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## Davidson, Reasons, and Causes: A Plea for a Little Bit More Empathy

Karsten R. Stueber

In this essay, I will suggest ways of improving on Davidson's conception of the explanatory autonomy of folk psychological explanations. For that purpose, I will appeal to insights from the recent theory of mind debate emphasizing the centrality of various forms of empathy for our understanding of another person's mindedness. While I will argue that we need to abandon Davidson's position of anomalous monism, I will also show that my account is fully compatible with Davidson's non-reductive and interpretationist account of meaning and mental content. Indeed, my account does more justice to the empathic capacities underlying our interpretive capacities, which Davidson himself has to acknowledge in thinking about the constitutive features of thought and meaning. More specifically, I will propose a new way of philosophically safeguarding the causal-explanatory autonomy of our ordinary action explanations by showing how our empathic capacities are involved in epistemically delineating the domain of rational agency.

### *Special Issue:*

Donald Davidson: Looking Back, Looking Forward

Edited by Claudine Verheggen

# Davidson, Reasons, and Causes: A Plea for a Little Bit More Empathy

Karsten R. Stueber

## 1. Introduction

A century after his birth, Donald Davidson's position as a classical author within the history of analytic philosophy is assured, since his philosophical interventions within the context of 20th century philosophy have had a tremendous and lasting impact in shaping the philosophical discussion in a variety of domains. Davidson's status however does not merely derive from the fact that his interventions in various areas of philosophy of mind and philosophy of language are particularly insightful contributions to specialized debates accessible only to a few philosophical "experts." Rather, it derives from the fact that his answers to questions such as whether reasons can be causes or how we should conceive of the form of a theory of meaning are systematically grounded—or, more precisely, developed into being so grounded during his writing career—within a comprehensive analysis of the nature of thought, meaning, and rational agency. Accordingly, Davidson supports his distinctive claims by showing them to be part of an incredible philosophical "package deal," supposedly allowing us to accept the constraints of a scientific and physicalist metaphysics, while rejecting the explanatory absolutism of the physical sciences and conceiving of the domain of rational agency as an autonomous realm of causal efficacy.

This paper will suggest ways of improving on Davidson's conception of the causal explanatory autonomy of ordinary folk-psychological explanations of an agent's action in terms of his or her reasons. It is motivated by the conviction that Davidson's position of anomalous monism, even though it does not conceive

of mental properties—contrary to widespread opinion—merely as epiphenomenal properties, fails ultimately to properly situate our folk-psychological practice of explaining each other's behavior vis-à-vis the other physical and biological sciences. In order to better illuminate the autonomy of folk psychology we need to circumscribe its explanatory domain more precisely within a broader conception of mindedness that will make use of insights from the recent theory of mind debate emphasizing the centrality of various forms of empathy for our grasp of another person's mindedness. Most importantly, I will argue that the above suggestions are fully compatible with Davidson's overall non-reductive account of meaning and mental content. They are best understood as pointing to epistemic capacities of grasping some form of mindedness in other people that Davidson himself at least implicitly acknowledges in his account of radical interpretation and triangulation.

This essay will argue for the above claims in three short sections. In the first section, I will briefly analyze Davidson's position of anomalous monism and articulate the central reasons for regarding it as deficient in explicating the causal character of our ordinary action explanations. I will then elucidate Davidson's conception of meaning and thought—more specifically what I regard as three distinct stages of Davidson's development in thinking about these issues—by situating it within the context of the contemporary theory of mind debate. In thinking about the nature of meaning Davidson increasingly acknowledges at least implicitly the central involvement of our empathic capacities (what I have myself referred to as basic and reenactive empathy; see [Stueber 2006](#)) for understanding other agents, their thoughts and their utterances. At the same time, Davidson remained throughout his career ultimately committed to conceiving of our capacity for understanding rational agency in analogy to knowledge of a theory or in analogy to constructing a theory of a certain kind. For that very reason he could not sufficiently utilize his "insights" in thinking about the causal-explanatory

autonomy of our ordinary folk-psychological practice of explaining a person's actions. In the last section, I will attempt to suggest a new way of philosophically safeguarding the explanatory autonomy of our ordinary action explanations by showing how our empathic capacities are involved in epistemically delineating the domain of rational agency. My suggestions are not only compatible with Davidson's account of thought and meaning. They are also in line with some of Davidson's difficult to understand remarks in his 1976 article critiquing Hempel's conception of the nature of action explanations.

## 2. Anomalous Monism and its Discontent

As is well known, Davidson conceives of the conceptual framework of propositional attitude psychology (which I will also refer to as the conceptual framework of folk psychology) as being irreducible to the conceptual framework of the physical sciences. Mental and physical predicates, as Davidson expresses it, are not "made for one another" (Davidson 1970, 218) and cannot be combined in the formulation of strict exceptionless laws, since the application of mental predicates proceeds holistically and is, in contrast to physical predicates, constitutively guided by normative principles of rationality. Davidson ultimately justifies these claims with the help of his analysis of radical interpretation, that is, within the context of a position commonly referred to as interpretationism (Child 1994) according to which the constitutive principles guiding the attribution of certain predicates and properties to an entity are also thought of as revealing the constitutive aspects of the properties themselves.<sup>1</sup> Mental content therefore

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<sup>1</sup>Without doubt all of these claims have been extensively and controversially discussed within the literature. It also has to be admitted that Davidson is frustratingly ambiguous about how exactly he understands the constitutive role of rationality. For my understanding of the rationality assumption see Stueber (2006, chaps. 1–2). For the purpose of the argument, I take it for granted that folk psychology is indeed constitutively guided by some conception of rationality.

