Sue opened the door to the bedroom and walked in. Why did she do that? In order to see whether her glasses were on the dresser. That is, she entered the room because she thought that by looking on the dresser she would satisfy her desire to either find her glasses or at least narrow down the number of places where they might be.

This paradigmatic explanation tells us why an action occurred by revealing the agent’s reason for performing the action. The principal philosophical question about such explanations— and the question to be discussed here—is, What makes such an explanation true? What informative specification of truth-conditions for such an explanation can we give?

The chief controversy about this has focused on the question whether it is necessary for the truth of such an explanation for a causal connection to exist between the explanans—the desire(s), belief(s), or intention(s) of the agent that, according to the explanation, do the explaining—and the explanandum—the action that they explain. The position that this is necessary we can call causalism regarding reasons explanations; the position that there need not be a causal connection, that there is at least one sufficient condition for the truth of such
an explanation that does not entail any causal connection, we can call noncausalism.

Those who advocate noncausalism usually also maintain that the existence of free and responsible action is incompatible with the truth of determinism; and so they are concerned to show that this view, that free and responsible actions are not causally necessitated, does not commit them to the absurd conclusion that such actions must lack reasons explanations.

1. Davidson’s Challenge

Before the publication of Donald Davidson’s defense of causalism in “Actions, Reasons, and Causes” (1963), the dominant attitude among analytic philosophers was anticausalist—but not since then. Davidson’s article turned the tide. He gave effective rebuttals to various arguments that purported to show that the explanatory connection in a reasons explanation is not causal.

Davidson also offered an argument for causalism. He pointed out that an agent’s having had a reason to perform a certain action she performed does not entail that she performed it for that reason. There are two essential aspects to a reasons explanation: (1) the set of the agent’s propositional attitudes offered as explanans must constitute a rationale for acting in the way the agent acted, and, in addition, (2) that rationale must be the reason (or one of the reasons) for which the agent acted in that way; and the first does not entail the second.

[A] person can have a reason for an action, and perform the action, and yet this reason not be the reason why he did it. Central to the relation between a reason and an action it explains is the idea that the agent performed the action because he had the reason. (Davidson 1980: 9)

To illustrate, suppose Sue had a second desire that was a reason for her entering the bedroom: she wanted Sam who was sleeping in the room to wake up and give her some company, and she believed that her opening the door to the room might well cause Sam to wake up. Compatibly with this, we can suppose further, however, that Sue did not enter the room for that reason: although she was aware that waking Sam was an outcome toward which she had a “pro-attitude” and that her entering the room might produce that outcome, it was not the case that she entered the room in order to produce it (not even in order to produce it among other things).

Davidson writes (ibid.: 11–12) that what must be added to “S did A and S had reason R for doing A” to get “S did A because S had reason R for doing A” is
that S's having R caused S's doing A. The explanatory connection between the reason and the action that is implied by saying that S did A for reason R must be constituted, he believes, by a causal connection between them. "Failing a satisfactory alternative," he says, "the best argument for [causalism] is that it alone promises to give an account of the [explanatory] connection between reasons and action" (ibid.: 11).

2. A Noncausalist Alternative

But there is a satisfactory alternative. For any true reasons explanation, we can formulate a condition that, if it obtains, is sufficient for its truth but that does not entail that the propositional attitudes of the explanans caused the action explained.

Reasons explanations take many different forms, not all of which can be discussed here. Let us focus on just the following two forms:

(1) S A-ed in order to B.
(2) S A-ed because she had promised to B and she believed that by A-ing she would B.

(1) could be paraphrased by "S's purpose/intention/aim in A-ing was to B." (2) could be paraphrased by, for example, "What led S to A was her remembering her promise to B and her belief that by A-ing she would (or might) keep that promise."

(1-C) and (2-C) state sufficient conditions, respectively, for the truth of (1) and (2).³

(1-C) Concurrently with her A-ing S intended of that A-ing that by it (and in virtue of its being an A-ing) she would B (or would contribute to her B-ing).⁴

(2-C) Before her A-ing, S had promised to B, and concurrently with her A-ing S intended of that A-ing that by it she would keep that promise.

One could not consistently affirm (1-C) and deny (1) that S A-ed in order to B; nor could one consistently affirm (2-C) and deny (2) that S A-ed because she believed that by A-ing she would keep her promise to B. The truth of those propositions guarantees the truth of those reasons explanations. Those propositions do not, however, give causal conditions. (1-C) does not entail that the accompanying intention it mentions caused the action. (2-C) does not entail that
the desire-plus-belief it mentions caused the action. Neither entails anything at all about what, if anything, caused the action or any of the events, physical or mental, ingredient in the action. Yet each is sufficient for the truth of the corresponding reasons explanation.

