

Causal, Teleological and Rational Action Explanations

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Abstract. The article contributes to the ongoing debate about causal and rational action explanations. Based on a conceptual distinction between causes and reasons, it is argued that both kinds of explanations should be distinguished but can well be considered as complementary. The article further argues that teleological action explanations are best understood as being neither causal nor rational explanations, but can be taken as a starting point for both. The question then is how to conceive of goals as, respectively, causal conditions or reasons for actions. It is argued that a causal understanding of ‘having a goal’ requires a dynamic interpretation that distinguishes goals from a general notion of pro-attitudes.

There is a longstanding debate about whether human actions can be explained causally or require a different form of explanation.¹ Disagreements are partly due to different understandings of causal explanations (see Schueler 2003:10-22). In particular, the view that causes make their effects in some sense ‘necessary’ has led to much confusion. Another source of differences lies in different notions of action. Of particular importance is whether a reference to intentions is made an essential part of the notion of action, that is, are considered as being part of the identity conditions of actions. Since intentions, however conceptualized, cannot be observed, this view implies that also actions cannot be identified through observation. Here I take a different approach and assume that one often can observe actions as being examples of commonly known action types.

Since this approach does not already begin with intentions (or reasons), it allows one to distinguish between causal and rationalizing views of action and to think of these views as complementary. The causal view discussed in this paper is concerned with the explanation of actions conceived as particular events. A causal action explanation is understood as a kind of etiological explanation having the aim to identify events and conditions which played a causally significant role in bringing about the action.

As the starting point for a rationalizing view I take it that actions can be, and often are, done in order to achieve, or contribute to achieving, a goal. This allows one to conceive of teleological action explanations that use the teleological relation ‘in order to’ for linking an action to a goal. I argue that a teleological action explanation is best understood as being neither a causal nor a rational action explanation, but can be taken as a starting point for both kinds of explanation. To take it as a starting point for a causal explanation generates the question how ‘having a goal’ can play a causally significant role in bringing about an action. I argue that a widespread approach that tries to causally explain actions by a reference to wants and beliefs does not provide a satisfactory answer. As

¹See, e.g., Melden (1961), Davidson (1963), von Wright (1971), Anscombe (1983), Keil (2000), Dancy (2000), Mele (2003), Sehon (2005), Hacker (2007), Wilson (2007).

an alternative, I propose to think of an agent's 'having a goal' as already being a kind of activity.

A further step in developing a rationalizing view of actions is in terms of practical reasons. I conceive of such reasons as being considerations aiming at an evaluation of actions as well as goals. I then argue that this conception of reasons makes it possible that a reference to reasons can become part of a causal action explanation without conceiving of reasons as also being some kind of causes (sometimes confusingly called 'motivating reasons', e.g. by Smith (1994)). The argument is based on a reference to practical reasoning as being an activity that can be a part of the process that brings about an action.

The notion of practical reason is then used to introduce rational action explanations that explain an action by a reference to reasons. I distinguish three versions depending on whether, and how, the agent participates in the explanation. Again, I argue that a teleological action explanation, while not immediately providing a practical reason, can be made the starting point for a rational action explanation.

1 Actions and Action Types

Consider, for example, A's pressing the bell-push. It is done by a particular agent (A) at a particular place and time. If A presses the bell-push again, this is another action. However, both actions are of the same type. Such types will be called *action types*; for example, pressing a bell-push, buying a ticket, making coffee, reading a newspaper.

Knowledge of action types is important for several reasons. First, almost all abilities to act must be learnt, and learning to act means to learn how to perform actions of a specified type.² Thus, knowledge of action types is required for the description of abilities to act.

Second, when learning to act one normally also learns to identify observable behavior as being actions. What is learnt consists of being able to

²For discussion of 'ability to act', and its relation to a notion of 'competence', see Nordenfelt (1997).

describe pieces of people's behavior as exemplifying action types. For example, one can learn to observe that A is pressing a bell-push, or knocking at the door.

Third, knowledge of action types is required when referring to actions that have not yet, but might be done. For example, assume that we observe A being in front of B's door. What will she do? We might say that A possibly will press the bell-push. In saying this we refer to an action that might be done. However, since a corresponding event did not yet occur, one needs the knowledge of an event type ('pressing a bell-push') in order to make the reference.

Fourth, referring to action types allows thinking that actions can have a purpose without being required to refer to an agent who actually has a corresponding goal. This is due to the fact that learning to act most often involves learning about goals which *could* be served by actions of a specified type. Instead of goals, I then speak of *purposes* in order to avoid confusion with goals actually hold by agents. Such purposes can be attributed to action types in the following way:

- (1) Actions of type a^* can serve the purposes p, p', p'', \dots

For example, pressing a bell-push can serve to ring the bell (p), or to inform someone (p'), or to annoy someone (p''), or to check whether the bell works properly (p'''). As it is the case in this example, actions exemplifying the same action type can almost always serve several different purposes.³ Thus, if an action is only identified as being of a specified type, 'serving a specific purpose' most often does not belong to the identity conditions of the action.⁴ On the other hand, it is a relevant feature of the action that it *can* serve any of the purposes which can be associated with the

³The example also shows that purposes can be compatible, and then simultaneously can be part of an agent's goal, or incompatible. For example, p'' is compatible with p''' but incompatible with p' .

⁴There are exceptions. In some cases the normal understanding of an action type implies that corresponding actions serve, in any case, at least one specific purpose; e.g. signing a contract.

action type (and, of course, it also could serve purposes not covered by an observer's knowledge of a corresponding action type). In this sense, using statements having the form (1) one can think of an action's having a purpose, or several purposes, without presupposing an agent who actually has a corresponding goal.

In sum, the notion of action type can be used for a typological approach to the identification of actions. The idea is that it often suffices to consider actions only in so far as they are examples of a specified action type. I then speak of *typologically identified* actions. Since no assumptions about an agent's goals are required, one can often typologically identify an observed action without communicating with the agent. One nevertheless can think of purposes (and, consequently, of possible goals of the agent) due to the action's being an example of a specified action type.

2 Causal Why-Questions

Given that an action has occurred, one can ask 'why'. For example, one can ask why A pressed the bell-push. I distinguish between a causal and a rational understanding of such questions. In a causal understanding, the question asks for a causal explanation of the occurrence of the action; in a rational understanding, the question asks for reasons which can show doing, or having done, the action to be reasonable. In order to develop the distinction, I begin with the causal understanding.

I first stress that we are dealing with questions which concern, in each case, a particular event (action) whose occurrence is to be explained (e.g. A's pressing the bell-push at a particular place and time).⁵ This suggests to place the causally meant 'why' into the framework of another question: How did this particular event come into being? Such questions will be called *etiological questions*. In general, these are questions asking for the description of a process that led to the specified event. Answers to such questions will be called *etiological explanations*.

⁵I assume throughout that referring to an action always implies a reference to a context in which the action actually was, or might be, done.

