



Action, Knowledge, and Will

John Hyman

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CHAPTER

6 Reason and Knowledge

John Hyman

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Abstract

The concepts of reason, explanation, and justification are examined in this chapter. Various factors involved in explanations of intentional action that are commonly called reasons are distinguished, including mental states and their contents. The popular idea that intentional action can be defined in terms of agents' reasons is criticized, on the grounds that intentional action is a manifestation of desire, whereas action done for reasons is a manifestation of knowledge or belief. In the final part of the chapter, an important kind of explanation of intentional action is examined, exemplified by 'James went to church because it would please his mother', in which the explanatory clause as a whole expresses the agent's ground. It is argued that explanations of this kind attribute knowledge of the *explanans* to the agent, and not merely belief.

Keywords: [reason](#), [explanation](#), [justification](#), [belief](#), [desire](#), [intention](#)

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6.1 Reasons, justifications, and explanations

If we survey the literature from the last fifty years there appears to be a wide divergence of opinion about what reasons are. For instance, Davidson says that reasons consist of mental states or dispositions, in particular, beliefs and desires; von Wright says that a request can be a reason; Kenny and Audi both say that goals are reasons; Dancy says that grounds (whether true or false) are reasons; and Raz says that a reason is a fact.¹ These are all opinions about reasons of a specific kind, namely, a person's own reasons for doing an intentional act. But before attempting to assess them, we should remind ourselves about the intellectual functions of reasons in general, in other words, what we use them to do.

There may be a divergence of opinion about what reasons are, but there is broad agreement that we use reasons to do two closely related things, namely, to justify and to explain. The sense of 'justify' in play here

is the OED's broad sense 6: 'to furnish adequate grounds for, warrant.' It is not the narrower sense 3: 'to prove or maintain the righteousness or innocence of; to vindicate (from a charge).'

p. 134 These two things, justifying and explaining, are closely related. On the one hand, to justify doing, believing, or feeling something—e.g. reducing the sauce, believing it will snow, or feeling angry—is to explain why it is just or right to do it, believe it, or feel it. (Not necessarily morally right, as these examples show; and not necessarily obligatory or required.) And on the other hand, in some cases, if one explains why something is the case—e.g. why the price of oil will fall—one also justifies believing that it is the case; and in some cases, if one explains why someone does, believes, or feels something, one also justifies their doing, believing, or feeling it. For example, one might explain that someone feels angry because a legitimate goal was disallowed. But one can also explain why something is the case *without* justifying the belief, since what one is explaining is a datum rather than a prediction—e.g. why the price of oil has fallen—and one can explain why someone did, believed, or felt something *without* offering a justification, either because it is not the sort of thing that can be just or right, such as when one explains why Keats contracted tuberculosis, or because it is evidently unjust or wrong, such as when one explains why Stalin believed that Molotov was a spy or why Dr Crippen killed his wife.

It therefore seems plausible that the basic function of a reason is to explain something—in other words, to make something intelligible or understood—and more particularly to explain why something is the case. That is why there are reasons *why* but no reasons *how*, *what*, *which*, *when*, *where*, or *who*. But the idea of something's being the case does not involve a contrast between facts and values, or the past and the future, or necessary and contingent, or probable, possible, and actual, or any other curtailment of the kind of fact or truth we use reasons to explain. I am not contrasting the idea that something is the case with the idea that it *ought to be* or *was* or *will be* or *must be* or *can be* or *is probably* the case. For example, if the price of oil has fallen, and James will go to church, and Lucy must or can or will probably or ought to get home before dark, then each of these things is the case, and the reason or reasons for its being the case explain why. Nor am I downplaying the importance of justification in the use of reasons. The relationship between explanation and justification is not major versus minor or original versus derivative; it is simply general versus particular.

Now it may seem as if the justificatory use of reasons is the primary one where a person's own reasons for doing an intentional act is concerned, because when we explain a person's conduct by giving his own reasons for it, we explain it in terms of his own assessment of what he would be justified in doing, and why.² So, one might think, his own reasons for his conduct explain it *because* they justify it, or seem to justify it, at least to him; and so explaining is not the primary function of a reason that explains an intentional act in this way. But this would be a mistake.

Consider the statement

(1) James went to church because it would please his mother.

p. 135 It is true that (1)—as it would normally be meant and understood—implies that the *explanans* is part of James's own assessment of what he would be justified in doing, and why. In other words, (1) implies that James thought that the fact that it would please his mother justified his going to church, or at least would justify it in the absence of countervailing reasons—that it putatively justified his going to church, or that it 'spoke in favour' of it, as we might say. But it does not follow that the explanatory use of reasons is not the primary one, because a justification is an explanation, and so a putative justification is a putative explanation, a putative explanation of why something is just or right.³

Since explanations like (1) are normally meant to give an agent's own reasons for his behaviour, they complicate the relationship between justification and explanation. Basically, they illustrate the fact that since an agent's assessment of what he would be justified in doing influences his behaviour, we refer to the

assessment when we explain the behaviour. So far, this is perfectly straightforward. If the temperature of a gas affects its behaviour, we refer to its temperature when we explain the behaviour of the gas. The complication arises from two facts. First, while explanations like (1) are not necessarily intended to justify the conduct they explain, they attribute a putative justification to the agent. Second, they include explanations of our own conduct, so *these* explanations attribute putative justifications to ourselves.

It does not follow that we always mean to justify our own conduct when we explain it in this way, but we often do, especially when the behaviour is in the recent past or the present or the future. This also applies to explanations which give our reasons for feelings or beliefs. For example, 'I shall vote Tory because the Tories have pledged to cut taxes', 'I feel proud to be a Tory because ...', and 'I believe the Tories will win because ...' would all normally have this dual function. They would normally explain why I intend to do something, or why I feel something or believe something, by attributing a justification for doing, feeling, or believing it to me; and at the same time they would *also* normally purport to justify doing, feeling, or believing the thing in question.

Evidently, the relationship between justification and explanation can be complex, especially when the one doing the explaining or justifying is also the one whose thought or conduct is being justified or explained. But even in these cases, the primary function of a reason is, as it always is, to explain why something is the case.*

p. 136 We can support this conclusion about what we do *with* reasons by considering what we do *to* them. We do not cook them, chew them, or swallow them. In fact the range of things we do to them is quite small. Like explanations, we find (discover, identify) them or find them out, state (render, give, offer, supply, or provide) them, consider (assess, weigh, or compare) them, accept (endorse) and reject (challenge, dispute) them. No doubt this list can be extended, but not in ways that would cast doubt on the idea that reasons are explanations. But the fact that it includes assessing and weighing reasons reminds us that justification is an important kind of explanation, because it implies that reasons can be good (strong, convincing, conclusive, or decisive) or bad (weak, unconvincing, inconclusive, or indecisive). Of course, explanations in general can be good or bad, but it is arguments or justifications in particular that can be conclusive or decisive or the opposite, because we rely on them when we conclude or decide that this or that is the just or right thing to do or feel or believe, in view of our other beliefs, and our aims and values; and when we take a practical step—in other words, act *for* a reason—as a result.

A reason, then, explains why something is the case. But we need to be aware of the complexity that our talk about explanation involves. There are four points to note.

