Acting against one's best judgement
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CHAPTER IV

DAVIDSON'S ARGUMENT ON CAUSALITY

0. Introduction

It probably was Descartes who first articulated the in his days somewhat vague view that a person’s actions are caused by his beliefs and desires. The idea that reasons can wield causal power upon actions was developed further by David Hume and William James, and has been dexterously defended by, among others, Paul Churchland and Alvin Goldman (Churchland 1970; Goldman 1970a; Goldman 1970b). The causalistic view is aptly summarised in Goldman 1970a:

"When we say that P flipped the switch in order to turn on the light, the explanandum event is obviously P’s flipping the switch. But what does the explanans consist of? ... What ... is implied by saying that P flipped the switch "in order to" turn on the light? Evidently, this explanation implies that P wanted to turn on the light, and it also implies that he believed ... that he would turn on the light by flipping the switch. ... It also implies that his having this want and his having this belief caused ... his flipping the switch.

To talk about an agent’s reasons for action ... can be analyzed in terms of the action-plans which cause his action." (Goldman 1970a, 77-78; emphasis by Goldman; Goldman’s text has ‘S’ instead of ‘P’).

Yet ever since Descartes there have been philosophers who contested a causal explanation of actions. Well over forty years ago, these anti-causalists found new support in the neo-Wittgensteinian thoughts that in the previous chapter have been placed under the heading of the logical connection argument (LCA).

The major difference between the LCA and the causalists touches the relation between reasons and actions. According to the adherents of the
LCA, actions are logically (i.e. analytically, conceptually, deductively) implied by beliefs and desires. They thus believe the reason-action relation to be fundamentally different from the cause-effect connection. A cause explains an action only by an (explicit or tacit) appeal to a regularity of nature, be it an empirical law or a constant conjunction; but whenever a reason explains an action, no natural regularity backs the explanation. The defenders of a causal theory of action explanation, on the other hand, deny that such a difference exists. In their opinion, reasons are to actions as causes are to effects, i.e. clearly separated and hence logically independent of one another. The explanatory character of reasons is, they argue, merely derived from the fact that reasons and actions instantiate regularities of nature.

The latter position one might call the classical causalist position. It can be summarised as the following two claims:

1\textsuperscript{clas} like causal explanations, action explanations rely on a regularity of nature;
2\textsuperscript{clas} like causes and effects, reasons and actions are logically independent of each other.

Both claims are denied by the LCA which says:

1\textsuperscript{lca} unlike causal explanations, action explanations do not rely on a regularity of nature;
2\textsuperscript{lca} unlike causes and effects, reasons and actions are logically connected.

Donald Davidson is a prominent and relatively recent champion of the causalist position. Just as the neo-Wittgensteinians have lended new lustre to the anti-causalist stance by formulating the LCA, Donald Davidson has breathed new life into the causalist view. This he did by inventing a theory - drawing on Aristotle, Anscombe, Hempel and Quine - in which a seductive comprehensiveness of content competes with a discouraging density of style. However, Davidson’s reanimative enterprise has not been without consequences for the causal theory. For in Davidson’s hands the causalist viewpoint was drastically recast. At first sight, it even looks as though Davidson is an advocate of the LCA, since he appears to argue for two claims which I call 1\textsuperscript{dav} and 2\textsuperscript{dav}:
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1\textsuperscript{dav} action explanations do not rely on a natural regularity;
2\textsuperscript{dav} reasons and actions are logically connected.

That Davidson nonetheless is a causalist becomes clear from his approval of two other claims, which I introduce as 3\textsuperscript{dav} and 4\textsuperscript{dav}:

3\textsuperscript{dav} action explanations are causal explanations, and causal explanations do rely on empirical laws;
4\textsuperscript{dav} reasons are to actions as causes are to effects, and causes and effects indeed are logically independent of each other.

In the present chapter I explain how Davidson tries to talk these four seemingly contradictory claims into a coherent framework. In other words, I shall, governed by the principle of charity, make every effort to show that the following two quotations are not really inconsistent:

"Hempel set out to show that reason explanations do not differ in their general logical character from explanation in physics or elsewhere. My reflections reinforce this view" (Davidson 1976, 274; my emphasis).

"I hold that there is an irreducible difference between psychological explanations that involve the propositional attitudes and explanations in sciences like physics and physiology" (Davidson 1987, 35; my emphasis).

Section 1 describes how Davidson deals with the common view that causal relations are relations between events. As we will see, Davidson commits himself to an ontology of events as particulars, with all its consequences. Section 2 introduces a problem to which the classical causalist position gives rise. Section 3 explains how Davidson solves this problem by means of the ontology described in Section 1, and how, as a result, the classical causalist position is revised. Finally, in Section 4, I list some difficulties associated with Davidson’s own approach. One of those difficulties will turn out to be the problem of akrasia, a predicament of which Davidson appears to be very well aware.
An ontology of events as particulars

1. An ontology of events as particulars

It is quite common to regard the causal relation as one holding between events (facts, states of affairs); to say that an object caused another object, or that a certain quality caused another quality sounds slightly strange. (But see the footnote to Chapter II, Section 2.) Assuming that causes and effects are rightly deemed to be events, what exactly is an event? What is its ontological status?

Events make up a vital part of Davidson’s ontology. "[T]he assumption ... that there are events", he writes, "is one without which we cannot make sense of our most common talk" (Davidson 1967b, 162). Moreover, in the Davidsonian universe events occupy a rather unusual position. Unlike many other philosophers, Davidson does not regard events as compound states of affairs, which are denoted by entire sentences. Instead, he considers them as "unrepeatable particulars (‘concrete individuals’)", i.e. datable, locatable individual entities (Davidson, 1970b, 181; cf. Davidson 1970c, 209). Examples of such events are "the particular eruption of a volcano, the (first) birth or death of a person, the playing of the 1968 World Series, or the historic utterance of the words, ‘You may fire when ready, Gridley.’" (Davidson 1970c, 209-210). As unrepeatable particulars, events are the sort of things that we refer to by singular terms or argument constants. As Davidson sees it, we do not denote them by entire sentences, but we quantify over them in entire sentences. In Section 1.1 I explain how this quantification is done. Section 1.2 is about two problems that, according to Davidson, can be solved by his approach.

1.1 Quantifying over events

Consider the sentence (IV.1):

(IV.1): Masetto marries Zerlina.

In first order predicate logic, (IV.1) is usually taken to consist of two names (‘Masetto’, ‘Zerlina’) and a two place predicate (‘marries’). The common predicate logical translation of (IV.1) would be:

(IV.2): Marries(Masetto, Zerlina).
Davidson, however, denies that (IV.2) represents the logical form of (IV.1). He thinks that (IV.1) contains an argument place that it seems not to contain, since ‘marries’ should in fact be construed as a predicate with three argument places. The third argument place is for singular terms denoting events, or variables ranging over events. Thus (IV.1) becomes a sentence with a hidden event variable, $e$, bounded by an existential quantifier. Its logical form, then, would be:

\[
(\exists e) \ (\text{Marries}(\text{Masetto}, \text{Zerlina}, e)),
\]

which should be read as ‘There is an event $e$ such that $e$ is a marrying of Zerlina by Masetto’. Of course, ‘a marrying’ is not a singular term, but ‘is a marrying’ is a predicate saying something about the otherwise indeterminate event $e$. Similarly, the sentence ‘All walks through Amsterdam with Betty are pleasant’ becomes:

\[
(\forall e) \ [(\text{Walk}(e)) \land (\text{With}(\text{Betty}, e)) \land (\text{Through}(\text{Amsterdam}, e)) \rightarrow (\text{Pleasant}(e))]
\]

to be read as ‘For all events $e$, if $e$ is a walk and $e$ is with Betty and $e$ is through Amsterdam, then $e$ is a pleasant event’. Again, ‘a walk’ is neither a relation nor a variable bound by the universal quantifier, but a predicate affixed to an otherwise unspecified event $e$.

Davidson’s commitment to an ontology of events looks rather artificial and forced. Why does he exert so much effort for an analysis of events as particulars? What is the use of denoting events by means of singular terms, instead of doing so by entire sentences? The following quotations might make up Davidson’s answer:

"This analysis copes with a variety of problems in what seems to me an attractively simple way; and I know of no other theory that does as well." (Davidson 1970b, 182).

"What could ... be said in defence of my analysis? What can be said comes down to this: it explains more, and it explains better. It explains more in the obvious sense of bringing more data under fewer rules." (Davidson 1967a, 141).
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"I do not believe we can give a cogent account of action, of explanation, of causality, or of the relation between the mental and the physical, unless we accept events as individuals." (Davidson 1969, 165).

So Davidson’s motive is purely practical. By positing the existence of events as particulars which are referred to by means of singular terms or variables, Davidson aims to show that several ostensibly unrelated philosophical problems are in fact related. Moreover, he thinks he can solve them. In 1.2 I discuss two problems that, according to Davidson, can be solved within his approach. The first problem concerns the role of adverbs, the second is how to construct a satisfying theory about actions and events.

1.2 Solving two problems

One of the problems Davidson wants to discuss concerns the role of adverbs. Adverbs modify verbs, and verbs are about what happens, whether what happens is a ‘mere happening’ (an event) or something that we do (an action). In natural languages, adverbs and adverbial clauses frequently function in a way that has no representation in formal languages like standard first order predicate logic. This discrepancy between natural and formal languages is a thorn in Davidson’s flesh, for one of Davidson’s projects is to stretch Tarski’s definition of ‘truth’ in formal languages to the point where it becomes a definition of ‘meaning’ in natural languages: Davidson wants to use the phrase ‘p is true iff s’ (where ‘p’ and ‘s’ are sentences, preferably in formal languages) for an explication of the phrase ‘x means the same as y’ (where ‘x’ and ‘y’ are terms, preferably in natural languages). I do not want to divagate upon that project here, but an outline of how a quantification over events à la Davidson enables us to express adverbial modification in standard predicate logic will prove to be useful.