supervenes only broadly on the physical realm (and not narrowly on a person's internal states), since in attributing propositional content to a person we take into account the specific manner in which he or she is causally integrated within the external environment. Accordingly, and given the fact that intentional agency is defined as behavior that is caused by beliefs and desires, mental concepts have an "irreducibly causal character" (Davidson 1995, 121, 1991, 216–17) that makes them unsuitable for integration with the physical sciences. In the end, folk-psychological accounts of human behavior have to be understood as serving unique explanatory interests, which are very different from the explanatory interests of physics. Only in the folk-psychological context can we grasp the behavior of an agent as a rational response to his environment in order to "see for ourselves what it is about the action that appealed to the agent" (Davidson 1991, 216). Davidson acknowledges that other special sciences such as biology also depend on causal concepts that cannot be used to articulate strict exceptionless laws and that cannot easily be integrated with physics. Nevertheless, he regards the framework of propositional attitude psychology to be special because it alone has features that indicate an in-principle irreducibility. Additionally, Davidson argues that the explanatory interests of understanding rational agency are non-negotiable and ineliminable since they are linked to a conceptual dimension, which is constitutive for our being able to distinguish between an objective and a merely subjective conception of a shared world (Davidson 1991, 217–19). Unlike Lynne Rudder Baker, he does not argue for the uniqueness of the explanatory interest of folk psychology or propositional attitude psychology because he conceives of it as being tied to a "commonsense conception of reality" that is necessary for human flourishing and that needs to be distinguished from a scientific conception of reality (Baker 1999, 14). Rather, the folk-psychological framework is revealed as a precondition for a scientific conception of the world, since it is the framework that allows us to question and adjudicate claims about the

objective truth value of theories articulated within the various sciences. No wonder then that Davidson declares propositional attitude psychology “not to be in competition with any natural science” (Davidson 1995, 134).

Notice that accepting Davidson’s interpretationist conception of meaning and mental content (and his argument for the non-reducibility of the mental) does not require adherence to any specific account of mental causation nor does it require any specific account of causation. Indeed, it is perfectly compatible with the adoption of a non-causal teleological conception of folk-psychological explanations that some philosophers in recent years have begun to resurrect. In my opinion, Davidson is however correct in insisting that beliefs and desires can only be understood as a person’s reasons for acting if they are also conceived of as the causes of his actions (Davidson 1963). Under that assumption, the question of the autonomous status of the causal explanatory character of folk-psychological explanations becomes central, since even if such explanations do not compete with other scientific explanations in regard to being scientific, they do come into potential conflict with them in regard to being causal explanations. According to Jaegwon Kim’s causal explanatory exclusion argument, if the physical realm is given ontological priority and one assumes that the physical realm is causally closed, then one has to wonder whether an appeal to mental properties adds to our understanding of the causal structure of the world (see Kim 2005). Granted that we can reveal ourselves as rational agents only in light of our beliefs and desires, it would seem as if the physical would do all the causal work and that the mental merely adds a bit of humanistic embellishment without adding any causal “oomph” qua mental.

Davidson attempts to answer these questions ingeniously in developing his position of anomalous monism, a position that he outlined in a series of articles already in the first half of the 1970s and that he basically adhered to throughout his career (see Davidson 1980a). According to it, strict laws can be articulated

only if events are classified in terms of physical terminology but not when they are described with the help of mental terminology. Despite the fact that for Davidson the existence of causal relations between events implies the existence of strict laws in some terminology, he can nevertheless maintain that mental events are causes because he views mental and physical events to be token-identical. With our mental terms we refer to the same events that we describe physically in a manner that allows us to formulate strict laws, that is, we can thus refer to events that are causes even in using mental terminology. Most importantly, Davidson distinguishes firmly between an extensional conception of causal relations among bare events and the intensional character of our describing and explaining those very same events. For the purpose of explanation, it is sufficient if they are backed up by non-strict generalizations epistemically justifying our expectations about what might happen under certain circumstances such that people normally do  $x$  if they think doing  $x$  allows them to achieve  $y$  and they want  $y$  and think of  $y$  as being valuable. Consequently, there is no reason to expect that events have only one causal explanation. Rather we choose the one that is pragmatically appropriate given our various explanatory interests: “In other words, there is a single ontology, but more than one way of describing and explaining the items in the ontology” (Davidson 1995, 121).

Davidson’s argument for conceiving of reasons as causes was generally well received and undoubtedly vanquished the philosophical appeal of the Wittgensteinian “little red books.” On the other hand, it is probably fair to say that his position of anomalous monism led to a lot of philosophical head scratching. It was felt that Davidson insufficiently accounted for the causal efficacy of the mental qua mental. Most often, as Davidson pointed out (in Heil and Mele 1993), the complaint was due to insufficiently recognizing the radical and purely extensional nature of his conception of causal relations. For Davidson, causal relations do not exist *in virtue* of any properties, physical or otherwise.

Rather, he tends towards a nominalist conception of properties according to which different conceptual frameworks associated with a variety of explanatory practices provide different ways of epistemically elucidating the causal web of the world. In this manner, Davidson saves the internal consistency of his position and has an effective response to the complaint that he views mental properties as having merely epiphenomenal status. Yet he pays a heavy price for it since his conception of properties having no role to play in constituting causal relations between events does not square with our scientific practices (see also [Hutto 1999](#)). We are not merely interested in causally explaining why a particular event occurs, answering questions such as why ulcers occur in a stomach, we are also interested in explaining why particular events cause others, such as why the presence of *Helicobacter pylori* bacteria can cause ulcers within the acid environment of the stomach ([Thagard 1999](#)). Davidson's anomalous monism should not be rejected because it (judged by its own standards) does not account for the causal efficacy of the mental. It is objectionable because its conception of causal explanation seems to be insufficiently backed up by our prevalent practices of causally explaining the world and violates Quine's admonition that philosophers should not speak from a cosmic exile position (see also [Stueber 2005](#)).