First, to explain something to someone is to make it clear to them, to make them understand it. But what makes something clear to one person may not make it clear to another. Hence, when we use the verb 'explain' with a *to*-complement, as in 'Justin explained to the children why the kitten had died', we imply that the explanation took into consideration, or at any rate did not exceed, the knowledge and the powers of comprehension of the audience for whom it was intended. (The same applies to the verb 'prove'.) By contrast, when we use the verb without the complement, the explanation is no longer explicitly related to a specific audience, but explanations still vary greatly in how explicit and precise they are, and in the knowledge and intellectual maturity or sophistication required to understand them. Every explanation qualifies as such relative to a standard, which is generally set by the presumed knowledge and intellectual ability of the intended audience.

p. 137 Second, we can use the word 'explanation'—like the words 'statement', 'question', 'answer', 'announcement', etc.—to refer either to a communicative act (an act of asking or saying something), or to what the act communicates (what is asked or said). So we can describe an explanation as patient or evasive, or alternatively as true or false; but it is the act of saying something, or the person who says it, that may be

patient or evasive, whereas it is what the person says that may be true or false. A communicative act is not the right sort of thing to be true or false. No behaviour is. If it were, it would also be the right sort of thing to be proved, disproved, or contradicted. Since reasons can be stated (rendered, given, offered, etc.) they can only be explanations in the sense of things said or communicated, not in the sense of the saying or communicating of these things.

Third, the use of 'explanation' has a further kink, because we can call the whole of what is communicated an explanation, or just part of it. For example, if someone explains that the price of oil will fall because growth in China will slow down, what he says as a whole is an explanation; but we also distinguish between the *explanandum* (i.e. what is explained) and the *explanans* (i.e. what explains it), and use the word 'explanation' to refer to the latter part alone.⁴ If we describe one fact as explaining, or being the explanation of another, this is the way in which we are using the word. Thus, in the example just mentioned, the presumed fact that the price of oil will fall is presented as an *explanandum* and the presumed fact that growth in China will slow down is presented as an *explanans*. A reason—for example, the reason why the price of oil will fall—is evidently an explanation in the sense of an *explanans*.

Finally, if a picnic was cancelled because the weather was bad, the *explanans* is the fact that the weather was bad and the *explanandum* is the fact that the picnic was cancelled. So the fact that the weather was bad is the reason why the picnic was cancelled. But it would be quite normal to say that the weather, or the bad weather, explains why, or is the reason why, the picnic was cancelled, although the weather is not itself the *explanans*. It is what the *explanans* is a fact about. It may be surprising to find that we use the word 'reason' to describe such different things as facts and fog. But it is no stranger than the fact that we use the word 'explanation' to describe both sayings and things said. In any case, as Strawson points out, there are distinctions we need to draw in order to understand philosophically our non-philosophical thought and talk that we do not need to draw in our non-philosophical thought and talk itself.

p. 138 Now one such distinction (Strawson explains) is between the natural relation of causality, 'which holds in the natural world between particular events or circumstances', just as spatial and temporal relations do, and the 'intellectual or rational or intensional relation' which holds between two facts or truths, when one explains the other.⁵ The *relata* now are not events or circumstances in the natural world, but 'obstinately intensional objects, not assignable to a place in nature'. It is true that we sometimes speak as if facts have a location in space and time, as when we ask where a certain fact can be found, or when a certain fact emerged, but what these idioms really show is that a fact can be recorded in a particular place, or be discovered at a particular time. Again, when we think of or state a fact or a truth, these mental and communicative acts *are* assignable to a place in nature, as are the things—such as fog and picnics—that the facts we think of or state are generally about. But facts themselves can only be objects of thought. (Regarding facts and truths, see 7.2.)

Our willingness to call such different things as facts and fog 'reasons' is one indication that we sometimes ignore the distinction between causing and explaining in our non-philosophical thought, and that we fail to mark it explicitly and consistently in our use of words. And there are others. We use the same kind of nominalization to refer to the terms of both relations (e.g. 'the picnic's being cancelled'), we use the same verbs and verb phrases to express both relations themselves (e.g. 'causes' and 'due to'), and we readily combine terms referring to events and facts in an explanation, without finding the result jarring. For example, if someone says that the picnic was cancelled because of bad weather, which relation should we assume he has in mind? The answer is not one or the other, or both, or even that we cannot tell. There is no point in trying to tell, because he is ignoring the distinction, and he is ignoring it because there is no need to attend to it in order to explain why the picnic was cancelled.

But if there is no need to attend to the distinction between reasons and causes for *this* purpose, it is vital to attend to it if we want to understand the various claims about reasons with which we began. For Raz's view

that reasons are facts is evidently about reasons as opposed to causes—in other words, it is about the *explanans* or *reason why* itself; whereas Davidson's claim that reasons consist of mental states or dispositions, von Wright's claim that a request can be a reason, Dancy's claim that grounds are reasons, and Kenny's and Audi's claims that goals are reasons: all these are about factors that the *explanans* in an explanation of a person's conduct must or may, explicitly or implicitly, introduce.

For example, if Felicity packs her bags because she wants to leave, her desire to leave *causes* her to pack her bags—the act *manifests* the desire—but while her desire to leave is a mental state, the *reason why* she packs her bags is *the fact that she wants to leave*.

Equally, if Sybil feeds James oysters because she believes oysters are aphrodisiac, the *reason why* she feeds James oysters is *the fact that she believes this*: her believing it is a mental state, and *what* she believes—namely, *that oysters are aphrodisiac*—is the *ground on which* or *reason for which* she feeds James oysters, or her *justification* for doing so. (It is more idiomatic to speak of the ground on which someone believes something than the ground on which she does something, but the latter use of the phrase is common in philosophy and law, and I shall use it freely.)

Again, if Peter passes Paul the salt because Paul asks him to, Paul's request—by which I mean the communicative act, rather than what it communicates—*causes* Peter to pass Paul the salt. But the *reason why* Peter passes Paul the salt is neither the act nor its content—namely, *that Peter pass him the salt*—it is *the fact that Paul asks him to pass the salt*.

Finally, an agent's *goal*, *aim*, or *intention* in doing an act is the *content* of the desire the act manifests, for example, *to die with dignity* or *to get home before dark*. So if Lucy's goal in calling a taxi is to get home before dark, then the *reason why* she calls a taxi is *the fact that she wants to get home before dark*.

Evidently, the word 'reason' is not reserved by philosophers, any more than by others, for an *explanans* or *reason why*. It also used to refer to various explanatory factors, including both mental states, such as believing X and desiring Y, and their contents—that is, justifications or grounds and aims or intentions, respectively. Some, including the present author, have expressed their disapproval, not because they deplore laxity in the use of words as such, but because it causes confusion in this case, as we shall see. But if we want to avoid unnecessary contention, the best strategy is to be intensely relaxed about how words are used, and intensely vigilant about the different ideas they are used to express. I shall adopt the policy of calling causes 'causes', grounds and justifications 'grounds' and 'justifications', goals, aims, and intentions 'goals', 'aims', and 'intentions'. I shall sometimes refer to a ground as a 'reason for', but I shall reserve the term 'reason why' for an *explanans*. This is policy, not dogma.