3. A Causalist Objection

There are some who would disagree with this claim. They think that the truth of (1-C) cannot be sufficient for the truth of (1) unless a causal requirement is added, so that (1-C) is revised as follows:

(1-C, rev) Concurrently with her A-ing S intended of that A-ing that by it she would B (or would contribute to her B-ing) and that intention caused her A-ing.

Alfred Mele is one of those who advocate this addition. He supports his view by imagining an agent S who opens a window and has two concurrent intentions in doing so: intention N is to let in some fresh air and intention O is to gain a better view. He writes: (Mele 1992a: 253)

[S]uppose that a mad scientist, without altering the neural realization of N itself, renders that realization incapable of having any effect on S’s bodily movements...while allowing the neural realization of O to figure normally in the production of movements involved in S’s opening the window. Here, it seems clear, O helps to explain S’s opening the window, and N does not. Indeed, N seems entirely irrelevant to the performance of that action. And if that is right, Ginet is wrong; for on his view, the mere presence in the agent of an intention about her [action] is sufficient for that intention’s being explanatory of her action.

Mele’s argument here seems to boil down to this: If we imagine that the neural realization of a particular concurrent de re intention plays no causal role in the production of the voluntary movements it is about—instead of supposing that it figures normally in the production of them—then we have imagined a situation in which the presence of the intention obviously does not contribute to explaining the action.

There is a whiff of question-begging about this argument. The argument assumes that, as things actually are, the neural realizations of such concurrent intentions normally do play a causal role in producing the relevant voluntary ex-
ervations. It is possible that this is true, but it is not something we know. We do not know nearly enough about how the relevant mental states are realized. For all we know, the neural realizations of our accompanying intentions about our voluntary exertions do not normally play a causal role in producing them (in producing, that is, the central volitional neural processes and thereby the bodily exertions they cause). But our ignorance on this point does not mean that we are therefore ignorant as to whether the reasons explanations we so confidently give, of our own and others actions, are true. If we were to discover, or somehow become convinced, that the neural realizations of intentions and volitional motor impulses are not causally connected in the way Mele assumes they are, we would not be obliged on that account to abandon giving reasons explanations, to say that concurrent de re intentions with the sorts of contents specified in my sufficient conditions do nothing to explain the actions they concern.

4. What Is the Noncausal Explanatory Connection?

If the explanatory connection between action and reasons provided by (1-C) and (2-C) is not causal, what is it? In the case of (1-C), the concurrent intention explains the action simply in virtue of the fact that it is an intention of that action that by it one will B, that is, in virtue of being that sort of propositional attitude with that content. Aside from the extrinsic relation required for the content's direct reference to the action, the explanatory connection is an internal relation between the explaining intention and the action explained: it follows from intrinsic properties of the relata (plus the direct reference). The explanatory connection is made, not by a causal relation, but simply by the direct reference and the internal relation.

In the case of (2-C) the explanatory connection between the prior promise and the action has two links. The first link is from the prior promise to the concurrent intention and the second link is from that concurrent intention to the action. The concurrent intention is the linchpin where the two links connect. The first link requires a concurrent memory of the prior promise and consists in the fact that the concurrent intention refers to the remembered promise and says of it that the action is to keep it (that is, to bring about what is specified in the content of that promise). The second link consists in the fact that the concurrent intention's content directly refers to the action and says of it that it is to keep the prior promise.
Note that the first link, in requiring that S concurrently remember the prior event (which is necessary if the concurrent intention is to be about the prior event), does imply a causal connection between the prior event and the memory part of S’s concurrent state. But this memory link obviously does not imply that the prior event causes the concurrent intention, even on the assumption that the prior event does cause the memory of it. The memory of the prior event is a condition that enables the concurrent de re intention to refer directly to the prior event—if S did not remember the prior promise, S could not intend of it that the current action keep it—but of course this does not mean that the memory causes the intention.

The direct reference of the concurrent intention to the action may require a causal link between the action and the intention. Since the subject is directly aware of at least the initial conscious volitional part of the particular action her intention concerns, it seems that she can take advantage of that and refer directly to that action, in a demonstrative fashion—“this action.” Perhaps this requires that something intrinsic to the intention-state is caused by part of the action. But even if such a causal connection is required, it is obvious that this will not entail that the intention cause any part of the action: the causation is in the opposite direction.

But there may be a difficulty in supposing that such a causal connection is required. If (a) the direct reference requires that what is referred to, the action, cause (or contribute to causing) what refers to it, the intention, and if (b) causes must always precede their effects, then there will be a small period at the beginning of the action during which the concurrent directly referring intention will not be in place, a gap during which the agent will have no intention about the action already begun, during which it will not be the case that she intends anything of that action. This is an unpleasant consequence.

Perhaps it can be avoided by denying one of the two premises, (a) and (b), from which it is deduced. In fact, neither one seems obvious to me. Consider (b) first. Why not an effect that is simultaneous with its cause? Suppose I push a button. My exerting force against the button with my finger causes the button to move. Does the button not begin to move as soon as I begin exerting force against it? Must there be any delay? (Whether or not there is in fact any delay, is a delay required by the very notion of a causal relation between the two?)