In addition to the above problem of mental causation, an equally puzzling problem needs to be addressed. In order to explicate the character of folk-psychological explanations we not only have to account for the causal efficacy of the mental qua mental, we also have to account for the causal efficacy of mental properties qua being reasons for which the agent acted. In ascribing beliefs, desires and other relevant mental attitudes to other agents in order to account for their behavior we do not merely describe inner causes that cause the agent to act in the manner in which an internal tickle causes us to sneeze. Rather we intend to describe considerations that from the perspective of the agent speak for the action and that cause him or her to

act insofar as he or she takes ownership of his or her actions in view of these considerations. Davidson famously illustrates the problem, commonly also referred to as the problem of deviant causation, through his example of a mountain climber, who somehow desires to alleviate the weight of a fellow climber, which dangerously pulls him down. As Davidson tells the story, while thinking about how to solve this problem and finding ways of satisfying his desire, the climber becomes so nervous that he lets the rope holding his fellow climber slip. We certainly would want to say that his belief and desire had a causal role making him let loose of the rope, yet they do not cause as considerations that speak for this action or constitute his reasons for acting ([Davidson 1973a](#), 79). Davidson diagnosed the problem as being due to an anomaly in the causal chain leading from the mental states to the outward action. Yet he despaired of ever solving the problem and suggested that we can understand an action as an intentional one—where the agent acted for reasons—only if beliefs and desires, which rationalize the action, *cause in the right way*.

The problem of deviant causation has in recent years become the central problem for the causal conception of folk-psychological reason explanations and its protracted existence led to a resurgence of positions arguing for a non-causal conception (see for example [D'Oro and Sandis 2013](#)). However, in some sense Davidson diagnoses the problem incorrectly in suggesting that it is due to an anomaly in the causal chain. The expression "causing in the right manner" suggests that it is in light of specific and local features of a pair of mental states (or of their realizing neuronal states) that we can account for what it means for mental states to cause an action as reasons rather than causing it merely qua being mental. Yet if mental states can be constitutively conceived of as reasons for acting only in light of their holistic integration with a person's other mental states (as I will argue in the last section) it is difficult to understand how their causing behavior in the right manner should be explicable



in terms of localized features. The last section will show that these problems can be avoided if one recognizes the essential epistemic involvement of our empathic capacities in our practice of providing reason explanations and one understands their role in situating the explanatory domain of folk psychology vis-à-vis the physical and biological domains. While this is certainly not the path that Davidson has travelled, it is a path which is fully compatible with his conception of the nature of thought and meaning.

### 3. Davidson's Progress in Thinking about Thought and Meaning and the Contemporary Theory of Mind Debate

For that purpose, it is useful to describe more precisely the development of Davidson's interpretationist conception of the nature of thought and meaning and to compare it to positions developed within the more empirically oriented and interdisciplinary theory of mind debate. Researchers in this debate are interested in describing the underlying psychological mechanisms of our ability to use the folk-psychological repertoire to understand other agents and to predict and explain their behavior, that is, predict and explain their behavior by ascribing propositional attitudes such as beliefs and desires to them. For simplicity's sake, and following common practice within the theory of mind debate, I will refer to the use of propositional attitude psychology as folk psychology. It should be noted that I use that term in a merely descriptive and in a non-pejorative manner. I also think that the use of our folk-psychological vocabulary is absolutely essential for making sense of rational agency not merely in everyday contexts but also in a variety of human and social sciences such as when historians construct a historical narrative or when anthropologists interpret the behavior of their chosen subject in doing

fieldwork.<sup>2</sup>

Originally, the theory of mind debate was conducted exclusively between so-called theory theorists, asserting that our theory of mind abilities are causally based on an implicit folk-psychological theory, and simulation theorists, who denied that very claim and suggested that understanding other minds depends on our ability to put ourselves imaginatively in another person's shoes and recreate, simulate or reenact their thoughts. While it is here not the place to analyze all the twists and turns of this debate,<sup>3</sup> it is important to mention one central development and insight. Not only have researchers been drawn to hybrid versions of social cognition that combine elements of both theories, they have also started to realize that our ability to properly use and acquire the conceptual repertoire of folk psychology depends on a developmentally earlier (and conceptually less developed or non-conceptual) sensitivity to the mindedness of others that allows us to become aware of the fact that others express emotional states, that their bodily movements are goal-directed (towards external objects) and that it allows us to engage in activities of joint attention.<sup>4</sup> Within the context of simulation

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<sup>2</sup>The last paragraph was prompted by a comment by an anonymous referee. Accordingly, my use of the term "folk psychology" does not imply analytically that folk psychology can never be transformed into a science (however one wants to understand that term). It is thus an open question whether a scientific psychology using the folk-psychological idiom can be constructed. Based on the argument articulated in the first section, Davidson would certainly deny this question, even if he would insist that ordinary folk-psychological explanations are causal explanations.

<sup>3</sup>In particular, I will not address the more recent and otherwise very important intervention of so-called narrativists and interactionists in this debate suggesting that both theory theory and simulation theory radically misconceive the nature of social cognition. See [Gallagher and Hutto \(2008\)](#).

<sup>4</sup>Some of these more primitive empathic abilities might also be realized on the neuronal level by so-called mirror neurons. This thesis is rather controversial within the literature. For a survey see [Stueber \(2012\)](#). For my purposes in this essay, the question of how these abilities are realized is of secondary importance.

theory, researchers have therefore also started to distinguish basic forms of empathy from cognitively more demanding forms of empathy requiring perspective taking, referred to as reenactive or reconstructive empathy (Stueber 2006; Goldman 2011). It is worth noticing that one certainly is able to combine recognition of the importance of a non-conceptual and developmentally early sensitivity to the mindedness of others with an insistence that the use of the conceptual framework of folk psychology depends on the use of an implicit theory. Indeed, this might be a way to understand Davidson's ultimate position, if one focuses mainly on how he explicitly characterizes it.