6.2 Reasons, grounds, and intentions

Grounds and intentions are both contents of mental states, but they are contents of different mental states. For the *ground on which* or *reason for which* one does an act is something one believes (e.g. *that oysters are aphrodisiac*), whereas the *intention with which* one does an act is something one desires (e.g. *to get home before dark*). Hence, doing something for a reason is not the same as doing it intentionally, and many things are done for a reason that are not done intentionally, such as weeping at sad news or laughing spontaneously at a joke.

When philosophers think of desires and beliefs as explanatory factors, they tend to think of them in combination, for the good reason that explanations of action that refer explicitly to desires normally involve assumptions about beliefs, and explanations that refer explicitly to beliefs normally involve assumptions about desires. Geach mentions a nice example. We cannot explain why Dr Johnson stood bare-headed in

Uttoxeter marketplace by saying that he expected rain unless it is understood that he wanted to do penance, and we cannot explain it by saying that he wanted to do penance unless it is understood that he expected rain.⁶ Neither the desire to do penance nor the expectation of rain explains the deed alone. So there are good reasons for thinking about desires and beliefs as explanatory factors in combination. But it is important to remember that they are distinct, particularly if we want to understand the relationship between intentional action and action done for reasons. And it is also important to remember that this symmetry between them is balanced by an asymmetry, since a rational person's beliefs affect his desires, whereas his desires do not affect his beliefs.

Intentional action and action done for reasons are commonly equated. Indeed, both Davidson and Anscombe claim that intentional action can be defined in terms of reasons. Davidson acknowledges that we sometimes say we did an act 'for no reason', but he claims this really means that we did it for no *further* reason, no reason 'besides wanting to do it', adding that this 'defends the possibility of defining an intentional action as one done for a reason'.⁷ Anscombe is more circumspect. She allows that in some cases the statement that one did an intentional act for no reason may be literally true. But she still claims that intentional action can be defined in terms of reasons:

p. 141

What distinguishes actions which are intentional from those which are not? The answer that I shall suggest is that they are the actions to which a certain sense of the question 'Why?' is given application; the sense is of course that in which the answer, if positive, gives a reason for acting.⁸

She does not say straight out here that she is defining intentional action, but she makes it clear in §47 that this is what she has in mind:

the term 'intentional' has reference to a form of description of events. What is essential to this form is displayed by the results of our enquiries into the question 'Why?' ... I have defined intentional action in terms of language—the special question 'Why?'.

What does the claim that intentional actions 'are the actions to which a certain sense of the question "Why?" is given application' mean? It does not mean that every intentional act *is* done for a reason, only that every intentional act is *either* done for a reason *or* done for no reason. But, Anscombe explains, one does not reject the question 'Why?' by answering 'No reason', as one would reject it if one said, 'I wasn't aware of doing it.' So intentional acts can, she believes, be defined as acts to which the question 'Why?' properly applies. She compares saying one did an intentional act for no reason to answering the question 'How many coins do you have in your pocket?' by saying 'None'.⁹ The idea is that the question 'How many coins do you have in your pocket?' is refused application if one does not have a pocket, but not if one has an empty pocket.

Davidson's and Anscombe's views about the relationship between intentional action and reasons are unsatisfactory for three reasons.

First, regarding Anscombe's proposal, the comparison between 'Why?' and 'How many coins do you have in your pocket?' suggests that we are dealing with a presupposition, in other words, that 'Why?' is predicated on the assumption that one did the act intentionally in the way that 'How many coins ...?' is predicated on the assumption that one has a pocket. But in that case we cannot *define* an intentional act as one about which the 'Why?' question can sensibly be raised, any more than we can define a pocket in this way. It may be true that a pocket is the part of a garment of which we can sensibly ask 'How many coins do you have in it?', but if so, the reason for this is that a pocket is a small bag or pouch sewn into clothing, and one can put coins in a small bag or pouch. One cannot *define* a pocket by stating that the question 'How many coins ...?' can be raised about it. The fact that the question can be raised is *explained* by the definition. In the same way,

it may be true that intentional acts are the ones of which we can sensibly ask ‘Why?’ in the relevant sense, but if so, the definition of an intentional act needs to explain why.

p. 142 Second, some acts that are not intentional are done for reasons. For example, someone who reacts to a piece of news with a laugh or a curse may not do so intentionally. But it would be absurd to insist that in that case he cannot be laughing or cursing for a reason, or that the ‘Why?’ question cannot ‘be given application’. For the relevant sense of the question is ‘that in which the answer, if positive, gives a reason for acting’, and ‘Because we won’ or ‘Because we lost’ or ‘Because he was killed’ or ‘Because he was saved’ certainly can give reasons for laughing or cursing. Of course, they may be poor or insufficient reasons, or no reason at all. But equally, they may be perfectly good reasons, which fully justify reacting in that way.

Third, we do not only *act* for reasons; we believe and feel and want for reasons too. Indeed the very fact that is someone’s reason for doing an act can also be their reason for believing or feeling or wanting something. For example, the fact that the azalea died can be Margaret’s reason for sacking the gardener, believing the soil is limey, feeling at the end of her tether, and wanting to get drunk. But believing, feeling, and wanting are not intentional. So even if it were true that only intentional acts are done for reasons, the involvement of a reason could not be what being intentional consists in, or how it should be defined. And the same applies to the proposal that being intentional should be defined in terms of the applicability of the ‘Why?’ question. For whatever the fact that we can raise the ‘Why?’ question about it *can* explain about an act, it can explain about things (beliefs, desires, etc.) that are not intentional as well.

For these reasons, it is a mistake to equate intentional action and action done for reasons, or to imagine that one can be defined in terms of the other. An intentional act is an act done with an intention, and the *intention with which* one does an act is the content of a desire because of which one does it. So by definition an intentional act is a manifestation of desire. Whereas the *reason for which* or *ground on which* one does an act is the content of a belief because of which one does it. So by definition an act done for a reason is a manifestation of belief. For example, if Sybil feeds James oysters with the intention of seducing him, feeding him oysters is a manifestation of her desire to seduce him; and if she feeds him oysters *for the reason*, or *on the ground*, that oysters are aphrodisiac, feeding him oysters manifests her belief that oysters are aphrodisiac. It is true that both kinds of explanation are possible in most cases of intentional action, because

p. 143 desires and beliefs normally explain an intentional act in combination. But the idea of \hookrightarrow a *reason for which* or *ground on which* one does an act is a particular application of an idea with a much broader scope than the idea of an *intention with which* one does an act, because reasons do not just inform our conduct, but also the elements of our mental lives—the desires, beliefs and feelings—from which it flows.

6.3 Reasons, grounds, and explanations

As we saw in 6.1, the word ‘reason’ can be used to refer either to an *explanans* or to an explanatory factor, whether the latter is a mental state, such as a desire or a belief, or the content of a mental state, such as an intention or a ground, and theories of explanation are likely to go wrong if the distinction between these things is not properly understood. Probably the most confusing feature of our licentious use of ‘reason’ is that we employ it both to refer to a *ground* or *reason for* and to refer to an *explanans* or *reason why*. In this section, I shall explain the idea of a ground and the distinction between an *explanans* and a ground in more detail (in (A) and (B)), and discuss a view about the explanation of intentional action which has attracted support because they are confused (in (C)).