Consider the sentences (IV.5) and (IV.6):

39 When Davidson is talking about formal languages, he usually has standard first order predicate logic in mind. Davidson often and explicitly defends quantificational theory, which he deems to be "a good theory" with important virtues such as "its known consistency and completeness (in the sense that all quantificational truths are provable)" (Davidson 1967a, 140).
(IV.5): Masetto marries Zerlina by proxy

(IV.6): Masetto marries Zerlina by proxy in the rain.

Sentence (IV.5) contains an adverbial modifier indicating manner (‘by proxy’); sentence (IV.6) has in addition another adverbial modifier (‘in the rain’). Obviously, (IV.5) entails (IV.1) whereas it is entailed by (IV.6); for if Masetto marries Zerlina by proxy then he marries her, and if he does not marry her by proxy then he certainly did not do so in the rain. But what are the logical forms of (IV.5) and (IV.6)? According to a generally accepted view, the logical form of a sentence has to render explicit how the sentence in question is logically connected to other sentences. Davidson appears to endorse this view when he writes:

"... much of the interest in logical form comes from an interest in logical geography: to give the logical form of a sentence is to give its logical location in the totality of sentences, to describe it in a way that explicitly determines what sentences it entails and what sentences it is entailed by.” (Davidson 1967a, 140).

Yet an ordinary first-order translation of (IV.5) and (IV.6) does not account for the fact that the former entails (IV.1) and is entailed by (IV.6). For such a translation would transform (IV.5) into (IV.7):

(IV.7): Marries(Masetto, Zerlina, Proxy),

in which ‘marries’ is construed as a three place predicate, and it would replace (IV.6) by (IV.8):

(IV.8): Marries(Masetto, Zerlina, Proxy, Rain)

where ‘marries’ has four places. Clearly, (IV.7) does not entail (IV.2) - the standard first-order form of (IV.1) - nor is (IV.7) entailed by (IV.8). However, in the Davidsonian universe of events as particulars we can account for the fact that (IV.5) entails (IV.1) and is entailed by (IV.6). For in that domain (IV.5) is translated as (IV.9):

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(IV.9): (∃e){(Marries(Masetto,Zerlina,e)) ∧ (By(Proxy,e))}

whereas (IV.6) becomes (IV.10):

(IV.10): (∃e) {(Marries(Masetto,Zerlina,e)) ∧ (By(Proxy,e)) ∧ (In(the Rain,e))}.

Sentence (IV.9) does entail (IV.3), which was Davidson’s reconstrual of (IV.1); moreover, (IV.9) is entailed by (IV.10).

The above shows that treating events as particulars enables us to regard adverbial modification as a sort of adjectival qualification. For now it is no longer true that adverbial clauses modify verbs. Instead, they modify the events that are introduced by certain verbs in much the same way that adjectives qualify ordinary nouns (cf. Davidson 1969, 167). This makes it possible to express adverbial modification in first order predicate logic, whereby the uncomfortable gap between formal and natural languages is narrowed.

There is, however, another problem that Davidson thinks he can solve by means of an event-as-particular ontology and its corresponding method of quantification. This problem concerns the relation between actions, being things that we do, and events, being things that merely happen to us. Actions and events differ in some respects while they are alike in others. Any theory about actions and events must account for the disparities as well as the similarities, preferably in a simple and systematic way. Davidson believes that his ontology of events as particulars provides the materials for such a theory.

According to Davidson, the main difference between events and actions is that the former are brought about by causes whereas the latter are engendered by reasons. Phrased in this way, Davidson’s idea is perfectly compatible with the positions which we have already been facing: it matches not only Hempel’s position, but also the LCA and the classical causalist approach. However, Davidson also holds that actions are those events the causes of which are reasons, and by that assertion he disentangles himself from the three positions just mentioned. He departs from Hempel and from the adherents of the LCA in affirming what the latter deny, viz. that actions are events and that reasons are causes. He deviates from the classical causalists in denying what the latter affirm, viz. that actions are events simpliciter and that reasons are causes simpliciter. As I shall explain in
Section 3, Davidson believes that actions are a peculiar sort of events, namely mental events, and that reasons are a peculiar sort of causes, namely rational causes.

The reason why Davidson wishes to free himself from the classical causalists is discussed in Section 2: the classical causalist idea that reasons are ordinary causes of actions leads to a problem and from there to a rather counterintuitive thesis, viz. the non-identity thesis. Davidson aims to circumvent these difficulties; in Section 3 it is explained how he works towards that goal.

2. A problem in the classical causalist view

I already noted that causal relations are supposed to hold between events: causes and effects are events rather than objects or qualities. Anyone who regards reasons and actions as being causally related must therefore look upon reasons and actions as if they were events. The classical causalists hold that reasons and actions are causally related, so it is only consistent that they also picture reasons and actions as events.

In the classical view, the concept of an event and that of a cause are considered to be full-blooded ontological notions. ‘Event’ does not originate from semantics nor from epistemology: it refers neither to a description nor to a mode of knowing but to something that exists in the outer world. Similarly, the concept of causality is treated as a purely ontological concept. If two events are causally related, this relationship has an ontological standing, not a semantical nor an epistemological one. For the events in question will remain causally related, no matter how we describe them, and no matter whether we know or do not know that they are thus related.

At first glance, considering ‘event’ and ‘causality’ as purely ontological concepts seems to be a sensible approach. However, when combined with the two classical causalistic claims that have been mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, this approach leads to the following problem. Consider two events $e_1$ and $e_2$, such that $e_1$ is described by the expression ‘$e_1$’ and $e_2$ is described by the expression ‘$e_2$’. If $e_1$ is the cause of $e_2$, then, according to the classical causalist, two conclusions can be drawn:

(i) $e_1$ and $e_2$ are logically independent of each other and so are the
A problem in the classical causalist view

descriptions ‘\(e_1\)’ and ‘\(e_2\)’ (see claim 2\(^\text{clas}\) above);

(ii) there exists a causal explanation that meets Hempel’s four requirements of adequacy, and that hence contains a causal law of the form ‘if an instance of ‘\(e_1\)’ occurs then an instance of ‘\(e_2\)’ occurs’ (see claim 1\(^\text{clas}\) above).

Keeping within the limits of the classical causalist framework, substituting reason \(r_1\) for event \(e_1\) and action \(a_1\) for event \(e_2\), yields a fully analogous story. Let \(r_1\) be described by ‘\(r_1\)’ and ‘\(a_1\)’. If \(r_1\) is the cause of \(a_1\), then again, according to the classical causalist, two conclusions can be drawn:

(i\(^*\)) \(r_1\) and \(a_1\) are logically independent of each other and so are the descriptions ‘\(r_1\)’ and ‘\(a_1\)’ (cf. 2\(^\text{clas}\));
(ii\(^*\)) there exists a causal explanation that meets Hempel’s four requirements of adequacy, and that hence contains a causal law of the form ‘if an instance of ‘\(r_1\)’ occurs then an instance of ‘\(a_1\)’ occurs’ (cf. 1\(^\text{clas}\)).

Clearly, the appeal to a causal law mars the ontological picture of causality with which the classical causalists present us. For laws are not out there on the ontological streets. They are man-made constructions, instruments that we have devised in order to get an intellectual grip upon the world. Laws are not elements of the world, they are part of theories about the world. As such, they exist by virtue of formulations: it is essential for them to be couched in words or other symbols. Likewise, it is essential for the causal laws mentioned under (ii) and (ii\(^*\)) to depend upon descriptions of what they causally relate. In (ii), the law depends on the descriptions ‘\(e_1\)’ and ‘\(e_2\)’; in (ii\(^*\)), the law depends on the descriptions ‘\(r_1\)’ and ‘\(a_1\)’.

The reliance of laws upon descriptions constitutes a problem for the classical causalist, who wants to use causal laws, but nevertheless wishes to regard ‘causality’ as a full-blown ontological concept. This problem becomes more pressing when we realise that actions and events can be described in many different ways, some of which do instantiate a law whereas others do not. If the entities to which the words in a certain law refer can easily be described in different words that make up a different law, what then should we conclude? Should we conclude that the two laws are identical even though they are couched in different terms? Or that they are not identical although they are about the same things? But how do we decide that things
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are the same if not by the identity of the laws that govern them? Or conversely, if the alternative description does not instantiate a law, what then is the merit of the original law? How can it really be about entities if it is so fragile with respect to the way in which the entities are described? And again, how do we know that entities differently described are the same entities?

Let us stop posing questions in abstracto: here is a concrete example, inspired by Von Wright’s book. Suppose that person $P$ does each of the following things simultaneously: (1) he moves his finger, (2) he pulls a trigger, (3) he fires a gun, (4) he kills a tyrant. How many actions does $P$ perform here? According to the classical causalists, $P$ performs four actions. Each action is a token of an other type, and each type has its own description (‘moving his finger’, ‘pulling a trigger’, ‘firing a gun’, ‘killing a tyrant’). Also, each action might have its own explanation, and hence its own reason to which it is causally connected by its own law.

The claim that, in the example above, $P$ performs four different actions sounds of course rather counterintuitive: how can $P$ perform four different actions if he performs them all at the same time? Moreover, there seems to be an infinite number of ways in which $P$’s action can be described. Should we regard every single description as referring to a unique action type, some of which correspond to a unique explanation embracing a unique law, whereas others do not? According to the classical causalist Alvin Goldman we should. In Goldman 1970a he claimed that $P$ performs four different actions. Goldman’s so-called non-identity claim depends on three arguments. I tersely outline them below, and then turn to Davidson’s alternative causalism, erected on the antithetical identity claim.40

Goldman’s first argument has also been called the argument from ‘by’-relations (Ginet 1990, 53). It rests on the observation that $P$ kills a tyrant by firing a gun, which he does by pulling a trigger, which is accomplished by moving his finger. Here the preposition ‘by’ expresses a binary relation, the ‘by’-relation, that is asymmetric and irreflexive. The relation is called asymmetric because although you usually pull a trigger by moving your finger, you normally do not move your finger by pulling a

40 Two of Goldman’s arguments are presented in Goldman 1970a. The third argument (the argument from temporal relations) Goldman subscribed to in 1970b. For a succinct survey of the arguments, see Ginet 1990 or Buekens 1992.
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trigger; the same of course goes for the other things that P does. The relation is called irreflexive because no one pulls a trigger by pulling a trigger or kills a tyrant by killing a tyrant. Obviously, no action has a ‘by’-relation to itself. Since the things that P does are connected by three different ‘by’-relations, and since it is assumed that (1) differs from (4), P does four different things, hence performs four distinct actions.

