

Explaining Emotional Outbursts: A Davidsonian Account of Hursthouse's Arational Actions

NICHOLAS BLOOM

In his paper, "Actions, Reasons, and Causes," Donald Davidson discusses what makes an action intentional. According to Davidson, an agent acts intentionally if the agent acts for a reason. He defines reason as "a belief and desire" (5). This means that the agent desires to perform an action of a certain type and believes that the action she chooses is of that type. This explanation is very plausible since almost all intentional actions can be explained in this way. For example, if I want to illuminate my room and believe that turning on a light will do so, my turning on the light is intentional. In her essay "Arational Actions," Rosalind Hursthouse presents a set of counterexamples to Davidson's belief and desire theory of intentional action. Her counterexamples are supposed to illustrate *arational actions*, which she claims are intentional but do not fit into Davidson's belief-desire formula. In this paper, I offer a response on behalf of Davidson by arguing that arational actions do not exist as Hursthouse defines them. I do this by showing that Hursthouse's arational actions either satisfy Davidson's conditions of intentionality, or they are unintentional.

My argument has four parts. First, I will explain Davidson's causal theory of intentional action. Second, I will discuss Hursthouse's theory of arational actions and explain how they may threaten Davidson's theory. Third, I will present a counterargument to Hursthouse's theory that shows how arational actions either fit into Davidson's formula or are actually unintentional. I will do this by explaining two possible epistemic states with

Nicholas Bloom is a senior majoring in philosophy at the University of Notre Dame. His interests include the philosophies of mind, action, and language.

respect to our emotions: pre-named and post-named actions. Fourth, I will defend my response to Hursthouse against counterarguments, notably the charge that the pre-named method of explaining intentional action removes the moral culpability of the agent performing the action.

I. Davidson's Belief-Desire Theory of Intentional Action

In "Actions, Reasons, and Causes," Davidson proposes a causal account of intentional action. A causal theory attributes intentional action to a motivational phenomenon. In Davidson's case, he argues that an action ϕ is intentional if and only if it is done for a reason. He calls this reason a *primary reason*, and argues that primary reasons are the causes of actions. The primary reason has two necessary characteristics. The first is a desire or pro-attitude toward a type of action X . This simply means that the agent wants to do something, such as write a paper (eat soup, greet a friend, etc.). This desire can be a desire about anything, even of the form "I wish to express emotion Y ." The second necessary characteristic is a *belief* that an action ϕ is an action of type X . If the belief corresponds to both the desire and the action, then the reason is a primary reason. That is, the belief is of the form "I desire to do X , and believe that ϕ -ing is an action that will allow me to fulfill my desire," meaning the desire and action are linked. In the first example, this would be a belief that moving my fingers and pressing the keyboard keys is an action of the type "paper writing" (or that moving my hands and arms in a certain way was an action of the type "soup eating"). The belief could even be something like "I believe that ϕ -ing will allow me to express emotion Y ." Thus, Davidson's theory can be outlined as follows:

An action is intentional if and only if

- (1) A has a pro-attitude or desire toward actions of type X .
- (2) A believes that ϕ -ing is an action of type X .

So, put together, writing a paper is intentional if (1) I desire to write a paper, and (2) I believe that moving my fingers and pressing my keyboard is an action of the type "paper writing." Davidson explains that not all actions are preceded by a conscious acknowledgement of a belief and a desire, and that it is often unnecessary in everyday life to determine the specific belief and desire of an action (6). However, he states that belief-desire combinations are always present as causes of intentional actions. In fact, Davidson argues that both a belief and a pro-attitude must be present for an action to be intentional, which Hursthouse rejects (Hursthouse 57).

II. Hursthouse's Objection

Hursthouse objects to Davidson by arguing that his second condition, a belief that the action is of a certain type, is not necessary for intentional action. Her counterargument hinges on a category of actions she calls arational actions. According to Hursthouse, arational actions comprise "a significant subset of the set of intentional actions explained by occurrent emotion" (57). She explains that "these actions threaten the standard account . . . by undercutting the false semantic theory that holds that account in place" (57). Hursthouse gives three necessary conditions for arational action:

An action is arational if and only if

- (1) The action was intentional.
- (2) The agent did not do the action for a reason.
- (3) If the agent had not been in the grip of an emotion, the agent would not have acted.

