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Reasons to Care about Reasons for Action: A Response to Paul S. Davies

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COMMENTARIES

- JULIE KUHLEN 1
THE STYLE OF PHENOMENOLOGY
- RANDALL AUXIER 7
*COMMENTARY ON ERIC MORTON'S "EMPIRICISM, NATURALISM,
AND FREEDOM: AN ALTERNATIVE DIAGNOSTIC SOLUTION TO
MCDOWELL'S PROBLEM OF EMPIRICAL CONTENT"*
- TODD M. STEWART 11
*COMMENTS ON KATERINA PSAROUDAKI'S "DEFENDING
CONCILIATIONISM FROM SELF-DEFEAT"*
- THOMAS DABAY 15
*COMMENTARY ON CUMBY'S "INTELLECTUAL FLOURISHING, THE
TRUTH NORM, AND EPISTEMIC NORM PLURALISM"*
- DEBORAH K. HEIKES 19
*COMMENTS ON SEENA EFTEKHARI'S "ARISTOTLE ON WOMEN'S
CAPACITY FOR (PRACTICAL) REASON"*
- SARAH WOOLWINE 23
*COMMENTARY ON MARTINA FERRARI'S "TRANSGRESSIVE
FREEDOM: ON BEAUVOIR'S HEGELIAN PHILOSOPHY OF ACTION"*
- SUSAN V. H. CASTRO 29
*WHY POSTULATE THAT THE NUMBER OF UNCONCEIVED
SCIENTIFIC ALTERNATIVES IS FINITE?*
- DAVE BEISECKER 35
*JOHN & SUSAN & BILL & SMITH: COMMENTS FOR
DAVID SACKRIS' "ON USING TRUTH RELATIVELY"*

Reasons to Care about Reasons for Action: A Response to Paul S. Davies

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In eschewing the specialty-standards of neuro-babble and philosophical neologism, Paul S. Davies (2016) argues with courageous clarity. He connects issues in neuroscience and epistemology to problems surrounding agency. I agree with many of his claims, but I think they need more context and precision for application. This is because his argument as it stands now affects only a limited set of theories, and a hidden modality in thesis 3 tempers his argument further. And perhaps most urgently, if his theory fails to address “top-down”¹ mental processes or social dimensions of knowledge, his argument fails to meet even his own goals set out in the paper.

1. Questioning First-personal Reasons: Ethics, Law, and Neuroscience

Davies argues for a “modest form of skepticism regarding our knowledge of our reasons for acting” (2016, p. 135). If successful, his argument challenges the justificatory status of first-personal reasons for action.

However, this first-personal focus on *reasons* affects only a limited subset of theories. For example, Davies’ argument frustrates normative systems that rely on rationality as the justifying or principle capacity. Davies chips the veneer of intellectualistic theories, like Kantian constructivism (given its dependence on self-legislating reason) or Stoic rationality (given that reason regulates the mind to achieve tranquility against the body, passions, and world).

But other theories take no damage at all. If a theory does not rely on *reasons* for action as fundamental, then it avoids Davies’ claims. Normatively, a holistic Aristotelian virtue ethics, a Humean theory of sentiments, or a Rossian intuitionistic deontology could parry Davies’ thrust (see: Hursthouse, 1999; Slote, 2010; Ross, 2002). Descriptively, moral psychologist like Jonathan Haidt (2001) already make similar attacks on rationality, agreeing that reason is often used in a rationalization of our gut reactions after we act, not as a premeditated account of our actions. His paper confirms the suspicion that many ethicists and psychologists already feel about myopic focus on rationality.

Additionally, the focus on first-personal reasons neglects third-personal ascriptions of reasons for action. For example, in law, courts

do not rely on a person's ability to give first-personal accounts. Even in crimes of first degree murder, a defendant does not need to confess to a crime or give certain reasons to be convicted. The reasons ascribed to a defendant by the jury can meet legal burdens of proof to justify conviction. Moreover, advocates of restorative justice might focus on more agent-neutral or systemic considerations to amend injustice, thus making no appeal to first-personal reasons whatever.

Even neuroscience itself, the field providing the bulk of Davies' evidence, does not rely on first-personal accounts of reasons for action. Brain imaging technologies aim at finding an impartial, third-personal way to observe the mind. Current technologies can measure the rough emotional or affective states that underlie a decision or action. And maybe rough states of mind are adequate for most enterprises. Pragmatic, clear-enough reasons can be tested against predictability, diachronic consistency, explanatory power, or success in achieving practical goals. The sciences have long progressed without philosophical certainty or justified, true belief. Neuroscience does not need Knowledge to proceed, only testable hypotheses.

I admire Davies' paper because it transcends mere academic worry, and I think his theory packs a punch. But my preliminary comments show its limited reach. With some footwork, he could jab at certain moral, legal, or scientific domains, but he would need to specify (a) what reasons are, (b) how clear reasons need to be for different disciplines, and (c) who exactly this argument targets.

2. Challenging the Autonomy of Mind in Theses 2 and 3

My second comment addresses theses 2 and 3 in Davies' argument. Davies structures it as a hypothetical syllogism, so if one part of the chain is broken, the conclusion does not hold. He argues roughly: if thesis 3 about human neurobiology is true, then it shows how limited our knowledge of our reasons for action is, proving thesis 2. And if thesis 2 is true, then we must accept some form of skepticism as in thesis 1 (2016, pp. 135-136). Alternatively: *if* neuroscience can show that at least one significant neural process prevents our conscious, attentive mind from knowing our reasons for action, *then* we must hold a modest form of skepticism regarding our own reasons for action.

