DRETSKE ON THE CAUSATION OF BEHAVIOR

Constantine Sandis
Oxford Brookes University and NYU in London

ABSTRACT: In two recent articles and an earlier book Fred Dretske appeals to a distinction between triggering and structuring causes with the aim of establishing that psychological explanations of behavior differ from non-psychological ones. He concludes that intentional human behavior is triggered by electro-chemical events but structured by representational facts. In this paper I argue that while this underrated causalist position is considerably more persuasive than the standard causalist alternative, Dretske’s account fails to provide us with a coherent analysis of intentional action and its explanation.

Key words: action, behavior, causes, Dretske, explanation, intentional, reasons, triggering, structuring

Triggering and Structuring Causes of Behavior

The term “behavior” has been used to refer to an immense variety of observable movements ranging from the motion of automobiles to voluntary and intentional human action. It is perhaps best, then, to begin with a brief characterization of how Fred Dretske uses the term. His use is no less idiosyncratic than that of most, as illustrated in the following passage from his book Explaining Behavior (1988b):

[We should not] confuse movements which are brought about by internal events with their being brought about by these events. The former is an event, a movement, something that happens. . .the second, I shall argue, is a piece of behavior, possibly an action, something the rat does. (p. 15; emphasis in the original)

AUTHOR’S NOTE: This paper was written with financial help from the Aspectos Modales del Realismo Materialista project, HUM2007-61108, MCYT–Spanish Government. Many thanks to Fred Dretske for discussing several drafts with me at length. I would also like to thank Jonathan Dancy, Michael Smith, and Galen Strawson for very helpful comments on an earlier version which was subsequently presented at the Joint Conference of the SPP and EuroSPP University of Lund, Sweden, August 11–14 2005. Thanks to all the organizers and participants; I particularly benefitted from discussion with Andreas Lind and Rachel Seabrook. Finally, I would like to thank the editor of this journal as well as five anonymous referees for their invaluable feedback.

Please address all correspondence to Constantine Sandis, Oxford Brookes University, Philosophy Department, Harcourt Hill Campus, Oxford OX2 9AT, United Kingdom; Email: csandis@brookes.ac.uk or c.sandis@nyu.edu.
Behavior, so understood, is not any kind of bodily movement but something that creatures do as opposed to something that merely happens to their bodies as a result of some external force: it is a causal process in which they partake and not the result or effect of such a thing. This view rules out the counterintuitive corollaries of more traditional accounts of action individuation, according to which the A’s act of killing B occurs either before B dies or after a time at which A may be dead (cf. Dretske 1988b, pp. 17-18, 2009; Sandis 2006).

It is worth noting here that Dretske remains neutral on whether all behavior, so understood, would count as action, let alone action that is voluntary and intentional (a point I return to further below)¹. What does follow from his account, however, is that behavior involves more than mere bodily movement. More precisely, it is to be identified with the causal process of a bodily movement’s being caused by an internal event. The event in question thereby stands in the wrong kind of relation to this behavior to count as its cause, in any normal sense of the term.

Dretske uses the term “cause” in two different (though related) senses, distinguishing between what he calls “triggering causes” and what he calls “structuring causes”:

In looking for the cause of a process, we are sometimes looking for the triggering event: what caused the event C which caused the M. At other times we are looking for the events that shaped or structured the process: what caused C to cause M rather than something else. The first type of cause, the triggering cause, causes the process to occur now. The second type of cause, the structuring cause, is responsible for its being this process, one having M as its product, that occurs now. The difference . . . is familiar enough in explanatory contexts. There is a clear difference between explaining why, on the one hand, Clyde stood up then, and explaining, on the other hand, why what he did then was stand up (why he stood up then). He stood up then because that was when the queen entered, or when he saw the queen enter the room. He stood up then as a gesture of respect. The difference between citing the triggering cause of a process (the cause of the C which causes M) and what I have been calling its structuring cause (the cause of C’s causing M) reflects this difference. (1988b, pp. 42-45; emphasis in the original)