An etiological explanation need not be a causal explanation that answers a causal why-question. Here I suppose that what makes a causal why-question specific is the quest for learning about specific causes. However, it seems obvious that presumed causes must be viewed as being part of a process that led to the specified event. This suggests to think of a causal explanation of a particular event as an etiological explanation that shows how specific causes contributed to the process that brought about the event.⁶

The question remains how to think of causes. In a general meaning, when describing a process through which a particular fact came into being, the word 'cause' can refer to any specific circumstances which can be attributed some significance for the process. There are mainly two ideas for an explication of 'significance'.

One idea is that a cause is something that can exert an influence. Thus, in the context of etiological explanations, a cause is something (most often conceived of as an event) that started or influenced the process that brought about the explanandum. This understanding shows up when it is said that causes can 'produce' effects; prototypical examples of causes in this sense are actions (Hart and Honoré 1959: 26-30). To indicate this understanding I speak of *dynamic causes*. Another idea is to think of causes as conditions. Thus, in the context of etiological explanations, a cause is a condition on which the process that generated the explanandum in some sense depended. In contrast to dynamic causes, I then speak of *causal conditions*.

There is a noteworthy difference between the two understandings of causes. Thinking in terms of conditions requires counterfactual considerations. Saying that a process (or object) depends on a causal condition semantically implies that, if the condition were different, also some aspect of the process (or object) were different. The dynamic understanding of

⁶Such explanations are often called 'singular causal explanations'. They presuppose the explanandum to have occurred. In contrast, when being interested in causal predictions, one assumes that some event has taken place (in some specified context), and then asks for possible consequences ('causal effects') and their probabilities.

causation, on the other hand, does not always require counterfactual considerations. For example, stating that A went to the window and opened it, causally explains why the window is open by referring to a dynamic cause. This explanation does not require an assumption about the state of the window if A had not opened it.

In this example, the effect is semantically implied by the cause.⁷ As another example where this is not the case consider throwing a die. Assume that the event e_1 (A's throwing a die) is followed by the event e_2 (the die comes up with a '6'). Then e_1 is a dynamic cause of e_2 , and this statement does not require any assumption about the state of the die if the event e_1 had not occurred.

To summarize, I understand causal explanations of particular facts as etiological explanations which, in addition to indicating a process that brought about the explanandum, show how specific circumstances contributed to the development of the process—and *can therefore be called causes*. Moreover, I distinguish between dynamic causes that can produce, or contribute to producing, effects and causal conditions on which something (an empirically identifiable explanandum) depends.

3 Dynamic Causes of Actions

Whether, and how, actions can be causally explained is discussed controversially in the literature (see note 1). No one denies, of course, that the occurrence of actions depends on causal conditions. The controversial question mainly concerns whether, and how, one can sensibly speak of dynamic causes which in some sense contribute to bringing about actions.⁸

⁷G. H. von Wright (1971: 66-68) has suggested to distinguish between results which are semantically entailed by performing an action, and causal effects of the action. However, also results are brought about by performing actions and can thus be viewed as causal effects. E.g., that the window is now open can well be viewed as caused by A's opening the window.

⁸Part of the discussion is due to the obscure idea that dynamic causes make their effects 'necessary', or, correspondingly, that causal conditions can be conceived of as 'sufficient conditions'; see e.g. Peters (1958: 12), Davis (1979: 85,107), Mohr (1996: 5,

In this section I argue that at least sometimes one can identify dynamic causes of an action. As an example, I consider a sequence of three events: A presses the bell-push (e_0), the bell rings (e_1), B opens the door (e_2). The question concerns the sense of saying that e_1 is a cause of e_2 . Obviously, e_1 is neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition for e_2 . It is quite possible that e_1 is not followed by B's opening the door; and, of course, B can open the door although the bell did not ring. Nevertheless, one might well say that, in the given situation, e_1 is a dynamic cause of e_2 . Following the general notion of 'dynamic cause' introduced in the previous section, this means that e_1 started, or significantly influenced, the process that brought about e_2 .

This understanding has several implications. First, the statement ' e_1 is a dynamic cause of e_2 ' (in the following referred to by S) presupposes that not only e_1 but also e_2 actually did occur. A causal statement of this kind is a retrospective statement that concerns a process that actually did happen in the past. In other words, before an effect (or more precisely, something to be viewed as an effect) did occur one cannot say anything about the causal relevance of a presumed cause *in the given situation*.⁹

Second, the statement S does not presuppose that there is a law that would allow one to think of e_2 as being a necessary effect of e_1 . On the contrary, the statement explicitly concerns a singular relationship between a particular cause and a particular effect. Consequently, the causal claim made by S cannot be derived from a generic relationship between corresponding event types. This would be true even if there were a probabilistic rule connecting corresponding event types; e.g. 'when an event of type e_1^* occurs there is a high probability that it is followed by an event of type e_2^* '. (In this formulation e_1^* and e_2^* denote event types exemplified by e_1

62). I stress that the understanding of dynamic causes and causal conditions employed in the present article does not entail this idea.

⁹As has been remarked, we are here concerned with singular causal explanations, not with causal predictions that refer to possible effects of an assumed cause event. In contrast, singular causal explanations start from an explanandum realized in a particular situation and then try to figure out a process that brought about the explanandum.

and e_2 .) Given such rule, and knowing that e_1 occurred, one could probabilistically predict e_2 . However, the causal claim made by S is different from, and does not rely on, the possibility to predict the explanandum; rather, it is the claim that e_1 played a significant role in the process that actually, in a given situation, brought about e_2 .

Third, the statement S , making the just mentioned claim, immediately leads to a further question: *How* did e_1 contribute to the occurrence of e_2 ? And it is the answer to *this* question that provides the meaning for, and must be considered in order to justify, S . Obviously, the formulation of S covers several possibilities for thinking of the process that led to B's opening the door. Possibly, B, after perceiving the bell's ringing, began deliberating whether he should open the door, and finally decided to open the door. In this case, the bell's ringing caused B's beginning to deliberate and only indirectly contributed to B's opening the door. There are other possibilities, too; for example: B expected A's visit and actually waited for the bell's ringing. Then, immediately after having heard the ringing, B opened the door. In this case, the bell's ringing directly caused B's opening the door.

The example thus not only shows that one can sometimes sensibly speak of dynamic causes of an action. It also shows that to speak of a dynamic cause requires to indicate *how* it contributed to the process that generated the explanandum. This requirement corresponds with the insight that the causal significance of an event often depends on a process taking place after the event has occurred.

