Explanation-by-norms

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Abstract:

Philosophers' search for the best way to explain human actions has led many to accept a core psychological model that can be supplemented by other forms of action explanation when needed. Rather than settling for this model – where everything ultimately hinges on psychological explanation – this paper argues for a pluralistic view. It does not claim that the psychological view is wrong, only that it is not as universally applicable as it is often taken to be. Explanation-by-norms is suggested as an important form of explanation in its own right. It explains actions by revealing how they conform to norms and patterns and become intelligible in light of them. Explanation-by-norms is shown to be especially salient in the case of slips.

> "I have now been in fifty-seven states."
> Barack Obama at a campaign rally in Beaverton, Oregon.

> "No head injury is too trivial to be ignored."
> 'A verbal illusion', P. Wason & S. Reich.

> "A genius is a guy like Norman Einstein."
> J. Theisman, Washington Redskins Quarterback,
> after being asked whether coach J. Gibbs was a genius.

Introduction

People sometimes say and do puzzling things, as the above quotes reveal. In such cases, it can be hard to explain what is going through the agents' minds; nonetheless, it is easy to make sense of their performance: one understands what the agents were trying to say or do. Obama should have said forty-seven states. Doctors generally advise that head injuries should *not* be ignored, however trivial they seem. Theisman should have said "Albert", not "Norman". The pattern is the same: a person makes a mistake; why the person made precisely *this* mistake is not known; yet one makes sense of the behavior.

A common philosophical view holds that *explanations for actions* ultimately reduce to *accounts of mental states*, typically by citing an agent's beliefs and desires (i.e. that actions ultimately

are explained *in terms of* mental states). However, not all action explanations can be reduced in this way. In the case of *slips*, like the three examples above, one understands what agents do – not by reference to what was going through their minds at the time, but by reference to the norms that apply in the context of the situation. In light of those norms, one grasps what the agent *should* have done and understands her behavior as an approximation to that. That is, one explains such actions by invoking the norms that would make the agent's performance intelligible, had she acted properly given her culture and physical situation.

Section 1 explores a common way of explaining actions, highlighting Michael Smith's account. Section 2 introduces slips by discussing examples, showing how they differ from other sorts of traditional mistakes. Section 3 introduces explanation-by-norms as contrasted with Smith's account. Section 4 discusses five possible objections. The concluding section claims that not all fundamental action explanation is a psychological explanation, or supplement a psychological explanation – as slips reveal. Psychological explanation and explanation-by-norms can well co-exist, but the former cannot supersede the latter.

1. The primacy claim

In philosophy of action, it is common to argue that human behavior is explainable in terms of an agent's psychological states.[1] One understands the movements of the agent in light of her mental states. For example, one might explain why Ella went to the refrigerator to get a glass of milk in terms of her desire for a glass of milk and her belief that the refrigerator was a good place to find it. Donald Davidson famously called such explanations *rationalizations*. By citing the beliefs and desires of the agent, one explains the action: that is, one reveals whatever valuable or otherwise positive outcome the agent saw in performing it (see Davidson, 2001: 3).[2]

According to many philosophers, this kind of explanation is not just common but *ubiquitous*. Even though actions are sometimes explained, say, in terms of the agent's feelings at the time, plans[3], habits[4], etc., such explanations only work as explanations insofar as they presuppose some Davidsonian rationalization. Michael Smith (1998: 17-18) makes the claim explicit:

> Philosophy of action begins with the claim that it is always possible to construct a Humean, belief/desire, explanation of action. The idea is that once we see the central place occupied by Humean belief/desire explanations, we see that all the other explanations we give simply supplement this basic Humean story.

Two claims are worth distinguishing here. First, there is a claim about *possibility*: for every action, one can always construct an appropriate belief/desire explanation. Second, there is a claim about *primacy*: whatever other explanation holds true of an action, that explanation is less fundamental than the belief/desire explanation.

One can interpret the possibility claim in two ways. Some see belief/desire explanation merely as a "useful fiction" (e.g., Dennett, 1987). On this view, the possibility claim is purely instrumental:

i.e., it is always possible to construct a belief/desire explanation, *true or not*. According to the alternate view, it is always possible to construct a *true* belief/desire explanation.

