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## ACTION AND ITS EXPLANATION

A commonly discussed problem in theories of action is whether an explanation of someone's action in terms of his reasons for acting is a causal one, that is whether when a person's action is accounted for by reference to his reasons, the reasons have been causally efficacious in producing the action. Many recent philosophers claim that explanation of action in terms of the agent's reasons is not causal explanation. In this paper I want to discuss some of their arguments and to try to show that they are invalid. My discussion will take the form of a defense of the position that explanation of action by reasons is a species of explanation by causes.

Giving an account of whether reasons-explanations of action are causal presupposes an account of what it is for a consideration to be a reason for acting at all. In this article I will assume a widely accepted notion of reason for action—which is agreed upon by both the causal theorists and their opponents—according to which, when fully spelled out, a reason for action contains a reference to a motive, intention, purpose or desire of the person for whose action the reason in question is a reason, as well as to a belief that he has to the effect that the motive, desire, etc will be fulfilled by his action or that his action will promote its fulfillment. Suppose that a habitual smoker refuses a cigarette. When we ask him to give his reason for his action, he might say that smoking is bad for his health. But (according to the notion of reasons in question), as is usually the case when we give reasons for action, the habitual smoker here gives only part of his reason. Part of what would make his reason complete is left out and may be obvious from the context. But suppose that we don't see the relevance of what he says and we ask him to expand out his thinking. Then he will most probably reply that he wants to be in good health and that he believes that smoking is a great health hazard. He will cite, that is, a desire as well as a belief that he has — the belief being about how to promote the satisfaction of his desire.

According to the causal theory<sup>1</sup>, when a man explains his action by citing his reason, he calls attention to a condition which is prior to the action and of which the action is the outcome. His reason for acting, that is to say, constitutes the causal antecedent of his action. Let us return to the habitual smoker's refusing a cigarette. The smoker cites as his reason that he wants to be in good health and that he believes that smoking is a health hazard. It would be the view of the causal theorists that the smoker's mentioned want and belief are events or states which precede his action and which explain it by constituting the cause, or part of the cause, of it. Of course, the causal theorists would say, the smoker has many other wants and beliefs at the time that he refuses a cigarette. For example he might also want to have a drink and he might also believe that the sun is shining outside (to mention one of each). In citing the one that he did, and not others, as his reason for action, he implies that these are the ones which are responsible for his action, which have led him to act as he did. But to suggest this is to call attention to a relationship between his reason and his action which we would most naturally and intuitively classify as a causal one. The causal thesis, the causal theorists suggest, enjoys intuitive, common-sense support.

Opposition to the causal theory comes mainly from a group of philosophers who may loosely be called «post-Wittgensteinians», such as G. E. M. Anscombe, A. I. Melden and R.S. Peters<sup>2</sup>. These philosophers claim that explaining a man's action by his reasons is not the same as explaining it by its causes, so that intentions, desires, beliefs, etc cannot be considered causes of the actions we explain by them. Anscombe for example writes «Motives may explain actions to us; but that is not to say that they 'determine', in the sense of causing actions»<sup>3</sup>. And Melden, «How then does citing a motive explain an action? Certainly, ...stating the motive is not offering a (Humean) causal explanation of the action»<sup>4</sup>. When we explain a man's action in terms of his reasons, these philosophers contend, we simply «redescribe» or «interpret» it, placing it in a familiar

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1. Donald Davidson's «Actions, Reasons and Causes», *The Journal of Philosophy* (1963), reprinted in *The Philosophy of Action*, A.R. White ed., (Oxford University Press, 1968) is the leading specimen of this theory. For a good deal of what I say in the present paper I am indebted to this article.

2. G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1957). A. I. Melden, *Free Action* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1960). R. S. Peters, *The Concept of Motivation* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1960).

3. *Intention*, p. 19.