Since effects of dynamic causes always depend on further conditions, explaining the causal significance of an event (and thereby showing that it actually was a cause) most often requires a reference to such conditions. Thinking of dynamic causes influencing the behavior of objects, relevant conditions concern, in particular, dispositions of the object. This is well known from ordinary objects but also true of human beings. Whether, and in which way, an event causes a person to do something depends, among other things, on the person's dispositions and abilities. For example, the bell's ringing can causally contribute to B's opening the door only if B is

able to recognize the ringing, move to the door, and finally open the door. A further causally significant condition might be that B actually waited for A's ringing the bell, and given this was the case, it should be mentioned in a causal explanation of B's opening the door.

4 External and Internal Causes

When thinking of events that can play a causal role in bringing about actions one can make a distinction between external and internal events with reference to the agent. External events are events that can be described without making an essential reference to the agent. For example, A's pressing the bell-push is an external event w.r.t. B. Also 'A's ringing the bell' describes an external event w.r.t. B because this description does not imply that B actually perceived the ringing. However, 'B perceived the bell's ringing' describes an internal event w.r.t. B because the description involves an essential reference to B.

In general, I define an internal event w.r.t. an agent as an event whose description involves the reference to an activity of the agent. The activities can be of different kinds, e.g. perceiving something or thinking about something.

Given this distinction, one can make a corresponding distinction between external and internal causes of actions. In our example, A's pressing the bell-push would be an external cause of B's opening the door, but B's perceiving the bell's ringing and a subsequent deliberation would be internal causes of his action.

The distinction also suggests to think of actions as those activities of an agent which have internal causes.¹⁰ This does not exclude the possibility that external events play an important role in bringing about actions. However, the contribution of an external event to bringing about an action must be in some way mediated by internal causes. A bodily reaction having

¹⁰I do not suggest that having an internal cause is a sufficient condition for an activity to count as an action. However, I am not here concerned with the question how to demarcate actions.

only an external cause would normally not count as an action.

One should note that an internal event w.r.t. an agent, say B, cannot be defined as an event brought about by B. Think, for instance, of B's perceiving the bell's ringing. This event is not brought about by B; nevertheless, it is an internal event because without an activity of B's it would not have taken place. In a sense, the event is brought about by both A who pressed the bell-push and B who perceived the ringing.¹¹

5 Mechanistic and Reflexive Causation

The causal significance of an event can depend on an agent's understanding its meaning. Think, for example, of B's perceiving the bell's ringing. What B perceived is not just some noise, but an event having a meaning: the bell's ringing indicates that someone has pressed the bell-push. Thus, a causal effect of the event (e.g., its generating, for B, the question who has pressed the bell-push) can depend on the agent's understanding its meaning. This requires that B already knows what events of a corresponding event type mean. Without such knowledge B could not perceive the bell's ringing as indicating that someone pressed the bell-push, and this event could not cause B to think about who might have pressed the bell-push.

The example motivates a general distinction between two kinds of causation. One possibility is that what is caused by an event does not depend on the event's having a meaning recognized by an agent who is involved in the causal process. I then speak of *mechanistic causation*. For example, the bell's ringing is mechanistically caused by A's pressing the bell-push. On the other hand, I speak of *reflexive causation* if what is caused by an event depends on the event's having a meaning for an agent involved in the causal process that brings about the effects.¹² For example, whether

¹¹Such events often form the basis of 'interpersonal transactions' in the sense of Hart and Honoré (1959: 48).

¹²In a more detailed account one would start from a distinction between mechanistic and interactive causation where an effect depends both on a primary dynamic cause and an induced activity. Reflexive causation could then be defined as a special case of

and how the bell's ringing has a causal impact on B's doings depends on B's perceiving its meaning.

Reflexive causation is only possible with internal causes. It is not only required that the cause event has a particular meaning.¹³ A further condition is that the meaning must be perceived by an agent, and this requires an activity of the agent (based on appropriate knowledge). On the other hand, one can well think of internal events which generate effects mechanistically, e.g. stumbling over a rock.¹⁴

In defining reflexive causation I referred to an event's meaning for an agent. It seems nearby to refer instead to the agent's beliefs about the event. However, talking in terms of belief can easily be misleading because there is easy confusion between referring to the content of a belief or to an agent's 'having a belief' (a further ambiguity will be discussed in section 11). Reflexive causation takes place when the meaning of an event is relevant for its causal significance in some process. However, it is still the event that plays the causal role, neither the agent's having a belief about the event nor the content of such belief. In the example, it is the bell's ringing which, possibly, causally contributed to B's further activities.

One should note that a reference to 'having a belief', because it is some kind of state attributable to an agent, cannot be used as a substitute for the reference to an event's meaning. Think of the bell's ringing. In considering its possible causal significance we assume that the event has a particular meaning which, possibly, can be perceived by B. Of course, in order to recognize this event, B must have the appropriate knowledge. However, this knowledge is different from having a belief about the event. The knowledge is a *prerequisite* for the agent's recognizing the meaning

interactive causation.

¹³I do not propose a distinction between events having, or not having, a meaning. At least all events that can be identified as examples of some event type have a meaning constituted by their corresponding event types. I am therefore not concerned here with the problem how 'physical events' can get a meaning for human beings.

¹⁴Here one could think about sharpening the suggestion made above, namely that an activity must be *reflexively* caused by an internal event in order to count as an action.

of the event (given that it occurs); so it must be a knowledge of a corresponding event type whose meaning is defined by a social praxis. In contrast, an appropriate belief about the event's meaning can result from having perceived and recognized the event, but cannot be thought of as generating the event's meaning.

It is possible, of course, that the bell didn't ring, but B heard some noise and erroneously thought this to be the bell's ringing; and he then went to the door and opened it. Also this would be a case of reflexive causation. Explaining the causal significance, in bringing about B's opening the door, of the noise requires to refer to B's *giving* the noise a specific meaning. One might then say that B's (erroneously) believing that the bell was ringing played a causally significant role in bringing about B's action. In this case, an essential reference to B's generation of a belief is required because there is no other internal event that could reflexively cause B's action.¹⁵ This is clearly different from the case where an event that already has a meaning (e.g., the bell's ringing) played a causally significant role in bringing about B's action.

6 Referring to Goals

So far I have discussed an approach to causal explanation of actions. I now consider some aspects of rationalizing views of human action and how they relate to causal action explanations. I begin with the idea that actions are often done in order to achieve, or contribute to achieving, a goal. As already mentioned in the first section, I distinguish goals from purposes which can be associated with action types. In contrast to purposes (in this sense), goals are always goals of an agent.

One has to distinguish between referring to a goal and 'having a goal'. To speak of 'having a goal' means to speak of a state that is attributed to an agent. In contrast, a goal is neither a state of an agent nor of something

¹⁵Notice that also in this case there is a distinction between B's *activity*, consisting in generating a belief, and the resulting belief. Moreover, this activity can only take place if B knows what the ringing of a bell means. Otherwise, his mistake could not occur.

else. A goal is an idea consisting of both a reference to something that possibly could be the case (the goal's content) and a positive evaluation of that possibility by the agent who has the goal.

