing for the possibility that the agent acts on another's desire directly as it were, without acting on her own desire (though, as we saw, still acting on some of her beliefs), the account shows vividly that our being embedded in the network of social expectations does not necessarily leave the agent cold, but can move her to action.