Consider (a), the claim that direct reference to one’s action in the content of one’s intention requires that the action cause the feature of one’s intention-state that does the referring. Now, there is no doubt that direct reference often does involve the referent’s entering into causing that which does the referring. When the representation given in my visual experience directly refers to a particular car, it does so because that car played a part in causing the relevant features of my visual experience; and when my utterance of “That car” directly refers to that car, the reason is that the car played a part in bringing about my utterance (via its
role in bringing about features of my visual experience). But I think that not all direct, demonstrative reference requires such a causal relation. Consider the following counter-examples:

- The demonstrative reference of an utterance to itself: “This utterance will have more than ten words in it by the time it is finished.”
- Suppose I know that my pressing a certain key will more or less instantaneously produce a brief flash on the computer screen. As I press the button, I utter, “Look at that flash [pointing to a place on the screen],” timing it so that my utterance of “that flash” coincides exactly with the occurrence of the flash.
- Suppose I voluntarily lift my arm and at exactly the same time as I begin willing the movement I begin an utterance of “This is a voluntary movement.”
- Suppose I voluntarily move my right leg a little and at exactly the same time as I begin willing the movement I begin an utterance of “This movement I intend to bring me into a more stable stance.”

If, as in the last example, I can simultaneously begin uttering an expression of an intention that directly refers to a concurrent voluntary movement, without any part of the movement’s causing any part of the utterance, then surely I can simultaneously begin having an intention that refers to the movement without any part of the movement’s causing any part of the intention.

We must suppose, of course, that the conscious beginning of the action and the accompanying intention that directly refers to the action occur within the same unified consciousness, that a single conscious subject is simultaneously aware of both mental items and the aboutness relation between them. This means, no doubt, that these items cannot belong to separate streams of events that are completely isolated causally from each other. But it does not entail that the accompanying intention causes the action.

5. Another Noncausalist View: Intention in the Action

Some (for example, Searle 1983, Wilson 1989, and O’Connor 2000) have suggested a sufficient condition for the truth of (1) that is much like (1-C); however, they regard the required intention as quite literally in the action, as a constituent or
intrinsic property of it rather than a mere accompaniment. They would revise (1-C) in something like the following way:

(1-C\*): It was a constituent or intrinsic property of her A-ing that S intended of it that by it she would B (or contribute to her B-ing).

A subscriber to (1-C\*) who also holds that the part that an intention-in-action plays in the action is to cause and sustain the bodily movements involved in it must allow that (1-C\*) does imply something about how some of the constituents of the action were caused: it implies that the intention in the action caused the bodily movement(s) ingredient in it. But even so, (1-C\*) does not entail any causal connection between the action and anything outside the action.

(On O’Connor’s agent-cause view, an action consists in the agent’s causing an intention to move her body in a certain way immediately, which intention causes and sustains the bodily movement (O’Connor 2000: 72, 86). He suggests (ibid.: 88–89) that his view introduces a causal element into a reasons explanation, and even that agent-causation is somehow required for a satisfactory account of reasons explanations. He says that the agent’s exercise of active power provides a necessary link between reason and behavior without which the reason could not in any significant way explain the behavior. It allows the reason to influence the agent’s producing the outcome while not (directly and independently) causing it. Were nothing to have caused this [the behavioral outcome, I take him to mean], then noting that the agent had a reason that motivated acting in that way would not suffice to explain it.

This last sentence sounds like a commitment to Davidson’s claim that the only thing that can make a reason the agent has a reason for which she acted is a causal connection; but it is hard to see how such a causalist view can square with O’Connor’s claim (ibid.: 52–55) that an event consisting of an agent’s causing something cannot be caused at all. To claim that, it seems to me, is to deny that the explanatory connection between an agent’s causing something and the reason for which he did so can be a causal connection of any sort (whether direct or indirect, deterministic or indeterministic).

Those who go for (1-C\*) do so, perhaps, because they fail to see any other way, than by positing such an intention in the action, to make the bodily movements part of an action rather than just involuntary movements. They overlook, however, the fact that one can perform a voluntary movement, and therefore act, without intending to perform a voluntary movement and therefore without intending the movement or any consequence of it. This would happen, for example, if one believed falsely that one’s arm was paralyzed, tried nevertheless to raise it, and, to one’s surprise, did raise it. The sort of thing sufficient for such a voluntary
movement when it is thus unintentional is also present when a voluntary movement is intentional (I would say that this is a certain sort of mental activity, volition, which causes the movement). So in all voluntary movements, intentional or not, we have ingredients sufficient to make an action that do not include any intention about the movement or its consequences. So in a case where the agent does intend her voluntary movement, the intention should be thought of, not as a constituent of the action, but as an accompaniment.