As with “behavior,” philosophical uses of the term “cause” can be shamefully slippery. While Dretske does not enter ontological or metaphysical debates about the nature of causes and causal relations, one can infer from his general account that—contra Skinnerian behaviorism—he takes triggering (viz. mechanical or automatic) causes of behavior to be mental “states,” “events,” or “processes” and structuring causes to be the “representational contents” of the aforementioned

¹ Action, for Dretske, is any causal process that may be explained by the behaving animal’s reasons for undergoing it (cf. Dretske 2009). His account thus lies closer to that provided by von Wright (1963), who identifies action with the process of an agent bringing about a bodily movement, than to that of Davidson (1963, 1969), who takes actions to consist of the subset of bodily movements that are intentional under some description.
“states,” viz. things we believe, desire, fear, suspect, and/or representational facts about the world.

It is important to note that both triggering and structuring causes are taken by Dretske to be capable of explaining something about an event or an occurrence. The opening line of the above quotation suggests that we have one object of explanation (one explanandum) to which we can attribute two (different kinds of) causes. But the second half of the passage suggests that there are two objects of explanation here: why he stood up then, and why he stood up then. Dretske (2004, pp. 170-171) explicitly states that there are two things to be explained, this time identifying one as an event (which is caused by the triggering cause) and the other as the background conditions in which the triggering cause causes the event in question (conditions which are caused by the structuring cause).

As Dretske maintains, so long as we are clear about what we are doing it is harmless to refer to both as the cause of one and the same thing. Indeed, this way of putting things may sometimes be preferable, for there are (at least) two different kinds of things we might ask about any one process or event, and depending on what we are asking (i.e. what we are trying to explain) we will sometimes be looking for a triggering cause, and at other times for a structuring cause of the event in question. Yet we must not lose sight of the fact that for any given event we have (at least) two different objects of event explanation (two different things we are trying to explain); in Dretske’s example quoted above these were why an event occurred now (we might have also asked why it occurred at this location, or at this speed) and why that event (rather than another one) occurred (here, now, slowly) at all. Thus we get two explananda (two objects of explanation), one of which requires a triggering cause as its explanans and one which requires a structuring cause; hence the need for two different kinds of causal explanantia. Dretske suggests as much towards the end of his book when he makes the following connection:

A structuring cause... helps explain, not why D or M is occurring now, but why, now, D is causing M (rather than something else). Failure to appreciate the difference between bodily movements (or external changes) and the behavior having those movements and changes as a product—hence, failure to appreciate the difference between a triggering and a structuring cause of behavior—is, I suspect, partly responsible for the mistaken idea that whatever triggers the behavior, whatever causes the beliefs (B) and desires (D) that (by causing M) constitute the behavior, must be the ultimate (causal) explanation of that behavior. (1988b, pp. 114-115)

The idea here seems to be that the difference between triggering and structuring causes of behavior relies on a distinction between behavior and its

---

\(^2\) See Dretske (1983) for a defense of his representationalism. The identification of true beliefs with facts is persuasively challenged by Rundle (1993). As one anonymous reviewer for this journal observed, such conceptions of facts undermine the notion of a “representational fact” employed by Dretske. There is nothing in Dretske’s account of action explanation, however, which renders it hostage to this detail of his presentation.
products (or results). This implies that there are two different events to be explained, something which, in turn, requires two different causal explanantia:

The difference helps to explain why one can know what caused each event constituting a process without knowing what caused the process. One can know what caused C (some triggering stimulus S), know what caused M (namely C), and still wonder about the cause of C’s causing M. In this case, already knowing the triggering cause, one is clearly looking for the structuring cause of the process—what brought about those conditions in which C causes M (rather than something else). (1988b, p. 43; emphasis in the original)

This is also implicit in an earlier passage of the book:

Think of one animal’s catching sight of another animal and running away. The approach of the second animal (let this be the stimulus S) causes certain events (C) to occur in the first animal’s central nervous system: it sees S. Together with relevant motivational factors, these perceptual events in the animal bring about certain movements M: the animal runs. To oversimplify enormously, S causes C, and C in turn causes M. This much might be inferred from casual observation—the animal ran when, and presumably because, it saw the intruder. But why did the sight of the intruder (C) cause flight (M)? Why did the animal run away? The intruder, after all, was not a predator. It was in no way dangerous. It was, in fact, a familiar neighbor. So why did C cause M? This question is a question about the structuring, not the triggering, cause of the process $C \rightarrow M$. (1988b, p. 43; emphasis in the original)

Dretske has here distinguished between the triggering cause of event M and the structuring cause of process $C \rightarrow M$. But what of the structuring cause of M and the triggering cause of $C \rightarrow M$? We have not been told anything about these things. This is because Dretske’s distinction between two different sorts of causal explanantia is really a disguised distinction between two different explananda, each of which has a different explanatory cause. It makes no sense to say of each of these explananda that they have both a structuring and a triggering cause. Rather, what we want is a causal explanation (provided by C) of why the (mere bodily) movements M (running) occurred and a separate causal explanation for why $C \rightarrow M$ (the entire process of C causing M) occurred. What we are looking for here are not two different causes of one and the same event (e.g., in the sense that we might ask two different things about it), but rather two different causes each of which explains the occurrence of a different event (or process).

Consider a further example of his:

The bell rings (S), and this produces a certain auditory experience (C) in the dog. The dog hears the bell ring. These sensory events, as a result of conditioning, caused saliva to be excreted (M) in the dog’s mouth. What, then, causes the dog to salivate? Well, in one sense, the ringing bell causes the dog to salivate. At least the bell, by causing the dog to have a certain auditory experience, triggers a process that results in saliva’s being secreted into the dog’s mouth. Yes, but that doesn’t’ tell us why the dog is doing what it is
DRETSKE ON THE CAUSATION OF BEHAVIOR

doing—only why it is doing it now. What we want to know is why the dog is salivating. Why isn’t it, say, jumping? Other (differently trained) dogs jump when they hear the bell. Some (not trained at all) don’t do much of anything. So what causes the dog to salivate? This clearly, is a request, not for the triggering cause of the dog’s behavior, but for the structuring cause. It is a request for the cause of one thing’s causing another, the cause of the auditory experience causing salivary glands to secrete. And once again, it seems, the answer to this question lies in the past, in what learning theorists describe as the contingencies (correlations between the ringing bell and the arrival of food) to which the dog was exposed during training. If salivation is thought of as something the dog does (not simply as a glandular event occurring to the dog or in the dog)—if, in other words, it is thought of as behavior—then the causal explanation for it resides, not in the stimulus that elicits the behavior, but in facts about the dog’s past experience. (1988b, pp. 43–4)

For Dretske’s purposes, classical (Pavlovian) conditioning plays the same functional role as operant (Skinnerian) conditioning, genetic determination, upbringing, duress, or any other cause that structures emitted behavior (be it intentional or otherwise). In the above case we are informed that the event of the dog’s salivating has both a triggering cause (the ringing of the bell) and a structuring cause (that the dog was exposed to correlations between the bell’s ringing and the arrival of food), but that the causal explanation of the dog’s act of salivating is typically provided by the structuring cause alone. The fact that the dog was exposed to certain correlations does not explain (causally or otherwise) why saliva was excreted from the dog’s mouth but, rather, why the ringing of the bell caused him to salivate. That is to say, it does not explain why M occurred, but why the process that was C→M — which Dretske identifies with the dog’s behavior — occurred. By the same token, the ringing of the bell cannot (alone) explain why the dog salivated. For that we need both the “triggering” and the “structuring” cause: the dog salivated because the bell rang and he had already been subjected to the aforementioned training. Both these facts form parts of one and the same causal explanation of why the dog salivated; however, only the second fact provides us with a full causal explanation of a different explanandum, namely why the dog salivated when the bell rang.