The second argument for the non-identity thesis I label the argument from temporal and spatial relations (cf. Ginet 1990, 58). It can be easily explained by extending the example above. Suppose that P moves his finger, pulls the trigger and fires a gun at the tyrant (all at the same time). Imagine further that the victim dies three hours later in a hospital, whence it became true, three hours after he has pulled the trigger, that P killed the tyrant. Are P’s pulling the trigger and his killing the tyrant one and the same action or are they distinct? According to Goldman they must be distinct, for "if [two actions] X and Y are identical, then X must have all and only the properties that Y has" (Goldman 1970a, 2). Pulling the trigger and killing the tyrant occur at different points in time and space, hence do not share the time/place property, thus cannot be identical.

Undoubtedly, the two arguments above sound very reasonable; they might even strip the non-identity claim of its counterintuitive character. The third argument, on the other hand, is differently placed. Ginet calls it the argument from causal-explanatory relations. Imagine that P pulls the trigger because he wants to liberate his country from a totalitarian leadership. Imagine further that he performs his action reluctantly, as a result of being filled with horror by the idea that he is going to murder a human being. Do ‘P pulls the trigger’ and ‘P pulls the trigger reluctantly’ refer to the same action? It seems rather foolish to deny that they do, but Goldman nevertheless makes a brave attempt at a proof to the contrary. P’s act of pulling the trigger reluctantly is an effect, Goldman argues, of his being in a state of abhorrence (Goldman 1970b, Goldman 1970a, 3). But his act of pulling the trigger tout court is not at all an effect of that state, since P pulls the trigger independently of whether or not he feels aversion. This indicates that there exists a causal factor of P’s pulling the trigger reluctantly that is not a causal factor of P’s pulling the trigger tout court. But if two actions X and Y are the same, one would expect them to be caused by exactly the same set of causes or causal factors. Therefore, ‘P pulls the trigger’ and ‘P pulls the trigger reluctantly’ do not refer to the same action. In Section 3, notably in 3.1.2, I explain how Davidson, following Anscombe in espousing
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the identity claim, deals with each of Goldman’s three arguments.

3. Three noteworthy distinctions

Davidson is a causalist. Vis-à-vis the LCA-adherents and other neo-Wittgensteinians, he has always stuck to the idea that actions are caused by reasons. In his Introduction to *Actions and Events* Davidson proclaims:

"All the essays in this book ... are unified in theme and general thesis. The theme is the role of causal concepts in the description and explanation of human action. The thesis is that the ordinary notion of cause ... is essential ... to the understanding of what it is to act with a reason" (Davidson 1980, xi).

Already in the book’s earliest essay (1963), Davidson makes the following statement about ‘rationalizations’ (that is Davidson’s term for action explanations or reason explanations):

"I want to defend the ancient - and commonsense - position that rationalization is a species of causal explanation. The defence no doubt requires some redeployment, but it does not seem necessary to abandon the position, as has been urged by many recent writers." (Davidson 1963, 3).

Recent writers such as the neo-Wittgensteinians, of course. The quotation further reveals that Davidson, although on the causalists’ side, does not want to identify himself with the classical causalists, whose position he deems to be in need of "redeployment".

Davidson’s main complaint about the classical position is, I would say, that it neglects the following three distinctions:

DISTINCTION 1: between *events* and *descriptions of events*;

DISTINCTION 2: between *mental descriptions* and *physical descriptions*;
Three noteworthy distinctions

DISTINCTION 3: between singular causal statements and general causal explanations.

By inserting these distinctions in the causalist viewpoint, Davidson reforms causalism, thereby placing himself somewhere between the classical causalists and the adherents of the LCA. This new causalism functions as the proverbial stone that kills two birds. Firstly, it breaks the bond between a causalistic view and the counterintuitive non-identity claim, thus showing that one can embrace the former without espousing the latter. Secondly, it facilitates the construction of a theory about actions and events in which the differences as well the similarities between the two categories are accounted for.

Below I examine the three distinctions. The first distinction is discussed in 3.1, the second in 3.2. Each of the two distinctions prompts a question, and these are dealt with in 3.3. In 3.4 the third distinction is discussed. Finally, in 3.5, some conclusions are drawn; it is explained how the three distinctions yield an up-to-date causalism that does the twofold job mentioned above.

3.1 DISTINCTION 1: events and descriptions of events

In discussing the LCA and the classical causalistic position, the distinction between semantics, epistemology and ontology was not important. Classical causalism, as we have seen, focusses entirely on the latter discipline; it is basically an ontology-oriented position. As far as the LCA is concerned, the distinction between ontology, semantics and epistemology proved to be insignificant for my argument in Chapter II. So I could allow myself to ignore it, and treat the LCA at once as a semantical, an ontological and an epistemological argument.

In the present chapter I can no longer follow that line. For in discussing Davidson’s position, it would be inappropriate not to distinguish between semantics, ontology and epistemology. Notably the distinction between ontology on the one hand and linguistics or semantics on the other is important for an understanding of Davidson’s thoughts.

Davidson has frequently emphasised the difference between events and descriptions of events. Without such a distinction, he argues, our daily
speech would simply be impossible:

"Our ordinary talk of events, of causes and effects, requires constant use of the idea of different descriptions of the same event." (Davidson 1967a, 120).

In fact, one of Davidson’s motives to consider events as particulars (cf. Section 1) is that, as particulars, events are easily described in many different ways. Another motive is that an assumed identity between events can now be reconstructed as an identity of tokens rather than an identity of types (there is more on the advantages of token identity over type identity in Section 3.2). Still another motive is that events as particulars can be causally related without obeying a covering causal law (I will discuss this point in Section 3.4).

Not only events, but even more so actions can be described in many different ways. The openness of actions to different descriptions has been deftly demonstrated in Anscombe 1957, a book to which Davidson often refers and for which he expressed his admiration (Davidson 1971b, 194, footnote 8; for the introduction of the expression "under the description", see Anscombe 1957, 11). One of Anscombe’s examples of this liability of actions to different descriptions is about the man who refills the water supply of a house by pumping up water that has been poisoned by someone. Anscombe asks herself how many actions the man performs:

"... are we to say that the man who (intentionally) moves his arm, operates the pump, replenishes the water supply, poisons the inhabitants, is performing four actions? Or only one?" (Anscombe 1957, 45; emphasis by Anscombe).

She concludes that the correct answer is ‘only one’:

"In short, the only distinct action of his that is in question is this one, A. For moving his arm up and down with his fingers round the pump handle is, in these circumstances, operating the pump; and, in these circumstances, it is replenishing the house water-supply; and, in these circumstances, it is poisoning the household. So there is one action with four descriptions ...." (Anscombe 1957, 46;
emphasizes by Anscombe).

Like Anscombe Davidson defends the identity thesis: the claim that one and the same action can be described in numerous ways. Consequently, Davidson takes the view that, in our earlier example, \( P \) performs only one action which can be described in four different ways, to wit ‘moving his finger’, ‘pulling a trigger’, ‘firing a gun’, ‘killing a tyrant’. Section 3.1.1 entails a further examination of the identity thesis. In 3.1.2 it is shown how Davidson refutes the three arguments that Alvin Goldman has put forward in defence of the non-identity claim.

### 3.1.1 Pros and cons of the identity thesis

According to Davidson there are "plenty of ... contexts" which suggest that the identity thesis is true. Within these contexts we "seem compelled to take talk of ‘alternative descriptions of the same action’ seriously, i.e. literally" (Davidson 1967a, 110). An example is the context in which excuses are made. A standard pattern of excuse consists in uttering ignorance of the fact that one’s action has an alternative description. "I did not know that Sophie is married to the minister of foreign affairs" could serve as an apology for having brutally denounced, in front of Sophie, the foreign policy. In this case I do not deny that I publicly decried the foreign course, nor that I insulted Sophie. My excuse pertains to the fact that I did not know ‘denouncing the foreign policy’ and ‘insulting Sophie’ to be descriptions of the same action. But apart from the excusing context, there are other contexts which suggest that the identity claim is sound. Davidson points for example to the setting in which actions are explained:

"Explaining an action by giving an intention with which it was done provides new descriptions of the action: I am writing my name on a piece of paper with the intention of writing a cheque with the intention of paying my gambling debt. List all the different descriptions of my action. Here are a few for a start: I am writing my name. I am writing my name on a piece of paper. I am writing my name on a piece of paper with the intention of writing a cheque. I am writing a cheque. I am paying my gambling debt."
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(Davidson 1967a, 110; emphasis by Davidson).

Davidson concludes:

"It is hard to imagine how we can have a coherent theory of action unless we are allowed to say that each of these sentences is made true by the same action" (ibid.).

The idea to separate actions from their descriptions sounds sensible, of course. But a problem remains. In Davidson’s philosophy, the number of ways in which an action can be described appears to be enormous. To mention only two points:

(a) an endless number of details may be added by attaching adverbs or adverbial clauses (I am writing my name slowly, smoothly, in a silk suit, sarcastically smiling, et cetera) (Davidson 1967a);
(b) every description of an action in terms of its consequences may be used since it is appropriate as a description (Davidson 1973a, 71).