4. *Free Action*, p. 102.

context which does not involve any causal considerations. Suppose that, upon approaching an intersection, a man driving a car raises his arm. And suppose that, when asked (by someone who is unfamiliar with what is happening) to give his reason for his action he replies that he intends to indicate to others that he is preparing to make a left turn. (This is Melden's example, and he has in mind British right-hand driving.) It is the view of the mentioned philosophers that, rather than his reason being a causal antecedent of his action, it is a redescription or a further characterization of it—it informs the questioner that the action of raising the arm is in fact the action of signalling left and, therefore, it provides him with a better understanding of what the driver is doing. In citing his reason for raising his arm (the mentioned philosophers would insist) the driver does not call attention to a feature over and above the action, of which the action is the causal consequent, but rather to the action of raising his arm itself and the circumstances in which it occurred — that one was driving, that one was preparing to turn, that there were others on the road to be apprised of what it was that one was about to do. «Citing a motive», writes Melden, is merely «giving a fuller characterization of the action»<sup>1</sup>. And Anscombe: «'His love of truth caused him to'... means rather 'He did this in that he loved the truth'; it interprets his action»<sup>2</sup>.

Underlying the line of thought of these philosophers is the Wittgensteinian desire to destroy the notion of the Cartesian subject and the Cartesian view of human behaviour that is associated with it, according to which action is explained in terms of a causal interaction between mind and body. On this view, the action of, for example, flipping the light switch is explained as having been caused by an unease in the mind of the agent—in this case a desire—which, in its turn, is caused by something material, such as the darkness of the room. In Wittgenstein's writings this interactionist view has been renounced as relying on the mistaken theory of private ostensive definition and private meanings. As is well known, Wittgenstein showed that a mental event, such as Descartes understood a desire or any other emotion to be, is an absurdity. For, such an event is supposed to be known only by introspection, and the word standing for such an event is thus supposed to acquire its meaning by a purely private ostensive definition. Yet no word could acquire a meaning by such

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1. *Ibid.*, p. 88.

2. *Intention*, p. 19.

a definition; since a word only has meaning as part of a language which is something essentially public<sup>1</sup>.

A second motive for interpreting explanation of action as non-causal is again the Wittgensteinian concern to reject the mechanistic picture of human life and action which is exemplified in theories such as those of Hobbes and the S-R behaviourists. These theories have inherited from Descartes an interactionist spirit, but as they have not respected the Cartesian notion of unobservable mental events, they have analyzed these in purely physical or dispositional terms. They have thus envisioned an all-inclusive theory of human behaviour reflected in what the psychologist Clark Hull says: «An ideally adequate theory of even so-called purposive behaviour ought, therefore, to begin with colorless movement and mere receptor impulses as such, and from these build up step by step both adaptive and maladaptive behaviour»<sup>2</sup>. It seems fairly clear that if it could be established that intentions, desires, beliefs, etc are not related to action in a causal way, both the Cartesian and the mechanistic theories of human action would be shown to be untenable.

Stemming from this double concern of the non-causal theorists is the claim that there is a fundamental difference between human action and mere human bodily movements and, moreover, between explanation of action and explanation of bodily movements. As to the first dichotomy, if we understand movement in the sense of physical displacement, there is no doubt that movements are distinct from actions. For it is possible that the same set of movements are involved in very different actions. For example, I may make the same movements when I signal that I am about to turn and when I point to something of interest to my passenger. It is also possible to have movements which are not actions. Heartbeats and blinkings are examples of these. It is even possible to have actions which involve no movements. So, for example, to say that, when struck by a policeman, John refrained from striking back because he practices non-violence is to refer to an act—John's act of non-violence—which involves no movements<sup>3</sup>. The non-causal theorists have, moreover, an alternative way of putting the above distinction. Thus they often talk about what a

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1. See L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, tr. by G.E.M. Anscombe, (Blackell, Oxford, 1953), par. 243-258.

2. Clark Hull, *Principles of Behaviour* (Appleton-Century-Crofts, New York, 1943), p. 25.

3. I borrow this example from R. J. Bernstein, *Praxis and Action* (University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1971), p. 266.

man does and contrast this with what happens to a man or what a man suffers. And there is no doubt that, looking to the movements involved in an action alone—looking for example only to the fact of someone's falling of a cliff at an accelerating speed—we would ordinarily say that something is happening to that person or that his body is reacting in a certain way (e.g. that he was pushed from the cliff by a force which he could not resist) and not that he is doing something (e.g. that he is jumping from the cliff).