I do not dispute either version of the possibility claim. Given sufficient creativity, it seems possible to come up with belief/desire reconstructions of actions in every instance: a true account on the one view, a useful fiction on the other. Either might be correct. It is the primacy claim I wish to question: the idea that whatever other explanation holds true of a given action, the belief/desire explanation is and must be the foundational one.

The idea behind the primacy claim can perhaps best be illustrated with Smith´s discussion of an example originally presented by Rosalind Hursthouse (1991). Hursthouse discusses a husband who, in an expression of grief, rolls around in his dead wife's clothes. According to Hursthouse, the widower's action lacks the possibility of a Davidsonian rationalization. The grief explains his behavior, but he does not act with a *desire* to express his grief. Smith objects, arguing that – on the Davidsonian interpretation – the man need not have such a desire for his behavior to be rationalized. All he needs is an appropriate set of beliefs and desires that *make it true* that he was acting out of grief (Smith 1998: 22):

> The man is doing what he is doing because he desires to roll around in his dead wife's clothes and believes that he can do so by doing just what he is doing: that is, by rolling around in those particular clothes that he is rolling around in.

For Smith, the mention of grief is explanatory to the extent that it supplements this more basic explanation: i.e., the grief helps explain the husband's behavior by placing his desire to roll around in his dead wife's clothes into an emotional context.

According to Smith, this pattern of explanation and dependence is ubiquitous. It applies not only to cases in which someone's actions are explained in terms of her emotions but also to those explained by her commitment to certain values or her capacity for self-control. In such cases, one need not assume that she acts as she does because she wants to express that commitment or display self-control. One simply assumes that she acts from certain beliefs and desires: ones that make sense for her to have, given her commitments or her self-control.

An important motivation for the primacy claim is that it provides the core for a simple theory of action. If true, it offers a unified account of actions in terms of how they are to be explained: i.e., an action is a behavior explainable at base in terms of beliefs and desires. This minimal explanation can then be supplemented by other forms of action explanation like e.g. expression of emotion. Indeed, Smith argues that the only way in which philosophy of action can succeed is by finding such a unified account.

Recent years have seen psychological explanations along these lines subjected to much criticism. Some have even questioned whether desires are necessary for action explanation at all (e.g., Platts, 1979; Dancy, 2002). The worry is that such explanations cannot really explicate what it is for an agent to act for a reason (Stoutland, 2007) and unduly leave the agent out of the picture

(Hornsby, 2004). My more modest concern is that this way of explaining actions is not as universally appropriate as the primacy claim suggests. In my own treatment of action explanation, I appeal to the phenomenon of slips. I must first describe what they are though before I can show why they pose a challenge to the primacy claim.

2. Slips

Mistakes are a pervasive fact of life; they come in many forms, under many guises. Yet philosophers' focus has generally been narrow.[5] Most attention has been on cases in which the mistake ultimately can be traced to the agent's ignorance of some state of affairs relevant to her action.

Consider Davidson's discussion of a man who mistakenly boards a plane heading to London, Ontario. The man is ignorant of the plane's destination; he intends to go to London, England and falsely believes that the plane marked "London" is crossing the Atlantic (Davidson, 2001: 84-85). It is easy to see how the primacy claim applies. To explain why he boarded the plane marked "London", an appeal is made to his ignorance. The problem is that such explanations only work to the extent that an agent has certain false beliefs, combined with desires that prompt her to act.

Not all mistakes fit this mold. Consider Obama's verbal slip in Oregon: "I have now been in fifty-seven states". Unlike the case of the man boarding the wrong plane, Obama's mistake cannot be explained in terms of ignorance.[6] One can safely assume that, as a US presidential candidate, he knows how many states there are in the Union. Had he been asked, he would have offered the correct answer. Similar reasoning applies to the doctor's verbal illusion (Wason & Reich, 1979). Her seeming advice that head injuries ought to be ignored is clearly not due to lack of medical or linguistic information. As a competent speaker of the language, she knows that the pattern <*no* NOUN *is too small to* VERB> is equivalent to <*All* NOUN*s, however small, should* VERB>, as in "no occasion is too small to warrant a gift" implies "all occasions, however small, warrant a gift." On reflection, she knows that the phrase "no head injury is too trivial to be ignored" implies that all head injuries, however small, should be ignored.

