

# SELECTED PAPERS FROM THE XXIII WORLD CONGRESS OF PHILOSOPHY

## ON METAPHYSICAL ANALYSIS

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**ABSTRACT:** What follows offers a solution for the problem of causal deviance in its three varieties. We consider Davidson on action, Grice on perception, and the account of knowledge as apt belief, as belief that gets it right through competence rather than luck. We take up the opposition between such traditional accounts and “disjunctivist” alternatives. And we explore how our take on the point and substance of metaphysical analysis bears on the problem and on competing reactions to it.

**M**ETAPHYSICAL analysis goes beyond conceptual or semantic inquiry, and also beyond necessary biconditionals, which can fail to provide the metaphysical explanation of special interest to the philosopher.

In the *metaphysics of persons* we find a threefold divide among: (a) words, such as the word ‘person’ and its cognates, (b) concepts, and (c) extra-linguistic, extra-conceptual entities, the living persons. Concerning the latter we find metaphysical options such as substance dualism, animalism, and so on. According to an Aristotelian view, for example, a person is never identical with, but only constituted by a body, which needs to be alive, and in possession of certain powers and abilities, in order to (thereby) constitute a person.

This style of view in the metaphysics of persons involves a concept of metaphysical dependence, of one thing existing or being actual dependently on certain other things and their properties. The dependent thing then exists or is actual in virtue of how the other things are propertied or related.

Turning to epistemology, our focus is on a state that people host, or an act that they perform. This is the phenomenon whose ontology we now wish to understand. What is the nature of such a state or act and how is it grounded? In virtue of what is it actual when it is actual?<sup>1</sup>

Performance whose success manifests the relevant competence of the performer avoids thereby a kind of luck. According to competence virtue epistemology,

knowledge is a special case of that. Knowledge of a sort is belief whose correctness derives from epistemic competence, and is thus “apt.” A serious problem of deviant causation is thought to affect the metaphysics and ideology of perception and action, and a similar problem would then affect the metaphysics and ideology of knowledge.

What follows offers a solution for the problem in its three varieties. We consider Davidson on action, Grice on perception, and the account of knowledge as apt belief, as belief that gets it right through competence rather than luck. We take up the opposition between such traditional accounts and “disjunctivist” alternatives. And we explore how our take on the point and substance of metaphysical analysis bears on the problem and on competing reactions to it.

### A. ACTION

What is intention in action? What is it to act intentionally? As a first approximation, you might think, to act intentionally is to succeed in a certain intentional aim, where the success is owed causally to the agent’s intention. But that has counterexamples, such as the following.

A waiter intends to startle his boss by knocking over a stack of glasses right now, which makes him so nervous that he involuntarily staggers into the stack and knocks it over, thus startling the boss. But this is not something he does intentionally.

So, we should require that the agent’s intentions must bring about the success in the right way, with “the right kind of causation.” Or so Davidson advises repeatedly in his long struggle with the problem, and in his parting thoughts on the matter. Here is how he puts it (with minor variations): What is it for an agent to F intentionally on a particular occasion? There must be some G such that the agent’s intending to G must cause “in the right way, the agent’s particular act of Fing.”<sup>2</sup> But no account of “the right way” has won consensus.

### B. PERCEPTION

1. What is it to perceive an entity? The account of perception defended in Paul Grice’s “Causal Theory of Perception”<sup>3</sup> is an early, influential answer. Grice considers a view drawn from H. H. Price’s *Perception*:

X perceives M iff X has a sense impression that is causally dependent on some state of affairs involving M.

This, he argues, is subject to counterexamples. Our visual sense impressions while in the sunlight are causally dependent on the sun even when we look away from it, as they are also on our eyes, without our thereby perceiving our eyes.

2. After considering various revisions, and counterexamples to them, Grice’s concluding view is approximately this:

X perceives M if, and only if, X hosts a sense datum (or a sensory experiential state of affairs) for which M is causally responsible in the right way.

This is what it comes to, given how in the “right” way is to be grasped, which we shall consider below.