What is meant by saying that an agent 'has a goal'? I will use this expression as implying two things. First, that the agent knows the goal (is able to bring to mind, and to reflect on, the goal). And second, that, depending on the circumstances, the agent is inclined to do something in order to achieve the goal. I do not require that the agent knows how to achieve the goal, or even that it must be possible for her to achieve the goal. There are many different forms of 'having a goal', ranging from vague wishes to firm commitments.

It is important that 'having a goal' does not imply knowing how to achieve the goal. In its general meaning, 'having a goal' is different from 'having pro-attitudes' which directly relate to actions.¹⁶ Whenever a goal cannot be achieved by a single action, it is only seldom that one has an explicit plan, specified in terms of actions, how to achieve, or approach, the goal. What can be done in order to achieve a goal often cannot be fixed just from the beginning simply because it depends on unknown future circumstances and, in particular, on other people. Think, e.g., of A's goal to visit B, or B's goal to have a pleasant evening, or C's goal to find a new job. I therefore also avoid to speak of 'intentions' when meaning goals. Even writers who distinguish between 'having an intention' and 'doing something intentionally' primarily relate intentions to actions, that is, think of intentions as 'intentions to do something'.¹⁷ In contrast, goals most often do not involve a reference to any specific actions (to be done

¹⁶Pro-attitudes as defined by D. Davidson include 'desires, wantings, urges, promptings, and a great variety of moral views, aesthetic principles, economic prejudices, social conventions, and public and private goals and values *in so far* as these can be interpreted as attitudes of an agent *directed toward actions* of a certain kind.' (Davidson 1963: 686, emphasis added)

¹⁷See, e.g., Davis (1979: chap. 4), Bratman (1984). See also Mele (2003: 27) who conceives of intentions as attitudes which have as their 'representational content' an 'action-plan'.

in order to achieve the goal). Even if a goal is described in terms of a doing (e.g. A's having the goal to visit B), the goal can most often be distinguished from actions serving to achieve the goal (e.g., making the appointment, moving to B's home, ringing the bell).

7 Teleological Action Explanations

Having a goal, an agent might explain an action that she performed by saying that the action was done in order to achieve, or contribute to achieving, the goal. Explanations of this kind can be called *teleological action explanations* since they employ the teleological relation 'in order to'. For example, having pressed the bell-push, A might say that she did that in order to signal B her arrival at his door.

A teleological action explanation is different from a causal explanation. The goal referred to in the explanation is not some state or event that could be conceived of as a possible cause. So one might ask what is explained by a teleological explanation. A. I. Melden has hinted at two points: '[F]irst, it [the explanation] provides us with a better understanding of the action itself by placing it with its appropriate context; and, second, it reveals something about the agent himself.' (Melden 1961: 102)

I begin with the second point. A teleological action explanation given by the agent provides two pieces of information about the agent: That the agent has a specific goal, and that the agent views the action referred to in the explanation as an action that can be done in order to support achieving the specified goal.

Melden's first point is more difficult because it depends on the presupposed concept of action. For Melden, agent's goals ('motives and intentions' in his terminology) belong to the identity conditions of their actions; a teleological explanation linking actions and goals therefore provides information about *what* the agent has done.¹⁸ This cannot be said when starting from typologically identified actions because a reference to goals

¹⁸'[A] motive, in explaining an action, makes it clear *what* the action in question is.' (Melden 1961: 90; emphasis in original)

is not part of their definition. Moreover, knowledge of an action type that identifies the action is in any case a prerequisite of its teleological explanation. (There could be situations in which one is unclear about the agent's activity. However, in such situations the first task is to learn about an action type that could be used to typologically identify the activity as an action. A teleological action explanation can only begin after this has been accomplished.) It is well possible, however, that a teleological action explanation adds to the understanding of the action type that is used to identify the action. If not already known, one learns that an action of the specified type can be done for the achievement of a particular goal; and one then learns something about possible purposes that can be associated with the action type.

This requires to take the explanation seriously, involving an arguable claim: that the action can reasonably be used in order to achieve, or contribute to achieving, the goal. Such a claim can be questionable. For example, A buys a lottery ticket having a very small chance of winning a million dollars. Then asked, he gives the explanation that he did this in order to win the money. Assuming this to be a serious answer, one certainly learns something about A. It is questionable, however, whether one also learns something about a purpose that can reasonably be associated with buying a lottery ticket.

Does a teleological action explanation answer a why-question about the action? This depends on the understanding of such explanations. I propose that such explanations only entail the following claims:

- (2a) The agent has done an action (say *a*).
- (2b) The agent has a specific goal (say *g*).
- (2c) The agent knows that *a* can be done in order to achieve, or contribute to achieving, *g*.

If the explanation only involves these claims it does not answer why the agent performed *a*. In fact, it is then neither a causal nor a rational explanation. It is not a causal explanation because it does not show *how*

(and therefore: whether) having the goal g played a causally significant role in bringing about the action a . And it is not a rational explanation because it does not entail an evaluation of the action. Nevertheless, a teleological action explanation might well be called an explanation because it answers a question, namely which of the possible purposes of the action that was performed are part of the agent's goal.

Moreover, a teleological action explanation provides a useful starting point both for a causal and for a rational action explanation. Before that will be further discussed, beginning in section 13, I develop a notion of 'practical reason' that can be used for introducing several versions of rational action explanations.

8 Reasons For and Against Actions

When talking about reasons for actions, the word 'reason' has no unique meaning. Here I start from an understanding of reasons that allows one to think of reasons for or against typologically identified actions. Reasons for actions will be conceived of as considerations that can be formulated, by the agent or by someone else, as saying something in favor of a typologically identified action that already was done or that might be done in the future. Correspondingly, one can think of reasons which can be formulated as saying something against having done a particular action, or against doing actions of a specified type (in situations of a specified type).

People think of reasons not only when deliberating on future actions, but also to answer why-questions about actions already done. For example, having observed that A pressed the bell-push at the door of B, we might ask, Why? And A might answer: 'I pressed the bell-push because I wanted that B opens the door.'

Formulations of reasons often refer to facts; in this example, the formulation refers to the fact that A wants that B opens the door. However, the reason is not identical with this fact. To formulate a reason for, or against, an action means to construct an evaluative relation between something and the action. In the example, let F denote the fact that A wants that B opens

the door. This fact can be used for the formulation of a reason by stating that it makes pressing the bell-push reasonable. Obviously, referring to F can be used to make many different actions reasonable and, consequently, to formulate many different reasons. This underlines that reasons must be distinguished from the facts referred to in their formulation.