(A)

If one does an act because one believes that p , the ground on which one does it is that p . (I shall return to this rule, and discuss an exception to it, in (B).) What about the reverse? If the ground on which one does an act is that p , does it follow that one believes that p ? It is commonly assumed that it does follow, but what is wrong with the view that we can act on grounds we do not believe, just as we reason from premises we do not believe when we argue by *reductio*? For example, suppose a meeting clashes with a game Charles wants to watch on TV, and he pretends there is a lecture on the Stoic theory of happiness that he cannot afford to miss. Grace may choose to accept his excuse and reschedule the meeting, even if she knows full well that he is planning to watch the game. ('Accept' here does not imply the slightest degree of credence: it simply means that she proceeds on the assumption that it is true, for instance, to avoid a confrontation.) Is this not a case of acting on a ground one does not believe?

p. 144 The answer is that we can if we wish call a premise someone accepts and acts on her ground, regardless of whether she believes it, and say that the ground on which Grace rescheduled the meeting was that Charles had \hookrightarrow to the attend the lecture. Alternatively, we can define a ground as the content of a belief because of which someone does (believes, feels, etc.) something, thereby retaining the principle that believing that p is a necessary condition for acting on the ground that p , and say that the ground on which Grace rescheduled the meeting was that it was better to accept Charles's excuse, so as to avoid a confrontation. I am not aware of a decisive reason to prefer one option or the other. But the second is generally preferred by philosophers, and I shall follow that convention here, noting only that it is exactly that, a convention.

(B)

It is worth underlining the fact that if someone does an act because she believes that p , the ground on which she does it is not normally that she believes that p , but that p . Compare

| (1) James went to church because it would please his mother

and

| (2) James went to church because he believed it would please his mother.

In both cases, the explanation cannot be true unless the *explanans* is a fact: (1) cannot be true unless James's going to church would in fact please his mother, and (2) cannot be true unless James did in fact believe that it would please his mother. But whereas the *explanantia* are different, the *ground* (1) and (2) attribute to James—the thought, whether true or false, which they imply seemed to James to speak in favour of going to church—is the same. In both cases, it is the thought *that going to church would please his mother*. This is obvious in the case of (1). But it is also true in the case of (2). The *explanans* in (2) is the fact, or supposed fact, that James *believed* his going to church would please his mother, but the *ground* (2) attributes to James is *what* he is said to have believed, and not the fact that he believed it.

Thus, explanations like (2) split the agent's ground from the explanation of his behaviour. The utility of being able to do this should be obvious. Since explaining is a relation between facts or truths, the *explanans* in an explanation of someone's behaviour must be a fact or truth, but the *ground* on which he acted may be false. (2) allows for this possibility by prescinding from the implication carried by (1) that James's going to church *would* please his mother, while attributing the same ground or justification for going to church to James himself.

p. 145 We can confirm that this is how (2) works by comparing a case where the explanation of a person's conduct looks superficially like (2), but the justification attributed to the agent is *not* what he is said to have believed, and is the fact, or supposed fact, that he believed it. For example, suppose Roger believes he is being pursued by MI5. There are various things he could do, such as fly to Brazil, or destroy his hard drive, or complain to

his MP. But suppose instead that he sees his doctor. If we explain that Roger saw his doctor because he believed he was being pursued by MI5, we are probably envisaging a different justification from the one we would be envisaging if we said that this was why he destroyed his hard drive. One way to describe the difference is to say that it was not *what* Roger believed that informed his decision to see his doctor, but the fact that he believed it. In other words, Roger's justification for seeing his doctor was not that he was being pursued by MI5, but that he *believed* he was. Again, suppose Ruth reasons as follows: 'People who believe that property is theft should stand up and be counted; I believe that property is theft; so I should stand up and be counted.' And so she stands up, and is counted. The fact that she believes that property is theft is part of her justification, but the fact, or supposed fact, that property is theft is not.

Now, returning to (2),

(2) James went to church because he believed it would please his mother,

it should be clear that the justification it attributes to James is not like Roger's justification for seeing his doctor or Ruth's justification for standing up. It is *what* (2) says James believed, namely, that going to church would please his mother, and not the fact, or supposed fact, that he believed it. So if we imagine James reasoning *sotto voce*, (2) tells us we should imagine him saying, 'It will please Mother; so I shall go to church.' The premise is his justification, and it is about his mother rather than himself. So, as I said earlier, the *explanans* in (2) is the fact, or supposed fact, that James *believed* his going to church would please his mother, but the *ground* (2) attributes to James is *what* he is said to have believed.

Similarly, the ground that

(3) James went to church because he wanted to please his mother

p. 146

attributes to James is again that his going to church would please his mother, and not that he *wanted to* please his mother. The ground on which a man blinds himself or sees an analyst may be that he wants to sleep with his mother, but if (3) is true, the ground on which James went to church is not that he wanted to please his mother, although the fact that he wanted to please her does explain why he did so.

Our lax use of the term 'reason' can make us lose sight of the fact that if someone does an act because he believes that *p*, the ground on which he does it is not that he believes that *p*, but that *p*. But if we bear in mind that 'His reason for doing it' can mean *either* the *ground on which* he did it *or* the *reason why* he did it, it should be possible to avoid confusion.

(C)

The confusion between a ground and an *explanans* accounts for a claim Dancy defends in several publications, that when we give a true explanation of an intentional act by stating the agent's reasons for doing it, the *explanans* need not be a fact. He writes as follows:

The explanations we give when we specify the agent's reasons for acting [...] are unusual in being non-factive. What this means is that for the explanation to be correct as an explanation, it is not required that what is offered as *explanans* in fact be the case. [...] A perfectly correct explanation of an act might be:

His reason for doing it was that it would increase his pension.

But such an explanation cannot be factive, in the sense given above, since it can perfectly well be expanded thus:

His reason for doing it was that it would increase his pension, but he was sadly mistaken about that.¹⁰

Dancy acknowledges that we may prefer to use what he calls a ‘factive turn of phrase’ such as ‘He did it because it would increase his pension’. But ‘the difference between the factive and the non-factive [turns of phrase] cannot be of any real significance’, because either way we explain the act by ‘laying out the considerations in the light of which the agent acted’, and these considerations do not need to be true:

We can phrase our explanation as we like, and that is the end of the matter. [...] a thing believed that is not the case can still explain an action.¹¹

p. 147 What exactly is factivity? The term ‘factive’, in the relevant sense, was originally applied to verbs whose object in a true sentence must state a fact. Factive verbs are therefore a sub-class of *factual* verbs, verbs that take finite clauses as direct objects—such as ‘admit’, ‘agree’, and ‘say’—most of which refer to a kind of speech act or a kind of knowledge or belief. For example, ‘know’ and ‘believe’ are both factual verbs, but ‘know’ is factive, since what is known must be a fact, whereas ‘believe’ is not factive, since what is believed may be either true or false. But philosophers have also described the mental state of knowing as factive, and believing as non-factive. Dancy claims that some explanations are factive while others are not, and that the concept of knowledge is factive, but he also mentions a ‘factive turn of phrase’ and ‘the factive pressure of the word “because”’.¹² This is problematic in two ways.