Structuring Reasons

In more recent work Dretske (1993, 2004) appeals to his distinction between triggering and structuring causes with the aim of showing how it is that psychological explanations of behavior differ from non-psychological ones such

---

3 A structuring cause need not be a reason for which an agent acts in order to explain why a stimulus elicited a particular piece of behavior.

4 Dretske is wrong to imply that the answer to the question (A) “why did the dog salivate?” will be the same as the answer to the question (B) “why did the dog salivate instead of jump?,” for these are two distinct inquiries (cf. Achinstein, 1975). Still, he is not alone in thinking this (cf. Nagel, 1986, pp. 115–117).
as, for example, *biological* explanations. He concludes that intentional human behavior is triggered by electro-chemical events but structured by so-called “representational facts”, facts about *how* we view the world.

When we seek an explanation of intentional action in terms of an agent’s reasons, Dretske maintains, we are always looking for a *structuring cause* (2004, pp. 174-176) that is *internal*, in other words, intrinsic to the system whose behavior we are seeking to explain (2004, p. 172). Unlike plant behavior, which is never intentional and whose structuring causes are always external, that is, extrinsic to their system (2004, pp. 172-173), human behavior is typically explained in terms of the agent’s beliefs and desires (2004, p. 172).5

Dretske maintains that in the sense in which an agent’s beliefs and desires may be called reasons *for* his behavior, they are not to be identified with psychological states or events. This is because explanatory reasons for action, on his view, are not reasons which cause the occurrence of a bodily movement but, rather, reasons for a person’s bringing about a bodily movement. This leads him to maintain further that the reasons for which an agent acts are to be identified with his so called “mental contents” or (as he sometimes also puts it) “what a creature knows and wants” (Dretske 1988b, p. 32, 1988a, pp. 40-43).6 Reasons, for Dretske, are not mental states or events but rather what agents believe and desire (e.g., that something is or becomes the case), where these might occasionally be facts about their beliefs and desires (and those of others), for example, when one seeks to see (or send a friend to) a psychiatrist because they have some irrational belief or desire. According to his representational theory of mind, such possible facts are the contents of mental states (cf. 1988a).

Dretske tells us that reasons for action are *structuring* causes of movements [M]. *Triggering* causes, by contrast, cause “states” of desire (D):

![Image](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

5 There are some superficial similarities between Dretske’s account and that made famous by Donald Davidson: both philosophers claim that reasons are *causes* of behavior and that these are further identifiable with the agent’s beliefs and desires (compare, for example, Davidson, 1963, with Dretske, 1988b, p. 44). Yet not only do their accounts of *action* differ (cf. footnote 1 above), they also conceive of *causes* in radically different terms. According to Davidson (1967) the term “cause” refers to an entity which “causally explains” the event that is its “effect,” whereas as Dretske (as we saw in §1 above) takes what he calls a “structuring cause” to causally explain why something triggered the event that is the *result* of the entire triggering process.

6 In this respect Dretske’s account of reasons for which we act is not dissimilar from those “externalist accounts” offered (typically in opposition to Davidson) by, among others, Baier (1985, p. 125), Tanney (1995), Collins (1997), Stoutland (1998), Dancy (2000), Bittner (2001), Schroeder (2001), and Schueler (2003). However, these philosophers all distance themselves from the suggestion (endorsed by Dretske) that reasons are *representational contents* and/or *causes* in any serious sense.
the explanation of why D is causing M, and hence an explanation of the behavior, is the fact that D has this goal, the fact that D is, specifically, a receptivity to food. It is this fact that explains D’s recruitment as a cause of M and, thus, helps explain the rat’s current behavior.

