

## **The Agent and Her Operative Reasons: Binding the Normative to the Mental**

We have (at least) these three flavours of reasons for action: explanatory, normative and operative. They are, respectively, the causes of actions, the units of normative authority with respect to actions, and the judgments on the part of the actors themselves, expressible though not necessarily expressed, as to the causes and normative rationales of their actions (cf. Hieronymi 2011). I undertake to demonstrate that, in their characteristic ways, each of these three flavours of reasons contribute as essential components to a Kantian conception of agency. On this Kantian conception, action is movement trained on normative success, where the mover is aware of this success as something attempted but not assured, that is, as something pursued by herself understood as causal apparatus that can fail in realizing its intended effect. This self-understanding is afforded to her by her conception of herself as a mind comprised of intentional attitudes that may misrepresent their objects. Thus, inasmuch as she is an agent, though she must attend constantly to her normative reasons as far as she is able, and obey their dictates as she finds them, she nevertheless has recourse to an attitude-citing explanation of her behaviour, one that can be relied upon to reveal her efforts to move so as to satisfy the demands that normativity makes of her, even when these efforts are frustrated or confused. The operative reason, in particular, functions as the site for the manifestation of this effort, and of agency itself; moreover, in this way, it tethers the normative to the mental, and situates the agent between the two.

I proceed in two sections. The first offers rough sketches of explanatory, normative and operative reasons with a view to establishing the boundaries between them. I hew rather closely to the Davidsonian conception of explanatory reasons (1980), according to which such reasons are causes constituted by attitudes. The challenge is to square this conception of explanatory reasons, whatever its original merits, with the recognition that we act from normative entities directly, and not from attitudes (Nagel 1986; Scanlon 1998; Dancy 2000). On first gloss, at least, we are

presented with the impression that the motivational bases of our actions derive from the *contents* of our attitudes, from their intentional objects, the putatively normative reasons that we interpret to be considerations that count in favour of particular actions or attitudes. It is as though the attitudes themselves are epiphenomenal; the contents do all the work.

Agents' first-personal reports, it must be granted, often corroborate this impression. As I regard my behaviour from the perspective I adopt in my capacity as architect of that behaviour, it is because my life is threatened that I act so as to preserve my life. My *belief* to the effect that my life is threatened is, as represented from this perspective, immaterial. And yet, because agents are fallible—they may misidentify the relevant facts, or surrender to akratic impulses—we cannot appeal immediately to normative reasons to explain actions. Supposing it happens that I act so as to preserve my own life, believing it is threatened, when in fact I am in error, and there is no threat, then it is not the contents of the belief that by themselves explain the resulting action, since *ex hypothesi* these contents are not veridical (and explanation, being factive, can only proceed from what has actually happened). Rather, and this is where the case for attitudinal explanations reasserts itself, we must appeal to the belief itself, with its non-veridical contents.

Granting Davidson's proposal that actions originate causally in attitudes, we must all the same posit normative reasons alongside attitudinal explanatory reasons since it is normativity that supplies our basis for depicting agency as intelligent. Operative reasons are instances of that intelligence; they are the results of the agent's efforts to determine what her normative reasons are. From the agent's perspective, the normative and the explanatory converge in the operative reason. She conceives it (sometimes mistakenly) as both the explanation of her action and its normative basis.

The second section of the paper fits these different flavours of reasons together into a single picture, with the operative bridging the gap between explanatory and normative. It does this by

interpreting operative reasons as akin to the maxims, the subjective principles of volition, of Kant's normative psychology (1997). In devising our maxims, we are mindful to the fact that normativity governs our will in the form of imperatives – commands issued to recalcitrant subjects – and the will, though it owes its authenticity to its striving to conform to these commands, is necessarily imperfect in so conforming, as manifested in its ignorance and akrasia. The agent understands herself as mediated in her relationship to the world by beliefs, and as mediated in her relationship to her imperatives by desires. While her will aspires after the normative, and in this way acts *from* normative reasons, it is itself comprised of attitudes, such that its exercise is to be explained attitudinally, as in Davidson.

In developing this conception of operative reasons, I hope to capture an aspect of the dynamics of the intentional attitudes involved in volition. I've said that, when agents err, an attitude, perhaps a normative belief or a straightforwardly conative attitude, like an intention, is invoked to reconcile the agency with the error. But in the absence of error, these attitudes, if they are to be at all compatible with the experiences of the agent herself, must be portrayed as translucent, seen through directly to their contents. While it is only in cases of agential failure that these attitudes announce themselves, and are in this way revealed in their entirety, they are nonetheless a constant presence. This dynamics in the phenomenology of volitional attitudes maps onto the reality of operative reasons. The operative reason is, for lack of a better term, liminal; in the success case, its content matches the corresponding fragment of normative reality, and in the fail case, it is not its content at all, but rather it is the vessel for that content, an attitude. This indeterminacy would be troubling were it not the case that we find this same liminality in agency itself. We are aware that, as we engineer our maxims, our *subjective* principles of volition, we can only strive after acquaintance with our object, our normative reasons, and have no guarantee of reaching it. In fact, to recognize

that our engagement with normativity is mediated by attitudes is to recognize that engagement *as* agency.

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