Prima facie, Davidson does not squarely fit within the empirically oriented theory of mind debate. Even though he covers some similar territory in trying to determine the principles that guide our attribution of propositional attitudes to others and even though he seems in the later part of his writings also to acknowledge a basic sensitivity to the mindedness of others, he is not primarily interested in the underlying psychological processes involved in the interpretive process. We have to keep in mind that Davidson prefers staying on a more conceptual level wanting to know "what it is about propositional thought—our beliefs, desires, intentions, and speech—that makes them intelligible to others" (Davidson 1995, 133). To a large extent, Davidson is best understood as providing philosophers with information about an "interpreter's interpretive abilities" (1995, 132) conceived of as abilities to epistemically justify the attribution of meaning and mental content in terms of non-circular and publicly accessible evidence.

Be that as it may, participants in the theory of mind debate have always attempted to situate Davidson within their discussion. I myself, for example, have extensively argued that Davidson's position is fully compatible with a simulation account of folk psychology (Stueber 2000, 2006). Alvin Goldman, a simulation theorist, and Shaun Nichols and Stephen Stich (theory theorists), on the other hand, view Davidson either as a repre-

sentative of a sui generis rationality approach or as a proponent of a form of theory theory that both simulation and theory theorists are happy to oppose (Goldman 1995, 2006; Nichols and Stich 2003, 142ff.). Ultimately, I stand by my interpretation. Yet I do acknowledge that Davidson's own explicit pronouncements seemingly favor a different interpretation since he often aligns himself with a theory theory perspective according to which understanding is best modeled as a theoretical activity, as the possession, construction, or the application of a theory (1980b, 1990b). He even claims at one point that decision theory "corresponds to our intuitions about how actual decisions are made, and so is part of our commonsense apparatus of explaining intentional behavior" (1997, 126).

To get a better grasp of this ambiguity in Davidson's writing, it is therefore important to note the development in Davidson's thinking about the role that a theory plays for an interpreter's ability to attribute thought and meaning. In contrast to his conception of how the mind causally interacts—a conception that was fully developed by the mid-1970s and stayed relatively static thereafter—his thinking about how to understand our interpretive capacities went through some significant changes. Focusing primarily on Davidson's conception of linguistic competence and linguistic meaning, we can schematically distinguish between three distinct phases emphasizing different aspects of the intelligibility of thought and meaning. In the first phase, Davidson tended to emphasize the formal aspect of a theory of meaning (covering a period from the mid-1960s and lasting till the early 1970s). The second phase, one could say, was dedicated to an analysis of the situation of radical interpretation and reflection on its epistemic consequences (starting from about 1973 onwards with the publication of his article on radical interpretation). In the last phase, Davidson was focused on arguing for triangulation as being constitutive for having thoughts (an idea mentioned in his 1982, but more fully developed in various articles from the late 1980s onwards).

In distinguishing between these phases, I do not want to imply that Davidson radically changed his mind about the nature of meaning in the manner that Putnam changed his mind about how to conceive of realism, for example. Rather, the phases are best understood as clarifications of and responses to objections emphasizing aspects in his original position that were left merely implicit. At the foundation of Davidson's thinking about linguistic competence—thought and meaning—has been the proposal to conceive of it in terms of an empirically adequate theory of meaning, knowledge of which would suffice for correctly interpreting all actual and potential utterances of a speaker.<sup>5</sup> First and foremost that meant that such a theory has to enable us to understand the compositional structure of a language by letting us grasp how simpler expressions contribute to the meaning of more complex ones. Accordingly, in the first phase, Davidson was preoccupied with defending the claim that a theory of meaning for a natural language is best understood as having the form of a Tarskian theory of truth in that it reveals a language's compositional structure by articulating how linguistic expressions contribute to the truth-conditions of sentences.

However, knowledge of such a formal theory of meaning alone is not sufficient for deciding whether or not its theorems also provide us with an empirically adequate interpretation of each sentence, that is, whether a sentence such as "snow is white" in a particular language should be interpreted as snow is white or coal is black, for example (see in this respect also [Stueber 1993](#)). The analysis of radical interpretation is understood as providing us with a philosophically satisfying and non-question-begging analysis of the publicly available evidence in light of which such interpretive questions can be epistemically justified. As Davidson's reflections on radical interpretation reveal, the attribution of meaning and mental content proceeds in an *externalist* manner,

<sup>5</sup>See for example [Davidson \(1977, 215\)](#). In choosing his words carefully in this context, Davidson stays neutral regarding the question whether such a theory describes real psychological structures.

by situating a speaker causally within his or her environment, and it proceeds *holistically*, since we can determine the content of one belief only in the context of determining the content of the speaker's other beliefs. Moreover, it advances under the global guidance of the *principle of charity* in that we can attribute a set of beliefs to a speaker only if they satisfy some norms of rationality and only if they include a certain number of true beliefs among them. Given his interpretationist framework, Davidson declares that "holism, externalism, and the normative feature of the mental stand or fall together" ([1995, 122](#)).

Nothing so far however suggests that the idea of a solitary speaker of a language (who never interacts with another linguistically competent speaker) is conceptually impossible. Davidson's analysis of radical interpretation has therefore most often been understood as suggesting that speakers can have a language and persons can have propositional attitudes if and only if they are in principle interpretable from a third person perspective in light of publicly available evidence as described above.<sup>6</sup> Interpretability however does not imply that a linguistically competent person or an agent with propositional attitudes needs to have concretely communicated with another person. Certainly, the claim that such interaction is necessary and constitutive for having a thought is compatible with Davidson's analysis of radical interpretation but it would require additional argument to support this stronger claim. It is exactly in this respect that Davidson strengthens his understanding of externalism in his third phase and moves from a causal-historical form of externalism (requiring that the speaker needs to have causally interacted with the world in order to have thoughts about it) to a triangular version of externalism (see particularly his [1982, 1990a](#),

<sup>6</sup>See for example [Stueber \(1993\)](#). [Myers and Verheggen \(2016\)](#) and [Verheggen \(2017\)](#) vigorously object to the standard view and conceive of Davidson's conception of triangulation as being more intimately tied to his conception of radical interpretation (or what I have referred to as the second phase in his understanding of thought and meaning).