The fact that a hungry rat, furiously pressing a bar in order to get food, occupies state D, a state that was recruited as a cause of bar-pressing movements because, in the past, these movements led to food does not, obviously, explain why D now exists, why the rat is now hungry. Nor does it explain why M is now occurring. D’s having R as its goal, its being for R, is not a triggering cause of behavior. It is a structuring cause. It helps explain, not why D or M is occurring now, but why, now, D is causing M (rather than something else). Failure to appreciate the difference between bodily movements (or external changes) and the behavior having those movements and changes as a product—hence, failure to appreciate the difference between a triggering and a structuring cause of behavior—is, I suspect, partly responsible for the mistaken idea that whatever triggers the behavior, whatever causes the beliefs (B) and desires (D) that (by causing M) constitute the behavior, must be the ultimate (causal) explanation of that behavior. (1988b, pp. 114-115; emphasis in the original)

Triggering causes, Dretske maintains, are neither our reasons for, nor the causes of, our actions (roles which only the structuring causes of our behavior can play). Rather, the triggering causes of our behavior are those (neural or perceptual) events which trigger beliefs and desires and thereby cause our movements M. Structuring causes of behavior, by contrast, are the reasons for which we act: things which we believe. Reasons can be causes—but only of the structuring kind. The triggering causes of our behavior are not reasons for which we act. We might illustrate this with the following diagram (all arrows signify, and reveal the direction of, a causal relation).

### Triggering Causes (Events):

- **Stimulus (S) → Beliefs and Desires (B&D) → Bodily Movements (M)**

  - S → B&D (my coming to acquire certain beliefs and desires)
  - B&D → M (my moving my body)

### Structuring Causes (Facts): Reasons which explain why B & D → M

- (why my moving of my body occurred/why I moved my body)

We saw in §1 above that (on Dretske’s account) behavior—be it intentional or otherwise—is to be identified with the process that is the causing of M (cf. 1988b, p. 15, 2009). In the case of intentional behavior M will always be caused (triggered) by a belief (B) and desire (D). This is a necessary condition, but not a
sufficient one unless the explanation provided by the related structuring cause is teleological in nature. For Dretske, teleological explanations are ones wherein the reason which structurally causes the behavior does so in virtue of the meaning of the “mental contents” in question. Accordingly, action is intentional if and only if its structuring cause explains why B & D caused M by virtue of its meaning and not some other property.

The structuring causal role played by meaning here enables Dretske to distinguish between explanations in which a belief–desire pair “rationalizes” an action (e.g., when a climber loosens her hold in order to rid herself of the weight and danger) and ones where the same pair causes the same type of action in some non-rational manner (e.g., by making the climber nervous, which, in turn, causes her to loosen her hold).

This successful method meeting the challenge presented by so-called “deviant causal chains” (in which belief–desire pairs cause the behavior they rationalize in a non-rational manner) constitutes a serious theoretical advantage over other causalist theories (such as Davidson’s), which cannot appeal to teleology here because they are in the business of providing a reductive account of what it is to act intentionally (a point nicely emphasized by Sehon, 1997).7

In the next section I raise an objection to Dretske’s necessary and sufficient conditions for an action being intentional. I then consider and reject a possible response (in §5). I conclude that while Dretske’s account of action explanation is superior to other causalist accounts, it remains based on a picture which ultimately fails to distinguish between intentional action and instinctive non-intentional behavior (of creatures) whose explanation is still teleological in nature, viz. action that is neither intentional nor unintentional (e.g., reflex action).

**Being Caused to Turn Your Head**

According to Dretske, the difference between instinctive non-intentional behavior and intentional action is that, in the case of the former, our beliefs and desires (though present) play no relevant role in the production of our behavior:

> Meaning, though it is there, is not relevantly engaged in the production of output. The system doesn’t do what it does, C doesn’t cause M, because of what C (or anything else) means or indicates about external conditions. Though C has meaning of the relevant kind, that is not a meaning it has to or for the animal to which it occurs. That, basically, is why genetically determined behaviors are not explicable in terms of the actor’s reasons. That is why they are not actions. (1988b, pp. 94-95; emphasis in the original., cf. 1988b, p. 80)

---

7 Davidson himself has confessed that the possibility of causal deviancy forms an “insurmountable” challenge to his view and that he despairs of “spelling out...the way in which attitudes must cause actions if they are to rationalize the action” (Davidson, 1973, p. 79).
In other words, the structuring causes of reflex actions are external, and the explanation of instinctive behavior is no different from the explanation of the behavior of plants. This is surely right for certain non-intentional actions, but I believe that it is wrong for many others. Consider the following example, which aims to persuade that meaning may sometimes play a role in the explanation of non-intentional action.

