Abstract: The standard argument for the causal theory of action is “Davidson’s Challenge”: explain the connection between reasons and actions without appealing to the idea that reasons cause actions. I argue that this is an argument to the best contrastive explanation. After examining the nature of contrastive explanation in detail, I show that the causalist does not yet have the best explanation. The best explanation would appeal further to the motivational strength of reasons. Finally, I show how this undermines the argument for causalism, since noncausalists, too, can meet Davidson’s Challenge by appealing to motivational strength to explain the cases at issue.

1. Introduction

Philosophers of action agree that actions are essentially connected with reasons in some way. But what way? According to one theory, the connection is a causal one. Reasons are composed of pairs of mental states, namely beliefs and desires, and every intentional action is an event for which a causal explanation can be given in terms of those mental states. In contrast to the causal theory, most noncausal theories of action emphasize the essentially normative character of reasons, actions, agents, and the connections between them. According to this view, although reasons are crucial to the explanation of action, their explanatory function is not causal.

The topic of this paper is the contest between the causal theory (“causalism”) and the noncausal theory of action (“noncausalism”). This dispute is not as lively as it once was. Donald Davidson’s landmark paper “Actions, Reasons, and Causes” is perhaps most responsible for the causal theory having become the dominant view. In that paper, Davidson argued against the prevailing noncausalist argument of the day (the “Logical Connection Argument”) and articulated what has become the
standard positive argument for causalism. Like many widely influential arguments, Davidson’s positive argument for causalism is seemingly very straightforward. I will show that Davidson’s argument is not as simple as it appears and spell out what I take to be the argument’s true structure. Second, I will capitalize on this complexity to show that Davidson’s argument is actually susceptible to a fairly obvious noncausalist rejoinder.

I will argue that Davidson’s argument is an argument to the best explanation and, specifically, an argument to the best contrastive explanation. In order to show the latter, I will discuss in some detail the nature of contrastive explanation and two conditions of adequacy on them. Once we see how Davidson’s argument is supposed to be an argument to the best contrastive explanation, it will become clear that he does not in fact have the best explanation of the phenomena that concerns him. He merely appeals to the “reasons-are-causes” thesis, but in order to have an adequate explanation, he must also appeal to a further property of reasons, namely their motivational strength. Finally, I will show how this complication in the argument for causalism undercuts the case against noncausalism, as noncausalists, too, can appeal to the notion of motivational strength to explain the cases at issue.

2. Davidson’s Challenge

In this section I will introduce Davidson’s argument and briefly show that it is an argument to the best explanation. The argument is often characterized as “Davidson’s Challenge”, i.e. the challenge to explain the connection between reasons and action without appealing to causality:

I would urge that, failing a satisfactory alternative, the best argument for a scheme like Aristotle’s [i.e. a causal one] is that it alone promises to give an account of the “mysterious connection” between reasons and actions.

From this alone it should be clear that Davidson’s argument for causalism fits the pattern of an argument to the best explanation. We need to make sense of what it is to act on a reason. However, merely asserting that the causal hypothesis best explains the connection between reasons and actions is not an argument. Davidson needs to show us why causalism provides the best explanation and, importantly, what exactly it explains.

A persuasive move to this end would be to draw attention to some particular aspect of the connection between reasons and actions that causalism can explain and that noncausalism cannot. In that case, it would be clear why we are supposed to prefer the causal account. One proposal, often cited in reconstructions of Davidson’s argument, is that the causal hypothesis best explains the force of the “because” in reasons-explanations,
as in “S did A because of reason R (S believed . . . and wanted . . . ).” According to this interpretation of Davidson, the target of explanation is reasons-explanation itself. Why should this require explanation? Recall that the argumentative context is one in which the causalist claims to explain something better than the noncausalist. It is in this light that we can appreciate the need for an explanation of the force of the “because” in reasons-explanations. How could appealing to reasons explain actions except on the assumption that they are causes? More pointedly, the causalist notes that mere justification, rationalization, or showing that the action was “the thing to do” – the noncausalist’s conception of reasons-explanation – do not suffice to explain an action.

Carl Hempel argued (several years prior to Davidson) precisely in this vein against William Dray’s account of historical explanation. Dray took the position that the “logic” of such explanations is essentially normative; they show that the action was “the thing to do” from the agent’s point of view. But Dray’s account, according to Hempel, cannot possibly explain why A did X. For . . . any adequate answer to the question why a given event occurred will have to provide information which, if accepted as true, would afford good grounds for believing that the event did occur. Now, the information that agent A was in a situation of kind C and that in such a situation the rational thing to do is x, affords grounds for believing that it would have been rational for A to do x, but no grounds for believing that A did in fact do x.4

According to Hempel’s conception of explanation, an event is explained “by showing that, in view of certain particular circumstances and general laws, its occurrence was to be expected.” Let’s call this the expectability condition. Hempel takes the expectability condition to be a necessary condition for explanation. Now we can see that Hempel’s objection is that Dray’s rationalizations fail to meet the expectability condition, so they cannot possibly be explanations.

Dray was not much impressed with this argument. Rightly so, it seems, for Dray’s rationalizations certainly can meet the expectability condition. Why shouldn’t they? We appeal to the normative/rational (that such and such was “the thing to do” in those circumstances) all the time to make predictions of behavior, especially when trying to predict on any other grounds would be highly intractable or impossible.5 And since explanations are just predictions in reverse for Hempel, I think this consideration is decisive against him.6

A defender of Hempel might say that reasons-explanations cannot be as Dray thinks they are because there are many rationalizations available for any given action, all of which make the action seem like “the thing to do.” So something must be added, e.g. an appeal to laws, causation, or both.7 But the noncausalist response is to point out that this is no different from
causal explanation. One can cook up many possible causal explanations for any given event, all of which seem to make the event to be expected. The trick is to hit upon the right one; so too for rationalizations. And the “right rationalization” will be one that appeals to the reason(s) the agent actually had.