1991 and 1997). In order for a person to have thoughts with propositional content, Davidson now argues, a triangular interaction between that person and another one with objects in the environment has to take place. More specifically, within such a triangular relation two persons respond or react to objects in their environment while being mutually aware of their reactions and being able to correlate the other person's reactions with their responses and attitudes toward those very same objects. Davidson claims that without such triangulation the object of one's thought would be completely indeterminate as it would not be clear what aspect of the environment persons are responding to and whether they respond to distal or to proximal causes (such as stimulation of one's retina). Davidson acknowledges that we do share with animals some primitive forms of triangulation in that animals show forms of social responding to features of their environments. Yet such primitive triangulation does not suggest the existence of propositional attitudes in animals. Accordingly, primitive triangulation constitutes merely a necessary but not sufficient condition for speaking a language. As Davidson expresses it, triangulation constitutes the space within which language and thought (and with it the concepts of truth and error, objectivity and subjectivity) can emerge (see particularly 1997, 128ff.).

Looking at Davidson's development retrospectively, one could describe it as constituting a shift of emphasis, that is, as focusing less on the centrality of a theory of truth as a theory of meaning for our thinking about the nature of thought and meaning and concentrating more on analyzing how we evaluate its empirical adequacy for a specific language and describing what processes are necessary for maintaining the triangular framework constitutive for thinking about truth, meaning and mind in the first place. Unfortunately, the later Davidson never explicitly acknowledges that knowledge of a theory of meaning can never be on its own sufficient for a philosophical account of what linguistic competence consists in. Throughout his career Davidson remains

ultimately beholden to the view that it is in light of a theory as the product of the interpretive process that we have to analyze linguistic understanding while not sufficiently paying attention to processes necessary for constructing those theories.

This statement is particularly true as far as the second phase of his development is concerned. Take for example Davidson's analysis of our understanding of deviant utterances and malapropisms like "a nice derangement of epitaphs," which we effortlessly grasp as being intended by the speaker to mean that there is a nice arrangement of epithets (Davidson 1986). For Davidson such understanding is possible because interpreters are able to adjust their interpretive expectations (a so-called "prior theory") and develop what Davidson calls a "passing theory" that assigns the intended interpretive truth-condition to the utterance. Yet to identify our interpretive understanding with the possession of a passing theory seems to leave it completely unexplained how exactly we should think about the shift from prior to passing theory. Such understanding seems to be centrally based on our ability to recognize the speaker's intentions and his reasons for making the utterance in certain contexts, an ability that requires grasping that there are no reasons for the speaker to be interpreted literally given the salient and relevant aspects of a situation. If we follow arguments articulated within the context of the theory of mind debate (Heal 2003; Stueber 2006) according to which it is implausible to assume that we possess a theory of relevance, such an ability seems to be based on what I call reenactive empathy and perspective taking, that is, we recognize that the speaker has no reason for intending to be understood literally, since we, placing ourselves in his position, could not imagine any such reasons. Similarly, as long as the principle of charity cannot be understood as an algorithmic procedure of interpretation, perspective taking and reenactive empathy should generally be understood as being essential for ascertaining which interpretive hypothesis can be regarded as plausible, as it is only in light of our reenactive capacities that

we grasp why it might be reasonable for a person to make a certain utterance or act in a certain manner in a specific context. Given Davidson's inclination to use the terminology of a theory of meaning for understanding linguistic competency, he however never fully and explicitly acknowledges the centrality of our empathic perspective taking abilities for our interpretive practices (Stueber 2000).<sup>7</sup>

As far as Davidson's argument for triangulation is concerned, the situation is a bit more nuanced. Here is not the place to evaluate the soundness of Davidson's argument for the claim that triangulation is constitutive for the existence of propositional thought, an argument that has been extensively and controversially discussed within the literature.<sup>8</sup> Personally I tend to be a bit skeptical about Davidson's triangulation claim suggesting that solitary thinkers constitute a conceptual impossibility, even

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<sup>7</sup>As an anonymous reviewer suggested, Davidson's reluctance in this respect might also be explained by the fact that the concept of empathy had not become as popular and widespread during his times as it nowadays is. As much as I like the principle of charity, in my opinion this line of thinking is a bit too charitable toward Davidson. Besides his inclination to think of linguistic competence as being related to a theory, I personally suspect another reason for Davidson's avoidance of the empathy concept. It is interesting to note that Quine explicitly appeals to empathy as the underlying psychological mechanism that sustains the radical translator, referring even to what "child psychologists tell us" (Quine 1995, 89). I would assume that Davidson was very much aware of the Quinean stance. Indeed, the fact that Quine explicitly appeals to empathy might have also counted as a strike against it from a Davidsonian perspective. As Baghramian (2016) explains persuasively, Quine refers to empathy in order to explain how it is possible to conceive of meaning as something that is intersubjectively accessible even if it is grounded in proximal neural stimulation. Accordingly, Quine appeals to empathy in the context of an overall empiricist and Cartesian conception of meaning and knowledge that Davidson rejects. Be that as it may, it needs to be pointed out that even though empathy has been often associated with a Cartesian and non-externalist conception of the mind, such association is merely a historically contingent one (see also Stueber 2012).