What is Davidson’s response to the jumble of descriptions that is generated by (a) and (b)? As far as (a) is concerned, Davidson concedes that the manoeuvre of adverbial modification might go on and on, thus producing an infinite series of sentences. However, he thinks the problem is not as big as it seems to be. For there appears to be method in the mess. The welter of seemingly disordered sentences actually is a hierarchical aggregate, in the sense that ‘I am writing my name’ is derivable from ‘I am writing my name smoothly’ which in turn is derivable from ‘I am writing my name smoothly with a sarcastic smile’ and so on. This derivability is possible because the logical form of action sentences is identical to the logical form of event sentences. Like events, actions are considered particulars, which are referred to by singular terms. Like events, actions can be extensively specified by adding more and more adverbial clauses. As in the case of events, these clauses create sentences and relations between sentences which are perfectly expressible in standard predicate logic. Davidson thus establishes a far-reaching similarity between actions and events, and hence between reasons and causes. Actions become a kind of events, and reasons become a kind of causes. The only difference between a reason/action pair on the one hand
and a cause/effect pair on the other, appears to be the vocabulary they are couched in: actions and reasons are written in a mental vocabulary whereas causes and effects are phrased in a physical idiom. An easy way of identifying the idiom is to take a look at the verb: mental versus physical idioms are often recognizable by mental versus physical verbs (‘believing’, ‘desiring’, ‘washing’, ‘walking’ versus ‘slipping’, ‘falling’, ‘failing’, ‘sleepwalking’). However, as Davidson observes, this identifying criterion is not waterproof (Davidson 1971a, 43). I shall say more on the difference between the two vocabularies in Section 3.2.

With respect to (b), the situation is slightly more difficult. For (b) entails that actions can have descriptions under which they lose their intentional character: although it was not my intention to offend the foreign minister’s wife, an offence certainly followed from what I did, whereby ‘offending the foreign minister’s wife’ is a decent description of my action. However, the idea of a non-intentional action has a contradictory ring to it. I have said that all the dramatis personae in the traditional debate on action explanation subscribe to the view that actions differ from events by the fact that they are brought about by intentions or reasons: Hempel, the LCA adherents, the classical causalists, and last but not least Davidson, all seem to consider unintentional actions as contradictiones in terminis.

Davidson’s position is somewhat ambiguous, however. There are passages in Davidson’s writings which indeed indicate that unintentional actions cannot be called real actions. While discussing the exemplary case in which I come home, flip a switch, turn on the light, illuminate the room, and thereby unintentionally alert a prowler to my return, Davidson comments in a footnote:

"We might not call my unintentional alerting of the prowler an action, but it should not be inferred from this that alerting the prowler is therefore something different from flipping the switch ... I follow a useful philosophical practice in calling anything an agent does intentionally an action ..." (Davidson 1963, 4-5, footnote 2).

But whereas the quotation above might be taken to imply that all and only intentional doings are actions, other passages indicate that also unintentional doings can be actions:
"When we describe our actions, we include not only what we do intentionally but also many things we do unintentionally. [I hold] that unintentional actions are actions under other descriptions." (Davidson 1973a, 70).

"... I have argued for the view that one and the same action may be correctly said to be intentional (when described in one way) and not intentional (when described in another)." (Davidson 1967a, 147).

At still other places Davidson seems to take up a sort of middle position (Davidson 1971a; Davidson 1974a). In the first paragraph of Davidson 1974a he claims that something is an action if and only if it can be described in a way that makes it intentional, so that when there is no way of describing them in terms of intention, happenings cease to be actions (cf. Davidson 1971a, 50). In the next paragraphs Davidson declares that this claim might well be mistaken. However, he decides to "[set] aside the need for further refinement" (Davidson 1971a, 46).

This apparent ambivalence in Davidson’s writings presumably is a reflection of what he called the "discrepancies between early and later views" (Davidson 1980, xi). "Before one starts to write one thinks one knows what one is going to say", Davidson declares in 1985. "But in my case at least it is only as I write that I discover what I think, and this is almost never what I thought when I began" (Davidson 1985c, 253). After 1963, the year in which his first essay on reasons and actions was published, Davidson changed his mind on the subject of intentions and intentional acts (Davidson 1980, xi). I personally conjecture this change to be prompted by the recognition of serious problems, among which notably that of akrasia. In the final section of the present chapter I explain how Davidson’s position, like those of Hempel and the LCA adherents, impinges upon the akrasia problem. However, I postpone further comments on Davidson’s change of mind until we come to Chapter VI.

3.1.2 Davidson’s response to Goldman’s arguments

We have seen that Davidson vindicates the identity thesis by drawing a distinction between events and actions on the one hand and their descriptions
on the other. This distinction is the very weapon with which Davidson tries to take the edge off the arguments that Alvin Goldman put forward in support of the non-identity claim (see Section 2).

Goldman’s first argument, the argument from ‘by’-relations, is countered by Davidson in the following manner (Davidson 1987, 38-39; cf. Davidson 1973a, 76-78; cf. Anscombe 1979, 209ff). Consider the relation between ‘to be the present queen of Holland’ and ‘to be Juliana’s daughter’. Obviously, this relation is asymmetric: Beatrix is the present queen of Holland by being Juliana’s daughter; she is not Juliana’s daughter by being Holland’s present queen. Also, the relation is irreflexive: it is not true that Beatrix is the present queen by being the present queen, or that she is Juliana’s daughter by being Juliana’s daughter. However, neither the asymmetry nor the irreflexivity shows that Juliana’s daughter and the present queen of The Netherlands cannot be the same person. They merely show that this person can be differently described. Similarly, Davidson argues, the asymmetry and irreflexivity between ‘pulling a trigger’ and ‘firing a gun’ do not show that pulling a trigger and firing a gun cannot be the same action. They merely show that this action can be differently described. In sum, then, Davidson admits that the preposition ‘by’ expresses an asymmetric and irreflexive relation, but he denies that this relation holds between actions. According to Davidson it holds between descriptions of actions.

Davidson’s response to Goldman’s second argument, the argument from temporal and spatial relations, is cast into the same mode. The temporal and spatial relations of which Goldman claims that they hold between actions, Davidson argues, in fact hold between descriptions of actions. Since actions may be described in terms of their consequences, a certain action may be described in terms of a consequence that occurred at, say, 10:00 a.m., and also in terms of a consequence that took place three hours later. To use Von Wright’s example once more: if I fire a gun in the morning and the victim dies at 1:00 in the afternoon, ‘firing a gun’ and ‘killing the tyrant’ both go for acceptable descriptions of my action, although the former already was an acceptable description at 10:00 a.m. and the latter did not became one until 1:00 p.m. In this case we have two descriptions, each with a different time property, but both referring to the same action.

Goldman’s third argument is based on the idea that two identical actions must have the same explanation. Davidson rejects this idea, which he deems to be the result of confusing ontology and semantics. The question whether or not two actions are identical is an ontological question; it is
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about individual actions no matter how described. However, to explain an action implies that one shifts to the sphere of semantics. For explanations rely on laws, and laws can only explain events if the latter are described in a certain way. This makes causality somehow language dependent. Goldman thinks this dependency of language is an "unattractive consequence" (Goldman 1970a, 7). Yet, as will become clear in Section 3.4, Davidson believes that language dependence is an undetachable part of the concept of causality.

3.2 DISTINCTION 2:
mental descriptions and physical descriptions

The lesson to be learned from 3.1 is that actions and events differ from their descriptions. Couched in this way the message is not very instructive. The advice to distinguish descriptions from entities described is almost a platitude, and the application of this wisdom to the realm of actions and events does not add very much. However, in Davidson’s hands the distinction between semantics and ontology cuts much deeper than that. In 3.2.1 I shall consider how Davidson applies the distinction, first in the sphere of agency, and then in the field of events. As we will see, Davidson’s application of DISTINCTION 1 leads to an original theory about the relation between actions and events. In 3.2.2 this theory will be examined further.

3.2.1 Mental events and physical events

In Davidson’s view, not only do actions have various descriptions, they are a sort of description themselves. Or, to put it in a more stately way, an action is an entity cum description. The entity in question is an event, the description concerned is a so-called mental description. Actions thus become so-called mental events, i.e. events under mental descriptions. What is a mental description? Given all that has been said above about the logical form of sentences on actions and/or events, it should not surprise us that a mental description pivots around the notion of a mental verb:

"Let us call a description of the form ‘the event that is M’ or an open sentence of the form ‘event x is M’ a mental
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description or a mental open sentence if and only if the expression that replaces ‘M’ contains at least one mental verb ...." (Davidson 1970c, 211; emphasis by Davidson).

So a mental description is a description with at least one mental verb in it. Mental verbs are those verbs that express

"propositional attitudes like believing, intending, desiring, hoping, knowing, perceiving, noticing, remembering, and so on." (Davidson 1970c, 210).

They are characterised by the fact that they occur in sentences of the form

\[ P \rightarrow \text{ that } s \]

where ‘P’ stands for the name of a person, the dashes symbolise a mental verb (‘believes’, ‘desires’, etc.), and ‘s’ represents a whole sentence to which the normal rules of substitution do not apply. As Davidson realises, the criterion is not very precise. On the one hand, he wants to include mental verbs which are not followed by the said sentences but which nevertheless occur in intensional contexts. On the other hand, he wishes to exclude apparently mental verbs that occur in fully extensional contexts (‘He knows Paris’ is among Davidson’s examples). Hence the creation of an intensional context is the crucial point: mental verbs create a semantically opaque context in which the principle of substitutivity fails (although sometimes we do not know whether these events are actions until "we know more than the verb tells us" - Davidson 1971a, 44).

Since not only actions, but also events can be differently described, Davidson recognises the existence of physical events, i.e. events under physical descriptions. As might be expected, a physical description is a description which uses physical vocabulary, notably a physical verb (‘to die’, ‘to faint’, ‘to fail’). The important characteristic of a physical verb of course is that it does not create a semantically opaque context.\(^{41}\)

\(^{41}\) There is still another problem, which is not mentioned by Davidson. If mental events are events of which the description contains a mental verb, and if mental verbs express propositional attitudes like believing and intending, then it is not immediately clear how actions can be mental events. After all, actions are usually described by such
Unfortunately, the criterion for distinguishing physical from mental descriptions is not without its own difficulties. The following is a variant of Davidson’s example. Let the verb ‘occurred in Groningen’ be essentially physical. Then its negation, ‘did not occur in Groningen’, is essentially physical too. But ‘occurred in Groningen or did not occur in Groningen’ is true of every event, whereupon every event becomes a physical event. The same of course goes for mental descriptions. If a mental event were indeed an event describable in a mental vocabulary, then every event would count as mental: ‘is believed by me or is not believed by me’ is true of every event.