Here Davidson enters the picture with an innovation to Hempel’s argument. “Ah,” we can read him as saying, “but sometimes an agent actually has more than one reason to perform an action and only acts upon one of those reasons. How do you explain that?” While the context for the argument is still “how reasons manage to explain,” the actual target of explanation is “what reasons must be” (i.e. causes). Davidson argues for causalism by drawing attention to a particular sort of scenario:

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.8

The case that concerns Davidson is, therefore, one in which the agent actually has more than one reason for an action but only acts upon one of them. For example: Luke ate fifty hard-boiled eggs. Why did he do this? He wanted to win the bet that he could not do it. But his real reason, the reason that he did it, was not to satisfy that desire at all, but rather because “it was something to do” (which we might interpret as a desire to alleviate boredom). Davidson’s claim is that the only way to account for the fact that the latter reason was the reason on which Luke acted, given that he had another reason, is to suppose that his desire for something to do caused his action, whereas his desire to win the bet did not.

I will call cases like Luke’s, in which an agent has multiple reasons for an action but only performs the action for one (or some subset) of those reasons, “multiple-reasons cases.” Davidson’s argument for causalism consists in pointing out the existence of such cases and claiming that the causal theory can explain them and the noncausal theory cannot. Davidson’s improvement on Hempel’s argument was to show that there is a problem with understanding how reasons manage to explain because there is a puzzle about what reasons are, or, more properly, a puzzle about the connection between reasons and actions. Davidson thinks that reasons must be causes; that is the only way to make sense of multiple-reasons cases. And, on those grounds, he concludes that reasons-explanations are not mere rationalizations (though they are special in being that, too), but causal as well.

It may be tempting to suppose that if an agent has two reasons to perform some action and performs the action, then he must have performed it for both reasons. Luke might have eaten the eggs both to relieve boredom and to win the bet. But we should not confuse these “compound-reasons”
cases with the sort of cases that interest Davidson. Compound-reasons cases do not generate a special puzzle, besides the general one about what it is to act on a reason, and so the causalist gains no ground in pointing them out. Rather, to motivate his view, he needs the puzzle generated by an agent’s failure to act on an available reason. And unless we grant the causalist the existence of such cases, his argument will not get off the ground. Denying the existence of multiple-reasons cases is the most common reaction to Davidson’s argument for causalism (as I discovered to my surprise in many discussions of it with different audiences). This is a sign, I think, that the argument has managed to be convincing even though it has not been well-understood. I think that multiple-reasons cases do occur, so I am willing to grant Davidson the sort of case he needs. However, even if there are no multiple-reasons cases, nobody can deny that there are many common cases in which an agent has competing reasons to perform different actions and only acts on one of them. Davidson could make his argument equally well with such “divergent-reasons” cases, though I will focus on the multiple-reasons cases.

The argument for causalism that I have described in this section is ubiquitous. It is no exaggeration to say that it is responsible for the near-universal acceptance of the causal theory of action. I am not convinced, however, that the real structure of the argument is very well understood, aside from the fact that it is a challenge to the noncausalist (and perhaps that it is therefore an argument to the best explanation). We must take a closer look at the phenomenon that the causalist purports to explain. What does it mean to explain multiple-reasons cases? In the following, I will argue that the target of explanation is a contrastive phenomenon. This insight will provide us with the key to undermining Davidson’s argument, for it will become apparent that a bare appeal to causality does not best explain the contrastive phenomenon in question. In order to explain this phenomenon, the causalist must additionally appeal to the motivational strength of reasons.

3. Contrastive questions

In order to show that the causalist is required to appeal to motivational strength, I will show that his explanation of the “mysterious connection” between reasons and actions belongs to the class of contrastive explanations. This section and the next give a general account of contrastive explanation and describe two conditions of adequacy for them. Then I will show how this model can be used to shed light on the structure of the argument for causalism.

Whether a particular piece of information is explanatory often depends on our own interests. This is to say that the constraints on informativeness
depend at least in part on us. Contrastive questions and explanations demonstrate this nicely.\textsuperscript{10} Suppose you ask why so many of the people on the \textit{Titanic} died of hypothermia and receive the reply that there were not enough lifeboats to accommodate all of the passengers after the ship sank. “Yes,” you say, “I know \textit{that}. I meant why did so many of the passengers die of hypothermia \textit{rather than} drown?” The contrast that one is interested in determines when certain bits of information count as informative explanations and when they do not. In this case, the explainer thought the relevant contrast was \textit{die rather than live}, and the questioner was actually interested in \textit{die of hypothermia rather than drown}.

In order to understand how these explanations work, let’s first examine the contrastive questions that prompt them. The canonical form of a contrastive question is “Why is A the case \textit{rather than} B?” I will adopt Peter Lipton’s terminology, as he has offered the most comprehensive account of contrastive explanation.\textsuperscript{11} He calls A the “fact” and B the “foil.” In order for contrastive questions to make sense, the fact and foil must be “suitably related.” One can ask for an explanation of anything one likes, of course, but there is a certain peculiarity in asking, for instance, “Why did I fail my driver’s test the first time \textit{rather than} Apollo 13 successfully land on the moon?”

It is hard to say why this question is peculiar or what the “suitably related” requirement really comes to. One tempting proposal is that fact and foil must be related in being incompatible, in it’s not being possible that they both be the case. Thus, the events in the above question are not suitably related because they could have both been the case. In fact, the incompatibility requirement is a standard assumption about contrastive explanation.\textsuperscript{12} Lipton argues, however, that this assumption is false.

We often ask a contrastive question when we do not understand why two apparently similar situations turned out differently. In such a case, far from supposing any incompatibility between the fact and foil, we ask the question just because we expected them to turn out the same.\textsuperscript{13}

To illustrate, Lipton appeals to the much discussed syphilis and paresis case: though only Smith got paresis, we can still ask for an explanation of why he did \textit{rather than} Jones, where of course it was \textit{possible} that they both get it.

Other counterexamples to the incompatibility requirement involve action. To foreshadow a bit, one contrastive question that we might ask would be “Why did S do A \textit{rather than} B?” Sometimes the actions will be incompatible, but not always, a fact apparent from a slightly more complicated contrastive why-question: “Why did S do A and not B \textit{rather than} doing \textit{both} A and B?” Granted, asking the first question is distinct from asking the “rather than both” question (the fact and foil \textit{are}
incompatible in the second case). The point is just that there are pairs of explananda for which one could ask both contrastive questions. I agree, therefore, with Lipton’s view that the incompatibility of fact and foil is not necessary for contrastive questions. Nevertheless, fact and foil must be suitably related in some way.