Slips and so-called *verbal illusions* are mistakes that occur in performing an action. The agent acts on an intention; she does something other than what she intends; her action does not reflect what she knows or thinks she knows (Amaya, 2013; Amaya and Doris, 2014). Slips are spontaneous: they cannot be traced to an error in prior deliberation. They tend to be puzzling: the agent normally does not know why she made them. They are typically surprising[7]: the agent expects herself to perform correctly.

Not all slips are verbal. One also finds the non-linguistic equivalent of verbal illusions. Suppose one takes the usual left turn heading home, instead of turning right to the supermarket as planned. Or, consider the person who, having traveled from Norway to the US, acts under the illusion that it is 8 pm when it is (according to local time) 2 pm. She knows her plane took off at

noon; she knows the flight was approximately eight hours; she knows about the time difference. Yet, upon arrival, she runs to make her 8 pm connection.

Mistakes due to ignorance aside, slips differ from other kinds of error commonly discussed in the action-theoretic literature: e.g., those involving akrasia and self-deception.[8] Akratic episodes need not surprise the agent. A dieter breaking her diet by eating a piece of chocolate cake likely knows and accepts that she acts against her better judgment. Episodes of self-deception likewise are often not spontaneous. The mother who refuses to believe that her son is guilty of murder must spend time and effort to deceive herself. Slips, on the other hand, happen on the spur of the moment.[9] The agent is unaware that she will commit an error prior to committing it; if something makes her aware that she is about to slip up, she corrects her behavior. This is why Amaya suggests that slips "have a quick and easy "cure"" (Amaya, 2013: 564).

3. Explanation-by-norms

This section lays out the explanation-by-norms of the three cases which feature in the epigraph. The aim is not only to introduce explanation-by-norms, but also to demonstrate that slip-cases are not reducible to belief/desire explanations. Moreover, the notion of explanation-by-norms is shown to be available in cases of ordinary actions.

Rather than explaining by means of beliefs and desires, explanation-by-norms exploits the knowledge people have of what they are supposed to do to explain what they actually do. Confronted with a slip, one's attention is not on the internal factors that led to it. One rather considers how to make the error intelligible in light of the concrete situation: both its factual and normative background. That normative background builds on assumptions about social roles, social class, career plans, and community beliefs; patterns of speech and gesture; prejudices concerning gender, age, occupation, life phases (child, youth, young adult, middle-aged, pensioner), etc. Norm here is used in an intentionally broadened sense, picking out not the moral dimension of action, but rather the social expectations for any given situation. Every human action is performed in a specific cultural context, which makes culture key to understanding behavior – just as every utterance must be judged against a linguistic background. I take this as a charitable and, indeed, obligatory strategy. To wit, knowledge of psychological states alone will not make slips intelligible, because agents who slip up do something other than what their psychological states would indicate.[10]

Explanation-by-norms looks beyond what an agent desires in the moment of action and her instrumental beliefs on how to achieve it. Instead, it explains action in light of norms, along with the facts (however interpreted) and patterns of thought and behavior informing those norms. This is of considerable advantage for explaining slips: the behavior becomes intelligible without any need to go into details of the psychological machinery giving rise to it: a job that may be left to the psychologists, psychiatrists – and, perhaps, linguists. The philosopher can explain the slip just as well without them, as can the agent herself and those around her, as they coordinate their ongoing actions with each other.

To see how this works in practice, consider Obama's (Obama, 2008) statement in full:

> It is just wonderful to be back in Oregon and over the last fifteen months we have travelled to every corner of the United States. I have now been in fifty-seven states. I think one left to go. One left to go – Alaska and Hawaii, I was not allowed to go to even though I really wanted to visit, but my staff would not justify it (Beaverton, Oregon, 9 May 2008).[11]

Some (e.g., Sorensen 2011: 404) hypothesize that Obama reasoned as follows. He first thought about the Union having fifty states. Because his staff did not allow him to visit Alaska and Hawaii, he subtracted them. Finding himself in Oregon, he subtracted it as well and concluded that he had visited forty-seven states. After months of intense campaigning, he was exhausted. When he opened his mouth, his previous utterance of "fifteen months" primed him to say "fifty-seven states".