6. An Objection to Deterministic Causalism

One objection to causalism that Davidson mentioned (Davidson 1980: 12–13) but did not deal with effectively is this: The explanans in reasons explanations often include only more or less enduring states of the agent—beliefs, desires, intentions, and so on. But a causal explanation of an event, says Davidson, requires that there be an antecedent event among the totality of relevant causal factors. Presumably he requires this because, on his view, causal laws are deterministic, specifying that when a certain collection of factors obtain at a time there immediately ensues as a result a certain effect. So not only must the totality of relevant causal factors explain why a certain sort of event occurred, but the timing of those factors—their coming to obtain precisely when they did—must also explain why the effect occurred precisely when it did. The objection is that, for at least many reasons explanations, no relevant event seems to play that role. There is only a certain combination of reasons-states that obtained for some interval and that could have led to the explained action at any of several times during that interval. In response Davidson writes:

In many cases it is not difficult at all to find events very closely associated with the [reason states]. States and dispositions are not events, but the onslaught of a state or disposition is. A desire to hurt your feelings may spring up at the moment you anger me; I may start wanting to eat a melon just when I see one; and beliefs may begin at the moment we notice, perceive, learn, or remember something. [In the case of a driver who signals a turn by raising his arm] there is a mental event; at some moment the driver noticed (or thought he noticed) his turn coming up, and that is the moment he signalled. (Davidson 1980: 12)

But the point of the objection seems to be missed here. The moment the driver noticed his turn coming up might not have been the moment he signaled. He
might have been aware that his turn was coming up, and have been intending to signal before getting there, for some time before he actually signaled; and he might have signaled at any of many different moments between that moment and the moment his turn came up, and the reasons explanation of his raising his arm have been the same, namely, that he wanted thereby to let others know that he would be turning at the next intersection and believed that raising his arm would do that. (It is surely implausible to suggest that, as a matter of causal law, his becoming aware that his turn is coming up (or some neural realization of this event) would, in sufficiently similar circumstances, always produce his signaling after exactly the same interval as occurred in this case.)

Davidson acknowledges that [there]

seem to be cases of intentional action where we cannot explain at all why we acted when we did. In such cases, explanation in terms of primary reasons parallels the explanation of the collapse of the bridge from a structural defect: we are ignorant of the event or sequence of events that led up to (caused) the collapse, but we are sure there was such an event or sequence of events. (ibid.: 13)

Supposing Davidson is right about the bridge case; it is not at all evident that the reasons case is parallel, that the truth of the reasons explanation requires some event to explain the precise timing of the action (whether or not we know what that event is). We certainly have nothing like the empirical reasons for believing this about reasons explanations that we have for believing the parallel that applies to the bridge-collapse explanation. And if we were to come to have empirical reason to doubt, with respect to lots of cases where I would have sincerely reported that I raised my arm in order to signal a turn, that there was an event that explains why I raised my arm precisely when I did (rather than a moment or two earlier or later), we would not, I submit, have come to have reason to doubt that I did raise my arm in order to signal a turn. It seems that one could have the conviction about reasons explanations that Davidson expresses in the last sentence of the remarks just quoted only if one were already convinced that reasons explanations must be deterministic causal explanations.

7. Indeterministic Causalism

A causalist who did not hold that all causal explanation is deterministic would not face the difficulty that Davidson struggled with here. A causalist who allows that causation can be indeterministic—that is, that the laws of nature governing
causation, the laws that determine what sorts of things cause what other sorts of things, can be indeterministic—can say that, where a reasons explanation can cite only states and no event that explains the precise timing of the explained act, the indeterministic law governing the causation here says that at any time at which that combination of states is present (and other conditions are right) there is a certain chance but no certainty that it will cause the result. Thus at each moment after I began both to believe that my turn was coming up and to intend to signal before reaching the turn, there was a chance but no certainty that those states would cause my signaling then. And there is no difference between conditions at the moment I do signal and those at the earlier moments that explains why it was at that moment and not an earlier one that the states caused the result. Of course, there is a chance that they will not cause me to signal at all; and, if the causation involved is indeterministic, there need be no difference between a case where they do cause me to signal and one where they do not that explains why they caused the signaling in one case and failed to cause it in the other (though I think that, if I end up not signaling at all, we will have to say that I either abandoned my intention to signal or forgot about it: it is not a conceptual possibility that all of the following should have obtained: nothing rendered me unable to signal, I continued to intend to signal, I remembered that intention throughout the relevant interval, and yet I did not signal).