Some contrastive questions are asked in such a way as to flag the way in which fact and foil are suitably related. We sometimes ask questions of the form, “Given that . . . , why A rather than B?” or “Why is A the case, given that B . . . ?” “Given” clauses usually function to signal some information that is taken for granted, that is not contested, or, in the context of explanation, that is not up for explanation. That is, using given-clauses is a way of stating the presupposition of the explanation. This is a well-recognized function of given-clauses in explanatory questions. However, I want to propose that given-clauses, as represented in the above questions, can serve a different function connected with providing information about the relation between fact and foil.

What we want to know determines what we ask to be explained; and how we ask for explanations is determined in part by what we know, what we think we know, or what we suspect. This is evident in explicitly contrastive questions. If you ask, “Why A rather than B?”, you are already bringing forward certain ideas about what the possibilities are (A and B). Without examining the context of the question, it is hard to see in advance what it is about A and B that makes them an appropriate pair, i.e. why they are suitably related so as to be paired in the question. However, sometimes questioners bring forward other ideas that do make this clear. Questioners mention ideas about why one would have expected the foil to be the case, or why, given some similarity between fact and foil, there is apparently no good reason for expecting fact rather than foil to have been the case. These ideas are expressed with given-clauses and indicate the way in which fact and foil are suitably related – why someone would be asking about that particular pair (or set) of options.

Why are the Beatles playing first rather than the Velvet Underground? Here the options involve which band plays first. Implicit in this question, which may very well be driving it, is the idea that the bigger band ought to or usually plays second. Given that the Beatles are the bigger band, it is odd that they are playing first. So, making this explicit, one might ask, “Why are the Beatles playing first, rather than the Velvet Underground, given that the Beatles are the bigger band?” In this case, the questioner has ideas about fact and foil that lead him to think that foil actually should have been the case. The point of the question is to discover why it was not, and the point of including the given clause is to help the explainer understand what specifically needs to be addressed.

Some contrastive questions with explicit given-clauses, which I will call “given-contrastives,” are asked because the items or circumstances
involved in the fact and foil appear to be similar in some key way. The questioner does not understand why the foil should not have also occurred or occurred instead of the fact. For example, one might ask “Why did the Dictator invade country X rather than Y, given that both countries had the natural resources that the Dictator needed?” Here the questioner has certain ideas about why the Dictator may have invaded a country and is puzzled since the reason does not seem to distinguish between fact and foil.

In summary, contrastive questions have a fact/foil structure, and in order for the question to make sense, fact and foil must be “suitably related.” What determines suitability is probably the context of the question and the interests of the questioner. But sometimes we can tell from the form of the question, i.e. in given-contrastives, what the fact and foil have to do with one another, such that it would be natural to ask a contrastive question about them. I indicated that given-contrastives are of at least two types: either the information in the given-clause indicates why the foil was to be expected or the information in the given-clause indicates some way in which the fact and foil are similar, such that, one would not have had reason to favor the occurrence of either fact or foil. I will now turn to a model of contrastive explanations.16

4. Contrastive explanations: two rules

So far, we have discussed what it is to ask for a contrastive explanation. Is there an account of what we are doing, in general, when we give a contrastive explanation? As I mentioned, Peter Lipton has offered an influential and elegant account of contrastive explanation, inspired by David Lewis’s discussion of causal explanation and Mill’s method of difference. I will offer a modified version of Lipton’s account.

Lipton takes most explanation to be causal, and thus his account of contrastive explanation is couched in causal terms.17 For Lipton, the central kind of explanation is one in which the occurrence of event A rather than B is explained. Suppose a platform is supported by two pillars, pillar A and pillar B (this is not Lipton’s case). Pillar A collapsed, causing the collapse of the platform. We might inquire why the platform fell. The answer would cite the collapse of pillar A. However, we might also wish to know why pillar A collapsed rather than pillar B (or why not both). Suppose the explanation cites the fact that there was water damage to pillar A and no water damage to pillar B. The explanation, like the question, refers to B. An explanation that only cited the causal explanation of A’s collapse would not suffice to answer the question. This is the first lesson about contrastive explanations: they must include relevant information about the foil in order to properly explain the contrast.
Lipton formalizes this feature of contrastive explanations in his “Difference Condition”:

To explain why P rather than Q, we must cite a causal difference between P and not-Q, consisting of a cause of P and the absence of a corresponding event in the history of not-Q.18

In the pillar case we cite the causal difference between A’s collapse and B’s failure to collapse – the water damage – that occurred to A but not B. Lipton clarifies,

The condition does not require that the same event be present in the history of P but absent in the history of not-Q . . . but only that the cited cause of P find no corresponding event in the history of not-Q where, roughly speaking, a corresponding event is something that would bear the same relation to Q as the cause of P bears to P.19

Like the “suitably related” condition, there is thus a potentially vague notion of “corresponding event” in this account. I think that this account is basically correct. Surely if we are interested in why one thing rather than another is the case, the only suitable explanation will be one that reveals some difference in them (at least as a start). I will rename Lipton’s condition of adequacy on contrastive explanations the “Basic Rule”: in order to explain the contrastive phenomena the explanation must address the foil by citing an explanatory item for the fact and the absence or failure of a corresponding item for the foil. I use “explanatory item” as a neutral term for whatever does or would do the explaining of the fact and foil. I hope in this way to capture the gist of Lipton’s account without committing to the view that there are only causal contrastive explanations. The key idea behind the Basic Rule, to reiterate, is that to explain a contrastive phenomenon, one should point out the absence or failure of an explanatory item corresponding to the fact’s explanatory item.

Despite the vagueness of the notions of corresponding events and explanatory items, they are valuable, for they will help us further understand the structure of explanations of given-contrastives and the condition of explanatory adequacy for them. Given-contrastives are explanatorily informed, in that the person asking for the explanation has information about a putative or possible non-contrastive explanation of the fact.20 So, for instance, in the Dictator case, the questioner has on hand an explanation of why the Dictator invaded country X: for its natural resources. Or, in the pillar case, the questioner has information or a hypothesis about the explanation of the collapse of pillar A: it had water damage. But besides this, the questioner is also informed21 about the occurrence or presence of a corresponding potential explanatory item for the foil. So the questioner is in the position of one who searches around for an explanation of the...
fact, finds one, and then notices that a corresponding story is available for the foil. And hence the questioner is in need of a distinctive sort of explanation and asks for one in such a way as to indicate this: she wants to know why the fact rather than the foil is the case, since a “corresponding item” for the foil is not absent, but present.