Suppose I am walking down the street and somebody calls out “Constantine.” Their doing so may cause me to turn my head toward the direction their voice is coming from. If asked why I turned my head that way, I will reply (rightly) that I heard someone call out my name. This reason (the fact that someone called out my name) causally explains why the sound they made in doing so triggered the event that was my head turning around. The reason is the structuring cause of my behavior. The triggering cause is the noise stimulus exerted by the person calling my name. We might illustrate what is going on here with the following diagram:

**Triggering Causes (Events):**

\[ \text{Noise stimulus (S) } \rightarrow \text{My hearing the noise (H) } \rightarrow \text{My head turning (M)} \]

\[ \text{S } \rightarrow \text{H} \quad \text{H } \rightarrow \text{M} \]

\[ \text{(my coming hear noise S) } \quad \text{(my turning my head)} \]

**Structuring Causes (Facts):** Reasons which explain why \( \text{H } \rightarrow \text{M} \)

(belief–desire pairs which are explanatory substitutes for H)

My hearing the noise causes me to turn my head because of the “content” of the noise, because of what it means to me. It is because the word uttered (“Constantine”) is my name etc. that I turn my head. If what is being uttered is given a purely physical (rather than a linguistic) description, then we will not ordinarily understand why these noises caused me to turn my head. This fact (the reason why I turned my head) is therefore of great explanatory value to us—but it does not trigger anything. It is my hearing the noise that triggers the turning of my head, not what the noise stands for, what it means, or, in Dretske’s terminology, what it represents (1988b, Chapter 3).

Nevertheless, it is by virtue of the meaning of the sounds uttered (and not merely by virtue of the physical properties of the sound waves being transmitted) that this piece of causation occurs; the meaning of the sounds structures the (non-deviant) causation taking place. Moreover, it could have been sufficient (for my

---

8 On some non-anomalous physicalist views, an extraordinary (neurobiological) understanding may be possible given a considerable amount of knowledge about relevant correlations. Dretske explicitly rejects such a possibility, claiming that he “doesn’t share these advanced ideas” (1988a, pp. 31-32).
head to move) that I thought or believed that someone had called out my name (and that I had the relevant desire; see below). Say it turned out that what had actually been said was “constant teen.” The fact that my hearing these words being uttered caused me to turn my head (because I thought I heard “Constantine”) does not render my behavior any more intentional. Likewise, we may assume that I wanted to see who was calling my name. Had I been differently disposed (say that, for some reason, I wanted to be left alone), then my hearing my name (or my thinking that I heard my name) would not have caused me to turn my head (perhaps, instead, it would have caused me to hide). So it makes sense to think of my beliefs and desires as the structuring causes of my non-intentional behavior. But what this means is that it is the fact that I have these beliefs and desires that is the structuring cause of my behavior. There is a sense in which my beliefs and desires may be said to cause my head to move; however, what causally explains my moving my head (the reason why I moved it) is not a belief–desire pair itself but the fact that I have those beliefs and desires. Facts about our psychology may explain why we do certain things, and they may do so causally (in the sense that they point towards a cause), yet it would be ontologically perverse to identify them with any mental episodes that trigger bodily movements of any kind.

Now, according to Dretske, if and only if this is so, my behavior must be intentional. Indeed, for Dretske, intentional behavior just is a movement being caused (in the “right way”) by a belief–desire pair. But although my wants and thoughts causally explained why I turned my head, I did not turn my head intentionally. Nor was I motivated to do it (and I certainly did not turn my head in the light of any reasons). To say that that you calling my name caused me to turn my head is just to say that my head turned when you called my name. I did not set out to turn it, nor did I turn it for a reason, though there is, of course, a reason which explains why I turned it. We should not, in such cases, conflate any teleological reasons we may give after the fact with motivation for the behavior (which will have been entirely absent in cases of non-intentional action). We can, no doubt, imagine someone who, in turning his head, acts upon the consideration that someone called their name, perhaps taking this to be a good reason for turning his head. The point here is only that this need not be so when a person turns his head because someone has called out their name (or something that sounds like it).

