

Consciousness and Understanding of Human Action

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I Introduction

In this paper, I mainly take up the problem of action. And in order to treat this problem, I pick up causal theory of human action and mention two philosopher's view. Donald Davidson and Harry G. Frankfurt.

Firstly, I introduce Davidson's causal theory because I evaluate his view to explain actions.

Causal theory of action has long history. From Hobbs, this theory has great influence. This theory claims that an agent has certain intention and her intention causes her action. For example, a person eats salad. In this case, agent's intension is that she intends to eat salad, and it causes her action. That is to say, the agent's intention in her mind causes a movement of her body.

II Davidson's view

Davidson's theory is different from traditional one as follows. Davidson thinks that an action has primary reason and this reason is also the cause of the action.

"Giving the reason why an agent did something is often a matter of naming the pro attitude or the related belief or both; let me call this pair the primary reason why the agent performed the action."

1. In order to understand how a reason of any kind rationalizes an action it is necessary and sufficient that we see, at least in essential outline, how to construct a primary reason.

2. The primary reason for an action is its cause."¹

Primary reason is consist of pro attitude and related belief. For example, when I do the action "I flip the switch." pro attitude is "I want to turn on the light." and related belief is "this action (flipping the switch) is to turn on the light". And this primary reason caused me the action.

I think Davidson's view works well because it makes the important distinction between "a reason for an action" and "the reason why one performs an action". To explain this distinction, for example, a man (call him Smith) hated his brother and wanted to kill him. Smith made a plan to kill his brother and someday Smith tried to do with the plan. But he was scared by the suddenly strange noise, so Smith fired at his brother.

In this case, Smith had a reason for this action but it is not the reason why Smith performed it. So, his desire to kill his brother is not the cause of the action. Therefore it is not part of primary reason.

To claim why agent performed the action, primary reason must be a cause of this action. This is one good point of Davidson's view.

III The problem of Davidson's view

But I find some questionable points in his view. The first problem: for Davidson it is not necessary condition that an agent has to know her primary reason. He writes,

"The signaling driver can answer the question, 'Why did you raise your arm when you did?'" and from the answer we learn the event that caused the action. But can an actor always answer such a question? Sometimes the answer will mention a mental event that does not give a reason: 'Finally I made up my mind.' However, there also seem to be cases of intentional action where we cannot explain at all why we acted when we did. In such cases, explanation in terms of primary reasons parallels the explanation of the collapse of the bridge from a structural defect: we are ignorant of the event or sequence of events that led up to (caused) the collapse, but we are sure there was such an event or sequence of events."²

Davidson admits that an agent need know her action under certain description and 'made up his mind', but need not know why she did her action. Davidson thinks that even if an agent cannot know the reason of her action, there must be some reason as cause of the action, but we might not know it. But this leads the following ridiculous situation.

If an agent need not know her primary reason, then nobody can decide what is the primary reason of her action. If an agent supposes more than one primary reason, then an agent doesn't know which primary reason is the real i.e. causal one. So no one decide which one is the real reason. Still according to Davidson, there must be cause.

And another problem arises as follows. I also think that we can even *create* primary reason freely. For example, when someone "A" bought a book, the pro attitude is "A wants to buy the book." and the related belief is "this action is to buy the book". Or the pro attitude is "A wants to spend some money" and the related belief is "this action is to spend some money". And so on.

I suspect that this sort of primary reason has not genuine causal relation to the action.

IV Another problem against causal theory of action

Secondly, here I introduce Harry G. Frankfurt's view

which shows another argument against general causal theory of action. He writes “Despite its popularity, I believe that the causal approach is inherently implausible and that it cannot provide a satisfactory analysis of the nature of action.”³

And he claims that “In asserting that the essential difference between actions and mere happenings lies in their prior causal histories, causal theories imply that actions and mere happenings do not differ essentially in themselves at all.”⁴

He thinks that causal theory is implausible. And according to Frankfurt, causal theory says that actions and mere happenings do not differ essentially themselves at all.

And in this line, he claims that causal theory arises problem as follows. “They are therefore committed to supposing that a person who knows he is in the midst of performing an action cannot have derived this knowledge from any awareness of what is currently happening, but that he must have derived it instead from his understanding of how what is happening was caused to happen by certain earlier conditions.”⁵

And also, “They require nothing of an agent, once the specified causal antecedents of his performing an action have occurred, expect that his body move as their effect.”⁶ We must decide whether the event is an action or a mere happening before the event starts to happen. By Frankfurt, this point makes causal theory implausible.

Therefore he characterizes actions different from movements as follows. He claims what makes any movement human action is not cause. “He is performing an action even if its occurrence is due to chance. And he is not performing an action if the movements are not under his guidance as they proceed, even if he himself provided the antecedent causes – in the form of beliefs, desires, intentions, decisions, volitions, or whatever – from which the movement has resulted.”⁷

He claims that agent’s guidance is decisive. “In fact, the state of affairs *while* the movements are occurring is far more pertinent. What is not merely pertinent but decisive, indeed, is to consider whether or not the movements as they occur are *under the person’s guidance*. It is this that determines whether he is performing an action.”⁸

And he explains the guidance as follows. “Our sense of our own agency when we act is nothing more than the way it

feels to us when we are somehow in touch with the operation of mechanisms of this kind, by which our movements are guided and their course guaranteed.”⁹

Frankfurt thinks that what event makes action is agent’s guidance. I think Frankfurt’s view has good point, because we usually think that while we do some action we hold certain relationship to our accomplishment of action. According to Davidson’s view, mental event and action are different entities. They have only causal relation. But by Frankfurt, both mental event and action coexist.

V The problem of Frankfurt’s view

But the word guidance has certain vagueness. Does guidance contain agent’s awareness of action? What is the criterion to have such guidance?

The guidance of an agent presupposes a consciousness of her. So, I understand Frankfurt takes a position of the first person’s view.

Under usual circumstances we think that an agent has the explanatory priority to her own action. When we want to know the reason of her action, for example someone’s stabbing a man, we firstly ask the agent “why did you do that?” If agent says “I want to kill the man.” we regard it as an intentional action. But we sometimes reject agent’s account for her action even if she insists that her action was just an accident. For example, when we find she made a plan to kill the man we conclude that her movement is an action. So, the first person’s view does not always have explanatory authority.

Notes

1. Donald Davidson ‘Actions, Reasons, and Causes’, in *Essays on Action and Event* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980) p4
2. *Ibid.* p13
3. Harry G. Frankfurt ‘The Problem of action’, in *The Importance of What We Care About* (Cambridge University Press, 1988) p69
4. *Ibid.* p69
5. *Ibid.* p69
6. *Ibid.* p70
7. *Ibid.* p73
8. *Ibid.* p72
9. *Ibid.* p75