Davidson is perfectly aware of these and similar difficulties verbs as ‘walking’ and ‘waving’, not by verbs like ‘believing’ and ‘intending’. In other words, the ordinary description of an action does not contain mental verbs, although the ordinary explanation of an action does.

I suspect that this problem relates to a certain obscurity in Davidson’s nomenclature. For although Davidson mostly writes as if actions are mental events, he sometimes refers to actions as if they are physical events:

” ... in identifying the action with a physical event, we must at the same time be sure that the causal history of the physical event included events or states identical with the desires and cognitive states that yield a psychological explanation of the action.” (Davidson 1973b, 254).

Simon Evnine refers to this obscurity when he writes:

"Laws which link mental states with actions will ... count as psychological laws, not as psychophysical laws. Unfortunately, this is not always made as clear as it should be, and sometimes, confusingly, Davidson does talk of such laws as psychophysical." (Evnine 1991, 21).

Evnine does not say where exactly Davidson uses the term ‘psychophysical laws’ for laws that link mental states with actions, but I presume that he has Davidson’s paper ‘Psychology as Philosophy’ in mind. In that essay Davidson tries to show that there are no psychophysical laws by arguing that there are no laws linking reasons and actions (Davidson 1974a, 231ff). Be that as it may, Evnine finally draws the right conclusion: "actions are none the less counted by Davidson as mental because in saying what actions someone is performing, as opposed merely to saying what movements his body is undergoing, we are contributing to our interpretation of him” (Evnine 1991, 21). I call Evnine’s conclusion right because Davidson, during a short conference on his work in Utrecht in November 1994, told me that this is indeed the correct interpretation.
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(Davidson 1970c, 210). However, they do not seem to bother him. First, Davidson deems it rather unimportant to formulate a precise criterion for physical descriptions:

"It is less important to characterize a physical vocabulary because relative to the mental it is, so to speak, recessive in determining whether a description is mental or physical." (Davidson 1970c, 211).

Second, Davidson admits that "it would be instructive to mend this trouble" (i.e. that on his criterion every event becomes mental). He nevertheless judges such a repair "not necessary for present purposes" (Davidson 1970c, 212). By "present purposes" Davidson means his ambition to develop a brand new version of the identity theory (not to be confused with the identity thesis referred to above). In general, an identity theory states that mind is identical to matter, or, in the Davidsonian jargon, that mental events (actions, beliefs, desires) are identical to physical events (bodily movements, reflexes, brain states). Relative to the construction of an identity theory, Davidson assures us, classifying too many events as mental events is not a grave sin. What would be a sin, Davidson argues, is the "failure to include bona fide mental events" (Davidson 1970c, 212). Evidently, if all events are mental events, this sin cannot possibly be committed. More on the Davidsonian identity theory in 3.2.2 and 3.4.1.

3.2.2 Ontological token identity

Davidson’s identity theory is a theory about ontological identity. It entails that the events to which mental descriptions refer are identical to the events denoted by physical descriptions. It is not a theory about semantical identity. In fact, it strongly opposes the claim that mental descriptions are translatable into physical descriptions. "[M]ental and physical predicates are not made for one another", Davidson says (Davidson 1970c, 218), since mental and
physical vocabularies have "disparate commitments" (Davidson 1970c, 222).  

Davidson’s main reason for this disparity is its supposed connection to Quine’s thesis of indeterminacy of translation. For according to Davidson the indeterminacy thesis says that mental terms cannot be translated into physical ones (Davidson 1970c, 222, footnote 14; Davidson 1985c, 245; but see also Davidson 1974b).

Davidson’s argument suggests that the intranslatability is typical for mental terms, and that only mental terms are affected by the indeterminacy of translation. That suggestion is, I think, wrong. Quine’s indeterminacy thesis covers mental and physical terms alike; hence the resulting intranslatability affects both categories. Intranslatability touches not only the interpretation of mental into physical terms, but also that of physical into mental terms, and even that of physical into physical, and mental into mental expressions. It would therefore be incorrect to use the indeterminacy thesis as a justification for the disparity between mental and physical descriptions.

The suggestion that only mental terms are affected by indeterminacy might well be caused by the neglect of a difference that is important for Quine, namely the difference between (linguistic) manuals of translation on the one hand and (psychological) theories of the mind on the other. Quine’s indeterminacy thesis is about the former, not about the latter (Quine 1990, 38; Quine 1987, 5; Quine 1974, Section 3).

Davidson, actually, is not the only interpreter who seems to underestimate this point. The same underestimation is, I think, prevalent in a paper by Lars Bergström (Bergström 1990). On the basis of Quine’s indeterminacy thesis, Bergström argues that there is no logical or epistemological, but only an ontological difference between explanations of actions and explanations of events. Hence, there is no logical or epistemological, but only an ontological difference between the social and the natural sciences. If I understood him correctly, Bergström argues as follows. Suppose we have two action explanations, (AE₁) and (AE₂), of what a person P did at time t. Of course, both the explanans of (AE₁) and that of (AE₂) refer to P’s reasons at t. Suppose further that (AE₁) and (AE₂) are empirically equivalent and logically incompatible. Then, according to Bergström, it does not make sense to ask which of the two explanations is the best. For, as in the case of two rivalling and empirically equivalent manuals of translation, there is no fact of the matter. Like the correctness of a translation, the correctness of an action explanation is determined exclusively by the observations involved. Just as observable, verbal behaviour is all there is for manuals of translations to be right or wrong about, so observable, non-verbal behaviour is all there is for action explanations to be right or wrong about. However, Bergström emphasises that matters are totally different in the natural sciences. If, in the natural sciences, two rivalling explanations of an event are empirically equivalent, then it does make sense to ask which is the right one. There is indeed a fact of the matter here.

In my opinion, Bergström’s reasoning could easily mislead us. It suggests that, for Quine, psychological ‘entities’ (such as beliefs, desires, and reasons) are on a par with linguistic ‘entities’ (such as meanings): in either case it is only observable behaviour that plays a rôle, in neither case is there a fact of the matter. Bergström thus
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Furthermore, Davidson’s identity theory is a theory about the identity of tokens, not about the identity of types. In Section 1 we have seen that Davidson reconstructs events as particulars, not as universals. Consequently, Davidson’s identity theory states that a particular mental event, for example my belief that my brother lives in Tokyo, is identical to a particular physical event, for example a certain state of my brain; it does not say that all beliefs about brothers-who-live-in-Tokyo are identical to brain states of a certain type. The absurdity of the latter is nicely illustrated by an analogy that Simon Evnine has drawn:

"Nobody would think that, just because one and the same object can be a tie and a birthday present, all ties are birthday presents or all birthday presents are ties. Similarly, just because one particular mental event, my present belief that \( p \), is a physical event, a certain synaptic connection, why should one think that all beliefs that \( p \) must be identical to that type of synaptic connection, or that all instances of such a synaptic connection are identical to a belief that \( p \)" (Evnine 1991, 62).

One of Davidson’s reasons for reconstructing events as particulars has been mentioned at the beginning of 3.1: as particulars, events can be described in many different ways. Now another reason becomes clear. If two events are identical, considering them as universals would lead to an identity of types. By regarding them as particulars, event identity becomes a identity of tokens, whereby the absurd consequences of a type identity are avoided.

ignores that, for Quine, there exists a big difference between psychology and linguistics. Beliefs and desires are dispositions, which might gain a physical footing as a result of future neurological research. Meanings are phoney, things that wrongly give the impression of existence. In this respect, beliefs and desires are more like the physical dispositions in the natural sciences. Hence the ontological difference that Bergström sees between explanations of actions and explanations of events vanishes. The ontological difference is not between the social and the natural sciences, but rather between those sciences on the one hand and linguistics on the other.

The same misunderstanding, I think, also impairs Ken Gemes’ analysis of Quine’s philosophy (Gemes 1991). For an analysis of Gemes’ argument, see Peijnenburg and Hünneman 1994. See also Chapter VIII, Section 4.2.
3.3 Two thorny questions

Our discussion so far of DISTINCTION 1 (Section 3.1) and DISTINCTION 2 (Section 3.2) presses upon us two thorny questions. Consider an arbitrary action $A$ and an arbitrary event $E$. Then, according to DISTINCTION 1, $A$ can be described in many different ways, and so can $E$. This raises the first question: what is the status of the action $A$ and the event $E$ to which all those descriptions refer? Furthermore, according to DISTINCTION 2, action $A$ is identical to an event, $E^*$, under a mental description, and $E$ is identical to an event, $E^{**}$, under a physical description ($E^*$ and $E^{**}$ might but need not be identical). This prompts the second question: what is the status of the entities $E^*$ and $E^{**}$ that are described in mental and physical terms respectively? Before we turn to DISTINCTION 3, something more needs to be said about both these vexing issues.

As far as the first question is concerned, I do not know of a place at which Davidson deals with it explicitly. However, Davidson’s writings on actions and events are suffused with the spirit of Anscombe, and she does handle the question. More than twenty years after her introduction of the phrase "under a description", Anscombe tells us:

"I have on occasion stared dumbly when asked: ‘If one action can have many descriptions, what is the action, which has all those descriptions?’ The question seemed to be supposed to mean something, but I could not get hold of it. It ought to have struck me at once that here we are in ‘bare particular’ country: what is the subject, which has all these predicates? The proper answer to ‘What is the action, which has all these descriptions?’ is to give one of the descriptions. Any one, it does not matter which; or perhaps it would be best to offer a choice, saying ‘Take whichever you prefer’.” (Anscombe 1979, 208-209; emphasis by Anscombe).

The message is clear enough: any attempt to separate entity $A$ from any of its descriptions as an action is meaningless. Without such a description, $A$ does not exist, since an essential constituent of $A$ is its description as an action. Apart from any of those descriptions, $A$ is like the earth before the Divine Spirit started moving, or like Adam before God breathed into his
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nostrils: without form, void, no more than dust of the ground.