Anscombe (1957, §15) notes persuasively that the attempted contrast between “having hung one’s hat on a peg because one’s host said ‘hang your hat on that peg’” and “turning around at hearing someone say Boo!” fails because whether or not we should view either action as one performed for a reason is to be decided by facts such as that of “how sudden one’s reaction was.” Whether or not the triggering of any reaction is to be explained by a fact about what (if anything) the words meant to the person acting is neither here nor there. Mutatis mutandis, the

---

9 Many thanks to the editor of this journal for bringing this point to my attention. This particular form of rationalization should be distinguished from (i) cases where we deceive ourselves about the real reasons for which we acted (as in the range of examples made famous by Nietzsche, Freud, and Sartre) and (ii) cases where we concoct explanations after a fact whose occurrence may have been random (cf. Taleb, 2007).
question of whether one acted for a reason or was merely caused to behave remains open in certain cases of actions that have exactly the same structure as the one which Dretske provides for intentional action. In the case of turning my head described above, some internal events (viz. my hearing, or my believing I heard, you call my name and my wanting to see who it was) in some way mediated between the initial triggering cause (calling my name) and the effect (my head turning), where this mediation played a causal role. Thus, the sound waves transmitted did not directly cause my head to turn (that would not have been a case of action at all—reflex or otherwise—but more like one’s hair, or in the case of Mary Poppins one’s whole body, being blown by the wind), yet we could not confidently describe a sudden action of this type as being intentional.

Of course, it remains possible that some cases of a movement’s being produced by one’s beliefs and desires are cases of intentional behavior since, for all I have said, Dretske’s analysis may have isolated necessary conditions of being an intentional action even if has failed to pick out sufficient ones. For my part, I remain content to have shown that Dretske’s model fails to provide a criterion by which we can distinguish the explanation of intentional action from that of non-intentional behavior. If I am right, then this would also help to explain Dretske’s counter-intuitive description of the behavior of a bird avoiding a noxious type of bug as intentional (2004, p. 174)10.

Reasons for Action

A possible response to the objection raised in the previous section would be to narrow the Dretskean analysis of what it is for an action to be intentional by inserting the very concept of a reason for action straight into it. On such a revised view, an intentional action would be a bodily movement’s being structurally caused by (only) those contents of a belief–desire pair which (further) constitute the reason(s) for which the agent acted.

One difficulty for this strategy is that some philosophers (e.g., Hursthouse, 1991) have devised a number of counter-examples to the claim that all intentional actions are done for reasons (these include such actions as tearing one’s hair or clothes in grief or clutching a picture or possession of a recently deceased loved one), while others (e.g., Knobe & Kelly, 2009) question the parallel assumption that all actions performed for reasons are intentional. If their arguments convince, then reasons will not help to mark out intentional behavior. Still, in what follows I shall not be relying on these controversial positions11, for I believe it can be demonstrated that the revised Dretskean analysis fails even if we should remain unpersuaded by the aforementioned challenges.

Suppose I raise my arm to wave to a friend. A Dretskean might illustrate this simple action with the following diagram:
Triggering Causes (Events):

Stimulus (S) → Beliefs and desires (B&D) → My arm’s rising (M)

(my coming to acquire certain beliefs and desires)

Structuring Causes (Facts): Reasons which explain why B&D → M
(why my beliefs and desires caused me to raise my arm)