First, it is true that the belief that doing X will increase one’s pension can be mistaken; but the belief that two is the square root of four cannot. Does this mean that the verb ‘believe’ (or believing) is factive in some cases and not in others? We could choose to say this, but it would be an unnecessary departure from the conventional idea of factivity, so it is better to say that ‘believe’ is not factive because what someone believes may be either true or false. Similarly, we *could* ask whether ‘explains why’ and ‘is the reason why’ are non-factive in some cases (or whether some explanations are non-factive), but it is better to ask whether they are factive or non-factive *tout court*, and to say that they *are* factive if and only if the *explanans* and the *explanandum* in a true explanation must both be facts.

Second, verbs, mental states, turns of phrase, explanations, concepts, and connectives form a bewilderingly heterogeneous group. Let us say that a sentence-forming operator *O* on one or more sentences or *that*-clauses, (that) *s*₁ ... (that) *s*_{*n*}, is factive if and only if the statement ‘*O*(that) *s*₁ ... (that) *s*_{*n*}’ cannot be true unless the statements ‘*s*₁’ ... ‘*s*_{*n*}’ are true. Accordingly, ‘explains why’ is factive if and only if ‘that *s*₁ explains why *s*_{*n*}’ cannot be true unless ‘*s*₁’ and ‘*s*_{*n*}’ are both true; ‘His reason for doing it was’ is factive if and only if ‘His reason for doing it was that *s*’ cannot be true unless ‘*s*’ is true; and so on.

If we define factivity in this way, ‘explains why’ is certainly factive. For if *a*’s being *F* explains why *b* is *G*, *b* is *G* because *a* is *F*; if *a*’s being *F* explains why *b* is not *G*, *b* is not *G* because *a* is *F*; if *a*’s not being *F* explains why *b* is *G*, *b* is *G* because *a* is not *F*; and if *a*’s not being *F* explains why *b* is not *G*, *b* is not *G* because *a* is not *F*.¹³ But ‘because’ must be factive, for if ‘*s*₁ because *s*₂’ is true, then ‘*s*₁’ and ‘*s*₂’ must also be true. So ‘explains why’ must be factive too.

p. 148 But *why* is ‘explains why’ factive? Dancy says, ‘knowledge is factive, because “He knows that it is raining but it isn’t” is uninterpretable’, but this gets things the wrong way round. On the contrary, ‘He knows that it is raining but it isn’t’ is uninterpretable—or at any rate cannot be true—because ‘He knows that’ is factive; ‘He knows that’ is factive because one cannot know (whereas one can believe) that something is the case if it is not the case; and one cannot know that something is the case if it is not the case because knowing (unlike believing) that something is the case is a relation between knowers and facts or truths.

Similarly, ‘explains why’ is factive because nothing can explain why something is the case if it is *not* the case, and if something is the case, a fiction or falsehood cannot explain why; and the reason for *this* is that

explaining why something is the case is a relation between one fact or truth and another—the relation of making intelligible or understood. For example, neither the fact that growth in China will slow down nor any other fact can explain why the price of oil will fall if in fact it will *not* fall. And if the price of oil *will* fall, but growth in China will not in fact slow down, then the proposition that growth in China *will* slow down cannot explain why the price of oil will fall, although of course it can seem to, if it seems to be a fact that growth in China will slow down.

Is ‘His reason for doing it was’ factive? Dancy says that ‘His reason for doing it was ... , but he was mistaken’ does not sound self-contradictory to him, adding ‘not everyone’s ears agree with me about this’.¹⁴ But many sentences can be interpreted in more than one way, depending on context and priming, and a sentence that is, and therefore sounds, contradictory when it is interpreted in one way may not be, or sound, contradictory when it is interpreted in another way. So if intuitions about ‘His reason for doing it was’ differ, we should expect to find that it can be interpreted in more than one way.

And of course it can. For as we have seen, the word ‘reason’ is not used exclusively to mean an *explanans*. It is also used to mean an explanatory factor, including a *ground*. Thus, if ‘His reason for doing it was that it would increase his pension’ is meant to imply that this—i.e. *that it would increase his pension*—explains why or is the reason why he did it, then ‘His reason for doing it was’ is factive, whereas if it is only meant to imply that this was the ground on which he did it, then it is *not* factive, because an *explanans* must be a fact, whereas a ground may be either true or false. Evidently, Dancy interprets it in the second way. He writes:

I suggest that locutions such as
 His reason for doing it was that it would increase his pension
 The ground on which he acted was that she had lied to him
 are not factive

p. 149 using ‘his reason for doing it’ and ‘the ground on which he acted’ as synonyms, and of course he is perfectly entitled to do this. His mistake is to confuse a ground and an *explanans*, and the comment, ‘We can phrase our explanation as we like [...] a thing believed that is not the case can still explain an action’, is a result of this confusion. For example, if Marcus married, but marrying was never going to increase his pension, what explains Marcus’s marrying is not the thing he believed, namely, *that marrying would increase his pension*. Stating his ground—the thing believed—is a way of explaining why he did it, and his ground need not be true. But when we explain an act in this way, the *explanans* is not the ground, the thing believed, but the fact, or supposed fact, that he believed it.

This kind of mistake is easy to make when statements are studied out of context. But when we are actually explaining conduct, instead of explaining how conduct is explained, we generally make it clear how ‘His reason for doing it was ... ’ should be understood.

6.4 Reasons, grounds, and knowledge

In the remainder of this chapter, I shall focus on a simple kind of explanation of intentional action, exemplified by

(1) James went to church because it would please his mother.

I shall argue that explanations of this kind, as they would normally be meant and understood, attribute knowledge of the *explanans* to the agent and not merely belief. This argument will lay a foundation for the

final chapters of the book, in which I shall defend the idea that knowledge is the ability to be guided by facts, and then show how this conception of knowledge provides a new solution to the problem posed by Plato in the *Meno* about whether knowledge is a better guide to acting the right way than true belief.

There are various kinds of *because*-explanations of intentional acts. In what I shall call the standard case, *the explanatory clause as a whole also expresses, or purports to express, the ground on which the agent did the act.**

p. 150 (1) is \hookrightarrow an example. For it implies *both* that the fact that it would please his mother explains why James went to church, *and* that the ground on which he went to church was that it would please his mother. Hence, it also implies that the ground on which James went to church was true, regardless of whether it was a reason, or a good reason, to go to church.

Compare (1) with

(2) James went to church because he believed it would please his mother

(3) James went to church because he wanted to please his mother

and

(4) James went to church because he knew it would please his mother.

Like (1), they identify the ground on which James went to church: (2) and (4) do so explicitly, since they contain the finite clause 'it would please his mother', whereas (3) also does so, but implicitly, since it contains instead the non-finite clause 'to please his mother'. But by contrast with (1), the ground is not expressed by the explanatory clause *as a whole* in (2), (3), or (4). (2) and (3) are therefore consistent with James's being mistaken about whether his going to church would please his mother, and although (4) implies that he was *not* mistaken, in this case the implication is due to the factivity of 'he knew' rather than the factivity of 'because'.

As I mentioned in 5.1, there are also *because*-explanations of intentional action that do not even identify a ground implicitly, or suggest that the agent had one, such as

(5) Sally bit a policeman because she was drunk

and

(6) Sally bit a policeman because she had had too much to drink.

