

Causes and Reasons

Philosophical Foundations of Explanation

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1 Analysing reasons

2 Differences between reasons and causes

Davidson on reasons

Davidson 1963: “The primary reason for an action is its cause.”

“A primary reason consists of a belief and an attitude,”

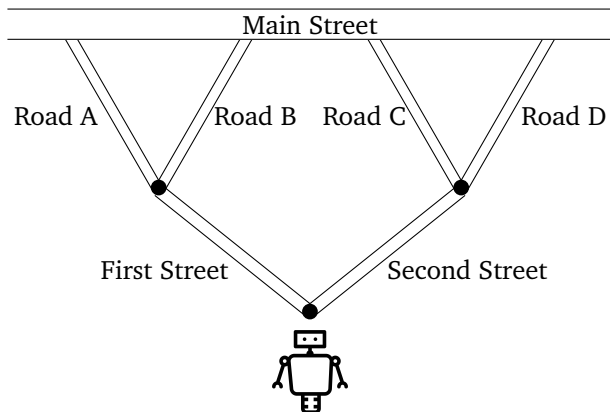
a person can have a reason for an action, and perform the action, and yet this reason not be the reason why he did it. Central to the relation between a reason and an action it explains is the idea that the agent performed the action because he had the reason.
(Davidson 1963, p. 691)

Example

A mountaineer wants to get rid of the second climber on his rope. This thought unnerves him and causes him to loosen his grip. The other climber falls. (Davidson 1973, ‘Freedom to Act’)

- (1) The reason the climber let go of the rope is that he wanted to get rid of the second climber.

Reasons and sufficiency



- (2) The reason the robot took Road B was that it took First Street.
- Context 1: the robot turns at random
 - Context 2: the robot is programmed to always change direction

Reasons and sufficiency

- (3) a. The reason Ali has an Irish passport is that he was born in Ireland.
- b. The reason Ali has an Irish passport is that he was born in Europe.

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Context: the radio starts playing spontaneously.

- (4) I don't know the reason why the radio started playing.
- (5) I can see that the radio is plugged in, but I don't know the reason why it started playing.

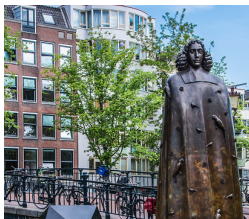
Reasons and sufficiency

- (3) a. The reason Ali has an Irish passport is that he was born in Ireland.
- b. The reason Ali has an Irish passport is that he was born in Europe.

Context: the radio starts playing spontaneously.

- (4) I don't know the reason why the radio started playing.
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- (6) Nothing exists of which it cannot be asked, what is the cause (or reason) [*causa (sive ratio)*], why it exists.



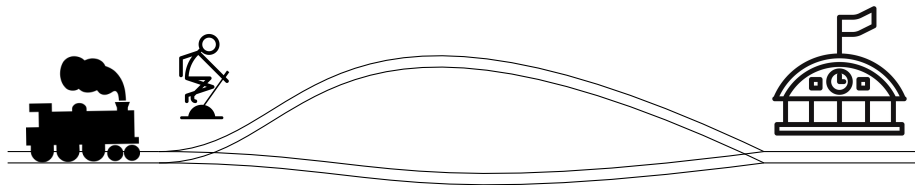
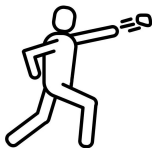


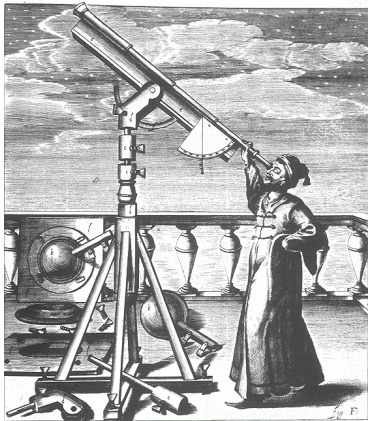
Figure: Hall's switching scenario.

- (7) The reason the train reached the station was that the engineer pulled the lever.



- (8)
- a. The reason the bottle broke was that Suzy threw her rock at it.
 - b. The reason the bottle broke was that Billy threw is rock at it.

One morning, the morning star was moving in an irregular way. Galileo to get his telescope to observe it. He believes that the morning star and the evening star are different planets (in fact they are both Venus).



