Constantine Sandis
The Things We Do and Why We Do Them.
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In *The Things We Do and Why We Do Them,* Constantine Sandis argues that philosophical and empirical theories of human action are littered with conflations. Most importantly, these theories conflate between different senses of "action" and between different senses of "reason". He argues that this has resulted not only in mistaken and misleading claims but also in many vacuous disputes—disputes that would dissolve if only the participants got their conceptual framework in order. As a positive view, Sandis recommends a pluralist stance concerning the explanation of action, one that avoids the conflations and that rejects the endeavor of constructing a *theory* of action: "What I offer, then, is not a theory of why we do the things we do, but an account of why all such theories are bound to fail" (ix). In terms of style and method, Sandis departs from the unashamedly metaphysical approach that is currently popular in the philosophy of mind and action, and he takes us back to the days of ordinary language philosophy with numerous points and arguments from grammar and language use.

Overall, I think that this is a valuable contribution to the philosophy of action. It introduces and elaborates on important distinctions that are often overlooked, and it makes some very good points in critique of various empirical and philosophical theories. The two most important distinctions—and their corresponding conflations—are between *what* we do and our *doing* of it (chapter 1), and between the reasons *for which* we act and the reasons *why* our actions occur (chapter 4). As Sandis acknowledges, others have made these distinctions before him (von Wright, Hornsby, Smith, and Dancy, for instance). Yet no one before him has put them to use in an argument for the interesting and provocative claim that there is "no such thing as the distinct enquiry of explaining action" (1). In my opinion, the book is most effective in showing that empirical theories are usually not in competition with commonsense reason explanations. They are best interpreted not as uncovering the real reasons for which we act, but as providing various explanations of why we take certain things as reasons (Chapter 5). I must say, however, that I found the overall argument of the book less than convincing.

First of all, Sandis overstates the scope and aim of the theories that he rejects on a number of occasions. For instance, he sums the main conclusion up by saying that "there is no such thing as *the* complete explanation of a human action" (141). This might mean either that there can be no such explanation, or that none of the existing theories provides a complete explanation. Whatever the intended meaning, I wonder who would disagree. In philosophy, no proponent of a theory of action has ever suggested that the theory provides a complete explanation of human action. The same, I think, holds for empirical theories. Everyone can agree that human behavior is subject to different explanations at different levels of description. It has been suggested that the level of intentional description is, in some sense, privileged. But this is a lot weaker than the claim that explanations at this level provide *complete* explanations of action—let alone *the* complete explanation.

Second, there are a number of theoretical moves that proponents of the various theories have at their disposal and that have not been sufficiently addressed. Sandis distinguishes between (1) bodily movements (2) an agent's moving her body and (3) the thing or what the agent does (6–11). He notes that most philosophers distinguish 1 from 2 (and 3), but they seem to conflate 2 and 3. This is indeed a subtle distinction that few are aware of. Sandis is right to emphasize this, as 2 and 3 seem to belong to distinct categories. Put another way, this is the distinction between *act* and *deed*: the act of doing something as opposed to what is done (9). However, just as it is far from obvious that making the distinction between 1 and 2 is incompatible with having a theory of action, it is far from obvious that making the distinction between 2 and 3 is incompatible with having a theory of action. There are a number of theoretical devices that philosophers have used in order to accommodate the distinction between 1 and 2, and it has not been shown, here, that similar theoretical moves cannot accommodate the distinction between 2 and 3. For instance, on Davidson's view, we can distinguish between 1 and 2 by way of distinguishing between descriptions: one and the same event can have a physical description as a bodily movement and a mental description as an action. Perhaps we can capture the distinction between 2 and 3 also in terms of descriptions? Sandis has not shown that this is impossible. More importantly, Goldman proposed a theory of action that follows Davidson's in many respect. But unlike Davidson, he suggested that we think of actions as tokenings of act-properties (or act-types). The type/token distinction is ubiquitous in contemporary philosophy of mind and action and it might be taken to capture the distinction between 2 and 3. In the main text, Sandis does not address this possibility. In an appendix on the ontology of action, he rejects the suggestion that we should think of the things we do (3) in terms of universals (or types, I suppose). The argument here derives from more general points about how not to do metaphysics. However, it is one thing to reject a certain theoretical or metaphysical proposal. It is quite another thing to hold that all existing theories of action conflate 2 and 3—or, yet stronger, that all theories are *bound* to conflate 2 and 3. Another possibility is to look at the distinction between non-basic and basic actions (as in giving a signal *by* raising an arm). This is not the same distinction as between 2 and 3. However, it seems that non-basic actions are generated or constituted by basic actions. Likewise, it seems that our deeds are generated or constituted by our acts. Why should we not have a theory on how that works?

Third, I think that some reflection on the distinctions suggests that a theory of action is worth wanting. For every performance of an overt action, we can distinguish between 1, 2, and 3. At the same time, it seems clear that these things stand in an intimate relation with each other. Given that 1, 2, and 3 are distinct and subject to different kinds of explanation, as Sandis argues, we face the question of *how* all this *fits together*, as it were (as there is no question *that* it all fits together when we act). This question of how the performance of actions is related to the causation of movements has been at the centre of the philosophy of action. Different theories of action provide different answers. Sandis' pluralism, in contrast, rejects the quest for an answer. The reason seems to be that one cannot give an answer without conflating between the different senses of "action". But it has not been shown that one *cannot* have a theory of action that preserves the relevant distinctions. As indicated, it has not even been shown conclusively that existing theories of action cannot avoid the mentioned conflations.

Fourth, Sandis distinguishes between the reasons for which we act ("agential reasons") and the reasons that explain why actions occur. He argues that agential reasons do not explain actions, as they merely *feature* in explanations: they are only part of the explanantia, as proper

explanations of actions are given in terms of the agent's taking something as a reason, not in terms of the reason itself. This is, by now, a fairly common move and it has not become clear to me why Sandis thinks that a theory of action cannot preserve the distinction by adopting this move. A common way of doing this is by stressing the distinction between *attitudes* and their *contents*: agential reasons may be the contents of mental attitudes which may explain action. In any case, it seems that agential and explanatory reasons are intimately related to each other when we act for reasons. We face, again, the question of how all this fits together: how are agential and explanatory reasons related to each other when we act for reasons? A good theory of action provides an answer—another reason why a theory seems worth wanting.

Finally, Sandis holds that once we uncover the conflations and reject all theories, many problems and disputes simply disappear. One such dispute concerns the question of whether reason explanations are deductive-nomological explanations (chapter 3). Let me point out here only that this debate is by now obsolete, within philosophy at least, because the deductive-nomological model of causal explanation is now widely rejected. Concerning the debate between internalism and externalism about reasons (between Smith and Dancy, in particular), Sandis says that it "evaporates" once we "abandon the notion that agential reasons are capable of explaining actions" (114). However, at the core of this debate is a dispute concerning the role of desires, and Sandis has not shown that his construal of agential reasons helps to dissolve this argument. To be sure, there might be some issues that would evaporate, but it is unlikely that this move would altogether dissolve the debate about internal and external reasons.

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