Now that we have mentioned causal laws, let us note that how one conceives of the relation between such laws and particular instances of causation depends on which of two fundamentally different ways of thinking of causation one adopts. On a strictly Humean view, the causal relation is definable in terms of (reducible to) generalizations or laws: to say that the occurrence of a certain combination of states or events at a particular time caused a certain particular event to occur is to say that there is a description “C” of the causal factors and a description “E” of the effect event such that it is a law of nature that in a certain percentage of cases occurrences of sort C will be accompanied by events of sort E. (For deterministic laws, this percentage is 100; for indeterministic laws it is less.) On the other conception, causation is not definable in any such way: the concept of the causal relation is primitive. This does not mean, however, that on this conception there cannot be true laws about causation, for example, ones of the form “Whenever an event of sort A occurs in circumstances of sort C, this will cause (or have a propensity to cause) an event of sort E.” Nor does it mean even that on this conception one cannot say that wherever there is causation a true causal law must cover the case.

Some have proposed that the explanatory connection in reasons explanation should be thought of as indeterministic causation. Call this view about reasons explanation “indeterministic causalism.” (Davidson’s view is deterministic causalism.) Indeterministic causalists, like noncausalists (those who think that the connection need not be causal at all), think that the truth of determinism is incom-
compatible with the existence of free action and wish to show how their incompatibilism does not entail the absurd conclusion that no free action has a reasons explanation, that no one can act freely and responsibly and at the same time act for a reason.

Robert Kane is an indeterministic causalist, holding that "[w]hen agents choose for reasons ... [t]he reasons play a role in the causal etiology of the choice (though they need not determine it) ..." (Kane 1996a: 136); he holds (ibid.: 192–95) that nondeterministic event-causation of an action by the agent's "self-network" (her plans, aspirations, ideals, and motivational structures [ibid.: 139]) is essential if the action is to be something that the agent produces or does, instead of something that just happens to her.

He gives no argument for this claim and, as far as I can see, it is no more evident than is "the pernicious assumption," which Kane rejects, that an agent's control over an action requires that the action have an antecedent determining cause. It may be, as Kane appears to think, that the speculation as to how decisions or actions for reasons could be undetermined that is most conformable to science's present understanding of basic physical processes is that (the neural realizations of) such decisions are resolutions of indeterminate processes. But even if this is true, it does not follow that such a feature is entailed by the nature of decision or action for reasons. And it is unclear why an account of the truth conditions for reasons explanation that simply leaves open the question of whether there is any causal relation between reasons and the actions they explain is not just as compatible with the best scientific understanding of the natural order as an account that requires a probabilistic causal relation. Further, it is clear—and here I echo Kane's argument against the "pernicious assumption"—that, even if we were to discover that the brain-processes underlying our deliberated decisions offer no basis for saying that the decisions are caused (either deterministically or probabilistically) by what we take to be our reasons for them, this would not be a ground for thinking that we do not after all make those decisions for those reasons.

Randolph Clarke (1993 and 1996a) combines indeterministic causalism with agent-causation. He thinks that free and responsible actions are directly caused by the agent, but also that a satisfactory account of reasons explanation requires that the agent's reasons probabilistically cause the action (a form of event causation). He favors the irreducibility (anti-Humean) conception of the event-causal relation.

The difficulty with this view is that it threatens to make every reasons-explained action over-determined. If an action-event of type A was caused by an antecedent reasons-event of type R (which includes all the propositional-attitudes that at the time the agent took to bear on her choice of action, including competing reasons for alternative actions, so that R might have indeterministically produced a different action instead of A), then it seems that the agent's own agent-causal effort was not really needed to bring about A, was instead otiose.
I think it is no answer to this to say that R only indeterministically caused A. To say this is not to say that R was only part of the cause of A or was only a causally necessary condition of A; it is to say that R did in this instance bring about A but the relevant event-causal laws leave it naturally possible that R might not have caused A (the laws of nature give the occurrence of R less than a 100 percent propensity, but greater than a 0 percent propensity, to cause A), that it might have caused a different action-event or perhaps nothing at all. Thus, it would seem, to say that this particular instance of R indeterministically caused this instance of A is not to imply that it needed help from something else, such as the agent, in order to do so. It is, rather, to say that while it might not have caused A, it did in fact cause A.

Nor will it help, it seems to me, to suggest (as Clarke 1993 does) that by exercising his agent-causal power the agent determines which of the several alternative sorts of action-events R could cause it does cause, to say that the agent causes R's causing A (and had it in his power to instead cause R's causing some alternative sort of event in place of A). The difficulty is still there: if R needed help from the agent's agent-causal power in order to cause A, if something other than R was a nonredundant part of what made it the case that A was caused, then we cannot say that R indeterministically caused A. Indeed, Clarke gives this objection additional purchase when he suggests (Clarke 1996: 29) that when A, the action-event, is in a subject of the right sort—one with the power to cause it (and the capacity to act for reasons)—then it is nomologically necessary that, if A occurs, it is caused by the agent. If this is true, then it is hard to see how it can be said of R that it indeterministically causes A: R may be a necessary condition of the agent's causing A, but if it is nomologically necessary that A does not occur unless caused by the agent, then R does not indeterministically cause A.

