

Chapter 18

Because

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For Kevin, who knows it all

Abstract There is a natural philosophical impulse (and, correspondingly, a great deal of pressure) to always ask for explanations, for example, explanations of why we act as we do. Kevin Mulligan has gone a very long way in disentangling the many different because's, and the many senses of "because," that tend to clutter our efforts to manage that impulse. This short dialogue is meant as a humble tribute to his work in this area, and to the unique pleasure that we all feel when we engage with him in actual philosophical debating (on any topic).

Keywords Action · Explanation · Reason · Motive · Desire

Ali What are you doing?

Baba Don't you see? I'm reshelving our books. I'm putting the yellow-covered books on the shelf where we had the brown-covered ones, and the brown-covered books on the shelf where we had the yellow-covered ones.

Ali And why are you doing that, if I may ask?

Baba Pardon me?

Ali Why are you moving our books around that way?

Baba I'm not sure I understand. I am just moving them—period. See? I've already taken them all down and now I only have to put them up again. These will go there, and those will go here.

Ali But surely you are doing that for some reason...

Baba Not at all. Are you telling me that I can only do something if I have a reason?

Ali Precisely!

Baba ?

Ali All right, there are things we do without a reason, like sneezing, hiccuping, falling asleep and waking up, or tripping over something. But those are not

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really things we *do*, they are not actions, for they are not intentional. Intentional actions are always driven by a motive. And surely you are reshelving our books intentionally.

Baba If by “intentional” you mean to say that there is an intention, an intending, then of course you are right. But I am telling you that I have no intention except for this: I intend to put the yellow-covered books where we had the brown-covered books—and vice versa.

Ali That makes no sense.

Baba If you really insist, I can tell you that I am moving them because I *want* to move them. That’s my motive.

Ali But *why* do you want to move them?

Baba You are never happy, are you? Now you are asking me to give you a reason, not only for my actions, but also for my volitions?

Ali You can’t just say that you are doing something because you want to do it without explaining why you want to do it!

Baba Listen, Ali, I realize I’m disappointing you. But I don’t have much time and I still have lots of books to move...

Ali Those are not just *your* books. I have the right to know.

Baba Let me put it thus: I want to move the books because...because then the books with the yellow cover will be above those with the green cover, and the ones with the brown cover above those with the blue cover. Are you happy now?

Ali No, because that is not a reason. If anything, it’s your goal. But a reason cannot be a goal; a reason must qualify as a cause of the action, not an effect.

Baba Is it supposed to be a cause because it is a reason, or a reason because it is a cause? Anyway, if all you were asking for was a cause, you should have said so at the beginning. The cause, i.e., the reason why I am moving our books in the way I described, is that at some point, this morning, I felt like doing just that. Okay?

Ali Sorry, I didn’t quite put it that way. Surely not every cause of an action counts as a reason for acting that way. I said that the reason must be a cause. I can try to be more precise: The reason of an action is the desire to realize or achieve a certain purpose.

Baba That can’t be right, either. Don’t you think that in some cases our reasons lie, not in our desiring something, but in the value we attach to it? I hate going to the gym, but I do so nonetheless because I know that exercising is good for me. I heard many philosophers argue that way.

Ali Let’s stick to the desire-based account.

Baba Fine with me. Right now, my greatest desire is precisely to have our books arranged in the way I told you.

Ali But that desire is utterly ungrounded!

Baba Give me an example of a better grounded desire. I’m telling you, I’m *dying* to have our books arranged that way.

- Ali* Let's see...I desire a new job. And this desire is grounded in my being unhappy with my current job, and in my thinking that a different job would improve the quality of my life. (You are right; maybe this is where values enter the picture.)
- Baba* Very well. My desire is that the yellow books be above the green ones and the brown books above the blue ones. And this desire of mine is grounded in the fact that I am unhappy with the current arrangement, and in my thinking that the new arrangement will improve the quality of my life.
- Ali* But *why* would it improve the quality of your life?
- Baba* What do I know? I guess I just like certain states of affairs better than others. They make me feel more comfortable. That's all. Is there anything more to your thinking that a new job would improve the quality of your life?
- Ali* I would have a decent salary and more free time, and I could use that time to do the things I truly enjoy, and...
- Baba* Exactly.
- Ali* Really, you don't see any difference?
- Baba* None whatsoever. I appreciate that we may have a natural impulse to trace back through the chain of our because's. But surely we must stop at some point. Suppose I want to make you a present. I could explain that I intend to do so because I want to make you happy, and I might add that I want to make you happy because I love you. But now you can't pretend that I also explain why I love you. I don't love you for a reason. I love you—period.
- Ali* *Touché*. You know I wouldn't ask for more.
- Baba* Of course, I could still add that I love you because it is true that I love you. And it is true that I love you because <I love you> is true. And...
- Ali* Thank you, but now you are digressing. Those are not the sort of "because" I was looking for. Besides, you've got it the wrong way around. At best, <*p*> is true because it is true that *p* (it is the connective that wears the trousers), and it is true that *p* because *p*. My question is, why *p*?
- Baba* And I told you: I love you because I love you. I thought you were pleased with my answer.
- Ali* I am. But you can't generalize. You can't always say, *p* because *p*. That's called the "because" of the exasperated adult.
- Baba* I'm not saying that we should always leave it at that (though I never thought I would care). I'm saying that eventually we get to a point where there's nothing else we can say. You seem to agree with that. You are happy enough if I tell you that I love you, without offering any further explanation. Why should it be different with the books?
- Ali* You are asking me why?
- Baba* Listen, I have no time for your *tu quoque*. Just tell me what difference you see between the two cases.
- Ali* Well, for one thing, I would not say that loving someone is an action. But never mind. I simply don't think that your love for me should be on a par with your silly craving to have the books arranged on the basis of the color of their covers! Tell me it isn't.

- Baba* And if I told you that I am craving to rearrange the books that way because I thought that it would make *you* happy? I suppose that wouldn't help...
- Ali* On the contrary, that would help a lot. Trying to make me happy would be a perfectly good reason (and I would say the same if you told me something else along those lines, for instance, that you thought it would make Sam happy).
- Baba* And you would not ask me *why* I thought that moving our books around that way would make you (or Sam) happy?
- Ali* I suppose I could. But knowing *that* would not be necessary to make sense of your current action, Baba—to see it as a genuine intentional action. What you said would be enough, provided it were true.
- Baba* I'm so relieved! Then I'll say just that. Forget Sam, Ali. (Who's he anyway? I always wondered.) *I'm reshelving the books because I thought it would make you happy.* Final answer.
- Ali* You see that it wasn't a waste of time? I like it when we manage to sort out our views like this.
- Baba* I know you do. And you know I like it too, despite my attitude.
- Ali* Of course, to tell the truth, it wouldn't *really* make me happy to have the yellow books above the green ones and the brown books above the blue ones. You see, I think I'd much prefer it if the yellow books were *below* the green ones and the brown books *next* to the blue ones.
- Baba* (*visibly disappointed*) I see. And why so, if I may ask?