Running parallel to the well-founded distinction between action and bodily movements is the non-causal theorists' questionable, I think, distinction between explanation of action and explanation of bodily movements. Although human action cannot be explained causally, these philosophers contend, causal explanation is applicable to bodily movements. Thus when we think of action as a mere series of movements — the movements which are involved in it—we can explain it causally. It is only when action is thought of as action and not as series of movements that explanation by causes becomes inappropriate. There is here a contrast between two levels of explanation: at one level we have the physiological factors that causally explain the bodily movements which are involved in actions but which are not themselves actions; at another level we have the reasons the agents give, which explain their actions but do not cause them. So R. S. Peters writes, «if we are in fact confronted with a case of genuine action (i. e. an act of doing something as opposed to suffering something) then causal explanations are *ipso facto* inappropriate...»<sup>1</sup> One of the arguments Peters offers in support of his claim is the following:

To give a causal explanation of an event involves at least showing that, other conditions being presumed unchanged, a change in one variable is a sufficient condition for a change in another... the trouble about giving this sort of explanation of human actions is that we can never specify an action exhaustively in terms of movements of the body or within the body. It is therefore impossible to state sufficient conditions in terms of antecedent movements which may vary concomitantly with subsequent movements<sup>2</sup>.

Take for example the action of «signing a contract». It would be impossible, Peters contends, to specify the bodily movements that must be involved in it, if it is to count as such. For if this is a case of human action,

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1. *The Concept of Motivation*, p. 12.

2. *Ibid.*

the agent will be intelligent and he will thus vary his movements in a variety of ways. He may hold the pen slightly differently, he may vary the size of his writing, he may even sign by holding the pen between his toes. There are of course certain very general criteria which the action of signing a contract must meet. So, for example, typing one's name cannot count as signing. But beyond these, more or less any movements will do.

One thing to be said in response to Peters' argument is that it is not true that no action can be specified exhaustively in terms of bodily movements. There are certain actions, such as, for example, that of voluntarily closing one's eyes—winking—or that of performing certain ballet exercises, which can be clearly specified in this way. More importantly however, Peters' premiss that in order for actions to be causally explicable they must be specified exhaustively in terms of bodily movements is problematic. For if movement specification were necessary for explaining action causally, then many pieces of behaviour which Peters would characterize as mere series of movements, rather than as actions, would, contrary to his own conclusion, fail to be causally explicable. Take the example of losing one's temper which, as Peters would say, is something which happens to a man or a «breakdown in action»<sup>1</sup>, rather than something that he does, and to which, on Peters' view, causal explanation is applicable. There is no specified series of body movements that one must have produced if he is to be said to have lost his temper. He may shout, he may say nasty things, he may break things in front of him etc.

But leaving aside the foregoing difficulties, there is a contradiction in the position of those such as Peters who claim that causal explanation is applicable to movements but not to actions. Consider the action of signing a contract and, more specifically, one particular instance of it. Peters and others would agree that we can think of this action token of signing a contract either as an action or as a mere series of bodily movements and, moreover, they would say that when we describe it as a series of movements we can explain it causally. The problem is that if this action token is causally explicable when described as a series of movements, then it must also be causally explicable when described as an action. For, as Donald Davidson rightly points out<sup>2</sup>, causal relations hold between e-

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1. Ibid.

2. «Actions, Reasons and Causes»,

vents independently of how the events are described. This is the so-called «extensionality of causal relations thesis». I flip the switch, turn on the light and illuminate the room. We have here three descriptions of one and the same event. Suppose that what caused me to flip the switch was my curiosity to see what would happen. Then we should admit that my curiosity to see what would happen was also the cause of my turning on the light as well as of my illuminating the room. For if this were not so, my curiosity would be both the cause and not the cause of a single event.

By the same line of reasoning we can establish that all instances of the action of signing a contract are causally explicable. But if this is so, then the action-type of signing a contract itself is causally explicable. For if all instances of a type have a property in common, this is a property of the type. And since all instances of the action type of signing a contract can be causally explained, the action type of signing a contract also can be causally explained. It appears then that in view of the extensionality of causal relations thesis, if Peters and others are willing to accept that causal explanation is applicable to movements, they cannot consistently deny that it is also applicable to action.