Let’s look at an example. Recall in the pillar case that we wanted to know why the platform collapsed. We know that pillar A’s collapse caused the collapse of the platform, but we went on to enquire why pillar A rather than pillar B collapsed. The answer that I proposed earlier was that pillar A had water damage and pillar B did not. Let’s now change the case. Suppose that both pillars have water damage and the questioner knows this. The assertion that A had water damage now does not answer the original contrastive question. Now we have a given-contrastive, an explanatorily informed one: “Why did pillar A collapse rather than pillar B, given that they both had water damage?”

Clearly the Basic Rule is not sufficient to describe the complex conditions of adequacy for explanations of given-contrastives. For in these cases, the very point at issue is the presence of the corresponding explanatory item for the foil, the absence of which would normally be cited in simple contrastives as the explanation for why the fact rather than the foil is the case. And so, an explanation that failed to address this would not meet the primary interest of the questioner. This, therefore, is the “Given Rule”: given-contrastives are only satisfactorily explained when the information in the given clause is addressed. Not only must we refer to pillar B in the explanation, but we must address its water damage and failure to collapse.

The information in the given-clause can be addressed in two ways, generally speaking. First, recall that given-contrastives are explanatorily informed, but only in the sense that the questioner has ideas about possible explanatory items for fact and foil. If this is wrong, then, she’ll be misguided in asking the contrastive question that she does. The most obvious way the questioner may be misguided is in thinking that the corresponding explanatory item is present for the foil. So, for instance, the questioner may be wrong in thinking that pillar B had water damage. Another way the question may be misguided is, for instance, if it turned out that water-damage had nothing at all to do with the collapse of Pillar A. In that case, asking why Pillar A collapsed rather than Pillar B, given that they both had water damage, will be inappropriate. The only answer can be “The fact that they both had water damage is irrelevant, since Pillar A collapsed for an altogether different reason, which is . . .”

So one way to address the given-clause and hence give a satisfactory explanation is to point out that the “corresponding explanatory item” for the foil is irrelevant either because it is not present after all or because the putative non-contrastive explanation of the fact is not what the
questioner seems to think it is. The second way the given-clause may be addressed pertains to those cases where the questioner is not misguided. So suppose that water damage is part of the explanation of why Pillar A collapsed and that pillar B does have water damage, too. In this case, the given-contrastive is a legitimate one, and Lipton's general idea still applies: to explain such cases, some difference between fact and foil must be cited. But in this case, it must be some difference between the fact's explanatory item and the corresponding item for the foil. And, of course, it cannot be the absence of the foil's explanatory item. Given this, it should be unsurprising that the explanation will often involve reference to some relational properties that these items possess. For instance, to explain the pillar case, we point out that Pillar A was weaker than Pillar B because its water damage was more extensive.

Generally, then, the Given Rule says that an explanation of a given-contrastive must address the information in the given-clause, either by showing it to be irrelevant or by showing that there is some difference between fact and foil in the explanatory items cited. Anything short of this is not an explanation of the contrastive phenomenon. An explanation that completely omitted the fact that pillar B also had water damage would not suffice to answer the contrastive question.

I have not tried to give a model of explanation or even a full model of contrastive explanation. I have, however, tried to bring out some of the features of contrastive explanations and two general conditions of adequacy for them. This will be useful for understanding the argument for causalism, as I shall now argue.

5. Contrastive explanation and action

Davidson's argument for causalism is an argument to the best explanation. But what precisely is it an explanation of? Clearly it is an explanation of a contrastive phenomenon. In multiple-reasons cases, agents act on one reason rather than another. A request for an explanation of this phenomenon is best phrased as a given-contrastive. We can, therefore, apply what we have learned about the conditions of adequacy for contrastive explanations to Davidson's explanation of multiple-reasons cases. I will argue that Davidson's bare appeal to the reasons-are-causes thesis does not satisfy the Given Rule. And when the causalist's explanation is amended in the natural way, we shall then see the weakness in Davidson's argument.

First, we should note that there is a difference between offering an explanation of an action and offering an explanation about the nature of action. I mention this distinction because the need for an addition to our reasons-explanation machinery for explaining actions has been noted by Davidson and other causalists:
A person may have a reason for preferring A to B and another reason for preferring B to A. This is an embarrassment for reason explanations, for they need to predict which reason will win out.22

Alfred Mele, a prominent causalist, makes the same point more clearly:

Suppose that we know that S had exactly one reason R₁ to do A and another reason R₂ to do B, a competing action. Suppose further that we learn that S intentionally A-ed and that R₁ was the reason for which he A-ed. We might still reasonably ask why S A-ed. We might want to know why S did A rather than B. Knowing the reason for which S A-ed does not satisfy our curiosity . . . 23

How is the embarrassment that Davidson mentions mitigated? Davidson provides the nearly universally accepted answer: we need to show that “S wanted more at the time to A than to do anything else, including B.”24 He observes more generally, “Any serious theory for predicting action on the basis of reasons must find a way of evaluating the relative force of various desires and beliefs in the matrix of decision.”25

Davidson speaks of desire-strength, but I will refer to the needed explanatory concept more generically as the motivational strength of reasons.26 Clearly this concept is a necessary part of our reasons-explanation machinery. We cannot hope to offer complete explanations of some actions without it. And notice that it is just the sort of relational property that I earlier predicted will often figure in explanations of given-contrastives.27 But the important point to keep in mind about this matter is that the considerations that Davidson and Mele raise in the above quotes may show that we need sophisticated explanatory machinery beyond mere appeal to reasons, namely the explanatory category of motivational strength, but it does not yet commit us to a view about the metaphysical nature of reasons or of the connection between reasons and actions. This appeal to motivational strength is so far completely neutral on those points. And though Davidson and others often talk about motivational strength, they do so in the context of filling a gap in reasons-explanation, and not also, as I shall argue they should, in the context of the argument for the causal theory of action itself.