For example, Hursthouse categorizes actions like shouting at objects because of anger, running or jumping for joy, and tearing one's clothes out of grief as arational actions. The problem for Davidson's theory lies in Hursthouse's first two conditions. She explains that arational actions "are explained solely by reference to desire . . . not to an appropriate belief" (59). She adds that for the belief-desire account to explain these actions, "the appropriate belief has to be something absurd," such as believing a photo one is tearing actually is the person represented by the photo (Hursthouse 60). According to the Davidsonian belief-desire account, these actions are unintentional if no belief can be found. In contrast, note that Hursthouse's account doesn't require any such belief for an action to be intentional.

III. My Objection to Hursthouse and Pre-named Actions

I will argue that no action satisfies the conditions Hursthouse places on arational actions. I argue this by analyzing supposed arational actions using Davidson's theory, which I argue gives a more satisfactory account of this type of action. I do this by differentiating between two epistemic states with respect to emotion: *pre-named* and *post-named* actions. I argue that if the agent is in a post-named epistemic state, then the action is intentional. I then argue that Hursthouse's arational actions can only occur when the agent is in a pre-named epistemic state. I will show that these actions are unintentional, but that the agent has some indirect control over them.

Hursthouse states that actions done in the grip of an emotion fall into a specific category of intentional action. However, I argue that the emotive properties that motivate an action have ramifications for the intentionality of that action. When in the grip of emotion, we can have two potential epistemic states regarding that emotion: We are either aware of the specific emotion we are feeling or we experience the emotion without knowing what specific emotion it is. In the latter case, we have not yet formally recognized or identified the emotion. To understand this, imagine feeling angry before saying or thinking something like “I am angry.” I will call the states before we have named or identified our emotions pre-named states and the states after we have named or identified our emotions post-named states. Phrases like “uncontrollable rage” and “fits of rage,” could potentially be used to describe this type of state.

Most of our intentional, emotion-influenced actions fit into the post-named category. These actions that occur during post-named states can be described using beliefs and desires in the following way:

- (1) A desires to express emotion Y.
- (2) A believes that ϕ -ing is an action that will express emotion Y.

This shows that post-named emotions comfortably fit Davidson’s explanation: they are actions done in order to express emotion. Imagine the case where I am filled with love for a significant other, and because of my love I desire to cook her dinner. As a result I shop for the food and spend a great deal of time preparing it. The cooking is clearly intentional: I know that I am in love and I *desire* to display my love and I *believe* that cooking dinner would allow me to do so. So, when I am in a post-named state I have named my emotion and can intentionally express it with an appropriate belief-desire combination. A belief-desire pair of this type always explains post-named actions, but other present belief-desire pairs may also explain these actions as well.

I should note that in distinguishing post-named actions, I take for granted that it is impossible to desire the expression of an emotion without first naming or identifying that emotion. But this shouldn’t be problematic. It seems absurd to desire to express an emotion we have not yet identified. That would require that we know what we are desiring, and at the same time not know. Thus, another category of actions is needed.

The remaining category, pre-named actions, accounts for instances in which an emotion has not yet been identified, so an appropriate belief-desire combination does not yet exist. I argue that these actions are unintentional, but with a caveat: the action itself is unintentional, but

the agent has some indirect control over the *emotion* which motivates the action.¹ Pre-named actions are, however, caused by an emotion. I argue that this emotion is one over which we have no control, since we have not yet identified it. The actions resulting from these emotions only flow through the agent, rendering the agent incapable of controlling whatever actions result. This makes pre-named actions appear very similar to cases of reflex or instinct. Indeed, pre-named actions are analogous to reflex actions insofar as no rational thinking is involved. They are simply uncontrolled responses to stimuli, much like swatting a mosquito. However, there is a distinct difference between cases of pre-named actions and cases of impulse. Pre-named actions are *always* and *only* a response to an emotional stimulus, whereas other cases of reflex type actions are responses to physical or other stimuli.

Pre-named actions are distinct from Hursthouse's arational actions because they explain these actions without referencing a desire. Hursthouse argues that all arational actions have a desire. However, in cases like these, agents can have no desire because they have not named an emotion, and therefore cannot desire to express it. Any other desire conforms to Davidson's belief-desire pair. Since pre-named actions have neither, they are unintentional. To demonstrate this, I will attempt to use them to explain some of Hursthouse's examples of arational actions.

Hursthouse gives several examples of supposed arational actions: "violently destroying or damaging anything remotely connected with the person . . . one's emotion is directed toward"; "throwing an 'uncooperative' tin opener on the ground or out of the window," "jumping up and down," and "covering one's eyes when they are already shut" (58). There are many more, but this serves as a decent gauge for the type of actions she is talking about. I will argue that these actions can be successfully explained using the pre-named and post-named categories.