The tonality of Davidson’s work is fully in harmony with these thoughts. Like a true pupil of Anscombe and Quine, Davidson has repeatedly intimated that the very idea of a description is inseparable from the idea of an entity described. By calling an event an action, we are placing it in a mentalistic framework that describes it as an action, whereby it becomes an action. The latter means that a description exists under which the event is intentional (see Section 3.1.1). Furthermore, it means that the event in question is explained by reasons - whether these reasons are considered as causes or not. Without such a framework or conceptual scheme we find ourselves, to use Anscombe’s beautiful expression, in ‘bare particular’ country. The event would be a bare event, either featuring in a framework in which only physicalistic terms are used or not featuring in any linguistic framework at all.

This takes us to the second question. What is the status of the events $E^*$ and $E^{**}$ that are described in mental and physical terms respectively? Evnine has justly remarked that in Davidson’s work "two fundamentally different conceptions of events [are] at work" (Evnine 1991, 64). The one we could call the semantical conception. It is the conception of ‘event’ as ‘event cum description’. The semantical conception is essentially twofold, since it allows events under mental descriptions (such as $A$ above) as well as events under physical descriptions (such as $E$ above). The other is the ontological conception. It is the conception of an event sine description, events such as $E^*$ and $E^{**}$, which are subsisting at the barren ontological level of the Dinge an Sich. What is the status of those events?

Davidson is not very clear about that. At some places, he speaks as if those events are of a physical nature. Talking about his identity theory (which, as we have seen, postulates an ontological token identity) Davidson declares that:

"[it] resembles materialism in its claim that all events are physical, but rejects the thesis, usually considered essential to materialism, that mental phenomena can be given purely physical explanations. ... [It] shows an ontological bias only in that it allows the possibility that not all events are mental, while insisting that all events are physical." (Davidson 1970c, 214).
This quotation may be taken to entail two things. First, it says that at an ontological level all events are physical, although some carry physical descriptions and others are written in mental terms. Second, it implies that mental descriptions cannot be translated into physical descriptions.

While the second implication is consistent with the rest of Davidson’s work, the first is not. At several places Davidson suggests that, on an ontological level, events are not physical, but neutral in character. The only thing that renders a event mental or physical is its description in mental or physical terms. As judged from this point of view, \( E^* \) and \( E^{**} \) indeed are Kant’s *Dinge an Sich* - under the proviso of course that the *Dinge* in question are tokens, not types. In the sequel I shall assume that Davidson ultimately holds the latter point of view; for Davidson, I take it, there is nothing either physical or mental, but description makes it so.

3.4 DISTINCTION 3:
causal statements and causal explanations

The present Section 3.4 is about the third distinction that Davidson wants to insert in the classical causalist framework in an attempt to redeploy it. A good way of explaining this distinction is by taking a fresh look at Davidson’s identity theory (3.4.1). The obviously inconsistent character of the theory will be removed by taking two steps; the first step is taken in 3.4.2, the second in 3.4.3.

3.4.1 Anomalous monism

Davidson calls his theory on ontological identity of tokens *anomalous monism*. *Monism*, because at an ontological level mental events are identical to physical events: both are unspecified pieces of a similarly unspecified reality. *Anomalous*, because on a semantical level mental events behave whimsically: mental terms resist translation into physical terms. More generally the anomalous character entails that regularities between the physical and the mental cannot exist; mental events escape any prediction
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or explanation on the basis of natural laws. To situate anomalous monism, Davidson presents a fourfold classification of theories dealing with the relation between mental and physical events. The classification is based on the theory’s claims concerning semantics (are there any psychophysical laws?) and ontology (are the events ontologically identical?). Thus Davidson divides the theories concerned into four sorts:

"nomological monism, which affirms that there are correlating laws and that the events correlated are one (materialists belong in this category); nomological dualism, which comprises various forms of parallelism, interactionism, and epiphenomenalism; anomalous dualism, which combines ontological dualism with the general failure of laws correlating the mental and the physical (Cartesianism). And finally there is anomalous monism, which classifies the position I wish to occupy." (Davidson 1970c, 213-214; emphasis by Davidson).

What makes anomalous monism interesting is that it reconciles the following three principles P1-P3, each of which Davidson explicitly endorses (Davidson 1970c, 208):

P1 (the Principle of Causal Interaction):
   at least some mental events interact causally with physical events

P2 (the Principle of the Nomological Character of Causality):
   causal interaction presupposes the existence of strict

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43 Davidson’s usage of the term ‘law’ is not particularly clear, an imperfection to which Føllesdal drew attention (Føllesdal 1980, 1982, 1986). The lack of precision is not diminished by Davidson’s distinction between homonomic and heteronomic generalisations. (Positive instances of the former “give us reason to believe the generalization itself could be improved by adding further provisos and conditions stated in the same general vocabulary as the original generalization”; instantiations of the latter “give us reason to believe there is a precise law at work, but one that can be stated only by shifting to a different vocabulary” - Davidson 1970c, 219.)
deterministic laws

P3 (the Principle of the Anomalism of the Mental):
no mental event can be predicted or explained on the basis of strict deterministic laws.

The first principle says that some mental events are causes or effects of certain physical events. For example, P’s intention to shout to his fellow mountain climber (a mental event) can cause an avalanche to break loose, and the latter (physical) event might cause in me the belief that an avalanche is breaking loose (a mental event). The second principle has a Hempelian flavour. It entails that a mental event, M(e), can only be a cause or an effect of a physical event, P(e’), if there is a causal law (L_1) of the form (L_1^a) or of the form (L_1^b):

\[
(L_1^a): (\forall e) \{M(e) \rightarrow \exists e’ (P(e’) \land e \text{ causes } e’)\}
\]
\[
(L_1^b): (\forall e) \{P(e) \rightarrow \exists e’ (M(e’) \land e \text{ causes } e’)\}
\]

where e and e’ range over events, and P and M characterise the events as either physical or mental events. (L_1^a) and (L_1^b) are the notorious psychophysical laws. (L_1^a) says that all mental events cause certain physical events, and L_1^b says that all mental events are caused by physical events. 44

44 Simon Evnine has formulated the psychophysical laws (L_1^a) and (L_1^b) differently. He writes: "Where M denotes some mental state and P some physical state, these laws would say:

(L_1^a''): for any objects x and y, if x is in M then y is in P
(L_1^b''): for any objects x and y, if x is in P then y is in M"

(Evnine 1991, 17-18). Of course, x and y preferably range over those objects that are in fact subjects, i.e. persons. (L_1^a'') says that, if person x has a mental state M, then person y has physical state P; (L_1^b'') expresses the reverse. (L_1^a'') and (L_1^b'') can be formalised as:

\[
(L_1^a''): (x)(y) (M(x) \rightarrow P(y))
\]
\[
(L_1^b''): (x)(y) (P(x) \rightarrow M(y))
\]

respectively. But this formalisation immediately shows what is wrong with Evnine’s formulation of the Davidsonian psychophysical laws. For (L_1^a'') is equivalent to
For our purposes the interesting psychophysical law is not so much a psychophysical causal law as, to borrow Evnine’s term, a psychophysical bridging law (Evnine 1991, 18). In order to distinguish the latter from the former, Evnine calls the bridging law (L₂). He then formulates (L₂) as ‘(∀e) (M(e) ↔ P(e))’ but that formulation is somewhat contestable. However, the idea is probably clear. It is that (L₂) identifies entities described in a psychological or mental vocabulary with entities written in a physical (behavioural or neurological) idiom. Jointly, the principles P₁ and P₂ imply that at least some mental events can be predicted and explained on the basis of causal or bridging laws. That, however, is denied by P₃. For P₃ denies the existence of any bridging or causal law which contains mental terms, not only psychophysical ones like (L₁) and (L₂), but also purely psychological ones in which only mental terms occur. Hence P₁, P₂, and P₃ are blatantly inconsistent. How then can Davidson endorse them all? How can anomalous monism be said to reconcile P₁, P₂, and P₃?

The answer consists in taking two steps. The first step, taken in 3.4.2, consists in refining the concept of causality by means of DISTINCTION 1. The second step comprises the application of the refined causality concept to the explanation of actions (3.4.3).

3.4.2 Causal statements and causal explanations

According to Davidson, most philosophers have failed to recognise that causality is essentially dual. On the one hand, causality is an ontological concept: it deals with the relation between events on an ontological level. If an event E* is said to cause another event E**, then what the word ‘cause’ relates are events, not expressions denoting events. The ontological side of causality reveals itself in what Davidson calls singular causal statements. An example of such a statement is ‘E* causes E**’. If ‘E* causes E**’ is true, then E* is the cause of E**, no matter how E* and E** are described. As Davidson says: "Causality [is a relation] between individual events no matter

∃x M(x) → ∀y P(y)

which says that, if there is a person in mental state M, all persons will be in physical state P. (L₁)’”) is equivalent to a statement mutatis mutandis.
how described" (Davidson 1970c, 215).

On the other hand, causality has a *semantical or linguistic* side: it deals with events that are described in a certain way. The semantical side of causality manifests itself in *causal explanations*. With respect to causal explanations, Davidson at first takes a purely Hempelian point of view. Causal explanations centre around causal laws, and causal laws are implicitly entailed by singular causal statements. When we say that $E^*$ causes $E^{**}$ and hence that the singular causal statement ‘$E^*$ causes $E^{**}$’ is true, we appeal to a causal law which says that every event of an $E^*$-kind causes an event of a $E^{**}$-kind (*ceteris paribus*). However, Davidson deviates from Hempel in stressing the fact that laws exist by virtue of certain formulations. In conceiving a law that relates $E^*$-events with $E^{**}$-events, the law’s content depends upon the way in which $E^*$ and $E^{**}$ are described. Not every description of $E^*$ and $E^{**}$ yields a law. In particular, we cannot simply transfer the expressions used in singular causal statements to the corresponding causal laws, for it is not the case that:

"... singular causal statements necessarily indicate, by the concepts they employ, the concepts that will occur in the entailed law." (Davidson 1963, 17; cf. Davidson 1976, 265).

In other words, although causality is a relation between events no matter how described, causal laws are linguistic; and so:

"events can instantiate laws, and hence be explained and predicted in the light of laws, only as those events are described in one or another way." (Davidson 1970c, 215).