Not distinguishing reasons from facts referred to in their formulation often creates confusion. For example, J. Dancy, in arguing that reasons must be distinguished from propositions, says: 'It is her being ill that gives me reason to send for the doctor, and this is a state of affairs, something that is part of the world, not a proposition.' (Dancy 2000: 114) However, 'her being ill' only becomes a reason by evaluating an action, e.g. 'to send for the doctor'. Obviously, many other actions could be made reasonable by referring to 'her being ill'. The state of affairs consisting in 'her being ill' must not, therefore, be equated with a reason.¹⁹

Unfortunately, often used formulations like ' x is a reason for (doing, or having done, the action) a ' suggest such confusions. The formulation sounds like a statement about x , but actually has a quite different meaning, namely: 'I (the speaker) take x to contribute to a positive evaluation of a '. This formulation makes explicit that a reason must be given (by a speaker), and that giving a reason involves an evaluation.

What I want to stress is that the meaning of 'reason' for or against an action should be derived from 'giving a reason', that is, from an activity that consists in stating a relation between something and the action having as content an evaluation of the action. To remind of this understanding, I refer to reasons for and against an action as being *evaluative considerations of an action*. Such considerations can make references to whatever seems

¹⁹Another writer who based an argumentation on identifying reasons with facts is D. W. Stampe (1987). Based on this identification, Stampe argues that having a desire *is* 'a reason' for doing something. In contrast, starting from the understanding of reasons proposed above, one should say that making a reference to a desire in the formulation of a reason for an action not just involves a factual claim (that one has, in fact, the desire), but also involves an evaluation of the action (e.g. to satisfy, or not to satisfy, the desire).

relevant for an evaluation of the action. In any case, the consideration that formulates the reason must be distinguished from such references.

Like many other mentalistic terms, ‘consideration’ is ambiguous. When thinking of reasons, the content of a consideration is meant. Instead, one can view a consideration as an activity. This complementary view will be taken up when arguing, in section 11, that practical reasoning can be causally efficacious in generating actions.

This understanding of reasons for and against actions is similar to what Darwall (1984:31) has called ‘dicta’: ‘the sort of thing that can be thought or said on behalf of an act.’ It is also similar to what Schueler (2003:104) has described in the following way: ‘To think that some consideration is a reason (that is, a good reason) for doing something is to think that this consideration shows that *there is something to be said in favor* of doing that thing in the context of the purposive activity in question.’ (Emphasis in original) However, Schueler also assumes that reasons in this sense always entail a normative claim. He says, for example, that ‘practical reasoning is always intended to support a *normative* conclusion about what the reasoner *should* do’.²⁰ It is, of course, true that practical reasoning is often concerned with the question what an agent should do. However, giving a reason not always entails a normative claim. Think, for example, of A’s saying that it is reasonable to press the bell-push in order to signal B her arrival at the door. This formulates a reason for her action but does not entail a normative claim. I therefore stress that the claim that an action is reasonable does not entail the claim that the action should be done in any specific normative sense.

9 How Do Reasons Exist?

Reasons for and against actions are not facts that could be described. They must be distinguished not only from any facts referred to in their formula-

²⁰Schueler (2003:126, emphasis in original). Several other writers have similarly suggested notions of ‘normative reasons’; see e.g. Darwall (1984:80), Smith (1994:95), Alvarez (2009:204).

tion, but also from psychological states. How then do such reasons exist? The primacy of ‘giving reasons’ that was stressed in the preceding section suggests to think of reasons as products of a specific kind of activity: practical reasoning (performed individually or as an activity involving several persons). Reasons for and against actions do not exist independently of this specific kind of activity. To say that people often ‘have reasons’ for their actions is therefore easily misleading. If used at all, this formulation should be understood as meaning that people often are able to think of, and communicate, reasons for and against their actions.

Given this understanding, ‘having reasons’ is not the same as ‘knowing what one is doing’. While ‘knowing what one is doing’ normally does not require a separate activity (of self-observation), ‘having reasons’ requires practical reasoning as an activity that can, but need not, accompany ordinary actions (actions different from thinking).²¹ Moreover, there is no regular link between ordinary actions and practical reasoning. If taking place at all, reflection on reasons for and against an action might precede or follow an action. In fact, most actions are not preceded by explicit deliberation.

It is therefore important to distinguish between two cases when an agent retrospectively provides reasons for an action. In one case the agent has thought about reasons for and against the action *before* the action actually was done. One can then ask:

- (3) Which reasons have been considered in the reasoning that took place before the action was done?

A different case is when no explicit deliberation has taken place before the action was done. Obviously, neither the agent nor anybody else can then answer the question (3) by referring to reasons. Instead one can ask:

²¹Thinking can take place in different forms. A useful distinction discussed by Ryle (1968) is between thinking that is concerned with how to do what one is actually doing, and reflecting on what one has done or might be doing. Practical reasoning can then be seen as a form of reflection, different from forms of thinking which directly relate to actual doings.

- (4) Was it reasonable (are there any reasons for and against) having done the action?

This question must be temporally located, however. One can relate the question to the agent's situation before she actually performed the action (say at the time t_a), or one can relate the question to the situation in which the question is considered (say at the time t_b). The distinction is required because knowing what resulted from an action often provides new points of viewing the action; and, of course, also the evaluation of the action can change between t_a and t_b (e.g. by reconsidering a goal). In any case, providing reasons for and against an action in order to answer (a version of) the question (4) is a form of practical reasoning. In contrast to answers to (3), answers to (4) cannot be given in the form of a descriptive report.

10 Practical Reasons and Reasoning

Similar to thinking of reasons for and against actions one can think of reasons for and against having goals. For example, A can think about reasons for and against having the goal to spend an evening with B. Whether the thinking concerns actions or goals, in both cases reasons are considerations aiming at an evaluation (of the action or goal). Such reasons will be called *practical reasons*, and the activity in which such reasons are considered will be called *practical reasoning*.

Practical reasoning can be done alone or by two or more persons together. If done together, it is evident that reasons must be formulated in order to become part of the shared reasoning. Practical reasons then *are* explicitly formulated considerations (evaluating an action or goal). If no other persons are involved, explicit formulations are not necessary and one can use instead various shortcuts. There is, however, a simple reason for the primacy of explicitly formulated reasons: practical reasoning is not an innate faculty but must be learned, and this learning requires a communicative context in which reasons are explicitly formulated and discussed. Only after having learned to participate in shared reasoning, the child can begin to do something similar alone.

It further follows that agents can have reasons for their doings only if, and so far as, they have learned to think of reasons for and against their doings. This corresponds to the remark made in the previous section, that 'having reasons' should be understood as being able to think of, and communicate, reasons. (It is well possible, of course, that an observer can think of reasons for and against an agent's doings. This is required, in particular, when teaching children to reflect on their actions by considering reasons.)

Practical reasons only exist if actually considered by agents in order to evaluate their own or other's actions and goals. They are therefore subjective, that is, formulated from a particular actor's point of view. This not only concerns the selection of facts and assumptions which are used as a basis for the formulation of reasons. Even if people do agree on all possibly relevant facts and assumptions, they still can disagree about the formulation of reasons (evaluations) which are based on these facts and assumptions.