Suppose further that stimulus S constitutes my seeing my friend across the road, and that S causes me to acquire the belief that my friend is across the road, and the desire to wave to her, and that this belief–desire pair further causes my arm to rise. According to Dretske, the triggering cause of my behavior (my raising my arm) is stimulus S, and the structuring cause is made up of the fact that—as I believe—my friend is across the street, and the further fact that I want to wave to her. Dretske himself has illustrated such a point with the following kind of diagram (1988b, p. 88):

\[
S \leftarrow \text{indicates (represents) } B&D \rightarrow \text{causes } M \\
\downarrow \text{explains (via our } \uparrow \text{knowledge and purposes)}
\]

In Dretske’s terminology, B&D come to represent S (the structuring cause of M) by indicating S, and because of this they come to be recruited as a triggering cause of M. As we have already seen, my reason for acting on this view is not B&D, nor (typically) the fact B&D are true of me, but rather the “content” of B&D. But now a problem arises: if M is triggered by my belief(s) and desire(s) proper, then although it is causally relevant that these beliefs and desires have a (meaningful) content, I will have many other (competing) belief–desire pairs with meaningful content that may also be capable of rendering the same action intelligible. Content alone apparently cannot tell us which belief–desire pair triggered the action, for at any given time I may have several pairs whose content could render my action intelligible\(^{12}\). In sum, the purported explanation of action provided by the Dretske’s structuring causes does not say anything about why one particular belief–desire pair triggered the action rather than another (with an

\(^{12}\) This kind of objection owes its origin to Smith & Pettit (1997).
equally suitable “content”), and *a forteriori* cannot (by Dretske’s own lights) determine which reason(s) I acted upon.

It is no good to retort that the belief–desire pair that triggered my bodily movement was whichever one was (motivationally) “strongest.” As it stands, this tired metaphor is next to meaningless, and the motivational information required to clarify things is not provided by a Dretskean structuring reason. While facts about my psychology may *indicate* a triggering cause, thereby explaining why certain features of my psychology caused me to move my body, so-called “mental contents” cannot alone indicate such a thing. For example, the so-called contents of one or more of my belief–desire pairs may well explain (or at any rate, render intelligible) why I moved my arm in such a way so as to make a wave, but (in so doing) they cannot explain why the relevant belief–desire pair (rather than some other one) triggered any movement at all—and yet this is precisely what a Dretskean account of action explanation requires. The problem is one of distinguishing between having a (motivating) reason and acting upon it (cf. von Wright, 1988, p. 281). Of course, on Dretske’s account, the reasons one acts upon will just be the ones related to whichever belief–desire pair leads us to action, but mental contents alone cannot inform us as to which one this is, for the mere existence of content that can render an action intelligible cannot explain which belief–desire pair triggered the bodily movement in question. Dretske’s account offers no method of determining which “mental contents” constituted the reason(s) for which the agent acted, leaving us with no demarcating criterion for intentional action.

**Conclusion**

I began this paper by outlining Dretske’s account of action and its explanation, arguing that it has been unjustifiably neglected in favor of less plausible causalist alternatives such as that championed by Donald Davidson. My case rested on considerations regarding the nature and individuation of action, the challenge of deviant causal chains, the powerful notion of triggering and structuring causes, the distinguishing mark of psychological explanation (viz. meaning), and the concept of a reason for which one acts.

I then, nonetheless, proceeded to reject Dretske’s overall view that intentional human behavior is triggered by electro-chemical events but structured by representational facts. My argument rested on the counterexample of non-intentionally moving one’s head as a result of someone calling out one’s name. I maintained that such action is best explained by the very same method that Dretske’s analysis reserves for *intentional* action, and I consequently concluded (having also considered a possible response) that his account is incapable of

---

13 There is something unashamedly Humean in this remark.

14 Incidentally, Dretske’s account can—and in my opinion should—be adapted in a way that leaves room for structuring causes which explain why my moving my body in a certain way is a piece of meaningful behavior.
explaining what is distinctive about the explanation of intentional action. Whether or not this should lead us to reject causalism I leave for another occasion\textsuperscript{15}.

References


\textsuperscript{15} I consider some aspects of this issue in Sandis (2009).
DRETSKE ON THE CAUSATION OF BEHAVIOR