- (9)
- a. The reason Galileo got his telescope was that the morning star was moving in an irregular way.
 - b. The reason Galileo got his telescope was that the evening star was moving in an irregular way.
- (10)
- a. The reason Galileo got his telescope was the morning star's irregular movement.
 - b. The reason Galileo got his telescope was the evening star's irregular movement.

- (11) a. Galileo's reason for getting his telescope was that the morning star was moving in an irregular way.
b. Galileo's reason for getting his telescope was that the evening star was moving in an irregular way.
- (12) a. Galileo's reason for getting his telescope was the morning star's irregular movement.
b. Galileo's reason for getting his telescope was the evening star's irregular movement.

- (13)
- a. The morning star's irregular movement caused Galileo to get his telescope.
 - b. The evening star's irregular movement caused Galileo to get his telescope.
- (14)
- a. Galileo got his telescope because the morning star was moving in an irregular way.
 - b. Galileo got his telescope because the morning star was moving in an irregular way.

- Galileo believes that the **morning star** was moving in an irregular way,
- but does not believe that the **evening star** was moving in an irregular way.

*Lois Lane is dating Clark Kent, but does not realise that he is Superman.
He was in an accident, and phones Lois Lane to visit him in hospital.*

- (15)
- a. The reason Lois Lane visited the hospital is that Clark Kent was in an accident.
 - b. The reason Lois Lane visited the hospital is that Superman was in an accident.

Lois Lane is dating Clark Kent, but does not realise that he is Superman. He was in an accident, and phones Lois Lane to visit him in hospital.

- (15)
 - a. The reason Lois Lane visited the hospital is that Clark Kent was in an accident.
 - b. The reason Lois Lane visited the hospital is that Superman was in an accident.

- (16)
 - a. Clark Kent being in an accident caused Lois Lane to go to the hospital.
 - b. Superman being in an accident caused Lois Lane to go to the hospital.

Eidelson's example

Suppose that Sally goes to her school's chess club meetings because she loves chess. One day the principal learns that a fight broke out at the last chess club meeting, and she decides to interrogate everyone who was there (including Sally). Using "because of" in a bare causal sense, one could say that the principal interrogated Sally because of Sally's love of chess. And a simple "but-for" test would support that conclusion: but for Sally's love of chess, she would not have been interrogated. Nonetheless, Sally could not honestly charge that the principal had decided to interrogate her because of—that is, "by reason of" or "on account of"—her love of chess. Such a complaint would clearly misdescribe what had happened. After all, the principal cares only that Sally was at a gathering that came to blows; she does not care at all about Sally's degree of interest in chess.

(Eidelson 2021, pp. 797–798)

- (17) The principal interrogated Sally because of Sally's love of chess.

Could sufficiency account for Eidelson's example?

Suppose we argue that Sally's love of chess was not sufficient for her to be interrogated (she could love chess but go to a different club). But is there still a contrast between the following cause and reason claims?

- (18) a. Sally's love of chess is part of what caused the principal to interrogate her.
- b. Sally's love of chess is part of the reason why the principal interrogated her.

- (19) a. Among the causes of Sally being interrogated by the principal is that she loves chess.
- b. Among the reasons why Sally was interrogated by the principal is that she loves chess.

If there is, since sufficiency is part of the meaning of both cause and reason claims, it seems there is more to the contrast than sufficiency.

It shall be an unlawful employment practice for an employer—to fail or refuse to hire or to discharge any individual ... because of such individual's race, color, religion, sex, or national origin.

(Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act)




the [United States] Supreme Court has long held that “[l]iability in a disparate-treatment case ‘depends on whether the protected trait ... actually motivated the employer’s decision.’ ”

(Eidelson 2021, p. 798)

If x is a reason that A , then A is true.

it is inconsistent to say “His reason was that the store was going to close, but it wasn’t going to close”.

(Unger 1975, p. 208)

-  Davidson, Donald (1963). Actions, reasons, and causes. *Journal of Philosophy*, pp. 685–700.
-  Eidelson, Benjamin (2021). Dimensional Disparate Treatment. *Southern California Law Review*. 95, pp. 785–856.
-  Unger, Peter (1975). *Ignorance: A case for scepticism*. Clarendon Press.