

Reasons Why

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Chapter 1

A Few Opening Remarks

I was tempted to subtitle this book “a theory of explanation,” so casual browsers running across it in their local bookstore would have a better idea what it was about. But that would betray everything the book stands for. One of my main claims is that so-called “theories of explanation” are not really theories of explanation at all—or, at least, they shouldn’t be theories of explanation. What they are, or should be, are theories of answers to why-questions.

The subject matter of such theories is interesting for its own sake—we are all born wanting to know why, and, if things go right, we never stop. The things we ask about range from the mundane to the esoteric: why does my brother keep hitting me, why are the stars visible only at night, why are we here at all. Given the importance of why-questions to our cognitive lives, a philosopher naturally wants to know what it takes to be an answer to a why-question.

Besides being themselves a topic for philosophical investigation, why-questions and their answers come up in philosophical investigations of other topics. Why-questions are important, for example, in the philosophy of science. “Scientific realism” means different things to different people, but one idea commonly associated with this doctrine is that it is one of the aims of science to answer why-questions. Science aims to figure out why things happen, not just describe, even very systematically, what happens.

Why-questions are also important in the philosophy of action. They help identify one central topic in the philosophy of action, namely intentional action:

someone acts intentionally if, and only if, one may ask “Why did he do it?”—where “why” is used in a special way, different from the way it is used when we ask why the moon is waning.¹

Why-questions are important in metaphysics. The obvious example is their importance to the theory of grounding. Many metaphysicians are very busy producing theories of grounding—but what *is* grounding? A common strategy for helping initiates get a handle on the subject-matter of these theories is to say that when one fact grounds another, the first may be used to answer the question why the second obtains. Another example of a part of metaphysics where why-questions are important is the theory of modality. If some fact *F* obtains in two possible worlds *W* and *V*, then those worlds are in one respect similar. Boris Kment argues, in “Counterfactuals and Explanation,” that this respect of similarity matters for how close *V* and *W* are, in the sense of closeness relevant to evaluating counterfactuals, if and only if the question why *Q* obtains has the same answer in both worlds.

Why-questions are important in normative ethics. When evaluating a theory of right action, utilitarianism for example, it is not enough to check whether it correctly sorts acts into right and wrong—whether every (possible) right act is classified as right by the theory, and every (possible) wrong act classified as wrong. A theory that correctly sorts acts into right and wrong is still false if it gives the wrong answer to the question of why right acts are right.

Why-questions are important in the philosophy of mind. The most appealing—to me—view about the status of mental facts is physicalism, the view that all mental facts are determined by physical facts. But there is a well-known problem for physicalism, a problem known as the “explanatory gap.” What is this problem? What is the gap? The explanatory gap is just this: physicalists have no answer to the question why the physical facts determine the mental ones in the way that they do.²

Why-questions of course are important in epistemology. “Inference to the best explanation” is the pattern of belief formation whereby, of the possible answers to the question why one’s evidence obtains (or, perhaps, why one has that

¹This is Anscombe’s proposal in *Intention* (§5).

²The term “explanatory gap” was coined by Joseph Levine, in “Materialism and Qualia.”

evidence), one comes to believe the “best” answer. Why-questions also appear in some theories of knowledge. Kieran Setiya defends the thesis that X knows p only if X formed the belief in p by a reliable method, and X used that method *because* it is reliable.³ (That is, “because it is reliable” is the answer to the question why X used that method.)

When one surveys all the answers science has given to all the why-questions it has addressed, it may be as if one finds oneself on an island rainforest, marveling at the magnificent diversity of what there is to see. To deny that diversity, one might think, is to give in to a reductive impulse that should be resisted. The right response is to celebrate and catalog that diversity, as a biologist would, were she to run across a jungle teeming with unknown species of parrot.

This is not my view. I hold that, however different answers to why-questions look on the surface, deeper down there is a great deal of unity to them. Or, at least, that is my view about answers to why-questions about events. In this book I will (almost) defend a version of the idea that an answer to the question why some given event E happened must cite causes of E.⁴ This idea is has been around for a while, but (you will not be surprised to learn) I don’t think others’ defenses of it have been good enough. Witness the continuing production and publication of examples of “non-causal explanations.”

My theory is organized around the “reason why.” One may answer the question why Q by saying something of the form “one reason why Q is that G,” and I think that a theory of answers to why-questions should take the reason why as its central object of analysis. It is the central object of analysis of my theory.

This is philosophy, so I will admit up-front that my theory of reasons why may be false. While it would, to be honest, take a lot to get me to accept that it is false, it would take a whole lot more to get me to accept that it was a mistake to focus on reasons why in the first place. Put another way, philosophers rarely

³See *Knowing Right From Wrong*, pp. 96-99 for citations of other philosophers with similar views. Setiya’s view is more subtle than is apparent from this one sentence sketch.

⁴“Almost” because I also hold that an answer can cite a ground of E, in the metaphysicians’ sense of “ground.”

persuade each other of anything, and so I know that those who disagree with me are unlikely to be persuaded that my theory of reasons why is the right one. I do hope, however, to persuade them that a theory of answers to why-questions should be a theory of reasons why, even if it should not be the one I defend.

I've been using "reason why" as if it were a noun phrase, when it is not. "Reason why" is not a semantically complete unit at all; in this respect, and in many others, it is analogous to "person who," or "place where." It would make little sense to propose a theory of persons who, or of places where. People who *what?* Places where *what?* So to prevent readers from thinking that here just a few pages in my theory is already incoherent, let me remark that when I say that I will propose a theory of reasons why I mean that I will propose a theory of what it takes for one fact to be a reason why some other fact obtains. Having said this, I will often in this book use "reason why" as a noun phrase, for stylistic convenience.

Both to formulate my theory, and to defend it, I make use of a distinction, a distinction that is much easier to see when we think in terms of reasons why than if we don't. It is a distinction between different levels of reasons why. There are, on the one hand, the reasons why it is the case that F, and on the other, the reasons why those reasons are reasons. This distinction is an essential component of my strategy for explaining away many apparent counterexamples to the idea that answers to why-questions about events must cite causes.

But before I say anything about reasons why, much less different levels of reasons why, I need to say something about explanation: about why my theory of explanation isn't a theory of explanation, and about why no one else's should be either.