6. Davidson’s contrastive question

In order to take Davidson’s argument to be one intended to establish a thesis about the connection between reasons and action, and not just as one concerning the need for further action-explanation machinery, we must shift the focus explicitly to the reasons and their connection with actions. I propose that “Why did S act on R₁ rather than R₂, given that R₂
is present?” is the question we might see Davidson as asking to this end. One potential problem with this formulation is that even this question can still easily be heard as asking for an explanation of the action. I suspect that partly for this reason Davidson forces our attention to a multiple-reasons case, where the competing reasons are for the same action. For the record, however, it does not matter whether the case involves a single action or more than one action, the same metaphysical puzzle arises. It is just easier to see it when focusing on the single-action case. To further aid hearing the question in the proper way, I will put it more cumbersomely as a sort of “how-possibly” question: What explains how it is possible that an agent can act on R₁ rather than R₂, given that R₂ is present?

Now that we finally have the right question in place, we can turn to Davidson’s explanation and my argument that it fails. I propose, then, that we understand Davidson’s argument for causalism as resting on the assertion that the best answer to the above question is that R₁ is the cause of the action and R₂ is not. One reason for the perceived success of this answer, and hence Davidson’s argument, is, I suggest, that he does manage to honor the basic condition of adequacy on contrastive explanations – he offers up a difference between fact and foil. One reason is a cause and the other is not. Davidson’s answer, then, appears to obey at least the Basic Rule of contrastive explanations.

Upon closer examination, however, we can see that there’s something quite peculiar about Davidson’s explanation. Consider an explicitly causal version of the Basic Rule, like Lipton’s Difference Condition. Lipton asks us to find a cause of the fact and absence of corresponding cause of foil in order to explain the contrast. But Davidson’s answer asserts that the event that constitutes the fact is a cause and the event that constitutes the foil is not. In other words, we would have expected, looking at the case from Lipton’s point of view, an answer to the question in terms of the different causal histories of R₁ and R₂, not a simple assertion that the R₁ and R₂ have different causal statuses.

Still, it might be argued, this is just a technical problem, and Davidson manages to honor the spirit of the constraint on contrastive explanations by citing a difference between fact and foil. However, this defence of Davidson is moot, considering that we are dealing not with a simple contrastive but with a given-contrastive. Davidson may cite a difference, but not one that makes much sense given the nature of the question he poses. His question is constrained by the Given Rule. In order to answer it, we must address the given-clause, namely R₂’s presence. This is precisely what pushes Davidson’s argument along – R₂ is a perfectly good and available reason that the agent has. How do we make sense of the fact that the agent has it but does not act on it? This is one of those cases where the questioner asks for an explanation of the contrast because she cannot see why the foil should not have occurred, given its similarity to the fact.
The information stated in the given-clause about the presence of the second reason is included in the question precisely to highlight the fact that there’s no apparent reason why it shouldn’t have been efficacious. Merely saying that \( R_2 \) is not a cause and that \( R_1 \) is a cause does not satisfy the puzzlement behind the question. Consider the pillar case again. Suppose you want to know why pillar A collapsed rather than pillar B, given that they both had water damage. The question is explanatorily informed in that you take water damage to be the explanation of pillar A’s collapse, and you correctly think that pillar B, too, has water damage. You want to know why, in light of this, pillar B did not also collapse. If the explanation you are given is that the water damage in pillar B did not cause pillar B to collapse, you will be rightly unsatisfied. For that does not explain why A collapsed rather than B, given that B did have water damage. The matter of water damage is the thing that needs to be explained. Pointing out that there is a difference in causal efficacy of water damage in the pillars does not meet the interest driving the request for the explanation.

Likewise, the simple causal difference between fact and foil that Davidson points out is inadequate – it does not explain the contrast. Davidson does not, therefore, offer the best explanation of multiple-reasons cases because his explanation does not satisfy the Given Rule on contrastive explanations. To repeat, just as you would not be satisfied being told that pillar B’s water damage had nothing to do with the collapse of the platform, so too we should not be satisfied being told that \( R_2 \) had nothing to do with the agent’s action since it was not a cause. Neither of these explanations tells us anything more than we already know.

A defender of Davidson may offer the following reply. Surely, he argues, Davidson does tell us more than we already know. The explanation he provides gives us a metaphysical interpretation of what we know: \( R_2 \) has nothing to do with the action because it is not a cause. Doesn’t that address the information in the given-clause? No. It is not \( R_2 \)’s non-involvement (to put it neutrally) with the agent’s performance of the action that is at issue, but rather \( R_2 \)’s non-involvement despite its presence that is at issue. And, to repeat, it is precisely this that is the source of puzzlement that generates the need for an explanation in the first place. Putting a metaphysical interpretation on non-involvement does no good unless in doing so you also explain how reasons can be present and still not be involved.

I will now make the same point in a slightly more complicated way by appealing to some of the ideas I discussed in the section on contrastive explanation. Consider a simple-contrastive version of the question: What explains how it is possible that an agent can act on \( R_1 \) rather than \( R_2 \)? In this case, the obvious explanation is that the agent has \( R_1 \) and does not have \( R_2 \) – that is, the first is present in or to the agent and the second is not. To return to the Lipton-inspired terminology, we should say that we
needed to point out the existence of an explanatory item for the fact and the absence of a corresponding explanatory item for the foil. In this case, the explanatory items are the presence and absence of the reasons themselves.

So far, so good. But recall what can happen in the generation of a given-contrastive: the questioner is puzzled by the very existence of the “corresponding explanatory item” for the foil. To get this explicitly into the question, the questioner uses a given-clause: What explains how it is possible that an agent acts on R₁ rather than R₂, given that R₂ is present? Normally, we might say, the absence of reasons is a perfectly good explanation of contrastive questions concerning cases of competing reasons. But when the competing reason is present (when the agent has it, too), we need a special question – the given-contrastive – to make it clear that this is what needs to be explained.