Another attempt to establish the position that causal explanation does not apply to actions is made by Melden. Melden reminds us of the Humean demand that a cause must be logically distinct from the alleged effect, in the sense that the existence of the one must not logically entail the existence of the other. But, he suggests, a reason for an action is not logically distinct from the action. One reason he gives in support of this is that the very description of a reason for acting in a certain way must make mention of the action—we talk about a reason for doing such and such (a desire for doing X, an intention to do Y etc). A reason for an action, that is to say, must get its characterization from the nature of its corresponding action. He therefore concludes that reasons and actions are not causally connected<sup>1</sup>.

Now it is true that motives, desires, intentions, etc are identified and characterized by their fulfilments or corresponding actions. Thus, in order to know, for example, what desiring to do X is we must know what doing X is. Moreover, the desire to do X differs from the desire to do Y precisely to the extent that doing X differs from doing Y. But this is not to say that reasons are not logically independent of actions, that the existence of the one logically entails the existence of the other. For

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1. *Free Action*, ch. 12.

although desires, intentions, etc are characterized by reference to the action, this does not imply that they will be followed by the action. I may have a desire or intention to do X, and yet not do it, because, for example, I was prevented or deterred or discouraged or changed my mind before I carried out the action. Consider the parallel example of the expectation of a rising stock market. Although in our characterization of this expectation we make reference to the rising stock market, this does not imply that the market will rise. The expectation of the rising market and a rising market are logically distinct — the existence of the one does not entail the existence of the other — and can be therefore causally connected. And, as we know, they are indeed causally connected<sup>1</sup>.

There is a further alleged difficulty in regarding reasons as causes of the actions we explain by them. According to Hume «we may define a cause to be an object followed by another, and where all objects similar to the first are followed by objects similar to the second»<sup>2</sup>. This claim has been accepted in many philosophical circles and has been put by saying that when we have a causal explanation of an event by some prior event, then we appeal, either implicitly or explicitly, to a law which connects cause and effect by stating that whenever an event of the first kind occurs, an event of the second kind follows. But, it has been said, reasons and actions do not meet this condition. «The statement that one person did something because, for example, another threatened him carries no implication or covert assertion that if the circumstances were repeated the same action would follow»<sup>3</sup>. Thus it has been concluded that reasons and actions are not causally connected.

In reply here it should be said that in most everyday cases of causation we cannot formulate any precise laws relating the cause and the effect. As Davidson remarks, «ignorance of competent predictive laws does not inhibit valid causal explanations, or few causal explanations could be made»<sup>4</sup>. When I watch a rock break a window I have no doubt that the rock's striking the window was the cause of the window's breaking. Yet, although I can probably cite a very rough and vague generalization relating these two kinds of events (e.g. windows, being fragile, tend to break

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1. This parallelism is suggested by J. A. Shaffer, *Philosophy of Mind* (Englewood Cliffs, 1968), p. 99.

2. D. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Clarendon Press, Oxford 1973), I, iii 14.

3. H. L. A. Hart and A. M. Honoré, *Causation in the Law* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1959), p. 52. Quoted in «Actions, Reasons and Causes», p. 91.

4. «Actions, Reasons and Causes», p. 91.

when struck hard enough), I cannot formulate any precise law on the basis of which I can predict what blows will break which windows—a law approximately to the effect that whenever a window of type *t* is struck by a rock of size *s* moving at velocity *v* etc the window will break. But if we are justified in accepting a causal link in the case of the rock's breaking the window, although we are not in a position to supply a law, why should we not accept a causal link in the case of desires, intentions, etc and action, simply because we are unable to frame precise predictive laws relating these two kinds of events? After all we can have rough generalizations in the case of reasons and actions too. So, for example, we might be able to say: threatened people tend to act in such and such a way.