11 The Causal Relevance of Reasoning

A large part of the literature discussing action explanations concerns the question whether reasons can be considered as (part of the) causes of actions. The answer depends on the understanding of the word 'reason'. Given the understanding proposed in section 8, reasons and causes must be distinguished.²²

The distinction is conceptual. To say of some x that it was a cause of an action, say a , means that x has influenced, or is a relevant condition of, the process that brought about a . This presupposes that x is some fact (event or state) actually existing before, or while, a was done. It is possible, of course, that a reference to x can also be used in the formulation of a reason for doing, or having done, a . Even then, however, the reason

²²Unfortunately, the word 'reason' is often used synonymously with 'cause'. For example, referring to one meaning of 'reason', Darwall (1983: 29) says: '[T]he reasons why someone did something include any fact that serves to explain the act.'

is not identical with x , but consists in an evaluation of a that is based, among other things, on x .

To illustrate, let x represent the bell's ringing. Viewed in isolation, this event is neither a cause nor a reason. However, referring to a situation where this event is followed by the event a (B's opening the door), it could well be said (although it might be wrong) that x was a cause of a . It is also possible to use a reference to x in the formulation of a reason for doing, or having done, a . In this example, the event x can be viewed both as a cause and as a fact used in the formulation of a reason.

One also can easily find something that is a cause of an action without being used to formulate a reason. For example, having the desire to smoke a cigarette can well be a cause of actually smoking a cigarette; but not only an observer, the smoker himself could deny that a reference to this desire should be used for formulating a reason for smoking. Finally, some fact can be used in the formulation of a reason for an action without actually performing the action. Then, obviously, the event or state referred to in formulating the reason cannot be viewed as a cause.

However, although there is a conceptual distinction between reasons and causes, it seems possible that practical reasoning can play a causally relevant role in bringing about actions. Practical reasoning is an activity which can take place before or after the action, say a , was done. Obviously, if this activity temporally followed a , it could not contribute to bringing about a . However, if the reasoning about a took place *before* a was done, one can well assume that it could have played a causally relevant role in bringing about a .

Think of B who perceived the bell's ringing and then began to think whether he should open the door, that is, considered reasons for and against this action. Whatever the result of his reasoning, being an activity performed by B it can be conceived of as a relevant part of the process leading to B's opening, or not opening, the door.

The example shows that practical reasoning *can* be an internal cause of

an agent's doing.²³ Moreover, if it contributes to bringing about an action, it is by reflexive causation. When considering reasons for and against an action, it is the contents of the considerations that potentially are relevant for the final conclusion. Of course, these contents must actually be considered by the agent, so it is still an activity of the agent (having a particular content) that possibly plays a causally relevant role in the process leading to an action.

The argument also hints at a further ambiguity in references to an agent's beliefs. It doesn't suffice to distinguish between an agent's 'having a belief' and the content of the belief. One needs a further distinction between 'having a belief' (in the sense of a state that can be attributed to an agent) and 'making use of a belief' (in the sense of using the belief in thinking, that is, in actually performing an activity). 'Having a belief' is similar to a dispositional property. In order to become dynamically relevant, the agent must activate her belief in actually using its content in thinking about a question (concerning an action or goal or something else).²⁴

It should also be stressed that an agent's beliefs are not static conditions of her reasoning. Not only can beliefs change over time; in fact, they often change *while* one is thinking about something. It is also important that beliefs, at least to some degree, depend on the context in which they are activated. This is especially true when beliefs are used in practical reasoning, that is, for evaluating goals and actions, their requirements and probable consequences. Moreover, an agent can 'have a belief' but neglect to make use of it when thinking about an action. Therefore, when

²³How to conceive of relationships between practical reasoning and subsequent action is discussed controversially in the literature. For a recent contribution see Helm (2002).

²⁴I therefore agree with R. Stout (2004) and M. Alvarez (2008) that it is the content of a belief which is potentially relevant for an agent's doings. However, simply contrasting this content with the agent's 'having the belief' (in the sense of a 'psychological state') will not suffice. Referring to a belief's content immediately generates the question how this content can become causally relevant; and this requires the reference to an activity of the agent in which the belief's content actually is considered.

referring to beliefs as causally relevant conditions of practical reasoning, ‘having beliefs’ must not be separated from actually making use of the beliefs in thinking.

12 Rational Action Explanations

Asking why A has done a particular action can be understood in a causal or in a rational sense. Rational action explanations presuppose a rational understanding and answer the question by referring to reasons. This can be done in different ways, and there are, correspondingly, different kinds of rational action explanations. A basic distinction concerns who gives the explanation, the agent or some other person.

I first consider explanations given by the agent. It is assumed that the why-question concerns a particular action, say *a*, done by an agent A. A might then say:

(5) I (the agent) did *a* for the reason *r*.

Of course, this is a simplifying short form. There could be several reasons, some in favor of and some against having done the action.²⁵ A rational action explanation can, and often does, consist in explaining some process of reasoning that actually has led, or could have led, to doing the action. However, the formulation (5) will suffice to characterize the kind of explanation. The relevant point is that, when saying (5), the agent gives an explanation of *her reason(s)*, that is, of her evaluation of the action.

This is true whether or not the agent explicitly considered reasons before performing the action. A rational action explanation does not require that the agent has explicitly thought about the action in advance. If the agent considered reasons before acting, she can refer to those reasons in her explanation. If not, the agent can still give reasons for having done the action. Of course, this then expresses the agent’s reasons at the time when she gives the explanation. However, even in the former case the explanation normally is not confined to a report of the past reasoning but is

²⁵This was stressed by Schueler (2003) in his critique of the simple ‘practical syllogism’.

supplemented by an evaluation from the current point of view. It is thus possible to refer to both variants under the heading of *reason-giving action explanations*.

It would be misleading to speak, instead, of ‘justifying explanations’. While it is often true that a reason-giving explanation aims at the justification of an action, this need not be the case. There are many reasonable actions that do not need a justification (demands for justification always belong into a particular social context). Moreover, at the time when the explanation is given the agent may well think that having done the action cannot be justified, even if taking into account only the knowledge available in the situation in which the action was performed. Such considerations will then be part of the explanation which in any case aims at finding a currently acceptable evaluation of the action.

I now consider another person, say S, and assume that this person is interested in an explanation of why A did *a*. An important distinction then concerns why S is interested in an explanation. I distinguish a practical and a scientific context. I speak of a ‘practical context’ if A and S take part in a discourse about A’s having done *a* by discussing their (different) evaluations of the action. In this context, a rational action explanation is typically given by A as a reason-giving explanation, creating a reference for the discourse. Even if S calls this explanation into question, the goal of the discourse is normally not to find a better explanation, but to reach a better (common) evaluation of (having done) the action.