In *this* kind of explanation, the *explanans* refers to the agent's state of mind, or a factor that affected it.

p. 151 My topic now is standard *because*-explanations, such as (1), as it would normally be meant and understood, where the explanatory clause as a whole expresses or purports to express the agent's ground. But I am not exclusively interested in action. Belief, desire, and feeling are just as much in the frame. Unlike (1), standard explanations of *these* phenomena are not even implicitly teleological, for we do not normally explain why someone *believes* X, or *wants* Y, or *feels* Z, by saying what her *aim* in believing or wanting or feeling these things is, or what *goal* her belief, desire, or \hookrightarrow feeling was meant to achieve. But that only goes to show that we should not associate grounds too closely with aims (as we saw in 6.2), and the question I shall pursue now applies in the same way to every *because*-explanation in which the explanatory clause as a whole expresses the agent's ground.

The question is what these explanations imply about the subject's cognitive state, about what she knows or believes. In particular, do they imply that the subject knows the *explanans*? For example, does (1) imply that

James *knew* that his going to church would please his mother? Or does it only imply that he *believed* this? Or does it imply neither of these things?

Consider first the idea that it implies neither knowledge nor belief. There is nothing to prevent us from setting aside the principle that a ground must be something the agent believes, and calling a premise on which he decides to act his ground, whether or not he believes it to be true. For example, in the case described in 6.3, where a meeting clashes with a game, we can choose to say, if we wish, that the ground on which Grace rescheduled the meeting was *that Charles had to attend a lecture*. But we do not have the same freedom of manoeuvre with standard *because*-explanations, because of the factivity of ‘because’. For example, if someone explained that Grace rescheduled the meeting *because Charles had to attend a lecture*, but added the disclaimer ‘mind you, she knew full well that he was planning to watch the game’, this would have the effect of putting the original explanation in scare-quotes; in other words, it would signal that it had been meant ironically, as if to add the qualification ‘or so she said’.

So we are left with the belief view and the knowledge view.

The *belief view* will seem plausible if we assume, with Dancy, that a standard *because*-explanation simply adds ‘the factive pressure of the word “because”’ to a statement of the agent’s ground. On this assumption,

(1) James went to church because it would please his mother

implies that James *believed* going to church would please his mother, because it implies that this is the ground on which he went to church, and it implies that James’s going to church *would* please his mother, because the *explanans* in a true explanation must be a fact. But it does not imply that James *knew* that it would please his mother. And the same applies to standard *because*-explanations of beliefs and feelings. On the same assumption, ‘Sebastian believes that he will be cured because the doctor said so’ implies that Sebastian believes truly that the doctor said he would be cured; and ‘Eleanor felt angry because a goal was disallowed’ implies that Eleanor believed truly ↵ that a goal was disallowed. But again, these explanations merely add the factive pressure of the word ‘because’ to the identification of a ground: they do not attribute knowledge of the *explanans* to Sebastian and Eleanor, only true belief.

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The *knowledge view* was first explicitly defended by Unger.¹⁵ But Prichard expressed it in passing in 1932, apparently without thinking that it needed to be defended:

[According to a certain view about duties] we can never, strictly speaking, do a duty, if we have one, because it is a duty, i.e. really in consequence of knowing it to be a duty [...] At best, if we have a duty, we may do it because we think without question, or else believe, or again think it possible that the act is a duty.¹⁶

The ‘i.e.’ signals the idea: one cannot do something *because* it is a duty unless one *knows* it is a duty, since doing something because it is a duty and doing it ‘really in consequence of knowing’ that it is a duty are one and the same thing.

I shall argue that the interpretation of standard *because*-explanations associated with the belief view is mistaken, and that the knowledge view is right: a ‘*standard*’ *because*-explanation of action, thought or feeling, i.e. one in which the explanatory clause expresses or purports to express the agent’s ground, implies that the agent knows the *explanans*.

Consider the following examples:

(A)

Suppose Jim made some truffles in the belief that Anna loves them, but he did not *know* that Anna loves truffles. (Perhaps he had overheard Anna's sister saying how much 'Anna' loves truffles without realizing that this was another Anna.) The *ground* on which Jim made truffles is evidently *that Anna (i.e. his Anna) loves them*. We can imagine him muttering *sotto voce* 'Anna loves truffles; so I shall make some'. But if in fact she does not love truffles, the *reason why* he made them cannot be *that Anna loves them*, because an *explanans* or *reason why* must be true. So in this case, he did not make truffles *because* Anna loves them. (This is common ground between all three views.)

p. 153 Presumably, he made truffles because he *believed* Anna loves them. But if that is the reason if his belief was false, then it is also the reason if it happened to be true. For comparison: if Meno took the left fork because a malevolent passer-by who wanted to lead him astray told him that that was the road to Larissa, then this remains the reason even if the passer-by was confused and gave Meno the right directions by mistake. The reason does not become the fact that the left fork was the road to Larissa, although we can register the fact that the directions were right by saying that Meno took the left fork because someone told him that that was the road to Larissa, *which happened to be true*. In the same way, we can register whether Jim's belief that Anna loves truffles was true or false by saying that he made truffles because he believed *truly* that Anna loves them or because he believed *falsely* that Anna loves them, but not by referring to his belief in the *explanans* if it was false and referring directly to Anna's love of truffles if it happened to be true.*

We need to be careful when we pronounce on what people would say in a given situation, not least because there are different ways speakers can expect what they say to be understood. But it is fairly clear that no one who understood this story would say that Jim made truffles because Anna loves them, and this cannot be explained by 'the factive pressure of the word "because"', because it still holds if we assume that Jim's belief was true. Nor is this a quirk of English. Every language in which it is possible both to explain intentional conduct and to distinguish between knowledge and true belief has a way of registering that if the *ground on which* an agent does an act is X, and X happens to be true, it does not follow that the *reason why* she does it is X. I would guess this means every language that is known. Scholars used to claim that the distinction between intentional and unintentional conduct was not recognized or understood in biblical or Homeric times, but this myth was demolished years ago.¹⁷ Similarly, Plato drew attention to the distinction between knowledge and true belief, but it was already implicit in the way people thought and spoke.

(B)

p. 154 The insufficiency of true belief is especially obvious if we consider a case where there can be no question of someone's knowing something because it is not a thing which *can* be known. For example, it was impossible to know in 1997 which team would win the 1998 World Cup. But suppose Marianne had unshakeable faith in the French team and bet 1000 francs that France would win. We know now that France was in fact going to win, but we also know that Marianne did not know this when she placed the bet. So why did she do it? Her *ground* may have been that France was going to win. We can imagine her murmuring (presumably in French) 'France *will* win; so I shall place a bet'. But the fact that France was going to win cannot be the *reason why* she placed the bet. ↪ Perhaps the reason is simply that she was convinced that France was going to win, or perhaps the story was more complicated than that. Perhaps Joan of Arc appeared to her in a dream and told her that France would win. But whatever the right answer is, it is certainly *not* simply that France was going to win.