To be told by Davidson that efficacious reasons are causes and non- efficacious reasons are not causes is fine and good, but this does not yet tell us anything about what we really wanted to know. How do we make sense of cases in which an agent has reasons that are non-efficacious (not causes)? What’s needed is an explanation that explicitly takes into account how a reason can be present in an agent and yet not be efficacious in producing the action. Only this truly addresses the given-clause in Davidson’s question and hence best explains the case under consideration.

How, then, do we go about explaining these cases? The above argument was not intended to show that a causal answer is hopeless, just that it has to involve something in addition to the claim that effective reasons are causes. In the pillar case, one place to look for an answer to why one pillar collapsed even though both had water damage is to the relative degree of water damage to the pillars. And, similarly, the obvious place to look for an answer to Davidson’s question is in the relative strength of the reasons. What explains how it is possible that an agent can act on R₁ rather than R₂, given that R₂ is present? Answer: the relative degree of strength of R₁ and R₂ – R₁ is stronger. This answer, once again, follows the pattern for explanations of given-contrastives that I mentioned earlier. Assuming that the questioner is not misguided in thinking that the agent performs the action for R₁ and that the agent also has R₂, then the natural explanation will be one that cites some difference in the explanatory items themselves – a difference that is often naturally stated in relational terms. An informative answer, therefore, to the causalist’s contrastive question is one that appeals to some notion of causal strength of the reasons, and not just the mere fact that one of the reasons is a cause.

We can understand, therefore, multiple-reasons cases as ones in which the non-efficacious reason is one that, though present, makes a non-winning “causal bid.” It, along with the winning reason, is present and
does its causal work, but it does not exert the causal influence responsible for the eventual action due to the causal dominance of R₁. This, at any rate, is what the causalist should say in explanation. It is open, of course, to Davidson’s defender to claim that this is what causalists meant all along by saying that R₂ is “not a cause.” The reasons-are-causes thesis is a sort of shorthand for this longer story, so the idea might go. If so, I recommend the longer story, given that causalists presume to offer the best explanation of multiple-reasons cases. Since it is the causal degree of strength that does the work in these cases, not bare causality, the account I have suggested seems like a much better candidate for the best explanation.

It should come as no surprise that the natural candidate for the folk psychological analogue of the causal strength of reasons is motivational strength. However, I hasten to add, once again, that this is intended as a sort of catch-all term for perhaps a variety of things to which the causalist might appeal. For instance, a natural application of Lipton’s causal Difference Condition would be to point out some causal difference in the histories of R₁ and R₂, i.e. some event in R₁’s history and the absence of a corresponding event in R₂’s history. (That strategy, however, must not cite the absence of an event in R₂’s history that entails the non-occurrence of R₂, since by hypothesis, R₂ is present at the time of action.) Or the causalist may appeal to a difference in timing – the effective reason beats out the ineffective reason. I will remain neutral on just which explanatory route the causalist might take, using “motivational strength” as a general term.

I should add, however, that I think the most natural way to understand motivational strength is along traditional lines, i.e. as a property in the family of desire strength. Indeed, it seems that this should be the preferred route of causalists themselves, since they acknowledge the need for just such a notion anyway to fill a gap in reasons-explanations of actions, as I previously showed. The items that figure in the fuller account of the nature of the reasons-action connection turn out, unsurprisingly, to correspond with concepts from our repertory of reasons-explanation.

7. Objection and reply

In this section I will consider an objection to the preceding argument that depends on interpreting Davidson’s primary explanatory target to be the explanatory connection between reasons and actions. According to this view, we avert the need to appeal to motivational strength if we read him as asking, “Why does R₁ rather than R₂ explain the agent’s action, given that R₂ is present and, like R₁, rationalizes the action?” It might appear that all we need to do is show why one reason figures in the explanation and not the other. So citing the fact that R₁ is a cause and R₂ is not would
be sufficient. I do not think, however, that this will work, as this answer still violates the Given Rule.

Before I get to the heart of my response, however, let me emphasize that I, too, take Davidson’s primary explanatory target to be the explanatory connection between reasons and actions. As I explained in section 2, I just think that the only way he can begin to show (ultimately unsuccessfully in my view) that reasons-explanations must be causal explanations is by introducing a metaphysical puzzle in the form of a puzzle about multiple-reasons cases. Let’s re-describe the situation. There are two potential explanations of the agent’s action:

1. The agent performed the action because R₁.
2. The agent performed the action because R₂.

Now we can ask, “Why is (1) the right explanation rather than (2)?” To this, one could informatively reply, “Because R₁ caused the action and R₂ did not.” But this is not the relevant question. For unless we suppose that the agent has both reasons, there would be no need for the causal answer, as we saw earlier in considering Hempel’s argument. We could just say that (1) is the right explanation because the agent had R₁ and did not have R₂. That this move is prevented is the beauty of Davidson’s argument. There’s a metaphysical puzzle about how to make sense of these cases where the agent has both reasons but only acts for one of them. Remember that it is R₂’s presence that generates the real puzzle in the first place, the puzzle that Davidson thought could only be resolved by appealing to the reasons-are-causes thesis.

Taking this into consideration, we can recast the above suggested question as, “Why is (1) the right explanation rather than (2), given that the agent had both reasons?” This question cannot be answered by saying that R₁ caused the action and R₂ did not. That is a difference between R₁ and R₂, but it is not a difference that meets the interests of the question, which concerns the fact that R₂ is present and available. Why shouldn’t it explain why the agent performed the action? To modify an earlier remark, it is not R₂’s explanatory non-involvement with the agent’s action that is issue, but rather R₂’s explanatory non-involvement despite its presence that is at issue. The causal answer does not address this at all.

The determined defender of Davidson might insist that we still have not appreciated the force of his question, which is “How does R₁ manage to explain the agent’s action, while R₂ does not, given that R₂ is present and, like R₁, rationalizes the action?” I am not sure that I hear a difference between this question and the ones I have been proposing. Anyway, I agree that there is a problem understanding how the reason the agent acts upon manages to explain in light of multiple-reasons cases. The real question is how the reason that the agent fails to act upon (R₂) fails to
manage to explain, given that it is present, ready to go, and, moreover, rationalizes the action. Once again, merely saying that it is not a cause does not answer that question. We need some story about its explanatory inefficaciousness in spite of its presence. The bare causal thesis does not provide it.