To see this, let R+ be a complex state of affairs that includes the agent's having reasons R1 for doing A1 and reasons R2 for doing A2, plus the agent's having the power to cause A1 and the power to cause A2, and a situation of which Clarke would say that if the agent does A1 for reasons R1, then R1 indeterministically caused A1 and it is nomologically necessary that the agent caused A1. Think of R1 and R2 as like springs, each of which, if released, will produce a particular action-event; and think of the agent's causing A1 as her releasing the energy in R1. Now it sounds correct to say that R+, in virtue of containing the tensed springs R1 and R2, has a "propensity" to cause A1 and a "propensity" to cause A2 and that the agent determined which propensity of R+ issued in actual causation. But is it right to say that R+, or its component R1, indeterministically caused A1? No. Here R+’s propensity to cause A1 cannot be what we mean in talking of indeterministic causation. For there is not here a probabilistic causal law stating that in a certain percentage of the cases when R+ obtains it (or its component R1) will cause A1, and whether it does so or not is not dependent on some
difference between the cases where it does so and those where it does not: What we have here rather is more like a deterministic law that says that when \( R+ \) obtains and the agent releases \( R_t \), then that causes \( A_t \).  

8. Counterfactuals

Some have suggested that causalism is supported by the (alleged) fact that reasons explanations support counterfactual conditionals of a sort whose truth has to be underwritten by the obtaining of a causal connection (Hornsby 1993: 165 n.3). It is true that very often when an explanation of the form “\( S \) did \( A \) in order to satisfy her desire \( D \) (carry out her intention \( I ) \)” is true there is also true a corresponding counterfactual of the form “\( S \) would not have done \( A \) if \( S \) had not had the desire \( D \) (or the intention \( I ) \).”

But when such a counterfactual is true, the reason is not that the truth of the explanation requires it; it is not that the explanation entails the counterfactual. There are cases where such an explanation is true but the counterfactual is not. Consider our earlier example of Sue’s entering the bedroom in order to find her glasses, while harboring a desire for Sam to wake up and believing that her entering the room might cause that awakening. Change the example and make it the case that Sue intended of her action both that it would help her find her glasses and awaken Sam. Then it could be true that she entered the room in order to look for her glasses but false that had she not had the desire to look for her glasses she would not have entered the room: it might be that she would still have entered in order to wake Sam; it might be, that is, that her attitude toward her two reasons was that either one by itself was a sufficient reason for the action.

But, the causalist might say, suppose (as we did earlier) that Sue did not enter in order to wake Sam, that, although she had that reason for entering, it was not a reason for which she entered: it was not because she had that reason that she entered. Then surely (the causalist continues) both of the following counterfactuals are true:

(a) If \( S \) had not had a desire to look for her glasses, she would not have entered;
(b) If \( S \) had not had a desire to wake Sam, she would still have entered;

and surely the truth of these counterfactuals must be underwritten by facts about a causal connection between the desire \( S \) acted to satisfy and the action explained. Surely what we must say (the causalist concludes) is that \( S \)’s desire to wake Sam
was, under the circumstances insufficient to cause her to enter, but the desire to find her glasses was.

In fact, it seems that the truth of these counterfactuals can be guaranteed by something other than a causal connection. It can be guaranteed in the way that the truth of a statement of conditional intention is guaranteed. Suppose Henry decides that, if he does not receive a call from Pam in the next ten minutes, he will call her. His forming and maintaining that intention until she calls (together with there being no obstacle to his carrying it out) is enough to make true Henry's later counterfactual statement to Pam, "If you hadn't called, I would have called you." Henry can know that this conditional is true just by knowing that he was committed to making it true. But, the causalist protests, does not his commitment to making it true entail that there is true a causal law linking his having that intention plus his believing its antecedent to be satisfied, with his making (or trying to make) its consequent true? No. He can know that he was committed to making the conditional true without having any idea whether such a causal law holds.

It does seem that counterfactuals (a) and (b) must be true if it is true that Sue entered only in order to satisfy her desire to look for her glasses and not in order to satisfy her desire that Sam awaken. But this is true, not, as causalists think, because the first desire, but not the second, was causally sufficient for her action whether or not the other desire was present. It is true, rather, because Sue's commitment to these conditionals—as a matter of her intention—is conceptually necessary for her to have at the time of the action the intention thereby to look for her glasses while lacking the intention thereby to wake Sam.

Consider counterfactual (a). It would be incoherent for Sue to say, "(1) I intended by entering the room to look for my glasses, but (2) I did not intend thereby to wake Sam; however, (3) had I not wanted to look for my glasses, I would [contrary to (a)] still have entered, in that case in order to wake Sam." Statements (1) and (3) indicate that Sue acted for both reasons, which clashes with what statement (2) says.