The situation is different if S has a scientific interest in finding a rational explanation of A’s doing (as an alternative, or in addition, to a causal explanation). How S can find an explanation then depends on whether he can communicate with A. If this can be done, he can ask A about reasons for her doing. The interest, of course, concerns the agent’s reasons, and it must not be forgotten that practical reasons do not exist as facts. They cannot be described, neither by S nor by the agent herself. Practical reasons are considerations aiming at an evaluation of actions and goals. Being interested in an agent’s practical reasons for an action must be understood, therefore, as being interested in understanding the reasoning

behind an agent's evaluation of her action. This understanding does not require of S that he accepts A's reasoning. However, an understanding is possible only to the extent that S is able to think of A's considerations as possibly being reasons for doing *a*.

In so far as the explanation can be based on what the agent says about her reasoning, one can speak of a *reason-reporting explanation*. The situation is again different if S cannot communicate with the agent as it is often the case in historical studies. If still interested in a rational explanation, S cannot avoid to construct reasons which could have been considerations in the agent's reasoning. This suggests to speak of *reason-constructing explanations*. As an example, one can think of W. Dray's concept of a 'rational explanation' (see Dray 1957:122-26; 1963). Depending on the available information about the agent's goals and character, and the situation in which she acted, such explanations are more or less speculative.

13 Starting from Teleological Explanations

Teleological action explanations as defined in section 7 can be taken as a starting point for both rational and causal explanations. If taken as a starting point for rational action explanations, the main question is how the reference to a goal, say *g*, can figure in a reason for doing a teleologically corresponding action, say *a*.

Obviously, having the goal *g*, and knowing that *a* can be done to contribute to achieving *g*, these facts can be taken as providing a reason for doing *a*. However, as was argued in section 8, the reason is not identical with these facts. This can easily be seen when the reason is formulated by an agent, say A, explicitly as follows:

- (6) Given my goal *g*, and knowing that I can do *a* in order to contribute to achieving *g*, it is reasonable to do *a*.

From having the goal *g*, and knowing that one can do *a* in order to contribute to achieving *g*, it does not follow that it is reasonable to do *a*. To say that it is reasonable to do *a* involves an evaluation of the action,

and this evaluation does not follow (in any logically valid sense) from the mentioned facts.

It might therefore be tempting to say that 'instrumental reasoning' about an action does not suffice to show its doing to be reasonable. This would be misleading, however. It is obviously possible (and often observable) that agents take an action's instrumental suitability (w.r.t. to a given goal) as a sufficient reason for doing the action. The relevant point is that this involves an evaluation of the action that is not implied by a statement about its instrumental suitability. In fact, there are many situations in which people do not think that an action's instrumental suitability provides a sufficient reason for its doing. Practical reasoning then also concerns goals of the action, social norms, and how the action is seen in the given situation.²⁶

Although a teleological action explanation does not immediately allow one to attribute the consideration formulated in (6) to the agent, it can be taken as a starting point for all kinds of rational action explanation distinguished in the previous section. In any case, given that the agent has the goal *g* and knows that *a* can be done in order to contribute to achieving *g*, the fact that *a* actually was done provides some support for the assumption that the agent might endorse (6), at least when referring to the situation in which the action was done.

14 Having Goals as Causal Conditions?

I now consider the complementary question, how teleological action explanations can be used as a starting point for causal action explanations. Since goals are ideas referring to future possibilities they cannot, qua ideas, be conceived of as causes. However, given the understanding that an agent's having a goal implies that she is inclined to perform actions serving to achieve the goal, it seems possible to consider 'having a goal' as playing a causally relevant role in processes bringing about actions.

One should note that using 'having a goal' in a causal explanation

²⁶For a discussion of the latter point see F. Schick (1997: ch. 2).

presupposes a teleological consideration. Think of A's pressing the bell-push in front of B's door; concurrently, she answers a handy call. How can we argue that her having the goal to see B is a causally relevant condition for her pressing the bell-push, but not for her answering the handy call? We can say this only because we know that the first of these two actions, but not the second one, can be done in order to support achieving the specified goal.

This can be generalized: to conceive of 'having a goal' as a causally relevant condition for an agent's doing *a* presupposes that *a* can be done in order to support achieving the goal. Thus, using 'having a goal' in a causal action explanation presupposes a teleological action explanation in the sense defined in section 7.²⁷

A further question concerns in which sense can 'having a goal' be viewed as being a cause of (= contribute to bringing about) teleologically corresponding actions. Since 'having a goal' is not an event, it cannot, without further explication, be considered as a dynamic cause. Thinking instead of 'having a goal' as a causal condition seems to require a counterfactual consideration. To say that A's having the goal *g* is a causal condition for her doing *a* seems to require the assumption that, without having the goal *g*, she would not have done *a*. Using this counterfactual assumption for an explication of 'to do *a* in order to achieve, or contribute to achieving, *g*' was proposed by S.R. Schon (2005:155-60). However, the assumption can easily be wrong. It is well possible, for example, that A pressed the bell-push without having the goal (to see B) that was used to explain her action. Moreover, even if treated as a fallible assumption, the counterfactual reasoning would not be informative because it doesn't show *how* 'having a goal' contributes to the generation of a teleologically corresponding action.

It is noteworthy that this problem is not immediately visible when starting from pro-attitudes in Davidson's sense. Since these pro-attitudes are defined as wanting to do the action, say *a*, whose occurrence is to

²⁷See also the discussion in Csibra and Gergely (1998).

be explained, it seems tautologically implied that without having this pro-attitude the agent would not have done *a*. The problem shows up, however, when starting from a general notion of goal that not immediately entails a pro-attitude for a particular action. The question then is how to conceive of a causal connection between having a goal and actually performing teleologically corresponding actions.

15 References to Wants and Beliefs

In order to further show the question's relevance I briefly consider an approach to the explanation of actions that is based on references to wants and beliefs. Instead of 'wants', writers also speak of 'desires'. In the philosophical literature dealing with action explanations these words are commonly used as terms of art covering any 'pro-attitude' that agents might have for their doings.²⁸ Here I follow Goldman (1970) and speak of wants.

A basic claim of this approach is that actions can be causally explained by referring to wants and beliefs of agents.²⁹ In order to understand the approach, one also has to recognize a further aim: to explicate what it means to do something intentionally (this often is the primary aim of writers following this approach).

To illustrate, I consider an example discussed by Goldman (1970:78). In the example, Goldman imagines an agent, called S, who '*wanted* to turn on the light' and who '*believed* (at least to some degree) that he would turn on the light *by* flipping the switch'.³⁰ Goldman then goes on:

Does the *whole* of the explanans consist in the assertion that S wanted to turn on the light and that he believed that his flipping the switch would generate his turning on the light? Clearly not. The statement that S had this want and had

²⁸For a critical discussion see Schueler (1995).

²⁹See, e.g., Davidson (1963), Goldman (1970), Smith (1994), Mele (2003).

³⁰All emphases in citations from Goldman are in the original.

this belief is compatible with the statement that he flipped the switch *for some other reason*, or *not for any reason at all, i.e., accidentally*.