Finally, I can imagine someone suggesting that the matter of R₂’s inefficacy despite its presence, while puzzling, is a secondary matter and that R₂’s status as “not a cause” is all that we need to explain why R₁ explains rather than R₂, even though both are present and rationalize the action. But I do not think that R₂’s noncausal status does suffice to explain that. At this stage of the dialectic, that is, prior to a settled conclusion about the metaphysical status of reasons, it is rather mysterious what it would be for a reason to be “not a cause” but, on the assumption driving the question, present and ready to go, as it were. This seems to leave the matter of how reasons manage – and fail to manage – to explain just as mysterious as before. If this seems unmysterious it may be because, as I suggested earlier, we are already reading the difference of causal strength into the answer. That is, we understand its not being a cause despite its presence as the claim that it is present but not sufficiently causally potent to do the trick (and R₁ is). But, as we shall see, once that idea is on the scene, the rest of my argument kicks in.

I will make one final clarification of the argument so far presented before turning to the final stage. The answer to Davidson’s question (as I posed it) that appeals to the relative degrees of strength of the reasons seems fine for the cases where the agent has reasons for competing actions, but is perhaps not quite yet adequate for multiple-reasons cases. For this answer fails to show why the reasons in this case do not just join forces, as in compound-reasons cases. The presupposition of the question is that there are multiple-reasons cases that are different from compound reasons cases. Presumably in compound-reasons cases, the reasons have strengths that join. So what we need is an explanation of why this does not happen in multiple-reasons cases. We have an explanation of why the reason that wins out wins out – it was stronger. But we still need to know why one wins at all.

This is a good question and one that, we might say, an appeal to “bare strength” does not address. I suspect that the explanation will only be found in a full account of the nature of motivational strength itself (and action production). This, however, is a possibility that my account allows, since I have left it open just what the nature of motivational strength is. Hence, an explanation of multiple-reasons cases that appeals to motivational strength, while perhaps still incomplete, is better than Davidson’s bare appeal to the reasons-are-causes thesis since it clearly identifies what will do the explanatory work, if anything will, while clarifying what still stands in need of explanation.
8. Undermining Davidson’s argument

I have argued that Davidson’s explanation of multiple-reasons cases is not the best explanation. It is at the very least incomplete; the best explanation will appeal to further machinery like motivational strength. The reasonable causalist should respond, “O.K. then, let’s add motivational strength to the explanation.” But once the causalist concedes that motivational strength is the natural and necessary supplementation to the story, the argument for causalism is in trouble. For, once the idea is on the table, it is available to the noncausalist as well. Specifically, the noncausalist can use it to noncausally explain multiple-reasons cases – in effect to meet “Davidson’s Challenge.” Davidson asked how we are to make sense of the situation in which an agent has a reason upon which he does not act. Noncausalist answer: the ineffective reason is not as strong as the other reason(s) that motivate him.

This is precisely what some noncausalists have already suggested. Julia Tanney, for instance, put the point persuasively. What we need to add to the rationalization story is

a more complex justificatory machinery which would allow us to attribute not only beliefs and desires, but competing primary reasons, values, and weighted judgements as well. But nothing yet has been argued about the necessity of positing a causal relation between reasons and actions: we just need to introduce judgements, weights, and values into the “anemic” analysis of reasons. But these judgments needn’t necessitate talk of mental processes.

In other words, we can deal with Davidson’s argument in the spirit in which noncausalists always have – just keep appealing to reasons and properties of reasons.

In summary, Davidson asks a question and challenges noncausalists to answer it. The idea behind the argument was supposed to be that causalists, but not noncausalists, would be able to answer the question (explain the phenomenon). But the actual best causal answer to it involves an appeal to motivational strength, a notion that noncausalists can employ just as well to answer the question.

The debate, naturally, will not stop here. The noncausalist will be required to provide an account of motivational strength. But so will the causalists. Both sides owe an account of just what in the world the motivational strength of reasons is. Davidson’s original argument seemed so persuasive because the burden seemed so clearly to fall on the noncausalists. Now the burden is at least evenly distributed: each side must formulate a theory of motivational strength. The causalists will surely reply that they have a plausible account of motivational strength that noncausalists do not – a causal one. If the noncausalist does not have a theory of motivational strength and the causalist does, then the causalist
can press a “New Causalist Challenge,” which is formally similar to the original – i.e. that they have the best explanation of what it is to act on reasons, including an account of the nature of the strength of reasons. But this time the persuasiveness of the challenge rests on demonstrating that there is a viable causal theory of motivational strength and that there is not a viable noncausal theory.

Even if we shelve the matter of the defensibility of the causalist account of motivational strength, we can see that the New Challenge is a far cry from the original. Davidson’s original challenge derived its force from common sense: it just seemed obvious that the way to make sense of those cases is to appeal to causality. Now, however, the causalist challenge rests on a theory, not common sense. And it is a commonplace in philosophy that as the number of premises in an argument goes up, the probability of the argument’s soundness goes down. That was that beauty of Davidson’s original argument – it had virtually no premises. Now, though, the causalist will have to argue for and defend a complex theory of motivational strength, a process that yields a considerably less obviously true causal theory. That does not mean that causalism is false, just that it does not deserve its platitudinous status.35

I will not here attempt to argue either that causalist accounts of motivational strength fail or articulate a noncausal theory of motivational strength. I will only try to undercut a perhaps lingering prejudice against noncausalism. A sceptic might wonder how a noncausalist could have anything to say about motivational strength. Indeed “strength” does have a causal ring to it, and so, given the label, it may seem that the deck is stacked on the side of causalism. But it is of course only a label, one chosen because of its already common usage in the literature. We could do just as well with perhaps a more neutral term like “motivational authority.” The point is not to let the label do the work, but the underlying theory of whatever the label is a label for.