(C)

These two examples make it clear that if the *ground* on which someone does something is X—i.e. the content of the belief because of which she does it is X—and X happens to be true, it does not follow that the *reason why* she does it is X. And if we consider some of the cases that pack the literature about knowledge, in

which true belief is supplemented by a particular kind of cause or justification, or by another condition, but still falls short of knowledge, it appears that nothing short of knowledge will suffice. I shall mention three familiar examples, and leave it to the reader to test this claim against others. Like disco music and the laminated wooden racquet, the first example belongs to a time when the debate about Gettier cases was livelier than it is today:

Henry is watching the television on a June afternoon. It is Wimbledon men's finals day, and the television shows McEnroe beating Connors; the score is two sets to none and match point to McEnroe in the third. McEnroe wins the point. Henry believes justifiably that (1) I have just seen McEnroe win this year's Wimbledon final, and reasonably infers that (2) McEnroe is this year's Wimbledon champion. Actually, however, the cameras at Wimbledon have ceased to function, and the television is showing a recording of last year's match. But while it does so McEnroe is in the process of repeating last year's slaughter. So Henry's belief (2) is true, and surely he is justified in believing (2). But we would hardly allow that Henry knows (2).¹⁸

Now suppose Henry, recalling that his brother backed McEnroe and stood to win £100, infers that his brother has won £100. It should be obvious that the fact that McEnroe is this year's champion is not the reason why Henry believes that his brother has won £100. The reason is that Henry *believes* that McEnroe is this year's champion. Hence, 'Henry believes that his brother has won £100 because he believes that McEnroe is this year's champion' is true; but 'Henry believes that his brother has won £100 because McEnroe is this year's champion' is false.

(D)

Next, consider a case described by Goldman:

A newspaper reporter observes p [say, that Assad has fled Damascus] and reports it to his newspaper. When printed, however, the story contains a typographical error so that it asserts not- p . When reading the paper, however, S[eb] fails to see the word 'not', and takes the paper to have asserted p . ↪ Trusting the newspaper, he infers that p is true. Here we have a continuous causal chain leading from p to S[eb]'s believing p ; yet S[eb] does not know p .¹⁹

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This example was originally designed to disprove a simple causal theory of knowledge, for the deviance in the causal chain prevents Seb from *knowing* that Assad has fled Damascus. But what concerns us now is whether it also prevents the *explanans* in a standard *because*-explanation of Seb's believing or feeling or doing something from being the fact that Assad has fled Damascus. For instance, suppose he infers that the Sunnis will come to power, or cancels a business trip to Beirut. Could it be true that he makes the inference or cancels the trip *because* Assad has fled?

It seems obvious that no one would say this—at least without qualification or elaboration—perhaps because causal explanation is not a transitive relation. For if the *explanans* in a true causal explanation must raise the probability of the *explanandum* to a point or by a degree that is above a certain threshold, then explanatoriness is not transmitted along sufficiently improbable or chancy sequences of events. Owens illustrates the point with a well-known nursery rhyme:

For want of a nail the shoe was lost,
 For want of a shoe the horse was lost,
 For want of a horse the rider was lost,
 For want of a rider the battle was lost,
 For want of a battle the kingdom was lost,
 And all for want of a horseshoe nail.

He comments: 'It requires a succession of accidents in order to keep the chain going and the first element can do little more than explain the second.'²⁰ The application of this point to the story about the newspaper report should be obvious, the accidents in this case being the errors in printing and reading, the second reversing the effect of the first.

But if we set aside the question of whether causal explanation is transitive, and assume that there is a way of interpreting 'Seb cancelled the trip because Assad had fled' in which it is validated simply by the existence of a 'continuous causal chain' connecting the two events, the question whether standard *because*-explanations of intentional acts implicitly attribute knowledge of the *explanans* to the agent is not affected. For if we interpret 'Seb cancelled the trip because Assad had fled' in this way, it ceases to be the kind of explanation the knowledge view and the belief view are in contention over, because the explanatory clause 'Assad had fled' no longer purports to express Seb's ground.

p. 156 Recall the ambiguity of 'Sally bit a policeman because she was drunk', which *might* be intended to identify the ground on which Sally bit a policeman, but is more likely not to be. The kind of *because*-explanation the knowledge view and the belief view are in contention over is the kind that is meant to identify a ground, whereas the kind that is made true by the existence of a causal chain—e.g. from drinking to biting, or from one man's flight to another man's cancellation—is the kind that is not.

(E)

Finally, the following is adapted from a well-known case attributed to Ginet:

George is touring the countryside in upstate New York. Delighted by the picturesque barns dotting the landscape, he photographs them one by one. Unbeknownst to him, most in fact consist only of façades, which the local tourist authority has arranged to look like barns from the road, but by chance one of the photographs he takes is of a real barn.

There is general agreement among philosophers who have thought about this kind of case that the one time George photographs a real barn, he believes truly, but does not know, that that is what he is doing. Their reasons differ. Some say it is because the processes that result in him believing he is photographing a barn are unreliable in this situation; others say it is because he believes mistakenly that he is photographing a barn in close counterfactual situations; and the reasons proposed by others are different again. But whatever the right explanation is, it seems clear that George does not know that he is photographing a real barn, and equally clear that he does not take the photograph *because the structure is a barn*, even though he can be expected to give this reason, should he be asked. Presumably, the reason why he takes this photograph is the same as the reason why he takes the others, namely, that he *believes* it is a barn, or that it looks like one.

These five examples do not *prove* that standard *because*-explanations imply that the agent knows the *explanans*. A series of examples could never prove this, because however many examples we examined it would always remain possible that a set of conditions falling short of knowledge which we had not considered would be sufficient to make the explanation true. But they do prove that true belief (cases (A) and (B)), true belief plus justification (case (C)), and true belief plus causation (cases (D) and (E)) are insufficient to make a standard *because*-explanation true. Whereas knowledge is sufficient. For if Jim made truffles because he *knew* that Anna loves them, and not merely because he believed truly that she loves them, the ground on which he made them remains the same, namely, *that Anna loves truffles*, but we can now say *either* that Jim made truffles because he knew Anna loves them *or* that Jim made truffles because Anna loves them, and there can be no objection to saying that the reason why Jim made truffles was simply *that Anna loves them*. And the same applies to Marianne, Henry, Seb, and George. In every case, *if we can explain the act (belief, desire, feeling, etc.) in terms of the agent's knowledge of a fact, then we can also explain it*

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directly in terms of the fact known. Knowledge, unlike belief, is transparent: we can look straight through it to the fact.

The evidence is not conclusive, but it is hard to explain unless Prichard's equation is right, unless doing something because of a fact and doing it 'really in consequence of knowing' the fact are one and the same thing. The orthodox view is that intentional action is explained by identifying the beliefs and desires that jointly caused it. But it turns out that the mental state that standard *because*-explanations invoke as an explanatory factor is knowledge rather than belief. Standard *because*-explanations do not mention knowledge explicitly, so this is easy to miss. But whereas 'The ground on which he acted was that she had lied to him' purports to identify the content of a *belief* because of which the agent did the act, standard *because*-explanations purport to identify a fact the agent knew.

We do not have a special word for a fact known considered as an explanatory factor—for what stands to knowledge as a ground stands to a belief and as an aim or intention stands to a desire—presumably because the transparency of knowledge lets us call it a 'reason why'. But it is not *merely* a reason why, for there are reasons why people do intentional acts that are not grounds, such as being drunk. It is a fact, as we sometimes put it, *in the light of which* the agent did the act being explained, a fact that *guided* her when she did it. The conclusion we have reached is in effect that the idea of being guided by a fact is not the same as the idea of doing, or believing, or feeling something on certain grounds, and it is not a compound of that idea together with truth, or truth and justification, or truth and causality, or any of the other agglomerations of ideas that were proposed as definitions of knowledge, and proved to be inadequate.