### C. KNOWLEDGE

As a first approximation, propositional knowledge can be understood as belief that attains its aim (truth) and does so not just by luck but through competence. Such knowledge is a performance that is not just lucky but apt: i.e., a performance whose success is relevantly owed to the performer’s relevant competence. The aptness of a performance is thus supposed to block an important sort of luck, the sort that precludes Gettiered subjects from knowing what they believe both correctly and competently. A belief falls short of knowledge when its truth is owed to luck and not to the believer’s competence.<sup>4</sup>

But this too has ostensible counterexamples. Take an archer’s competent shot that (a) would hit the target in the absence of wind, and (b) does hit the target because, although a first gust diverts it, a second gust puts it back on track. Here the agent’s competence yields the early orientation and speed of the arrow, and this combined orientation and speed, together with the two compensating gusts, results in the bull’s-eye. So, why is this shot not apt after all? Its success does derive causally from an exercise of the archer’s competence! If the agent’s competence had not resulted in the right orientation and speed upon release from the bow, then the arrow would not have hit the target.

Taking a leaf from Davidson and Grice, we might now judge success to be apt only if it derives causally from the competence *in the right way*. Success essentially aided by the gusts of wind would not derive in the right way from the archer’s competence.

### D. ASSESSING THE THREE ACCOUNTS

1. All three accounts may be rejected as unsatisfactory until we are told what it is for success to derive “in the right way” from the relevant causal sources.

2. We are considering accounts of phenomena that are broadly “factive,” such as perceiving x, killing x, perceiving that p, intentionally acting, and knowing that p. These involve relations spanning mind and world, relations between the subject/agent’s mind and her enviroing world. Philosophical analyses of these various relations are then proposed. And the analyses repeatedly appeal to some essential causal relation.

Thus we reach the nub of the problem. The problem is posed by deviant causation, wayward causation that yields counterexamples, whether the analysis targets action, perception, or knowledge. Time after time, a kind of “luck” derives from the deviant character of the causation, incompatibly with appropriate success and relevantly creditable perception, action, or knowledge.

3. For all such “factive” phenomena, there is a good case and a bad case. In the good case the agent fully succeeds. In the bad case she fails in some way or other.

Traditionalists take the good case to be constituted in part by what constitutes the bad case, plus something else that is missing in the bad case. The phenomenon in the good case is constituted thereby so as to be metaphysically analyzable into factors. The good and bad cases share a highest common factor. What distinguishes them is that the good case combines metaphysically that highest common factor with some other factor. In the bad case that further factor is missing.

Disjunctivists reject that traditionalist account. On their view there is no such common factor. Disjunctivism is familiar in accounts of perception, and in the knowledge-first theory of knowledge.<sup>5</sup> And it is also applicable to action theory.

Disjunctivists deny that there is any highest factor shared in common by the respective successes and failures. Should traditionalists be worried?

4. If our causal accounts of perception, action, and knowledge are to be rejected in favor of disjunctive or X-first views, the objection will need to go beyond any assumption that proper analyses must be *conjunctive analyses into logically independent factors*. That is why it is so important for *metaphysically* disjunctive and X-first positions to reject the appeal to “the right way.” In order to clinch their case they must argue more fully than has been done to date. They must show not only that there is no factorizing analysis of the relevant phenomena into independent conjunctive factors. They must show also that there is no acceptable causal analysis.

Suppose even that essential appeal to “in the right way” spoils semantic and conceptual analysis. Suppose firsters are thus right in thinking that there is no such linguistic and conceptual analysis in any of our three domains: that of perception, that of action, and that of knowledge. Compatibly with that, however, there might still *be* a metaphysical analysis, even if the *formulation* of the analysis must make use of “in the right way.” So, there might be a metaphysical analysis, whether we are in a position to *give it in full detail* or not. Any formulation we could give might then have to be partial, not complete. Compare Leibniz on “infinite analysis.”