The explanation seems logical. Yet, on reflection, it leaves loose ends. Why did Obama claim, after saying "fifty-seven states," that he had only "one left to go"? Did he, in addition to his verbal slip, make an arithmetic mistake? Was he thinking of Oregon as the one state he had left? The utterance "fifteen months" might indeed have primed him to say "fifty-seven", but so, too, might the thought of fifty states. Which was the "real" primer?

Such questions are hard if not impossible to answer. At the same time, not knowing what went through Obama's mind causes no difficulty to everyday life. Understanding his performance requires only to characterize it as a mistake and then appeal to the facts and norms of the situation. One explains the action by showing how the actual behavior approximated what would have been the most relevant and appropriate thing to say under the circumstances.

Consider how this works in more detail. In talking of fifty-seven states, Obama failed to represent basic facts correctly. Everyone (or nearly everyone) knew he made a mistake. That there are fifty states (and have been since 1959, though that is less often remembered) is a fact drilled into every American child in school. As an educated man of seemingly above-average intelligence – surely competent in basic arithmetic – and a successful campaigner, he acted neither from ignorance nor stupidity. His clarity on other occasions reveals this as an isolated incident, a classic slip. Yet, for all that it *was* a mistake, his performance came close (on some metric) to being correct. Imagine Obama saying not "fifty-seven" but "two" or "one hundred and one". *That* would have been exceptionally puzzling and give his audience genuine cause for concern.[12]

An explanation-by-norms such as I propose does not take the form of a Davidsonian rationalization. With Obama's remarks as with countless similar cases, one may as well give up making sense of the action in light of what the agent believed or desired at that point in time – except insofar as these offer clues as to what the agent actually intended. One understands the agent's action against the background of norms, associated facts, and patterns of thought and behavior presumed to be known and held in common by all observers. What might otherwise be puzzling becomes instead a cause to chuckle.

Now consider the doctor who says that "no head injury is too trivial to be ignored". Linguists agree that grammatical awareness diminishes under conditions of syntactic complexity, as clearly apply here.[13] The noun phrase "no head injury" – the object which functions as the theme of "ignore" – does not appear in the usual position for a direct object: *cf.,* "we ignored the head injury". The sentence is somehow in the passive voice, but it's not a standard passive-voice construction, either: *cf.,* "the head injury is ignored by us". It effectively contains three negatives: one explicit (the negative quantifier "no") and two implicit ("to be ignored": i.e., take no notice; and "too trivial": i.e., not serious). Part of the difficulty is that it is superficially similar to sentences like "no missile is too small to be banned" (i.e., "all missiles, however small, should be banned"), giving the false impression that it operates in the same manner.

Such linguistic intricacies are hard for most people to follow. Fortunately, in everyday life, one need not give them too much thought, and one can understand what the doctor is saying. After all, doctors are meant to *help* people (that is the norm that doctors are expected to act in accordance with), and "everybody knows" that head injuries are generally not to be ignored. The doctor surely cannot mean what the linguistic pedant claims her to say – and one can safely conclude that without relying on any complex analysis of sentence structure or the doctor's mental state.

These examples and countless others like them show just how common normative action explanations are in everyday life. They are especially salient where psychological explanations are beyond easy reach. Sometimes, as with Obama's slip, one lacks the information to provide a proper psychological explanation. Other times, as with the doctor's verbal illusion, the psychological story is too complicated to follow in detail.

Why did Theisman say "*Norman* Einstein"? Given the common stereotype of football players as intellectually challenged, one might plausibly think he believed "Norman" to be Einstein's first name; his mistake was one of ignorance. However, when questioned by journalists, he claimed he knew the correct name all along. If so, why did he slip? One can suppose that he wanted to mention an intelligent person. In an interview with *Sports Illustrated*, he said he actually went to school with a clever student named Norman Einstein (Hallinan, 2009: 29-31). Possibly Theisman was referring to him – and not his more famous namesake. Likely Theisman made an honest mistake, a slip of the tongue, given the stressful setting of TV cameras and aggressive journalists.

