

In "Actions, Reasons, and Causes" (1963) [Donald Davidson](#) famously argued that actions are both 'rationalized' and caused by the agent's reasons. Here is the tritest illustration of this "standard account" of actions: When Brett wants a beer and believes there is beer in the fridge, this gives him a reason to open the fridge and causes him to do so. The usual interpretation of such a case is that, when Brett opens the fridge to take a beer, he does so as the practical conclusion of a syllogistic inference, the two premises of which are his desire for a beer and his belief that there is beer in the fridge. Taken jointly these two premises constitute Brett's reason for opening the fridge (this is a simplified description, of course, but here it will do).

Imagine now that looking for beer in the fridge is something Brett, who likes beer, has been doing several times a day over many years. Quite plausibly, he doesn't have to go through the steps of this syllogism anymore; his behaviour has become routinized. In other terms, he has developed a little modular mechanism that guides his opening of the fridge when he want a beer. Brett does, of course, believe that there is beer in the fridge (which is almost always true in his house), but this belief doesn't have to play a role as a premise in a syllogistic inference for the action to occur. In philosophical jargon, this belief may well remain 'dispositional' (as opposed to 'occurrent') when he performs the action. The routine is triggered by Brett's occurrent desire for beer and causes him to open the fridge. This routine is well-adapted to the fact that the fridge is a reliable source of beer. That much shouldn't be too controversial.

One evening, Brett takes out the last bottle of beer in the fridge. He realises - forms an occurrent belief, if you prefer - that there is no beer left in the fridge and decides to buy some the next day. The next morning, he fails to remember that there is no beer in the fridge. It is not that the belief he formed the night before has been erased from his mind; if Brett were asked whether there still is beer in the fridge, his belief would become occurrent and causally potent and Brett would say that, no, there is no beer left. It is just that, when Brett comes to want a beer that morning, the belief that there is no beer left in the fridge remains dispositional; it doesn't play any causal role and in particular it fails to inhibit the routine, as it probably would have if it had been an occurrent belief.

Most of us sometimes look for something where it ordinarily is but where, as we knew and should have remembered, it currently is not. Such behaviour is, I would argue, evidence that the behaviour is caused by a routine that by-passes the relevant belief. In such cases, the Davidsonian account doesn't strictly apply.

When your action is caused by a reason, then the rationality of the action is, at least in principle, easy to assess: if the reason is a good one, so is the action (again, this is very simplified, but it will do).

A routine action, on the other hand, is caused not by a full reason but by a mere component of a reason, a desire in our example. The other component, the belief that there is beer to be found in the fridge, doesn't play any causal role in the routine action (and if anybody wants to object that the belief plays an "implicit" causal role in an "enthymematic" syllogistic inference, I will gladly answer their arguments).

So, how rational is a routine action, which is not caused by a mentally represented reason? This question can be asked in two ways: as a normative question about the facts of the matter (if there are such facts) or as a descriptive social-psychological question about people's intuitive assessment of rationality (which might vary across cultures).

One possible way to answer the normative question would be to argue that routine actions, because they are not caused by a reason, are not to be assessed in terms of their rationality (just as, arguably, reflex actions such as a withdrawal movement when touching a hot surface shouldn't be

assessed in terms of rationality either). Another possible answer, which I favour, would consist in arguing that, as long as the routine emerged (in evolution or in development) because it is well-adapted to a goal of the agent (satisfying Brett's desire for beer, for instance), then following this routine is rational, even if the routine action itself is not caused by a reason and even if the routine itself has not been adopted as a result of a reason-based decision. If so, Brett can be said to act rationally when he routinely opens the fridge, even on the rare occasion where, as he should have remembered, there is no beer in the fridge. The difference between these two answers to the normative question may hinge on the way you define rationality: a terminological issue.

Regarding the descriptive social-psychological question, one would need empirical evidence regarding the way people assess routine actions. Do they view them only as successful or unsuccessful (depending, for instance, on whether there is beer in the fridge); or do they also view them as rational or irrational (or reasonable or unreasonable, or justified or unjustified, and so on) depending on whether the routine is or is not well-adapted to cause successful action with sufficient frequency (what counts as sufficient frequency being a cost-benefit issue)? In other terms, how strictly Davidsonian are people in their intuitive judgments of the rationality of actions?