More generally the sceptic may wonder what a noncausal account of motivation could be. Naturally all of this would seem much more convincing if we had some idea of the general shape of a noncausal account of the metaphysics of reasons and their connection with actions. But it is a mistake to think that the causalist can get any mileage out of this. If you think so, then you are probably a causalist who is still thinking of the causalist theory of motivational strength as just a minor detail to be worked out within a wider well-articulated theory. But if the argument of this paper is correct, then in the context of arguing about the nature of action, it is not a minor detail. Rather it is the central detail. And without an account of what it is, the causalist cannot claim superiority over even a relatively impoverished noncausal account of motivation.36

I grant that there is a legitimate challenge for everyone to provide a theory of the connection between reasons and actions. But this is not a special
causalist challenge. That is, it is not a unique challenge for noncausalism or one that gives causalism a presumptive advantage. The point of my argument is to show that both sides have work to do (roughly the same work) and that, importantly, the sort of argument typically used to support causalism does not in fact give us any reason to favor causalism over noncausalism.

9. Conclusion

I hope to have accomplished three main things in this paper. First, I argued that the argument responsible for the high regard in which the causal theory of action is held is not in fact as straightforward as is usually thought. I showed that it is an argument to the best contrastive explanation. Second, I made some suggestions about how to generalize Lipton's account of contrastive explanation, identified a special class of contrastive questions – given-contrastives, and articulated a condition of explanatory adequacy for them. Third, with these points in hand, I argued that Davidson's argument for causalism is not persuasive. The thesis that reasons are causes does not best explain the contrastive phenomenon that Davidson identifies. In order to do so, he must appeal to a further property of reasons – motivational strength. But such a property can serve noncausalists as well as causalists in making sense of Davidson's cases. So Davidson has given us no reason to favor the causal theory of action. In order to make headway in the debate between causalism and noncausalism, the scene of action must shift to an investigation of the nature of the motivational strength of reasons.37

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NOTES

1 In Donald Davidson (1980), Essays on Actions and Events. Oxford: Clarendon. All Davidson references are to this book.
3 Davidson, p. 11.
5 This is a theme of Daniel Dennett's. See Dennett, D. (1987), The Intentional Stance. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
6 One might insist that rationalizations do not deductively entail that the actions occur, and that's why they must be causal explanations (or involve an appeal to laws). But Hempel himself did not insist on deductive entailment, since some explanations are inductive.
Hempel eventually made it clear that, on his view, reasons-explanations are causal explanations because the relevant laws are causal ones.

Davidson, p. 9. See also p. 232.


I do not assume that all explanations are contrastive explanations.

Peter Lipton (1991), *Inference to the Best Explanation*. New York: Routledge. All Lipton references are to this book.


Lipton, pp. 36–37.


The account that I am about to give of the function of given-clauses is probably compatible with a presupposition account, widely construed. I mean to be isolating a use of given-clauses distinct from a setting-aside presupposition function. That is, sometimes we ask contrastive questions with given-clauses where the questioner is in effect saying, “I know about that, so do not bring it up in the explanation.” I mean to discuss cases distinct from this.

For my purposes in the following, it will only matter that there are some given-contrastives. It may not be the case that the information stated in the given-clause must always be state-able for any well-formed contrastive question.

Lipton concedes that there are noncausal explanations, but seems to think they are peripheral to the practice of explaining (or at least should not concern us first in an attempt to find a model of explanation).

Lipton, p. 43.

Lipton, p. 44.

Actually I only describe a sub-set of given-contrastives here. I do think that all given-contrastives are “explanatorily informed” and so explanations of them are constrained by a version of the rule that I will cite shortly. However, the kind of case I describe, and hence the level of generality of the rule, is the most useful for my purposes in discussing Davidson’s argument for causalism.

I am not using “informed” as a success term. The questioner may only have hypotheses about the explanations of fact and foil.

Davidson, p. 269.


Davidson, p. 269.

Davidson, p. 16. For more discussion along these lines see Randolph Clarke (1996), “Contrastive Rational Explanation of Free Choice,” *Philosophical Quarterly* 46, pp. 185–201.

This allows those who favor other things besides desire strength, like degree of preference, to do so without altering the substance of the argument.

Lipton, too, writing about the nature of contrastive explanation, came close to noticing this about certain reasons-explanations: “If I tell you that Lewis went to Monash rather than Oxford because only Monash invited him, you might reply, ‘Yes, but Oxford has much
better bookshops, and Lewis loves bookshops.’ In such a case, I will have to supplement
my original explanation by showing, or at least claiming, that the actual cause of the fact
‘trumped’ the potential cause of the foil. Thus I might claim that his preference for
places that invite him was stronger than his preference for places with outstanding
bookshops . . . There are doubtless other principles that also play a role in determining
which differences yield the best explanation in a particular context.” Lipton, p. 48.

You will notice that the formulations I provide are compatible with either multiple-
reasons and divergent-reasons readings, since the R’s can be for the same action or for
different actions.

More specifically, of the histories of the agent’s acting on R1 and not acting on R2, the
fact and foil respectively.

Strictly speaking, I suppose, the difference in the explanatory items in this case is in
the degree of “presence” of the two reasons. But I think the natural reading of this is the
one I offer.

Thanks to an anonymous referee for bringing this possibility to my attention.

Of course it is “available” before this. But, the point is that the noncausalist appeal to
motivational strength can appear unmotivated or unconvincing, until we see that it is a
notion that the causalists must appeal to as well.


See for instance William Dray (1957), Laws and Explanation in History. Oxford: Oxford University Press. There is one important wrinkle that I should mention in this con-
nection. By hypothesis, the multiple-reasons cases that Davidson is concerned with are
two in which both reasons are equally “good.” So motivational strength for the non-
causalist cannot just be “rational strength” or superiority. I leave open what it could be.

Juan Comesana reminds me that there are already well recognized problems with the
causal theory, e.g. the problem of deviant causal chains, which serve to show that the
causal theory is not obviously or clearly true. However, my point is that the argument for
the causal theory is not nearly as straightforward and decisive as it is usually thought to be.
One can be troubled by the problem of deviant causal chains and still think that some
version of causalism must be right. I am here proposing that we should not be so confident
that the view even gets off the ground.

Of course the available noncausal accounts are not necessarily impoverished. There
are several noncausal accounts “on the market,” though none to my knowledge articulate
a noncausal account of motivational strength.

I thank Douglas Long, William Lycan, Juan Comesana, an anonymous referee for
Pacific Philosophical Quarterly, Nancy Langer, and Ben Theis for their help with this
paper.