First, imagine violently destroying something, particularly something valuable. It seems that no one would perform this action were she not in the grip of emotion. In addition, I argue that we very rarely, if ever, have the specific desire to destroy something—particularly if it is something fragile and of great value. This is not to say that a desire could not be present, but imagine a case where a person destroys her flatscreen television. We could probably agree that, had the person not been in the grip of emotion, she would not have destroyed the television. In addition, it seems nearly certain that no one ever truly wants to destroy her own television, even when in the grip of an emotion. Next, the case of throwing an object is almost

¹ I will explain how this happens in greater detail in the section on moral culpability.

identical to the destruction case. We rarely imagine a desire whose focus is the destruction of any object, let alone an expensive possession. The most plausible explanation is a total lack of thought, with the action explained by an emotional reflex type action. Finally, covering one's eyes seems like a quintessential emotional reflex case where a person is so overcome with emotion that she simply reacts, which is exactly the type of action the pre-named account describes. In this case an emotionally based desire cannot be present either, since the emotion has not been named. Another desire could exist, such as the desire to hide from a scary movie, but this action would conform to Davidson's belief-desire account (i.e., I desire to hide from a movie, and believe that covering my eyes is an action of type "hiding"). Thus, in these cases, either no desire is present, or a suitable belief-desire pair exists.

Imagine a person who acknowledges his emotion and then acts. This sounds exactly like a post-named action where an appropriate belief-desire pair can be found. It could not be a pre-named action, since a pre-named action takes place before emotion recognition or naming. After any type of emotion naming, an emotion-caused action is a post-named action (though another belief-desire combination could be found).

One might object to the post-named action argument by presenting a case where an agent feels an emotion, identifies the emotion, acknowledges that the action *will not* express the emotion, and then performs an action anyway. Imagine a case where I am angry, I have identified my emotion, and I desire to punch my computer monitor. After consideration, I know that punching my computer monitor will not express my emotion, but I do it anyway. This case seems, quite clearly, like a case of compulsion. In these cases, the agent has no reason at all for acting destructively but does so anyway because of an irrational motivation. That is, if the action is done for *no* reason, is motivated by an emotion, is done in contradiction to the belief-desire combination, and is done in a post-named state, then it seems the agent acts compulsively. But a compulsive action is not intentional. This is because the belief contradicts the desire and does not link the desire and the action. Thus it cannot cause the action in the way Davidson requires. In addition, this claim is supported further by Hursthouse's descriptions of the actions she categorizes as arational. An arational or irrational action implies an absence of rational thought, and a lack of thought bodes poorly for Hursthouse's assertion that these actions are intentional.

While not all intentional actions require reasoned thought, those that do not are morally irrelevant because they are impulsive (as described above). They are miniscule, reflex-driven actions such as scratching an itch or swatting a mosquito. To reiterate, these actions differ from emotion-caused action because they are not caused by an emotion. In addition,

non-emotional, impulsive actions are ones that *never* have the capacity to be morally relevant. One can imagine a situation in which scratching an itch would be morally relevant, but these cases generally don't apply to everyday life. Furthermore, if one is going to follow Hursthouse and do away with the belief component of intentional action on the grounds that it is not always present, it seems that one ought to do away with the desire component as well (as I have done with pre-named actions). We ought to do this since, like Hursthouse says of beliefs, we cannot be assured that we will *always* find a desire-based cause to the action, especially if that action is pre-named. However, we will always be able to find an emotionally based cause in a pre-named action, so we ought to explain these actions completely in terms of emotions instead of beliefs and desires.

It seems that pre-named actions better account for Hursthouse's examples than her own definition of arational actions. The pre-named category of actions are unintentional because they are done out of emotional impulse *before* the emotion has been named. Any action done after the emotion has been named fits into the standard Davidsonian belief-desire pair. Therefore, Hursthouse's arational actions are better described as pre-named actions, and therefore unintentional, with no desire present. If a desire is present, then the emotion has been named, and thus has a corresponding belief.

IV. Objections

The Moral Culpability Objection

The first and most important objection to the preceding account is the problem of moral culpability. Pre-named actions are unintentional, or at least close enough to unintentional that they seem to remove all moral culpability from the agent. One might argue that a murder performed as a pre-named action would not be an action for which the agent would be responsible. This is certainly not a possibility we want to admit, and so the problem of moral culpability must be solved. The closest legal counterpart to this problem is the "crime of passion," in which an agent pleads temporary insanity. This concept reinforces the pre-named action account, since those actions are said to be unintentional.