In Theisman's case, it is easy to provide psychological explanations; it is only hard to tell which one is correct – assuming there even *is* one single, correct account (there need not be). At the same time, and even though it is difficult to know what Theisman thought or knew when he said what his audience took to be the wrong name, what he meant is easily understood: namely, the concept of genius does not apply to football. He invoked an epitome of genius.[14] Theisman may have failed to refer correctly (or maybe he *did* refer correctly to *Norman*?), but context makes clear what he meant. What he said was sufficiently close to (what his audience judged to be) the "correct" answer for it to be understood. Like Obama and the hapless doctor, Theisman probably made an honest mistake: a slip.

Explanation-by-norms is particularly useful in the case of slips because, in these cases, one often does not know the agent's beliefs and desires – but one *does* know the norms that govern the situation and so can appeal to them for explanation; the difference between belief/desire explanation and explanation-by-norms becomes especially clear. This does not mean that these are the *only* cases amenable to explanation-by-norms. Explanation-by-norms plausibly applies in normal, everyday action explanation as well. Consider a man running towards a bus stop.

What is he doing? He is probably trying to catch a bus. How does one know this? Well, people running toward bus stops, from experience, are generally doing just that. Explanation-by-norms works by interpreting an agent's behavior in terms of what is normally and normatively expected. When approaching the idea of explanation-by-norms it is helpful to think about actions as social patterns, i.e. instances of how a culture behaves and operates. Consider what John Rawls called "the basic structure:"[15] the arrangement of all the basic institutions of society (the political constitution, the legal system, the economy, the family, and so on). Rawls saw the basic structure as the location of justice. It makes sense as well to see the basic structure as a source of action explanation. The rules of any basic structure will be such that agents within the structure act according to them. Thus, their actions can be explained considering those rules.[16] Roughly, this is what normative action explanation is all about. People act according to the ground rules that shape the society they live in. These rules contain the fundamental terms of social cooperation. They shape the social conditions within which people live their lives and their actions are understandable in light of them.

The common, psychological, view on action explanation is compelling. The claim put forth here is not that it is wrong, only that it is not as universally applicable as it is often taken to be. Sometimes the best explanations are psychological as in Dancy's example of "the crumbling cliff": It can be the case that S's reason for acting is S's genuine belief that the cliff is crumbling. This belief *per se* is S's reason not to climb it. What S does is not dependent on whether the belief is true or false, S's reason would remain even though S were to recognize that the cliff is *not* crumbling (S would simply continue to treat it as if it were). (Dancy, 2002: 124).[17] In this case the most reasonable action explanation is psychological. Other times, for example with slips, the most reasonable explanation is normative. However, I foresee five possible objections to my account.

Objections
The psychologistic objection

One might argue that explanation-by-norms *presupposes* psychology. After all, I seem to allow that one relies on psychological assumptions to make an action intelligible: Obama knew and knows how to do proper arithmetic, and he meant to act according to this knowledge. Explanation-by-norms traces back to the agent's mind and what is in it.

Explanation-by-norms does presuppose that the agent generally acts rationally and in light of norms. Specifically, one assumes that the agent wants to act in accordance with the norms that govern the situation she is in, respond relevantly to facts, and so on. However, although it makes

reference to such matters, explanation-by-norms is not explanation *by virtue* of anything "inside" the agent. It does not deny that the "inside" is there; but it proceeds by revealing how an action conforms to norms in relation to facts and to patterns of behavior – not how it expresses an agent's psychology in general or her beliefs and desires in particular. Explanation-by-norms underscores how action always takes place within a normative setting. If this were not so, observers would have no expectations regarding what is going on – and no way of understanding it, either. Precisely *because* actions take place against a normative backdrop, observers have a stock of knowledge about them – at least, insofar as they partake in the culture defined by the norms. In fact, a psychologistic explanation presupposes an explanation by norms, rather than the other way around – for how else, other than by recourse to the norms and facts of the situation, can one know that Obama surely meant to say forty-seven? This paper, however, does not argue for the primacy of explanation-by-norms.