Goldman then hints at a situation in which S accidentally flipped the switch, and finally concludes:

Thus, the statement that S flipped the switch *in order to* turn on the light implies more than that S *had* the indicated want and *had* the indicated belief. It also implies that his having this want and his having this belief *caused*, or *resulted in*, his flipping the switch.

How to understand the idea that S's want and belief, together, can cause his flipping the switch? A first problem concerns the role played by belief. Why does S need the belief that by flipping the switch he can turn on the light? Of course, S must know how to turn on the light by flipping the switch (that is, he must know a corresponding action type), and he must be able, in the given circumstances, to perform the action. Both, this knowledge and his ability are causal conditions of his action consisting in flipping the switch. But knowing how to turn on the light by flipping the switch does not require a corresponding belief. Moreover, even if S has the specified belief, it is not clear what its causal role might be.

This is not to deny that beliefs can serve people's thinking, and thus could become relevant for their actions via practical reasoning (see section 11). However, to turn on the light by flipping a switch does not require practical reasoning. Assuming that one wants to turn on the light, and one knows how to do that, no further reasoning, and no belief, is required for actually performing the action.

The second problem concerns the causal role of wants. The problem is basically the same that was mentioned at the end of the previous section with respect to goals. Since having a want (like having a goal) is not an event it cannot dynamically cause an action. In general, having a want can only be conceived of as a condition of a process that actually generates an action. The problem can sometimes be avoided if one can think of an event

consisting in the 'occurrence of a want'.³¹ This might well be possible in trivial examples like Goldman's. In this example, one can imagine that, at some point in time, it occurs to S that he wants to turn on the light, and given all further necessary causal conditions, this occurrence then generates his flipping the switch. However, this solution will most often not work. In most situations, having a want cannot be conceptualized as an event but must be conceived of as a temporally extended state that not immediately produces any particular actions.

As already mentioned, the problem becomes easily obscured when wants already are defined in terms of action. This is also done by Goldman who explicitly speaks of 'wanting to do certain acts' (Goldman 1970: 50).³² Then, assuming that S wants to do something, say *a*, one can well think that having this want causes his actually doing *a* (given all further necessary causal conditions). However, the content of a want most often cannot be described by an action and, in particular, not by those actions that possibly contribute to bringing about a satisfaction of the want (e.g., A's want to visit B, or her want that B opens the door).

16 Dynamic Understanding of Having Goals

In section 14 I criticized to use counterfactual assumptions for interpreting 'having a goal' as a causal condition of action. I now attempt a different approach based on the idea to think of 'having a goal' as already consisting in some kind of activity.

First, I propose to use the term 'goal' in a more specific sense than 'want' or 'desire'. When these latter terms are used in their commonly assumed broad sense they include goals. In contrast, I will assume that to say that an agent has a particular goal entails that she has given some consideration to the goal. This can be a very rudimentary consideration

³¹This has been remarked already by Davidson (1963: 694); see also Goldman (1970: 86-88), Mele (2003: 30-33).

³²Goldman (1970: 50) also uses the term 'action-want'. Mele (2003: 16), correspondingly, speaks of 'action-desires'.

or an explicit thinking about reasons for and against having the goal. In any case, some consideration must have taken place at some point in time. Having a goal can, of course, result from reflecting on a ‘want’. There are many possible forms. For example, a want can be transformed into a goal without much thinking. An agent can also explicitly refer to a want in thinking about reasons for and against having a corresponding (or a different) goal. In fact, a goal can even consist in not satisfying a want.

A second consideration concerns not the generation of a goal but the timespan while the agent has the goal. In section 6 it was required that ‘having a goal’ should entail that, depending on the circumstances, the agent ‘is inclined’ to do something in order to achieve the goal. Obviously, this formulation does not provide a reliable conceptual link between ‘having a goal’ and acting. No better formulation is possible because, in general, actions that can be done to support achieving the goal depend on circumstances out of the agent’s control. However, in order to establish a conceptual link one can use an activity that is under the agent’s control. I propose the following definition:

- (7) An agent’s having a goal consists in her searching for opportunities to perform actions that can contribute to achieving the goal.

This definition proposes to think of ‘having a goal’ as essentially being an activity. It entails the view that an agent only has a goal *while* being engaged in searching for, or actually taking, opportunities to act in support of achieving the goal.

The definition (7) allows one to link a teleological with a causal explanation. In order to show that I refer to a question put by A. R. Mele (2000:280) in the following way: ‘In virtue of what is it true that a person acted in pursuit of a particular goal?’ A teleological explanation answers this question by pointing to the facts formulated in (2a), (2b) and (2c), so it does not immediately provide a causal answer. However, if ‘having the goal’ that is posited in a teleological explanation can be interpreted according to (7), the action done by the agent consists in taking an opportunity that was created (= actively found) by the agent. This then

not only would provide an additional answer to Mele’s question. Since the activity by which the agent found the opportunity for acting can be considered as being an essential part of the process bringing about the action, this also would create a link between the teleological and a causal action explanation.

The argument relies on (7) and can therefore be used only if this definition of ‘having a goal’ is applicable. However, it often is applicable already in simple examples like A’s pressing the bell-push. Observing closely what she did, we might well have seen that she actively looked for the bell-push and how she can use it.

17 Conclusion

I have argued that causal and rational action explanations answer different questions and must, therefore, be distinguished. A causal action explanation tries to identify events and conditions that played a causally significant role in bringing about an action. A rational action explanation, on the other hand, aims to explicate an evaluation of the action by considering reasons. Depending on how the agent is involved in developing such reasons, different versions of rational action explanations can be distinguished.

Both kinds of explanation are logically independent. A causal explanation of an action does not immediately entail arguments for its evaluation. Likewise, a rational explanation of an action does not entail claims about its causal generation. There could be relationships, however. References to facts about the causal generation of an action (e.g. that it was an emotional act) could be used in the formulation of reasons evaluating the action. Conversely, reasons for and against an action could have played a causally relevant role if their consideration was part of the agent’s practical reasoning preceding the action. No easy generalizations are possible, however. Action does not need practical reasoning; and even if some reasoning preceded an action one can still ask whether, and how, the consideration of reasons played a causally significant role in the process that finally brought

about the action.

I further argued that the proposed understanding of causal and rational action explanations suggests to think of teleological action explanations as being neither causal nor rational. Such explanations neither immediately add to describing a causal process that generated an action, nor do they entail reasons evaluating the action. Nevertheless, teleological action explanations can well be used as a starting point for both causal and rational why-questions. Being interested in causal explanations, the important question concerns how to conceive of ‘having a goal’ as being a causally relevant condition of the generation of teleologically corresponding actions (that is, actions which can contribute to achieving the goal). I tentatively proposed a dynamic understanding that conceives of ‘having a goal’ as already being a kind of activity.

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