It might be thought that the foregoing considerations disprove the Humean claim that causal connections imply laws. But in fact they do not. For, as Davidson points out<sup>1</sup>, Hume's claim is ambiguous: it may mean that a causal statement of the form «A caused B» entails some particular law in terms of the descriptions 'A' and 'B'; or it may mean something much weaker, namely that «A caused B» entails only that there exists some causal law which is in terms of true descriptions of A and B but not necessarily in terms of the descriptions 'A' and 'B'. On the first version the causal statement, for example, «a desire for revenge caused Mary to kill John» entails a law which relates desires for revenge with acts of killing, and this statement cannot be defended unless the entailed law can be precisely formulated. On the second version, however, no law relating desires for revenge with acts of killing is necessarily entailed by the above causal statement, since the entailed law here might be in terms of descriptions other than «desires» and «actions»—its items might, for example, be described in neurological or chemical or physical terms. Thus, on this second version, it is an error to think that the above causal statement cannot be defended unless a law relating desires for revenge with acts of killing can be formulated. It is now clear that, interpreted in this second way, Hume's claim is not inconsistent with the idea, expressed in the previous paragraph, that no laws relating the cause and the effect can be formulated in most cases of indisputable causal connections. And, as Davidson emphasizes<sup>2</sup>, it is indeed this second, weaker sense of Hume's claim that can be made to fit with most causal explanations, including explanations in terms of reasons, or, as he labels these, «rationalizations».

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1. *Ibid.*, p. 92.

2. *Ibid.*

To return to Melden, his suggestion is that explanation of action in terms of motives, intentions, beliefs, etc «provides us with a better understanding of the action» by redescribing it, placing it within a familiar context or pattern which does not involve any causal considerations<sup>1</sup>. Now it is true that explaining an action by its reasons involves interpreting it in a way which makes it more intelligible and less puzzling to whoever the explanation is given. This person finds the action unusual, strange, untoward, pointless, out of character, disconnected. By redescribing it to him we fit it into a picture with which he is familiar. So, for example, my answer «I am operating the water-pump» to the question «why are you moving that handle up and down?» (Anscombe's example) redescribes my activity, presumably unintelligible to my questioner, of moving the handle up and down, so as to make it an instance of the action, familiar to him, of operating the water pump. But in offering an explanation of my action of moving the handle up and down here, I am not merely stating that I am operating the water pump, which of course includes, as integral components, some intention, desire, etc as well as some belief (the intention, desire, etc to operate the water pump, the belief that by moving the handle up and down I will achieve this). Indeed, my mere citing that I intend etc to operate the water pump does not touch the question of *why* I move the handle up and down, it does not carry the implication that operating the water pump is my reason *why* I move the handle up and down. Offering the redescription «I am operating the water pump» of my action of moving the handle up and down as my reason for doing it implies more than my mere action of operating the water pump with its integral parts of an intention etc and a belief. It implies, namely, that my intention etc and belief were *efficacious* in producing my action of moving the handle up and down, that they *led* me to act in this way, that they *caused* my action.

Melden is right in saying that explanation of action in terms of motives, intentions, beliefs, etc involves a redescription of it, but wrong in suggesting that this redescription does not contain any causal considerations. Indeed, unless the redescription contained an intelligible connection between intention etc and action, such as a causal connection, it is not clear how it could explain action. And here it may be valuable to point out that one good way in which we can explain an event is by placing it in the context of, or by redescribing it in terms of, its cause. So, for example, we fully explain how someone was injured by stating that he

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1. *Free Action*, p. 102.

was burned<sup>1</sup>. «Citing a motive», writes Melden, «is giving a fuller characterization of the action». What is not clear, however, is how the mere citing of a motive can characterize the action in a way which explains it, unless a coherent account of how motive and action are connected is given. But Melden's view offers us no such an account. As Davidson, who makes a similar complaint, says, if we accept Melden's claim that «causal explanations are 'wholly irrelevant to the understanding we seek' of human actions then we are without an analysis of the 'because' in 'He did it because ...' where we go on to name a reason»<sup>2</sup>.

Of course to argue that the force of the «because» must be causal if we are not to think of the connection between reasons and actions as mysterious is merely to appeal to the greater plausibility of one's own position and, therefore, to argue inconclusively. However, the fact is that the causal theory gains considerable support from that, even if we cannot certainly subsume explanation by reasons under causal explanation, we render intelligible the connection between reasons and action by so subsuming it.