To clarify, the problem with slips, when it comes to psychologistic explanation of action, is the complexity of the situation. To know exactly why somebody did what they did when they did something they did not mean to do is an exhausting endeavor. Any number of factors may be involved. Yet, we do understand automatically what the agent did as an *approximation* of what ought to have been done in the given situation given facts and normative context. Thus, we can explain it *as* a slip through explanation-by-norms. Something that is not open to the belief/desire theorist because an action *cannot* be an *approximation to a belief/desire-pair*, that just means you have the wrong belief/desire-pair.

The belief/desire theorist could of course object that this does not prove that there does not conceivably exist a psychological explanation of the action, and the belief/desire theorist would be correct in this. There does exist a psychological explanation of slips, even if complex. But just as actions are psychological phenomena, they are sociological ones as well, and the action can be explained as such, through a recourse to norms and facts.

Slips are not actions

The belief/desire model is meant to explain intentional action, but performing a slip is doing something one does not intend. Slips seem to fall outside the scope of what the belief/desire model seeks to explain.

Admittedly, slips *per se* are not intentional, any more than any other isolated mistakes. That does not mean however that the performance as a whole is not intentional. Slips are thoroughly intertwined with intentional action: though they themselves are (clearly) not intended, they occur within a sequence of behavior that is. While one has diminished control over them, *some* sense of control remains, particularly within the larger context. Consider linguistic mistakes: the agent stays in control of her speech; she does not speak gibberish. In the case of verbal illusions, the agent intends – in some sense – to say the words she does; it is only that her words do not strictly reflect her intended meaning, knowledge, and competence.

The vacuity objection

One could argue that explanation-by-norms does not *explain* anything: it merely offers re-description. Even if that is true, explanation-by-norms finds good company with some of the most famous action theories around: e.g., Anscombe's and Davidson's. To be sure, re-description does not always aid explanation – but often enough it does. So e.g. the rising of an arm could, given the appropriate circumstances, be re-described as trying to catch a ball, signaling to a team player to pass the ball, preparing in case the ball comes one's way, etc.

However, though it has elements of re-description – it re-describes what an agent does as a mistake – explanation-by-norms amounts to more than this. It characterizes the erroneous performance as approximating to what the relevant norms prescribe, thereby placing it into the larger picture.

The scope objection

One could insist that belief/desire explanations are universally applicable but that some such explanations must be given in terms of a modified (or "shallow") belief. So e.g. Sorensen (2011) has suggested that Obama's slip could be explained by appeal to such a belief: Obama has no "deep" belief that there are fifty-seven states, but tiredness, perhaps along with other factors, makes him believe it in the moment.

This solution could work, but it seems *ad hoc*: one does not normally appeal to "shallow" beliefs for understanding actions. Supposing that the agent is acting on a "shallow" rather than "deep" belief – that she makes a mistake – is based on the normative constraints of the situation, thereby echoing explanation-by-norms. To conclude that an action was caused by a "shallow" belief, one must already have understood what the agent did as a mistake – making the appeal to "shallow" belief seemingly superfluous.

The primacy objection

I have argued that explanation-by-norms does not take the form of Davidsonian rationalization: i.e., explanation can be offered without attempting to make sense of the action in light of the agent's immediate beliefs and desires. The concern is that belief/desire explanations nevertheless remain fundamental; explanation-by-norms are parasitic on them.

To argue this, the defender of belief/desire primacy needs to show that the agent who is subject to explanation-by-norms has some relevant belief/desire pair that can plausibly be construed as the most fundamental explanation for her behavior. Mirroring Smith's reply to Hursthouse, this amounts to the claim that explanation-by-norms can always be reduced to belief/desire explanation – where, perhaps, the desire is to abide by the relevant norms, and the belief is that performing a certain action is the best means of doing so. Such a reduction is necessary to make sense of how the relevant norms are operative in the agent's behavior.

That claim notwithstanding, citing such belief/desire pairs does not suffice to explain slips. Whatever belief/desire explanation one produces must be supplemented by further factors

explaining the failure of the action to subserve the relevant desire: Obama was tired or nervous, the doctor's sentence was syntactically complex, etc. The belief/desire primacist can respond that this picture is consistent with thinking of belief/desire explanation as the most fundamental.