Firsters thus owe further argument that there is no metaphysical analysis of perception, action, or knowledge into phenomena metaphysically more fundamental. Such metaphysical analysis is not precluded even if there is no interesting, non-circular, informative semantic or conceptual analysis of the words or concepts in the relevant domains (that of action, that of perception, and that of knowledge).

## E. AN APPROACH THROUGH PERFORMANCE THEORY

In conclusion, let us try to turn the tables on objections to traditionalist causal analyses. The use of a concept of “manifestation” will enable causal analyses in all three cases. Appeal to manifestation helps to develop a better solution to those problems. The notion of aptness (success that manifests competence) promises to be helpful not only in the theory of knowledge, but also in the theory of action, and in the philosophy of perception.

Both Davidson and Grice make a crucial move in defending their respective accounts. Even though their formulations are different, the move is essentially the same. They both in effect require *a particular sort* of causation, while ostensibly assuming that no verbal formula can nontrivially define it. Davidson then says that *no such formula is needed*, and Grice adds that *a grasp of the right sort of causation can be attained through examples*. Let us have a closer look.

Recall the waiter who intends to knock over a stack of dishes *right now*, but does so only through an attack of nerves caused by the nervy intention. Why isn't *this* a way an intention and a doing can be related so as to constitute intentional action? What *is* the required causal relation? Can it be defined so that we can see why the waiter's doing does not qualify? Davidson claims that we need *no armchair analysis of this matter*. In his view intentional actions are analyzable as doings caused by intentions *in the right way*, and no further analysis of *the right way* is possible or required. We might ask: "No further explication is required *for what?*" And here is one plausible response: We need not provide a further explication (of what that "right way" is) in order to make any progress. We can at least partially formulate an analysis of intentional action through appeal to *appropriate* causation "in the right way."

Still, it would be nice to be able to go beyond such "appropriateness," beyond invoking "the right way."

Let us try an account in terms of *competences and their manifestations*. Consider:

Knowledge is apt belief, belief whose success manifests competence.

Perception (propositional perception, perception that such and such) is apt perceptual experience, experience whose success manifests competence.

Action is apt intention, intention whose success manifests competence.

In all three cases, the following factors come to the fore:

Success, the attainment of the aim.

The competence of the performance.

The aptness of that performance: whether the success manifests competence.

And it is not just an accident that competence is the master key to "the right way." Again, all three human phenomena involve *aimings*, performances with an aim. Perception involves functional, teleological aimings, through the teleology of our perceptual systems. Intentional action involves aimings that are full-fledged intentions. Knowledge divides into a functional perception-like side, and a judgmental action-like side.

The *sort* of causation essentially involved in all three phenomena is hence the causation of aptness. It is not enough that the success be just *caused* by competence, for it may be caused deviantly, by luck. Rather, the success must be *apt*. It must *manifest* the performer's competence.

## NOTES

1. Here I have lumped together questions of grounding, questions concerning the *in virtue of* relation, and questions of *nature, essence, or constitution*. I am leaving open whether these various ontological issues should be distinguished. These are the issues at the focus of my own interest in the ontology of persons, as in “Subjects among other Things,” *Philosophical Perspectives* Vol. I (1987): 155–187. Questions of grounding have recently attracted intense attention among metaphysicians such as Kit Fine, Gideon Rosen, Jonathan Schaffer, and others.
2. See p. 221 of his “Reply to Vermazen,” in B. Vermazen and M. Hintikka, eds., *Essays on Davidson: Actions and Events* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985). Davidson’s thought evolved from “Actions, Reasons, and Causes,” *Journal of Philosophy* (1963), to “Intending” in his *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford University Press, 1980), and then to his replies in the Vermazen and Hintikka collection.
3. H. P. Grice, “The Causal Theory of Perception,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* (1961): 121–153.
4. “We have reached the view that knowledge is true belief out of intellectual virtue, belief that turns out right by reason of the virtue and not just by coincidence.” (E. Sosa, *Knowledge in Perspective* ([Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991], p. 277).
5. Timothy Williamson, *Knowledge and Its Limits* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).