Consider counterfactual (b). Sue's having in the action the intention to satisfy her desire to look for her glasses but not the intention to satisfy her desire to wake Sam commits her to having the conditional intention regarding the latter desire that, had she not had it, she would still have entered the room. Sue could not consistently say, "(1) I did not intend my action to wake Sam, but (2) had I not had the desire to wake Sam, I would [contrary to (b)] not have entered the room."

What about the example, considered a few paragraphs back, in which Sue entered the room in order both to look for her glasses and to wake Sam? In that case it might or might not be true that, had she lacked the one desire, she would still have entered the room in order to satisfy the other. Her attitude when she decided to enter might have been that neither reason by itself was sufficient but
that together they were jointly sufficient. That is, her attitude was a conditional intention: “If entering the room will both help me find my glasses and wake Sam, then I'll do it; otherwise I won't.” In that case, it would be true of neither desire that, had she lacked it, she would have entered the room in order to satisfy the other. Or her attitude might instead have been that each reason was by itself sufficient reason to enter the room. In that case it would (as a matter of her intention) be true of each desire that, had she lacked that desire she would still have entered in order to satisfy the other.

9. Intention Guides Action

Let us consider one more argument for causalism. This one has to do with the idea that intention guides action. Sue entered the bedroom by voluntarily making certain exertions with her body and she intended of those bodily exertions that they would bring about her entering the bedroom. In general, when an intentional action involves voluntary exertion of the body, the agent intends of the voluntary exertion, under some description of it, that it will accomplish the intended action. So the agent's propositional attitudes contain a fully adequate reasons explanation of the action only if they contain a rationale for making the particular sort of voluntary bodily exertion that she made in order to perform that action—only if they contain, that is, a belief that by exerting her body in that way she will (or might) perform the intended action.

The content of the intention accompanying the voluntary exertion specifies of it that it should have certain intrinsic features—for example, that it should be an exertion of force forward with arm and hand—and, typically, also that it should bring about a certain thing—for example, that it should push against a door and continue until it has caused the door to open a certain distance. It seems right to say that the intention, in virtue of having this content, guides the course of the voluntary exertion, or rather that the agent is guided by it in making the exertion so as to conform to its content. If this is right, then, it might be urged, there is a causal connection involved in the truth-maker of a reasons explanation after all, for surely guidance is a causal notion.

Sometimes guidance is a causal notion, but here it is not. Here what makes it the case that an antecedent intention guides a voluntary exertion is, not its causing the exertion, but rather this: the agent's concurrently intending of the voluntary exertion that it conform to the content of the antecedent intention. The only causal relation this requires is whatever causation is involved in the
agent's currently remembering the antecedent intention and its content; it does not entail that the antecedent intention cause either the voluntary exertion or the concurrent intention about it.

What about a case where an intended voluntary movement takes more than just a moment, where it requires a more or less extended course of voluntary exertion—for example, a dance movement, the movement involved in a tennis serve, the movements involved in playing a scale on the piano, the movements involved in writing or typing a longish word—and where the agent is not practiced in the movement? Here, surely, the agent's concurrent intention to be making a movement of the sort in question guides the development of the movement in a sense that is not exhausted by saying merely that this intention accompanies the movement throughout. This is true, but still no causing of the movement by an intention need be involved.

Consider a simple example. I am, let us suppose, just beginning to learn to play the chimes. I am practicing and I wish to produce a certain pattern of three successive notes, as prescribed on the exercise sheet before me. This will involve, I realize, a certain complex movement of my arm and hand (which grasps a mallet), consisting of three successive stages. So I form the intention to make such a movement and then carry out that intention, attending carefully to the successive movements as I make them. A causalist picture of what happens here might be something like this: my initial intention to make the three-stage movement of my arm and hand beginning now causes the movement involved in striking the first note; and as I go along, the accompanying intention to complete such a movement together with realization of where I currently am in it causes the next phase of the movement involved in striking the next note.

My alternative picture is this: as I make each voluntary exertion involved in striking a note, I recall my antecedent intention to produce the three-note pattern and I intend of the concurrent exertion that it be what is needed at this point to contribute to making a whole movement that conforms to that prior intention; and, of course, as I begin each successive voluntary exertion, I am aware of what I have done so far toward completing the intended three-part movement and thus of what is needed next to contribute to its completion. This series of concurrent intentions makes the explanatory link between the antecedent intention and the whole movement. (And, of course, it could be broken down further into a series of many more intentions, each about a more limited current phase of the exertion; or we could think of it as a single continuing intention with a continuously changing content.) But these concurrent intentions provide that explanatory link without its being the case that they causally produce the voluntary exertions they accompany. The explanatory link is made simply by the content of the concurrent intentions, including their direct references to the prior intention and to the concurrent actions. A similar account can be given for extended movements, like a
basketball player's drive to the basket for a layup, where the agent needs in later phases of the movement to take account of how well the earlier phases have gone and of how relevant circumstances have changed.