However, making that claim is tantamount to sweeping slips under the rug. The problem is that one misses a core aspect of explanation-by-norms. Its attention is not on the agent's psychology but on her actions. It explains those actions by placing them into context with relevant norms, related facts, and established patterns of behavior. Explanation-by-norms shifts the theoretical perspective from the psychological to the normative and the social. It takes no position on what is going on "inside" the agent – something that may, or may not, correctly be theorized through the belief/desire model.

Conclusion

Explanation-by-norms and belief/desire explanation are not incompatible; indeed, they can fruitfully be combined in various ways, as I have tried to point toward. My preferred view on action explanation is pluralistic. That said, I believe that the belief/desire model is not quite as important as often supposed, and belief/desire explanation far from universally applicable -- particularly in the case of slips.

Such pluralism is, of course, unacceptable to a theorist like Smith who thinks it crucial for the very possibility of having a philosophy of action that the account of action explanations be unified (Smith, 1998). Needless to say, I do not think that such a unified account can ever be provided – although, *pace* Smith, I do not take this to be in any way devastating for philosophy of action. Certainly, what happens when one acts can often if not usually be described by appeal to psychological states like beliefs and desires – but what happens can *equally well* be described by appeal to norms, interacting with habits, memories, plans, character traits, cultural traits, other patterns of thought and behavior, etc.[18]

Endnotes:

1. The origin of this view is normally attributed to David Hume, so it is sometimes called "the Humean story" (M. Smith, 1998). Probably the most famous contemporary source of the view is Donald Davidson's 1963 paper "Actions, Reasons and Causes", reprinted in his *Essays on Actions and Events* (2001).
2. J. E. Malpas (1992) offers an excellent introduction to Davidson's account.
3. See M. E. Bratman's (1987) theory of planning agency.
4. For an attempt at explaining actions in terms of habits see T. Lekan (2007) and B. Pollard (2006).
5. Exceptions include S. Amaya (2013), G. E. M. Anscombe (2000), J. L. Austin (1956-1957) and K. Peabody (2005).

6. At least, it seems farfetched to do so. That said, see the discussion on Sorensen's notion of *shallow beliefs* in the last part of the paper.

7. ...If noticed: many slips, including so-called *slips of the tongue*, go undetected.

8. See S. Amaya (2013) for a thorough treatment of the distinction between slips and other forms of behavior.

9. What is interesting about so-called *Freudian slips* – one kind of "slip of the tongue" – is the suggestion from Freud and others that they can be explained by hidden beliefs and desires. In that case, they are not slips in the way I am intending.

10. For a similar strategy, see R. Grandy (1973).

11. Obama's speech is available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EpGH02DtIws.

12. President Donald Trump's famous Tweet about "covfefe" seems to belong to this latter category.

13. For more details on this particular case see Cook and Stevenson (2010), Dabrowska (2004), Libermann (2009), Wason and Reich (1979).

14. Such invocation is very common in Western culture. Roland Barthes (2009: 77) writes: "...the supermen of science-fiction always have something reified about them. So has Einstein: he is commonly signified by his brain". He continues (2009: 78-79): "popular imagery faithfully expresses this: *photographs* of Einstein show him standing next to a blackboard covered with mathematical signs of obvious complexity; but *cartoons* of Einstein (the sign that he has become a legend) show him chalk still in hand, and having just written on an empty blackboard, as if without preparation, the magic formula of the world".

15. See Leif Wenar's 2017 SEP-article on John Rawls.

16. The basic structure is complex. There are contradictory norms like norms saying one should not smoke because of health issues, and norms saying you ought to smoke because it is part of what it means to be a rock'n'roll kind of guy. There are also people that consciously act against social norms. However, their actions are easily understood by appeal to norms. The norms they break are the very parameters against which their acts make sense, had not the norms been there, they would have had nothing to protest.

17. Dancy credits Joseph Raz for these sorts of argument (Dancy, 2004: 124, Raz, 1986: 142-3).

18. Though Hume is commonly described as a "pure" belief/desire theorist, Annette Baier (2009) has written an excellent article showing that he was not as narrow-minded in his action explanation as is often thought.

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