<sup>8</sup>For an astute reconstruction and defense of Davidson's triangulation argument, in addition to a comprehensive and excellent discussion of the literature, see particularly Myers and Verheggen (2016).

if I would agree that understood as an empirical thesis such a claim is quite plausible. For my purposes it is more important to emphasize that in arguing for triangulation as being constitutive for thought, Davidson in fact argues for the epistemic centrality of certain psychological abilities allowing us to be sensitive to the mindedness of others in establishing a socially shared relationship to a common world. It needs to be admitted that Davidson only recognizes very specific aspects or a very narrow slice of such capacities, that is, in more contemporary terms, the capacity for joint attention and the fact that humans do share innate abilities that make us focus on and respond to similar aspects of the world and also recognize that we do so. Accordingly, Davidson acknowledges only those capacities that are minimally necessary for establishing triangular relations between two people and an object in the world.<sup>9</sup> One should therefore not expect Davidson to be interested in fully investigating for its own sake the rich psychological reality that characterizes a child's developmentally early capacity to relate to the mindedness of other people and to recognize their emotional expressions and the fact that their bodily movements express goal-directed activities towards objects in their environment.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>I would therefore disagree with Sinclair (2002) when he declares that Davidson was a naturalist because his view of interpretation not merely emerged from a priori considerations but by "paying close attention to our nature as biological creatures" (179). It seems to me that Davidson appeals to our biological and psychological nature only insofar as it served his conceptual argument. Moreover, Davidson provides a conceptual argument why complete knowledge of psychology, neuroscience and biology is in principle insufficient for knowing a person's propositional attitudes (Davidson 1973b).

<sup>10</sup>Compare however Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations* (1973), where Husserl articulates a triangulation argument very similar to Davidson's. In contrast to Davidson, Husserl recognizes the centrality of our empathic capacities. For a very interesting and promising attempt to strengthen Davidson's argument with the help of Husserl, see particularly O'Madagain (2015). For an empirical account of the "natural history of human thinking" stressing the importance of joint attention and shared intentionality see particularly Tomasello (2014) and Hobson (2004).

While researchers do not necessarily agree about the underlying neurobiological mechanisms of what I refer to as our capacities for basic empathy, there is widespread agreement that humans have them. More importantly, such basic forms of empathy are already at play in getting radical interpretation off the ground, since as Davidson himself acknowledges, we have to identify attitudes such as holding true in order to take another person's behavior within a certain environment as evidence for our interpretation (Davidson 1973b, 135). Davidson refers to such attitudes as "nonindividuating" and merely psychological in nature since they are not genuine propositional attitudes (1991, 211) characterized by conceptual *de dicto* content. They seem to indicate that the other person is oriented towards the world in a minded manner without allowing us to understand directly the conceptual framework within which he or she is thinking about the world. Attributing genuine *de dicto* intentionality to people, however, is possible only in light of the holistic framework that Davidson has described in his analysis of radical interpretation.

The holism of the mental is also the reason why Davidson is rather skeptical about a project of describing the emergence of thought from a naturalistic and evolutionary perspective (1997, 127).<sup>11</sup> It also should be regarded as the reason why we should not put too much hope in the project of trying to explicate the causal explanatory nature of reason explanations by attempting to characterize what it means for mental states to cause behavior in the right manner. Accordingly, I will suggest that we should abandon Davidson's orthodox stance of trying to account for the causal character of action explanations with the help of his posi-

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<sup>11</sup>For a constructive manner of addressing this problem see Hutto's radical enactivist account of accounting for the "natural origins of content" on the basis of mental states without any content. Hutto's project can indeed be understood as trying to constructively follow some of Davidson's remarks in his essay on the "The Emergence of Thought" (Davidson 1997). See Hutto and Satne (2015); Hutto and Myin (2017). In this essay, I will try to stay neutral in regard to the feasibility of Hutto's constructive project.

tion of anomalous monism. Nevertheless, we should not give up all hope of explicating the causal explanatory autonomy of folk psychological explanations within the framework of a holistic and non-reductive account of thought and content. Rather, we need to recognize more explicitly the epistemic involvement of reenactive empathy in interpreting other people with the help of the intentional idiom and we need to recognize the full range of our basic sensitivity toward the mindedness of other people (what I refer to as basic empathy) as it is revealed by the psychological sciences. In this manner, we can also make sense of some of Davidson's (for me initially cryptic) remarks when commenting on Hempel's account of rational action explanations.

#### 4. How Reasons Cause: Moving Beyond Orthodox Davidson

To that end, let us briefly review Hempel's account and Davidson's critique. For Hempel action explanations are best understood as having the following form (Hempel 1965, 471):

- 1.) *A* was in a situation of type *C*.
- 2.) *A* was a rational agent.
- 3.) (Schema R) In a situation of type *C*, any rational agent will do *x*.

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Therefore, *A* did *x*.

Furthermore, Hempel understands schema R as an empirical generalization and he understands rationality to be "a broadly dispositional trait," whose attribution is based on objective and empirical criteria of the behavior of the agent in certain situations. Moreover, schema R is best understood as a scheme that will be filled out with the help of folk-psychological generalizations such as that when a rational agent believes that *x* is a means to *y* and wants to get *y*, he or she, *ceteris paribus*, will do *x*.

For our purposes, three aspects of Davidson's critique are particularly relevant. First, for Davidson, the assumption of rationality does not have sufficient empirical content in order to back the explanatory character of reason explanations since rationality is already structurally built into our practice of attributing beliefs and desires to particular agents.<sup>12</sup> Belief/desire explanations do not work because we are told that a person has certain beliefs and desires and that he is also rational. Rather their explanatory force depends on the fact that we grasp a person's beliefs and desires as his or her reasons that cause his or her behavior and reveal him or her in this manner as a rational agent. For that very reason, Davidson also suggests that we regard belief/desire attributions as "satisfying and informative" not because of any grasp of the concept of rationality. Rather they allow us to situate such explanations within the context of our "general knowledge of how persistent various preferences and beliefs are apt to be, and what causes them to grow, alter and decay" (Davidson 1976, 274). Finally, Davidson emphasizes in his critique of Hempel the ideographic character of reason explanations. Reason explanations are geared toward accounting for the behavior of a unique individual in specific circumstances without implying that everybody who is rational and has specific beliefs and desires will act in the same manner. That is, a reason explanation of the action of President Ford "will tell us a lot about him, but almost nothing about people in general" (274).