However, I assume we want to hold agents accountable for *some* pre-named actions. On this assumption, I argue that agents can still be held indirectly accountable for their actions because of their power to actively moderate their emotions. By this I mean engaging in preventative exercises. We are in a position to consciously and intentionally perform

post-named actions that prevent our emotions from causing us to commit morally reprehensible actions in the future, even to the point of stopping immoral pre-named actions. Though some may be able to moderate their emotions subconsciously, the majority of people can and must moderate emotions intentionally. Imagine meditation programs, counting to ten, gripping stress balls, or attending anger management classes. All of these methods presuppose that we occasionally have unruly emotions that can be modified by performing intentional actions, thereby minimizing the effects of uncontrollable future emotions. That is, we recognize and name these emotions and then seek to change them. All are methods by which we intentionally perform actions in order to control our future emotions with the goal of preventing negative results. The assumption is that since controlling emotions is an intentional, post-named action, we can hold people responsible for their failure to do so, particularly in the context of a morally culpable action. We can control our future pre-named actions through the intentional practice of post-named actions.

Let's begin with an example. Consider Bert. He is a young philosophy student who learns that he failed his philosophy final exam. In response to this, he throws his computer out the window in a fit of rage. Now suppose I also failed my philosophy final exam. This has, in fact, happened, and I did not throw my laptop out the window. I was overcome by the same (or similar) emotions as Bert, but I did not act in the same way. It is entirely possible that I yelled or punched a pillow, but I did nothing for which I should be held morally culpable. Though neither of us had control over the emotion in the moment that it caused us to act, we *did* have control over our emotion-influencing actions leading up to that point. That is, we had the power to indirectly control our emotions through these actions. Therefore, though we cannot hold Bert accountable for his computer bashing because he did it unintentionally (on Davidson's account), we *are* able to hold him accountable for his computer bashing because he failed to take preventative measures before his action, and thus failed to control his emotions properly during his action.

The notion of holding agents accountable for unintentional actions is fairly common. Imagine that a drunk driver accidentally hits and kills a pedestrian. In this case, the killing is legally regarded as unintentional. However, the drunk driver is punished for an unintentional action because of other, intentional actions that ultimately led to involuntary manslaughter. Since we view drunk driving as morally reprehensible, we punish intoxicated drivers for any action resulting from their drunk driving. Thus, drunk drivers are guilty both for the drunk driving and killing, because they failed to control actions which indirectly led them to both consequences. The same is true in pre-named actions, where controlling emotions is analogous

to limiting alcohol intake in the drunk driving case. In both cases, we can hold the agent morally culpable for their unintentional actions because of the fact that those unintentional actions resulted from morally culpable intentional actions that the agent performed.

This concept is also common in the language used to describe emotion. Phrases like “you shouldn’t have let your emotions get the best of you” ascribe moral culpability to a failure of emotional control. Such phrases assume that the majority of people manage to control their emotions in such a way that they never, or at least rarely ever, perform morally reprehensible actions when in the grip of an emotion. If we can hold people morally culpable for their inability to control emotions, then that strengthens the case for regarding the actions that control emotion as an intentional actions.

Imagine a man named Lawrence. This man has a history of anger management issues but keeps his anger moderately in check. For several years, his worst offense is angering an occasional customer service representative at his local grocery store. Lawrence has no reason to be blamed or punished for any of these actions. However, one day, he finds out that his wife has been cheating on him with his best friend. Lawrence is so overcome with rage that he strangles his friend to death. Lawrence can be held accountable for the murder of his best friend since he failed to intentionally control his emotions over time, and this case applies equally to someone with no anger problems. Pre-named actions like these are completely driven by emotion, and because they are out of the agent’s control, we can fault the emotion for the action. As mentioned earlier, the agent has no control over what his action is, so the emotion is the only active culprit. However, because we regard emotion control as an intentional action, any morally reprehensible action (like drunk driving) that flows from uncontrolled emotions renders the agent responsible.

The emotion control concept has a few requirements. First, the agent must be a rational, conscious human being. Those agents incapable of making regular rational decisions are excluded, since they do not seem to fit Hursthouse’s assumptions that arational actions are a secondary case to rational, intentional action.

Second, the emotions must not be intentionally strengthened in any way. This qualification includes side effects of known emotion-enhancing catalysts. This means that situations like steroid-induced anger are included under those for which agents are held morally culpable. However, if an agent is taking a prescription drug for an illness-related problem and an unintended side-effect of the drug is emotion enhancement, the agent should only be held partially responsible, if at all.