Davies' main support for our neurobiological limits is his characterization of an autonomous, endogenous, ancestral mind. I question, though, the strength of the autonomy ascribed to it. The relevant claim I want to challenge is Davies' assertion:

So the case of Heather Joy, as well as the cases described by Shewmon, vividly illustrate that we are born with endogenous, autonomous affective systems. The effects of these systems are not acquired via learning and they operate in the absence of cortical input. It's as if our mid- and lower-brain structures comprise a free-standing mind unto itself. Panksepp refers to it as our ancient mammalian brain. (2016, p. 141)

I take issue with two things here. First, I think there is a hidden modal operator determining the scope of the autonomy. Instead of claiming that sub-cortical systems simply *do* operate autonomously, the argument should claim that it is *biologically possible* for human sub-cortical systems to operate autonomously. Empirical evidence abounds, not only in Davies' examples, but in the cases of patients in persistent vegetative states who still react to foot scrapes, and in patients who lead normal lives, despite missing large portions of their brains.² So, I agree that sub-cortical structures in the human brain *can* function autonomously in *at least some* cases.

However, the challenge of using cases like split-brain, anencephalic, persistently vegetative, or neuro-developmentally atypical patients is drawing an analogy from them to full agents. This is my second issue. In the same way that biologists cannot apply all the insights from zebrafish or mice to human biology, philosophers must exercise caution when extrapolating from neuro-atypical patients to full agents. Just because parts of the human brain *can* function autonomously does not indicate how autonomous these parts of the brain *must be* in more species-typical patients. Difficulties compound when considering the plasticity of the mind as well. So, while split-brain, anencephalic, or developmentally challenged patients illuminate how some persons think, they may not clarify how full agents think. It is plausible that lessons learned from them will not strictly apply to the epistemically virtuous or the fully morally responsible.

3. The Moral Importance of “Top-Down” Processes, and Friends

The real issue, however, is that philosophers have never disputed the fact that parts of the mind seem autonomous when allowed to run freely. We resort to our animal natures when uneducated. This is why Aristotle turns to human souls only after addressing plant and animal souls (1984, 413a23 ff., 432a15 ff.), and why he painstakingly dissects competing faculties of the mind and *akrasia* (2002, bks. VI-VII). More famously, Plato envisions the human mind as a chariot with one good horse and one bad horse pulling

in different directions (1997a, 246a-b). No one denies the existence of the bucking, vicious horse, an analog for the sub-cortical processes associated with the endogenous, ancestral mind in Davies' argument. The disagreement is about whether the charioteer—intellect or reason-giving capacities—can rein it in.

This is why “top-down” processes are important to address. *If* reason (likely some cortical process in the conscious, attended mind) can affect, regulate, or train the subcortex, *then* it can maintain its executive status. Sub-cortical processes need not be perfectly transparent to the agent; the charioteer does not need to know the mind of the vicious horse. But, reason needs to be able to regulate sub-cortical processes; the charioteer needs to be able to train the vicious horse to trot on command. Relatedly, in the presence of such a charioteer, the horse might not be autonomous in the sense necessary for this argument to have its greatest impact. Davies needs to address how functions of the cerebral cortex interact with subcortex, especially the executive functions of the prefrontal cortex and the theory of mind functions of the temporoparietal junction. Without this, the argument relies on a hidden assumption: the cortex always insufficiently regulates the subcortex.

Also, for the skepticism to hold more securely, the first-personal restriction merits expansion. Over-emphasizing the first-personal knowledge of reasons for action belies the social nature of moral life and information. This is why Plato's *Republic* repeatedly emphasizes education while defining justice (1997b, bks. III-IV, VII), and why, to define virtue in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle spends one book on justice and two on friendship (2002, bks. V, VIII-IX). Others, especially friends, have privileged epistemic access to evaluating some of our actions, and they help us to cultivate virtue. Moreover, we can use our interactions with others to discover our own internal moral principles or reasons for action. Aristotle even goes so far as to argue that we love others as we love ourselves (2002, 1161a1 ff., 1169b34-5). There is a strong parallel between others and ourselves in moral psychology and knowledge. And when we observe them and they us, we learn new things about ourselves.

My three comments ask Davies to expand his argument. Thesis 1 sets out that he wants the skepticism to hold in “some non-trivial range of conditions” (2016, p. 135). That burden might not be met without addressing the ways the cerebral cortex can affect lower brain structures, and without addressing the social nature of morality. However, if Davies can show (a) the cerebral cortex cannot regulate the subcortex and (b) third-personal perspectives do not ascribe sufficiently accurate reasons for action, then every normative theory will need to regard the empirical

literature more seriously.

Notes

¹ I use “top-down” to refer to cortical processes affecting sub-cortical processes. I do not use it as Davies does when citing Dehaene’s “top-down attention mechanism” (2016, p. 136). I use “subcortex” and “sub-cortical” to refer to non-cortical parts of the brain most broadly. Throughout, I do not mean to identify the mind with the brain in a strict form of eliminative materialism. My argument needs only that some states of mind depend on some brain regions.

² See, for example: Yu et. al. (2014, pp. e1-e5). They review a case of a 24-year-old woman leading a life of relative normalcy—married, mother to a child, integrated with her family. However, after going to the hospital complaining of dizziness, physicians diagnosed her with “mild mental retardation and cerebellar ataxia” (2014, p. e3), finding her cerebellum never developed and many areas of her brain were more cerebrospinal fluid than brain tissue. See also: Feuillet et. al (2007, p. 262). They describe the case of a 44-year-old man—married, father of two, employed as a civil servant. Complaining of leg weakness, he went to the hospital, and brain scans revealed “severe dilation of the lateral ventricles” and “a very thin cortical mantle and a posterior fossa cyst” (2007, p. 262). The scans showed that most of his brain was cerebrospinal fluid.

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