10. Conclusion

I have defended noncausalism about reasons explanations. Specifically, I have argued that it is sufficient for the truth of an explanation of the form “S A-ed in order to B” that, concurrently with her A-ing, S intended of that A-ing that by it she would B; and that it is sufficient for the truth of an explanation of the form “S A-ed because she had a desire to B” that before her A-ing S had a desire to B and concurrently with her A-ing S intended of that A-ing that by it she would satisfy that desire. I have argued that these sufficient conditions entail nothing about how the action was caused.

But I have not argued—and I see no good reason to believe—that these sufficient conditions rule out the possibility that the action was caused either by factors that include the intention or desire cited in the reasons explanation or by something else (for example, external manipulation of the subject’s neural processes). Thus, as far as I can see, if our universe were one where every event is caused, or where every event is deterministically caused, our actions could still have the sort of reasons explanations we are accustomed to think they have.10

Notes

2. Earlier works mentioned by Davidson which took noncausalist or anticausalist positions, include Anscombe (1958), Dray (1957), Hart and Honore (1959), Kenny (1963), Melden (1961), Peters (1960), Ryle (1949), and Winch (1958). Somewhat later works in this same category include Charles Taylor (1964), Richard Taylor (1966), and von Wright (1971).
3. I give noncausalist sufficient conditions for a few other forms of reasons explanations in Ginet (1990: ch. 6).
4. I take “S intended of this A-ing that by it she would B” to entail that S believed that by this A-ing she would or might B.
5. As do, for example, Searle (1985) and O’Connor (2000).
6. Thus despite those misleading remarks, O’Connor’s view is best seen as combining agent-causation with noncausality about reasons explanation. On his view, agent-causation is needed, not to account for how reasons explain action, but rather to account for how agents control or determine, and are responsible for, which action they perform.

On my view, agent-causation is not needed for that either. The question we incompatibilists face is this: if an action is uncaused, then what makes it the case that the agent is responsible for it, that its occurrence was up to her, something she determined? O’Connor and I agree that the answer to this must lie at least partly in the intrinsic nature of an action event: it has to be intrinsically a sort of event of which it is plausible to say that, given that such an event was not causally necessitated by antecedents, the subject of it is responsible for it. O’Connor thinks that agent-causings are events of this sort (and I agree that they are, or would be if any such events existed). I think (but O’Connor does not) that another sort of event, namely, a causally simple mental event possessing an ‘actish’ phenomenal quality—one that “feels” to the subject like an action, like something she does—such as a volition, is an event of this sort. In support of his intuition that an agent-causing event has intrinsically what makes for agent control of the event, but a causally simple volition does not, O’Connor (2000: 59) writes:

[T]here is internal causal structure to the agent-causal event that is lacking in a volition. This difference in causal structure bears directly on the issue of agent control. An agent-causal event is intrinsically a doing, an exercise of control. Ginet claims that this is true of uncaused volitions as well, in view of their “active phenomenal quality.” However, “control,” “determination,” and allied notions cannot be grounded in intrinsic, phenomenal characteristics alone—they require causal elucidation. It is just this missing feature in simple indeterminism that the agency theory captures.

I cannot see that the internal causal structure of an agent-causal event provides a special basis for saying that the agent controls that event, a basis that is lacking in a causally simple volition for saying the corresponding thing about it. To say that in an uncaused agent-causal event the agent controls what he causes is not to say that he controls his ‘causing it.’ O’Connor says that “‘control,’ ‘determination,’ and allied notions require causal elucidation.” What does this mean? It cannot mean that any event an agent controls must have internal causal structure, for, as O’Connor would surely allow, an agent can control and be responsible for a causally simple event that she causes. But if it means that any event an agent controls must be either one the agent causes or itself an agent-causal event, then it is just asserting what needs to be proved.

I suspect that the terms “control” and “determine” may cause mischief here. In the ordinary senses of these words, to say that a person determined or controlled the occurrence of some event is to imply that she caused it, but that is not implied by saying that an agent was responsible for an event, that it was up to her whether it occurred or not. And what is required for the latter is the issue. What I find evident is that, if any intrinsic feature of an uncaused event will make it one an agent is responsible for, it is either its being an agent-causal event or its having the actish phenomenal quality. The only thing that should make us doubt with respect to either of these features that it makes the agent responsible for the event would be some reason to think that no intrinsic fea-
ture of an uncaused event could guarantee the agent’s responsibility for it, that only some extrinsic relation of the event to the agent could do that.

7. For more on my account of voluntary exertion of the body see Ginet (1990: ch. 2).

8. For further discussion of Clarke’s view see O’Connor (2000: 76–79).


10. Though, in my view (which I have not argued for here), in a deterministic universe they would not be freely chosen actions for which the agents are morally responsible.