In sum I should say that no valid arguments have been offered so far in favour of the «post-Wittgensteinian» position that reasons for action are not causes. Moreover there is a good (even if not conclusive) reason why we should subsume reasons under causes, namely that doing this is in accordance with common sense as well as affords a gain in clarification. The question remains, if we think of reasons as causes aren't we exposed to the Wittgensteinian objection against the Cartesian or any mechanistic conception of human behaviour? I will conclude this paper by saying that, although Cartesian dualism is rightly quite friendless today, there are certain sophisticated forms of materialism, such as, for example, what in recent philosophical writings has come to be called «the identity thesis»<sup>3</sup>, which can overcome many of the difficulties facing e.g the classical materialism of Hobbes or Behaviourism, and which therefore strongly recommend themselves. If reasons are causes there are, I think, good grounds for saying that they are material causes.

1. See «Actions, Reasons and Causes», p. 86.

2. Ibid, pp. 86-87.

3. According to the identity thesis, there are no philosophical considerations which rule out the possibility that future scientific inquiry will show that every mental state and event is identical with some material state or event. About the identity thesis see *Materialism and the Mind-Body Problem*, D.M. Rosenthal ed., (Prentice Hall, New Jersey, 1971), pp. 53-80; also, D. Davidson: «Mental Events» in *Experience and Theory*, L. Foster and J.W. Swanson ed., (University of Massachusetts Press, 1970) and «The Individuation of Events» in *Essays in Honor of Carl G. Hempel*, N. Rescher ed., (Humanities Press, Dordrecht-Holland, 1970).

Σ. Δρακοπούλου

## Η Πράξη και η Εξήγησή της

### Π ε ρ ί λ η ψ η

Όταν εξηγούμε μια πράξη δίνοντας τους λόγους που έχουμε γι' αυτήν, είναι η εξήγησή μας αιτιακή; Τελευταία πολλοί φιλόσοφοι απαντούν το ερώτημα αρνητικά. Στην παρούσα μελέτη εξετάζονται μερικά από τα επιχειρήματά τους και γίνεται προσπάθεια να καραριφθούν.

Καταρχήν εκτίθεται μια ευραίως αποδεκτή ανάλυση της έννοιας του λόγου για μια πράξη. Κατόπιν, αφού πρώτα διατυπωθεί η μη-αιτιακή άποψη και υποδειχθούν τα κίνητρα αυτών που την υποστηρίζουν, συζητούνται και απορρίπτονται τα επιχειρήματα αυτών των φιλοσόφων: Πρώτ' απ' όλα η γνώμη ότι μια αιτιακή εξήγηση είναι δυνατή στην περίπτωση απλών σωματικών κινήσεων αλλά όχι στην περίπτωση πράξεων. Κατόπιν η άποψη ότι παρόλο που η έννοια της αιτιότητας προϋποθέτει ότι η σύνδεση μεταξύ αιτίας και αποτελέσματος είναι τυχαία, λόγοι και πράξεις δεν πληρούν αυτήν την προϋπόθεση. Τρίτον η αντίληψη ότι η αιτιακή σύνδεση απαιτεί την ύπαρξη νόμων που σχετίζουν αιτία και αποτέλεσμα, ενώ λόγοι και πράξεις δεν προϋποθέτουν νόμους που να τα συνδέει. Οι μη-αιτιακοί θεωρητικοί ισχυρίζονται ότι η εξήγηση μιας πράξης από τους λόγους του πράττοντος είναι μια απλή επαναπεριγραφή της πράξης και δεν εμπεριέχει καμία αιτιακή αναφορά. Η αντίρρηση που παρατάσσεται εδώ είναι ότι εκτός αν αυτή η επαναπεριγραφή εμπεριέχει μια κατανοητή σύνδεση μεταξύ λόγων και πράξης, όπως είναι η αιτιακή σύνδεση, δεν είναι καθόλου ενόητο πώς μπορεί να εξηγήσει την πράξη. Η μελέτη ολοκληρώνεται επισημαίνοντας ότι αν οι λόγοι για μια πράξη είναι αιτία της πράξης, μια υλιστική ερμηνεία αυτών των λόγων είναι πολύ πιο εύλογη από μια μη-υλιστική Καρτεσιανή ερμηνεία.