6.5 Conclusion

The principal claims I have defended in this chapter are as follows.

p. 158 First, there is no need to postulate a variety of functions for reasons to perform, such as explaining, justifying, favouring, and so on. The only function of a reason is to explain why something is the case. A justification for believing or doing something is an explanation of why it is \hookrightarrow just or right to believe it or do it, and a reason that 'favours' believing or doing something is one that would justify believing it or doing it in the absence of countervailing reasons.

Second, explanation is a relation between facts or truths, the relation of making intelligible or understood. But we commonly use the term 'reason' to refer to explanatory factors, as well as *explanantia*. The explanatory factors we refer to when we explain an intentional act include the agent's mental states and their contents, notably, desires and their contents, which are aims or intentions, and beliefs and their contents, which are grounds. The idea that explanations of intentional action are not factive is the result of confusing a ground on which an agent did a certain kind of act with a reason why he did it, i.e. an *explanans*.

Third, intentional action cannot be defined in terms of reasons, or 'the special question "Why?"' An intentional act is an expression of desire, while an act that is done for a reason is an expression of knowledge or belief. It is true that we can normally ask for the agent's reason for doing an intentional act. But this is not because the applicability of the question is what makes an act intentional, it is because desire normally produces action in combination with knowledge or belief. The applicability of Anscombe's 'special question "Why?"' cannot be what makes an act intentional, because the question also applies to unintentional acts, and to thoughts and feelings.

Finally, an explanation of an act in which the explanatory clause expresses or purports to express the agent's ground or reason for doing it implies that the agent knows the *explanans*. For instance, 'James went to church because it would please his mother' implies that James knew his going to church would please his

mother. It identifies a fact he was aware of and was guided by, or purports to do so, whereas ‘James went to church because he believed it would please his mother’ merely identifies a mental state his act expressed.

I first defended the idea that some explanations of intentional action that are generally thought to attribute belief to the agent actually attribute knowledge in my article ‘How Knowledge Works’. Since then, some have agreed that if one’s reason for doing an act is that *p*, then one knows that *p*, while others have disagreed.²¹ But as far as I know, all those who have disagreed have interpreted ‘one’s reason for doing the act’ as referring simply to the *ground on which* one did the act, regardless of the *reason why* one did it.²² The exposition here is designed to make the principal idea easier to accept by removing this reason for disagreement. As we shall see in the next chapter, this connection between knowledge and reasons offers the prospect of a new theory of knowledge.

Notes

- * Raz objects to an attempt to ‘[explain] reasons independently of value’ that it cannot ‘preserve the normativity of reasons’, ‘account for the fact that defying reasons is irrational’, or explain why ‘one may disregard a reason only to follow a more stringent one’ (Raz, *Engaging Reason*, p. 28). These remarks support the view that the idea of a *justification* cannot be explained ‘independently of value’, but they do not count against the view that reasons in general are explanations, and that a justification is a particular kind of explanation, namely, an explanation of why something is just or right.
- * If a fact is a true proposition, the standard case is one in which the explanation as a whole implies that the *explanans* is the agent’s ground; whereas if (as argued in 7.2) a fact is the truth of a proposition, it is one in which the explanation as a whole implies that the *explanans* is *the truth of* the agent’s ground. The formulation in the main text is designed to avoid relying on either view about the relationship between facts and propositions at this stage.
- * Bernard Williams comments that ‘the difference between false and true beliefs on the agent’s part cannot alter the *form* of the explanation which will be appropriate to his action’ (‘Internal and External Reasons’, repr. in *Moral Luck*, p. 102). The purpose of the remark is to support the view (which Williams ultimately rejects) that if someone who wants to drink gin and believes that some stuff is gin has a reason to drink it *if his belief is true*, then he has a reason to drink it *if his belief is false*—if the stuff is actually petrol, for example.

Notes

1. Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events*, p. 12; von Wright, *Practical Reason*, p. 54, but cf. von Wright, *In the Shadow of Descartes*, pp. 10f; Audi, *Action, Intention and Reason*, pp. 15f; Dancy, *Practical Reality*, pp. 132f; Raz, *Practical Reason and Norms*, p. 17.
2. For example, see Raz, *Practical Reason and Norms*, p. 19.
3. Cf. Raz, *From Normativity to Responsibility*, pp. 18f.
4. When the terms ‘*explanans*’ and ‘*explanandum*’ were introduced into analytic philosophy by Hempel and Oppenheim in their ‘Studies in the Logic of Explanation’ (pp. 136f), they were meant to refer to sentences. They are now commonly used to refer to the facts stated rather than the sentences used to state them, so that different sentences can be used (e.g. in different languages) to state the same *explanandum* or *explanans*.
5. Strawson, *Analysis and Metaphysics*, pp. 109ff.
6. Geach, *Mental Acts*, p. 8.
7. Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events*, p. 6. See also Kenny, *The Metaphysics of Mind*, pp. 38ff; Stout, *Action*, ch.2.
8. Anscombe, *Intention*, §5.
9. Anscombe, *Intention*, §17.
10. Dancy, ‘Two Ways of Explaining Actions’, pp. 25f; cf. Setiya, *Reasons Without Rationalism*, pp. 29 & 42.
11. Dancy, *Practical Reality*, p. 134.
12. Dancy, ‘Acting in Ignorance’, p. 350.
13. Either a *that*-clause or a nominal *-ing* clause can be used to express the *explanans*. I have used the latter here because it is more idiomatic. See Quirk et al., *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*, 11.23f.
14. Dancy, *Practical Reality*, p.132.

15. See Unger, *Ignorance*, at pp. 206ff. Regrettably, I was not aware of this passage in Unger's book when I defended the claim in my article 'How Knowledge Works', so I failed to acknowledge his priority.
16. Prichard, *Moral Obligation*, p. 24.
17. See ch. 4, n. 8.
18. Dancy, *Introduction to Contemporary Epistemology*, p. 25.
19. Goldman, 'A Causal Theory of Knowing', p. 363. Goldman does not seem to distinguish between events and propositions, but the story could easily be amended to rectify this.
20. Owens, 'Levels of Explanation', p. 76. The detail of Owens's argument, but not the principal point, is challenged in Neander & Menzies, 'David Owens on Levels of Explanation'.
21. Those who have agreed include Williamson, Raz, Hornsby, Alvarez, Neta, and McDowell; those who have disagreed include Dancy, Dustin Locke, and Setiya. See Williamson, *Knowledge and its Limits*, p. 64; Raz, *Engaging Reason*, p. 23; Hornsby, 'A Disjunctive Conception of Acting for Reasons', p. 251; Neta, 'Treating Something as a Reason For Action', p. 690; Alvarez, *Kinds of Reasons*, p. 25; McDowell, 'Acting in the Light of a Fact'; Dancy 'Acting in Ignorance', pp. 346f; Locke, 'Knowledge, Explanation and Motivating Reasons'; Setiya, *Reasons Without Rationalism*, p. 29.
22. Dustin Locke may be an exception. He explicitly considers whether one can be guided by a fact one does not know, and concludes that one can, relying on barn-façade cases such as (E). See his 'Knowledge, Explanation and Motivating Reasons'.