Here is how I suggest we make sense of Davidson's remarks outside the framework of anomalous monism. To illustrate

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<sup>12</sup>Indeed, as various commentators have pointed out, Davidson seems to imply that psychological generalizations such as the *central action principle* that if somebody desires  $x$  and believes that  $A$ -ing is a means of achieving  $x$ , then *ceteris paribus* he will do  $A$  seem to have *a priori* status. If one requires explanations to be backed up by empirical law-like generalizations however, it is difficult to understand how folk-psychological accounts of action could be genuinely explanatory. For this discussion and various ways of resolving this issue, see Rosenberg (1985), Henderson (1993), and Stueber (2003).

Davidson's assertion that the rationality assumption does not ground the explanatory force of specific action explanations and that such explanations do have an ideographic character consider the following attempt to explain the action of a specific person. Let us assume that we are told that Peter, who lives in Massachusetts, went out into his garden at the end of the recent fall season because he wanted to count every single leaf that had fallen onto the ground. Moreover, compare it to an explanation according to which Peter went to the store because he wanted to buy ice cream. In both cases, we assume that Peter is a rational agent. Yet appealing to an abstract concept of rationality is of no help in understanding the difference in the explanatory force between these two explanations. Rather, in the second case, we do not have any problems accepting the causal explanatory character of the account because we just assume that Peter shares other relevant beliefs with us about the nature of stores and the value of eating ice-cream and so on. For that reason, we have no problem grasping that his desire for ice cream is a consideration that speaks for going to the store, since it would be a reason for us to go to the store in his situation. *Prima facie*, we are a bit skeptical about the causal explanatory character of the first account. From our perspective, the desire to count all the fallen leaves could not be understood as a reason—or at least as a good enough reason given that we have many other important things to do—for going into the yard. However, if we are told that Peter is a research biologist, who is interested in determining the effect of the massive gypsy moth infestation from the last spring on the health of the trees in Massachusetts, we can understand his desire as part of his reason for acting the way he does. Given that information about the set of Peter's relevant background beliefs, interests and values we could ourselves imagine acting in this manner if we were in his shoes. Accordingly, mental states can be understood to cause as reasons only if they are understood as being properly integrated with the relevant subset of a person's overall belief sets, normative commitments, preferences and so on, that is,

with what Anscombe refers to as a person's "desirability characteristics" (1957/2000, 72). Grasping another person's mental states as his or her reasons in this manner implies then an ability to decide which of his or her other states from a relatively vast set of mental states are relevant to consider in a specific context. Yet this is only possible, as I have extensively argued elsewhere, with the help of reenactive empathy (Stueber 2006, 2008), that is, with the help of our imaginative abilities reenacting the thoughts of another person.

Second, as Davidson also indicates in the quotation above, the fact that we find such explanations satisfactory has nothing to do with the assurance that there are strict laws formulated in the vocabulary of the most basic science that might describe the most general aspects of the physical world.<sup>13</sup> Rather it has to do with the fact that we think of mental dispositions such as beliefs and desires as revealing a very specific causal network. More specifically, the above considerations commit us to the claim that the cited mental states cause behavior if and only if they can also be grasped as reasons for acting with the help of reenactive empathy. Minimally that implies that Peter would not have behaved in that manner if he would not have had those cited beliefs and desires—at least those that we can also have grasped as his reasons for action—in the specific situation he finds himself in. The notion of causation that we presuppose in our ordinary folk-psychological explanation is therefore closer to the one that has been recently articulated by Woodward with his interventionist conception of causation. Very roughly described, according to the interventionist understanding a variable  $x$  is a cause of  $y$  if an intervention ( $I$ ) on  $x$ —that is, chang-

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<sup>13</sup>Davidson is certainly right to claim that no strict laws can be formulated with the help of the folk psychological idiom. Yet it is rather controversial to assume that the existence of causal relations implies the existence of strict laws since this assumption does not sit well with our ordinary belief that the special sciences expand our causal knowledge of the world without being able to formulate strict laws.

ing its value—makes a difference to the value of  $y$ . Accordingly, causal knowledge and causal explanations require implicit reference only to knowledge of "counterfactual dependencies" among properties of a system that allows us to answer "what-if-things-had-been-different-questions" (Woodward and Hitchcock 2003, 4). Such knowledge does not require reference to strict laws but only reference to what Woodward calls invariant generalizations. Significantly, and in contrast to strict laws, the scope of such invariant generalizations is restricted to a specific domain of application, whose constitutive features are not included in the formulations of invariant generalizations since knowledge of such features does not increase the explanatory force of a specific explanation. Folk-psychological explanations, for example, apply only to agents whose brain is functioning normally. Yet to be told that the brain is functioning normally does not add to explaining his action in terms of his reasons for acting. Being told that his brain does not function well tells us only that we cannot expect such an explanatory strategy to apply any longer and that we should look for alternatives.<sup>14</sup> Given such an inter-

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<sup>14</sup>For our purposes the technical details are less important. More technically, an intervention  $I$  is understood in terms of an idealized experimental setup making sure that there is no other relevant causal pathway from  $I$  to  $y$  and all the other variables in a relevant variable set  $V$  are held fixed. Philosophers are divided on the question whether a change in a mental variable should count as an intervention in the technical sense since it cannot control for and hold steady the variables that constitute the physical supervenience base for mental properties. They are thus divided over the question of whether an interventionist understanding of causation can on its own meet the challenge of Kim's causal explanatory exclusion argument (see particularly List and Menzies 2009; Woodward 2015; Baumgartner 2018). Yet, within this context one also does not sufficiently recognize that explanations in the physical sciences and folk-psychological explanation do not compete with each other. They generally do not try to explain the same phenomena or aspects of the same phenomena. As far as I am concerned, folk-psychological explanations explain behavior that is situated in larger social, historical and cultural context and that is also characterized in this manner, as the signing of a mortgage, declaring war, breaking a promise and so on. Mental states with propositional content do not supervene narrowly on physical states but only very broadly and holistically, that



ventionist understanding of causation, a lot speaks *prima facie* for the ordinary assumption that mental states do indeed have causal powers. Changing the value of mental states does seem to change the behavior of people. Just imagine telling somebody that the food that he is about to eat is poisoned and changing his belief about it in this manner. Similarly if we told Peter that it was already scientifically proven that gypsy moth infestation does not affect the production of leaves, we would expect that he would not count the leaves in his yard.

