Reasons, Causes and Motives

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This paper will be an attempt to demistify Anscombe's ontology, and will revolve around three concepts: reasons, causes and motives. I will first try to give precise definitions of each based on Anscombe's Intention as well as how they are related, and then give the definition of an intentional action by only using these established concepts. Finally, I will explain Davidson's concept of primary reasons and compare them with Anscombe's reasons for action.

The main problem will revolve around trying to find a good criterion of a reason for acting, which will remain unclear until we establish the other three concepts. None of these concepts will depend upon mental events, but only refer to physical events happening in the world. The fundamental tool will be the question "Why?", directed to agents, and their verbal answer, by also taking the situation into account, will most of the time reveal what we are dealing with. Since Anscombe sees expressions of intention as predictions justified by reasons for acting, once we figure out what is meant by this "Why?", we will also figure out what reasons for acting are; and once we figure out which actions give application to this question, we also will have figured out what intentional actions are.

Causes are going to operate in a way such that they can be known by the agent without observation, as well as be recognized by observers. We will call the specific type of causation that can only be known without observation: a mental cause. If an agent is asked what things produced and led to an action of his, such as the things he heard, seen or felt, or the ideas and images that were present in his mind, the answer will give us the mental cause of an action. The answer could refer to a mental state but can also be an object or an event in the physical world: "I heard a scream and it made me jump". It's crucial that the agent does not look at the world to find the cause but knows the cause 'automatically' without observation for it to qualify as a mental cause. The answer to the question "Why?" by the agent, will most of the time not give us that mental cause. When the agent is asked "Why did you stand up?", and the answer is: "In order to open

the door", it is not a mental cause since it mentions some event in the future. But if the agent absurdly utters: "I heard a knock and felt the desire to open the door", it will be an expression of a mental cause, since he will be mentioning a desire that led up to the action, which he came to know without any kind of observation. One might explain their action as if they consciously experienced a desire to do something and then acted on it, but most of the time that intermediate step will be absent from their conscious experience as well as their answer to the question "Why did you do that?". It's certainly possible to modify "Why?" such that it asks for the mental cause, but the answer will not qualify as a reason for acting, but simply be an expression of mental causation.

Anscombe's motives, as opposed to its popular-sense meaning, do not cause or determine or lead up to actions of any kind. Motives have nothing to do with mental causes in any way, although it might sometimes be tricky to distinguish one from the other. There will be three types of motives, the first being the interpretive motive. When the agent gives an interpretive motive, he explains his own actions and puts that action in a certain light. "I am cooking because my father also cooks, and I admire my father" would be such an example. The agent's answer to the question "Why?", gives us a new and different interpretation of his cooking. Anscombe sees interpretive motives as answers that give application to the question "Why?" in its relevant sense, which are therefore reasons for acting, and cooking in this case is an intentional action of the agent, justified by that reason for acting. The second type of motive will be the forward-looking motive, which in Anscombe's ontology will be equivalent to intention. If the answer to the question "Why?" is answered with a description of future state of affairs, it is a forward-looking motive. They always give a reason for acting and cannot be confused with mental causes, since by definition mental causes must be descriptions of things that lead up to the action being questioned.

Backward-looking motives are the final and the trickiest type, since they can very easily be confused with mental causes. When the question "Why?" is directed to the agent and the answer is the mention of an event that has happened in the past and that event is given as the ground for what he did, we are most likely dealing with a backward-looking motive. But Anscombe binds the concept to an additional criterion that must be satisfied. What the agent refers to in the past, he must *think* of it to be something good

or bad, and he must also find his own action as doing either good or harm. "I wrote her paper for her because she paid for my drink last night" would imply that the agent found the event of his drink getting paid by her to be something good, and in return wrote her paper with the motive of gratitude, where he also sees his writing as an act of good. Examples could be extended to cases of revenge, pity and remorse where we have the agent thinking of certain events and actions to be good or bad and therefore conceives his reason for acting as something good or bad, which according to Anscombe, is sufficient to show that the question "Why?" is given application in the relevant sense. This means the presence of a backward-looking motive will imply that there is a reason for acting but detecting these motives might be tricky.

Distinguishing mental causes from motives where we also have reasons for acting is hard, and most of the time analyzing the agent's verbal response to "Why?" will not be enough on its own. On one end of the spectrum we have examples such as writing the girl's essay out of gratitude, a reason for acting which is conceived as being either good or bad; and on the other end we have examples such as the scream making you jump, cases of instant mental causation. The hard problem lies in the ambiguous cases in the middle, such as the teacher telling you to shut up when you are chatting with your friend in class and you shutting up. It first looks as if it is like the scream, a mental cause you know without observation that makes you jump, implying that there is no reason for your shutting up. But if some random guy on the street told you to shut up, you probably wouldn't instantly shut up. So one would assume that you have a reason for shutting up: that you find it embarrassing to get rebuked by your teacher in class and you want to further avoid that uncomfortable feeling (future-looking motive) or that you believe a teacher is someone you should respect (interpretive motive) or that your teacher gave your paper an A so you commit that act of good towards her out of gratitude (backward-looking motive).

Anscombe's belief is that to determine if there is a reason or a cause, one should keep on asking questions that are linked to his intentions or motives such as "Did you shut up just because she gave you an A?". If the agent's reply is "Of course not! It was simply out of respect" and we assume he is not lying to save his charisma, the agent's original answer: "Because she told me to shut up" will take its place among reasons. But if we

keep pushing on and his replies are not going anywhere meaningful, we might conclude that the teacher's warning was simply a mental cause on the same level as some random scream making you jump. This is a weird account since the agent's shutting up might have been due to simple mental causation, but after thinking about that event he might have made himself believe that it was due to his showing respect and answer our question in that manner. The agent wouldn't be lying with the intention of lying, but simply giving us a false account of what happened at that point in time. Since it is a fact that we attach various kinds of motives to our actions *after* we take them, which were not present during or before that action, to turn them into coherent stories, this method will be unreliable most of the time, but is probably the best we can do. This observation I believe aligns with Anscombe's claim that reason and causes are not sharply distinct notions in every case.

Now we have the building blocks, an intentional action is very easy to define using them. First, it must be an event in the agent's history, and the agent should know about it not just through observation but must also have non-observational knowledge of it. Second, it must give application to the question "Why?" in the relevant sense. It will be rejected if the answer is a cause (as well as a mental cause) and will be accepted if the answer is any of the three motives we have covered, assuming we can classify the answers into these categories correctly. One can further define voluntary and involuntary actions using these concepts, but they are not needed to draw a line between mental causes and reasons.

Davidson's primary reasons are constructed out of having some sort of pro-attitude towards actions of a certain kind and believing that the action you take is of that kind. Primary actions are also the causes of actions. At first glance it looks like they are a generalization over Anscombe's backward-looking motives, but instead of good and bad, we have *kinds.* Once the agent has a pro-attitude towards actions that show gratitude, if he *believes* that writing the girl's paper is of that kind, it will form a primary reason and be the cause of his writing her paper. The difference is that we have no clue how that pro-attitude came to be, whereas Anscombe's motives usually refer to how events in the past or the future are conceived in order to give reasons for acting. Also, a major point made by Anscombe is that motives cannot be causes, and the question

"Why?" in the relevant sense is rejected once the agent's answer describes a mental cause. Davidson's primary reasons are causes themselves, which gives a completely different account of action. The final difference, which is my favorite, is that Davidson's definitions refer to the presence and types of mental states, but Anscombe only refers to physical happenings taking place in the world and the verbal answers given by agents.