The difference between singular causal statements and causal laws might be clarified further by pointing to the difference between *tokens* and *types*. Singular causal statements relate events at an ontological level, and thus are about events as tokens. Causal laws relate events on a semantical level, and hence deal with events as types. Types and tokens should not be confused, as Davidson made clear by the following telling example:

"Suppose a hurricane, which is reported on page 5 of Tuesday’s *Times*, causes a catastrophe, which is reported
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on page 13 of Wednesday’s Tribune. Then the event reported on page 5 of Tuesday’s Times caused the event reported on page 13 of Wednesday’s Tribune. Should we look for a law relating events of these kinds? It is only slightly less ridiculous to look for a law relating hurricanes and catastrophes. The laws needed to predict the catastrophe with precision would, of course, have no use for concepts like hurricane and catastrophe.” (Davidson 1963, 17; emphasis by Davidson).

There are thus two ways in which an event can be explained. The first consists in simply giving its cause. This is, as Davidson says, "the most primitive explanation of an event" (Davidson 1963, 17). It corresponds to the production of a singular causal statement, and I shall call it explaining in the broad sense. The second way I term explaining in the strict sense. It consists in constructing "more elaborate explanations", preferably explanations which "defend the singular causal claim by producing a relevant law" (Davidson 1963, 17). Broadly explaining is to strictly explaining as predicting the weather is to predicting a well defined event on the basis of strict deterministic laws:

"The trouble with predicting the weather is that the descriptions under which the events interest us - ‘a cool, cloudy day with rain in the afternoon’ - have only remote connections with the concepts employed by the more precise known laws." (Davidson 1963, 17).

Although strict and broad explanations differ in refinement and sophistication, both are equally respectable as a mode of explaining. In particular, Davidson vehemently opposes the Hempelian adage that concocting an explanation implies commitment to a law. According to Davidson, "it is an error to think that no explanation has been given until a law has been produced" (Davidson 1963, 17). Let us now see how Davidson applies this differentiated concept of causal explanation to action explanation.
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3.4.3 The explanation of actions

Suppose that P performs an action A which is described as a pressing of the seven, the two, the nine and the cube root buttons on her calculator (Davidson 1976, 263). Since A is an action, its explanation involves reference to a reason, R, which by definition consists of a desire D (e.g. P's desire to take the cube root of 729) and a belief B (e.g. the belief that by punching the seven, two, nine and cube root buttons, the cube root of 729 will appear). In Davidson’s view, R explains A if and only if R meets the following two conditions.

The first condition, C1, requires that there is a logical connection between R and A. In Davidson’s words: C1 demands that R consists of a desire D towards actions with a certain property and a belief B that A, under the chosen description, has that property (Davidson 1963, 5). In the words of the later Davidson:

"Beliefs and desires have a content, and these contents must be such as to imply that there is something valuable or desirable about the action. Thus a man who finds something desirable in health, and believes that exercise will make him healthy can conclude that there is something desirable in exercise, which may explain why he takes exercise." (Davidson 1982, 293).

Obviously, R in our example meets C1. However, meeting C1 is necessary, but not sufficient for a reason to explain an action. In Davidson’s view, far more often than not people have a reason that meets C1 but nevertheless fail to perform the recommended action; or alternatively, they do perform the action that the reason suggests, but do it either par hasard or for entirely different reasons. In order to explain A, R has to be effective in A’s coming about, i.e. it must have causal power:

"[T]he reasons an agent has for acting must, if they are to explain the action, be the reasons on which he acted; the reasons must have played a causal role in the occurrence of the action." (Davidson 1982, 293).

"... reasons explain an action only if the reasons are
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Thus a second condition, C2, presents itself: R can only explain A if R was the proper cause of A (Davidson 1963, 12). C2 may look troublesome. First, Davidson subscribes to the generally accepted view that causes are logically independent of their effects; but on condition C1 A is logically dependent of R. Second, Davidson acknowledges that the very concept of a cause presupposes the existence of a causal law; however, according to principle P3 a law between R and A cannot exist.

Both problems are solved by Davidson’s distinction between singular causal statements and general causal laws. Firstly, if R is the cause of A, then the singular causal statement ‘R causes A’ (read: ‘token R causes token A’) is true. Does this mean that R and A are logically independent of each other and hence that the statement in question is not analytical? According to Davidson it does not. Consider the singular causal statement ‘E* causes E**’ mentioned above. If we describe E* as ‘the cause of E**’ and E** as ‘E**’, we obtain the causal statement ‘the cause of E** causes E**’. The latter statement is analytical, but it still is an impeccably causal statement (Davidson 1963, 14). Similarly, ‘(token) R causes (token) A’ may be analytical, but that does not deprive the statement of its causal character; it is still about genuine causes and genuine effects. As Davidson says:

"The truth of a causal statement depends on what events are described; its status as analytic or synthetic depends on how the events are described." (Davidson 1963, 14).

45 But Davidson continues: "And even this is not enough; a man’s motives for acting in a certain way may cause him to act in that way without it [Davidson has "it’s" - JP] being the case that those were the reasons for performing the act. Thus a man might want to break a pot, and believe that by stamping on the floor he will cause to break the pot. The belief and desire cause him to stamp, but the stamping has no direct bearing on the pot. However, the noise makes a bystander utter an oath which so offends the agent that he swings around, accidentally knocking over and breaking the pot." (Davidson 1976, 264). Hence in order to explain A, R must, as Davidson would say, follow the right causal route. (For other examples of cases in which R fails to follow the right causal route, see Davidson 1973a, 78-79 and Davidson 1987, 39.) The problem of wayward causal chains has caused a lot of troubles, which, I think, can all be circumvented by the extensional approach that I describe in Chapter IX.
Secondly, the truth of the causal statement ‘(token) R causes (token) A’ implies that there exists a causal law which says that all events of a certain type (including event R) cause events of a certain other type (including event A). However, it does not imply that single events of the former type are described in the law as ‘R’ nor that single events of the latter type are described as ‘A’. In other words, it is not implied that the law reads: ‘For all persons x, if x wants to take the cube root of 729 and believes that by punching the seven, two, nine and cube root buttons, the cube root of 729 will appear, then x will press the seven, the two, the nine and the cube root buttons on her calculator’. For the law the existence of which is implied by a singular causal statement need not be written in the same terms. In Davidson’s words (recall that ‘rationalizations’ is Davidson’s term for ‘reason explanations’ or ‘action explanations’):

"The laws whose existence is required if reasons are causes of actions do not, we may be sure, deal in the concepts in which rationalizations must deal." (Davidson 1963, 17).

The conclusion will, I hope, be clear: it is perfectly reasonable to say that a particular reason R causes a particular action A, and thus that A is causally explained (in the broad sense). Also, it is reasonable to state that this explanation in the broad sense indicates that a causal law exists. However, any causal law that connects R with A must describe R and A not in mental but in neurological, chemical, or other physicalistic terms. For in Davidson’s view, a psychophysical law (connecting mental events with physical events) or a psychological law (connecting mental events with each other) can only be a law if it is in fact a physical law (although usually we do not know which law). This presupposes that the mental terms involved can be translated into physical terms, and such a translation is excluded by P3, the principle of the anomalism of the mental. Hence a causal or bridging law between reasons and actions cannot exist, whereby a strict explanation of actions qua actions is impossible. A can be broadly explained by R, but a strict explanation of A qua action does not exist.

Clearly, the crux of Davidson’s argument consists in the claim that, since mental and physical idioms have "disparate commitments", mental terms resist translation into a physical vocabulary (Davidson 1970c, 222). But what is the ground for this claim? Why should it be impossible in
principle to translate? How do we know that the mental is anomalous _per se_? Davidson’s main argument for the anomalous character of the mental is that it follows from Quine’s thesis of the indeterminacy of translation (cf. Davidson 1970c, 222, footnote 14). Unfortunately, however, Davidson never explained how exactly his argument is supposed to run. The criticism has already been made by Dagfinn Føllesdal. "As long as the argument has not been spelled out", Føllesdal writes, "it is hard to evaluate it" (Føllesdal 1980, 238; but see also the footnote to Section 3.2.2 of the present chapter).

3.5 Summary and conclusion

We have seen that Davidson takes an intermediate position between the LCA-advocates and, as I called them, the classical causalists. Davidson’s sympathy for the LCA is seen from his defense of the following two claims that I have extracted from his work:

1. action explanations do not rely on a natural regularity;
2. reasons and actions are logically connected.

His proclivity for a causalistic position becomes clear from his subscription to the claims 3 and 4:

3. action explanations are causal explanations, and causal explanations do rely on an empirical law;
4. reasons are to actions as causes are to effects, and causes and effects indeed are logically independent of each other.

In the present chapter I have explained how Davidson talks these four seemingly contradictory claims into a coherent framework.

Davidson starts by introducing a distinction of which neither the classical causalists nor the champions of the LCA take much notice, viz. the distinction between events and actions on the one hand, and their descriptions on the other. This distinction, that I have called DISTINCTION 1, implies that events _qua_ events and actions _qua_ actions can be described in many different ways. It thus leads directly to the identity thesis, which says that two or more different descriptions might refer to the same action. The identity thesis is the reverse of the nonidentity thesis, which is defended
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by classical causalists like Goldman.

DISTINCTION 1 might suggest that events *qua* events and actions *qua* actions are ontological categories, and thus that the distinction between actions and events has an ontological bearing. However, that is not what Davidson wishes to say. According to Davidson, the seemingly ontological distinction between actions and events is in fact a semantical one. It is a distinction between two vocabularies, viz. a mental and a physical one. A necessary condition for calling something an event is that it has a physical description, and a necessary condition for calling something an action is that it is described in mental terms. This semantical distinction between actions and events I have labeled DISTINCTION 2.