Even if these considerations show how essential our capacity of reenactive empathy is for understanding the causal explanatory character of folk-psychological explanations, I do not think that they suffice to address the problem of deviant causation. *Prima facie*, Davidson's example of the mountain climber illustrating deviant causation appears to be similar to our example of Peter wanting to count the fallen leaves in the garden. Davidson ascribes to the climber the desire "to rid himself of the weight and danger of holding another man on a rope" and the knowledge/belief "that by loosening his hold on the rope he could rid himself of the weight and danger" (1973a, 79). Clearly such beliefs and desires—unless the situation is very extreme and no alternative that is more compatible with our valuing another person's life is available—do not seem to provide good enough reasons for getting rid of one's fellow climber. As a first answer to address the question of deviant causation we might therefore want to say that a person's beliefs and desires cause behavior as reasons only if we can understand them as reasons when provided with more information about the climber's other mental states and about other relevant aspects of the situation and when we are able to integrate them suitably into his larger set of mental states.

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is, they do not supervene on physical properties that the physical sciences realistically conceive of as causal properties, as properties that they within their experimental contexts manipulate and intervene (Baker 1999; Stueber 2005). *A fortiori* this debate does not address the central question of how mental states cause as reasons.

Yet even if the climber's mental states are integrated in a way that they could be grasped as potential reasons for his action, they still could cause the action in a wayward manner, because all of these considerations could still make him nervous so that he lets the rope slip out of his hand. The question to be asked however is whether such cases have to philosophically worry us and cause us to lose sleep over attempts to find necessary and sufficient conditions for beliefs and desires causing behavior in the right way. After all, it is no coincidence that such cases of deviant causation appeal to psychological conditions of nervousness.<sup>15</sup> They appeal to psychological conditions that tend to be expressed in facial expressions, tone of voice, bodily attitudes such as fidgetiness, that is, states of mindedness that we are sensitive to as part of our basic empathic capacities and that are revealed in the manner that we bodily interact with the world and each other. Most importantly, they are indicative of the fact that skilled, controlled, and goal-directed bodily movement should be regarded as a further constitutive aspect of the domain in which we regard folk-psychological application to be properly applicable. The causal-explanatory power of mental explanations is therefore not merely in doubt if we are unable to reenact them as thoughts that could be reasons for acting. They are also seriously in doubt when we try to apply them under conditions that seem to indicate a breakdown of skilled and controlled bodily movements. To explain the action of a novice bike rider in terms of his reasons—that he turned left because he wanted to, for example—probably does not reveal the real cause for his turning left, if he is rather unsteady on his bike. Most importantly, this fact is obvious to all of us looking at his attempts to control the bike (see also Stueber 2013).

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<sup>15</sup>In the literature two types of causal deviance are distinguished: cases in which deviance in the causal pathway happens due to events external to an agent's body, and cases in which deviance happens due to events internal to his or her body. I am focusing only on the second type of cases. Cases of the first type are generally regarded to be not as problematic for causal theory of action. See Bishop (1989, chaps. 4–5) and Enç (2004, chap. 4).

From a practical point of view, we have thus all the means necessary to ascertain the causal explanatory power of folk psychological explanations, means that involve both capacities of basic and reenactive empathy allowing us to determine whether we are within the proper explanatory domain of folk psychology, that is whether we are within the domain of rational agency. Cases of deviant causation tend to be cases in which we are in doubt about whether those preconditions are fulfilled. As argued in the last section, Davidson himself seems to (at least implicitly) acknowledge those capacities for recognizing the folk psychological domain in his argument for triangular externalism as a constitutive feature of meaning and thought. Yet, throughout his career Davidson remained committed to the doctrine of anomalous monism and to thinking about the relation between the mental and the physical in rather general terms, as the mental somehow supervening on a relatively unspecified realm of the physical and mental events being supposedly token-identical to physical ones. Certainly, I do not deny that the explanatory framework of propositional attitude psychology, in which we think of mental states as indicating the reasons for which somebody acted, supervenes on the physical. But as an explanatory framework it is applicable only to a very specific subsection of the physical, that is, the realm of skilled and controlled bodily movement within which we understand another person's thoughts as reasons through empathic uptake.<sup>16</sup> It is a realm that Davidson himself has to acknowledge if he thinks of triangulation as being constitutive for thought and meaning. My

<sup>16</sup>I, however, do not deny that the psychological and neurobiological sciences can provide us with further information about the structure of the domain of rational agency, that is the conditions under which folk-psychological explanations properly apply. Assuming that severe depression neutralizes the powers of one's reasons, we could say that understanding the neurobiological basis of depression tells us also something important about the domain of rational agency. But as I have argued elsewhere, I very much doubt that neuroscientific knowledge will completely replace our explanatory practice of folk psychology (Stueber 2005, 2006).

suggestions of how to account for the causal explanatory character of folk-psychological explanations are therefore not only compatible with Davidson's thoughts on meaning and mind. They also allow us to situate the causal explanatory character of folk psychology more appropriately than Davidson's position of anomalous monism.

**Karsten R. Stueber**  
College of the Holy Cross  
kstueber@holycross.edu

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