Third, the agent must have had at her disposal the ability to influence and control emotions prior to the event for which he or she is being

blamed. This will be explained in more depth later, but some sort of regular influence over emotions is necessary. As a note, it should be evident that meeting these three requirements is not rare. In fact, most people operate under these requirements all the time. However, we exclude people whose actions are *always* pre-named actions for a similar reason as the first requirement. The assumption is that pre-named actions are exceptions to the rule of regular intentional or post-named actions.

Possible Redefinitions of Intentionality

Hursthouse might respond by insisting that arational actions do in fact exist. I have explained how a Davidsonian philosopher can account for Hursthouse's arational actions by classifying them as unintentional. Because of this, and because Hursthouse uses the intentionality of the action in her definition of intentional action, Hursthouse must explain how arational actions are intentional. She rejects the Davidsonian belief-desire account of intentional action on the grounds that arational actions exist. However, she does not provide a definition of intentional action to replace Davidson's definition. So, Hursthouse would need to prove that at least *some* of the pre-named actions are intentional, and I see two possible ways she might do this.

The first way is to consider two properties of intentional action as described by Anscombe: the non-observational knowledge of action and the application of the question "Why?" (9–15). Non-observational knowledge is simply a priori knowledge, or knowledge that one has independent of any experience. For Anscombe, the two properties are intertwined. She explains that in order for an action to be intentional, the question "Why?" must apply to the agent's action in a reason-giving way. The question's application depends on the agent's non-observational knowledge. If the agent (a) lacks the non-observational knowledge of what he or she is doing, or (b) lacks the non-observational knowledge that *X* is the cause of his or her action, then the question "Why?" has no reason-giving application, and the action is not intentional. For example, if I am circling my arms in the air, I presumably know I am doing so. If I have to be told I am doing so, the action would be unintentional. Or, if I know that I am circling my arms, but I don't know a priori why I'm doing so, the action also seems unintentional.

Under this formulation of intentionality, pre-named actions could not be intentional because agents lack the non-observational knowledge of the fact that such and such is the cause of their ϕ -ing. In order to overcome this, Hursthouse must find a way to explain how, in participating in her

arational actions, agents have the non-observational knowledge that such and such is the cause of their actions. While she argues that agents asking the question “Why” could respond with either “I just wanted to” or “I felt I had to,” she fails to provide any examples of non-observational motivating knowledge (58). The latter answer sounds like a case of compulsion, and the former answer provides a desire-based motivation at best, which does not necessarily explain an intentional action. That is, the applicability of the question “Why?” is a necessary but not sufficient condition for describing an action as intentional. In addition, neither of these reasons describes the *emotion* as the motivating cause, which is one of Hursthouse’s requirements for arational action.

In light of this, Hursthouse gives a third response to the “Why?” question: “Because I was so frightened (or happy, or excited, [or] ashamed)” (58). This explanation gives a possible response to the need for non-observational knowledge. However, if we put this knowledge into Anscombe’s formula, we would get something like this: Agent A has non-observational knowledge that emotion Y is the cause of his ϕ -ing. However, this looks exactly like the knowledge needed for post-named cases described earlier, where the agent has a belief and desire about expressing the emotion. Thus, in order for Hursthouse’s third response to be plausible she would need to explain how agents could know which emotion they are experiencing, be aware of the fact that the emotion is causing them act, and yet not form any appropriate belief-desire combination, which is impossible since they know the cause of their action and thus must have an appropriate belief and desire.

The second way Hursthouse could solve the dilemma is by giving an account of intentional action that is compatible with her definition of arational action. Hursthouse could assume that in cases of emotive causes, the emotion replaces or removes the need for a belief, allowing the desire to motivate the action completely. However, as discussed earlier, this does not necessarily follow. The fact that I am angry and desire to do something does not mean the resulting, corresponding action is intentional. It is entirely possible that I desire to do something and do it unintentionally. For example, consider a case where I desire to let go of a rope holding my rock-climbing friend, and my belief and desire to do so makes my hands sweat, so I drop the rope. While the belief and desire caused the action, it didn’t do so in the right way. Regardless, it seems Hursthouse must come up with a definition of intentional action, since without it, her argument is incomplete. Even if we ignore this omission, Hursthouse’s account of arational action is still not the most complete or accurate account of its type.

V. Conclusion

I have explained both Davidson's argument and Hursthouse's response, showing that a Davidsonian philosopher can successfully account for Hursthouse's arational actions with greater accuracy than Hursthouse. I have addressed the problem of moral culpability regarding pre-named actions, and have demonstrated how this might be applied. Finally, I have explained that, in order for Hursthouse to present an acceptable response, she would have to give a new account of intentional action. If Hursthouse is unable to do this, the pre-named account stands as the best way to explain actions of this nature.

Works Cited

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