On the basis of DISTINCTION 1 and 2 Davidson constructs a theory of actions and events in which the differences as well as the similarities between the two categories are accounted for. This theory is Davidson’s anomalous monism; it postulates an ontological identity of tokens between actions and events. Anomalous monism implies that, on an ontological level, actions and events are fully identical to each other. On a semantical level, however, there is anything but identity. To be sure, the logical form of action sentences is the same as that of event sentences (cf. Section 1 and Section 3.1.1). Yet action sentences can never be translated into sentences about events, because mental terms cannot possibly be translated into physical ones. The latter conclusion follows from P3, the principle of the anomalism of the mental. P3 denies the existence of any psychophysical causal law, and hence of any psychophysical bridging law, in which mental terms are translated into physical ones. In its turn, P3 is assumed to follow from Quine’s indeterminacy thesis (but see Section 3.2.2).

Anomalous monism has its repercussions for the explanation of actions and events. In Davidson’s view, both actions and events are causally explained. However, Davidson argues, most philosophers failed to recognise that causality is essentially dual: it has an ontological and a semantical side. The ontological side is revealed in explanations by means of singular causal statements. I have called this explaining in the broad sense: it is the most primitive way of giving an explanation. The semantical side reveals itself in strict explanations. Strict explanations are based on a law, in this case a causal law, and laws exist by virtue of their formulations.

Actions as well as events can be explained by an appeal to singular causal statements. The statement consists of physical terms in the event case, and of mental terms in the action case. In both cases, singular causal
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Three noteworthy distinctions statements indicate the existence of causal laws. However, when the entity explained is an action, then the causal law can never be formulated. For by definition laws are physical laws, and it is impossible to translate mental terms into physical ones.

Now I can make clear how the contradiction in the four Davidsonian claims is merely apparent. As I see it, the inconsistency disappears once we realise that the word ‘explanation’ is used in two senses. The first two claims, 1\textsuperscript{dav} and 2\textsuperscript{dav}, are about explanation in the broad sense. Underlying these claims is the idea that actions and reasons are stated in mental terms which make up a singular causal statement and which, moreover, bear a certain logical relation to each other. On the other hand, 3\textsuperscript{dav} and 4\textsuperscript{dav} are about explanation in the strict sense. The background of these claims is that every causal explanation, broad or not, indicates the existence of a causal law, which by definition is couched in physical terms. The four claims look inconsistent because an entire argument is tacitly assumed. The conclusion of this argument is that in the case of actions the causal law can never be spelled out, since first, laws are couched in physical terms, second, actions and reasons require mental descriptions, and third, mental terms can never be translated into physical terms.

4. Problems

In this section I mention some problems to which Davidson’s position gives rise. One of them is the problem of akrasia. In 4.2 I explain how exactly this problem follows from Davidson’s view, and in Chapter VI I explain how Davidson tries to cope with it. Chapter VI is part of Part Three, which also contains my own attempt to tackle the problem. But first, in 4.1, I briefly summarise a few other problems which arise from Davidson’s position. To those problems I shall not try to find an answer.

4.1 Unsolved problems

When commenting on some of Davidson’s papers, Patrick Suppes does not particularly mince matters. "Nothing is proved in detail", Suppes writes about the work of his former partner in mathematical decision theory. "The arguments are not complete. ... I miss in his arguments and analysis the
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formulation of problems and issues he cannot solve." (Suppes 1985, 183-184). In the present section I list five problems and issues which, I suspect, Davidson will find hard to solve. As already noted, I restrict myself to a mere enumeration: I will not go into details and shall not try to find solutions.

1. It is not always clear what exactly Davidson means by ‘physical’ when he talks about a psychophysical law. Is the latter a law that links mental events such as beliefs and desires with actions? Or is it a law that links beliefs and desires with events on a neurological level? In other words, is the physical domain in this case a set of macro events or of micro events?

2. The second difficulty concerns Davidson’s usage of the indeterminacy thesis in order to prove that mental terms are not translatable into physical ones. As I explained in the footnote to 3.2.2, this operation starts from an error. Davidson, however, has put forward another reason for the supposed intranslatability of the mental idiom: see problem 3.

3. One of the reasons that mental events cannot be reduced to physical events (although they do coincide on an ontological level) is the assumed normative character of mental concepts (Davidson 1970c, 223; Davidson 1985c, 246; Davidson 1987, 46). As fas as these normative demands are concerned, mental concepts are on a par with moral concepts (Davidson 1970c, 214). It is generally accepted that moral terms cannot be reduced to descriptive terms, not even if the events denoted by the former are identical to the events described by the latter. The reason is that moral terms are charged with normativity, so to speak. Obviously, the normative character of moral concepts differs from the way in which mental concepts are said to be normative. The former normativity touches the difference between virtues and vices whereas the latter has to do with ..., indeed, with what? Davidson does not tell us, although he does give some hints. Normativity of the mental involves "rough standards of consistency and correctness"; it is "a primitive aspect of rationality" (Davidson 1987, 46-47). Davidson restricts this kind of normativity to the mental domain, in much the same way as the normativity presupposed by the difference between virtues and vices is restricted to the moral realm. However, this restriction does not prevent him from comparing the mental normativity to the normativity which is given by "the theory of measurement for length or mass, or Tarski’s theory of truth" (Davidson 1976, 273). In each case the motto is "that we must strain to fit our findings, or our interpretations, to preserve the theory. If length is not transitive, what does it mean to use a
number to measure a length at all? We could find or invent an answer, but unless or until we do we must strive to interpret ‘longer than’ so that it comes out transitive. Similarly for ‘preferred to.’” (Davidson 1976, 273).

4. It is not quite clear whether or not Davidson regards mental events as dispositions. Sometimes Davidson regards mental events as "states" (as in Davidson 1973a, 63); elsewhere he declares that states are not events (although he also says that "the onslaught" of a state is an event - Davidson 1963, 12). Sometimes a reason, and thus a mental event, is referred to as "a disposition to act under specified conditions" (Davidson 1987, 40; cf. Davidson 1985c, 211). But elsewhere he writes: "These logical features of ... reasons show that it is not just lack of ingenuity that keeps us from defining them as dispositions" (Davidson 1963, 15). The father of the idea that reasons are dispositions, Gilbert Ryle, sharply separates dispositions from episodes: "beliefs and desires signify dispositions, not episodes" (Ryle 1949, 112). But Davidson carefreely speaks about desires and beliefs as episodes (Davidson 1973a, 63). I do not know whether this difficulty is real, or whether it results from the fact that Davidson changed his mind (cf. the final paragraph of Section 3.1.1).

5. According to Davidson, a mental term cannot be translated into a physical term. On the other hand, Davidson also holds that reasons (after all described by mental terms) do cause actions, although the causal relation can only exist between physically described entities. As we have seen, Davidson tries to solve this seeming contradiction by assuming that there are physical descriptions under which the reasons in question cause the actions. But in my opinion, this assumption only makes sense if we can translate, however tentatively, mental terms into physical ones. The same difficulty has been noticed by Evnine 1991, 161-162, and Hornsby 1980-1981 and Hornsby 1985.

In addition to these five problems, there exists the problem of mental causation (how can mental events qua mental events have causal power?), and the related problem of wayward causal chains (how do we know that a particular instance of mental causation followed the right causal route?). I think that these two problems, which were mentioned before, will not turn up in the approach to the akrasia problem which I shall propose in Chapter IX.
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4.2 Akrasia

The aim of Part II, I recall, was to show that the ancient *akrasia* problem re-enters contemporary philosophy through the modern debate on action explanation. Three positions dominate this debate. The first is the Hempelian stand, which implies that action explanations are like causal explanations, although reasons are not causes (Chapter II). The second position basically is the LCA; it holds that, since reasons are not causes, action explanations cannot possibly be causal explanations (Chapter III). The contours of the third, Davidsonian, position have been outlined in the present chapter. It says that action explanations do differ from causal ones, although reasons are causes.

I have explained in Chapter III how both the first and the second position run into the problem of *akrasia* (see Chapter III, Section 6). What remains to be shown is how Davidson too bumps into the problem.

In Section 3.4.3 of the present chapter we have seen that a reason *R* explains an action *A* if and only if *R* meets two conditions: the propositional expressions of *R* and *A* must be deductively related (condition *C1*), and *R* must be the cause of *A* (*C2*). We have also seen why Davidson, contrary to the LCA-adherents, thinks that *C1* is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for *R* to explain *A*. This is partly because Davidson wants to account for akratic actions. According to Davidson, time and again people fail to perform an action, although they have a (according to the LCA sufficient) reason for performing it that satisfies *C1*. Or conversely, they do perform the action that the reason suggests, but they do it either by accident or for an entirely different reason. In order to make these cases of akratic behaviour understandable, Davidson demands that *R* can only explain *A* if *R* also is a cause of *A*, i.e. if *R* also meets *C2*. 

Ironically enough, it is via *C2* that Davidson stumbles upon the *akrasia* problem. For *C2* renders the occurrence of akratic actions unintelligible. If reasons cause actions, then how can one not act in accordance with one’s reason? This can only happen if something occurs that *disturbs* the reason’s causal power. However, this disturbing factor needs to be described. Within Davidson’s conceptual framework, two ways

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46 The fourth position, that of the classical causalists, I do not call dominating. It is not as important for my argument as are the three other positions.
are open to us. Either we describe the disturbing event in physical terms, or
we introduce it under a mental description. In the first case, the event is a
physical event, and then the phenomenon effected by it cannot be called an
action any more. For in Davidson’s view actions are brought about by
reasons, and reasons are mental, not physical events. If, on the other hand,
we take the second way and describe the disturbing factor in mental terms,
then it becomes a mental event. In that case, the phenomenon caused by it
is an action, but not one of the akratic kind. For it was caused by a mental
event to which it is, see condition C1, deductively related.

It is in particular Davidson’s work that caused a philosophical
revival of the akrasia problem. For Davidson became well aware of the fact
that his ideas on action explanation make it difficult to understand how
akratic actions can occur. Consequently, he tried to settle the akrasia
problem in a way that will be explained in Chapter VI. There we shall see
that Davidson’s attempt to deal with this problem is accompanied by a shift
in the meaning of ‘reason’ and ‘intention’: the two concepts will no longer
be taken as synonyms (as they were in Chapter III, Section 1).