

Explaining human action

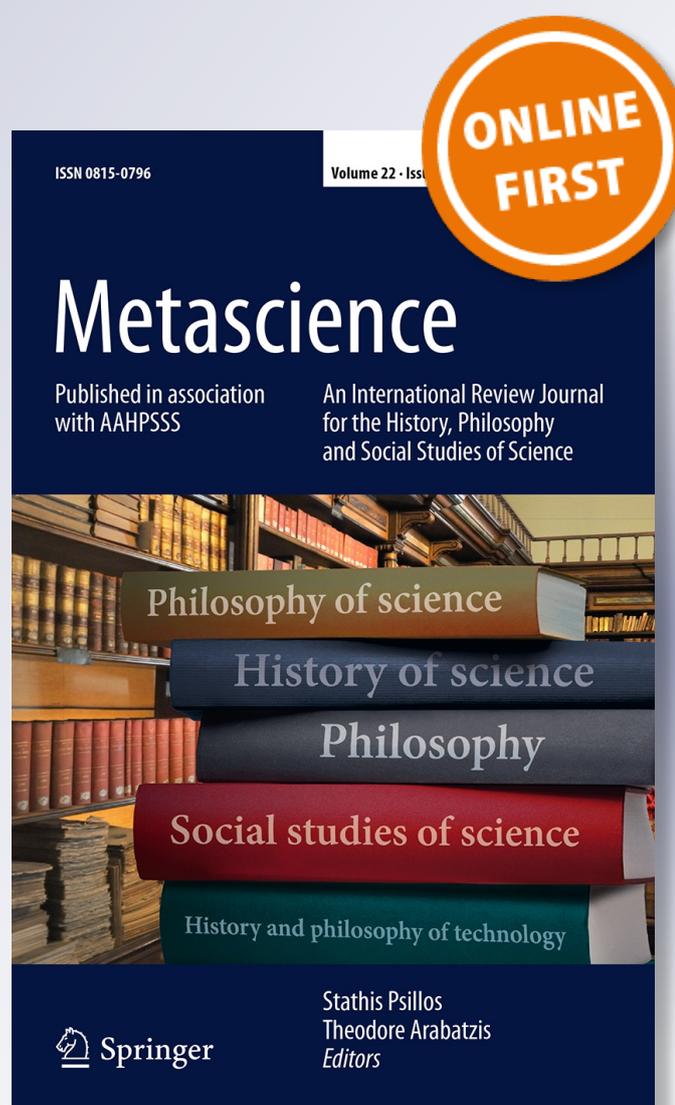
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**Constantine Sandis: *The things we do and why we do them.*
Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2012, 226pp, £58 HB**

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This is a book which, despite its simple-sounding title, makes considerable demands on its readers—and there are at least three reasons for that. The first is that it purports to undermine some deeply entrenched views about action; the second is that the book covers an impressive amount of interdisciplinary work in a relatively short space; and the third reason is that the author's ability for cutting straight to the chase might alienate readers who are used to dwell on technicalities, instead of trying to grasp, as the author does, the implicit assumptions that inform alternative theoretical models in the philosophy of action.

Along with the difficulties come the rewards. Here is a text that offers a fresh look at some familiar issues in the analysis of action, explicating both how those issues once arose, and why they are still with us. In seven, tightly argued, chapters, complemented by two appendices, Sandis purports to give a diagnosis for the problems that beset the contemporary debates in the field and to show how most of those problems can be resolved to everyone's satisfaction.

In the opening chapter, we are introduced to the multitude of explanatory projects concerning a variety of phenomena which are often lambded together under the capacious notion of 'action'. Chapter 2 is a *tour de force* of correcting the errors committed by philosophers who—according to the author—hold views which conflate sharply different things. Sandis begins by identifying six erroneous views, including the conflating view of behaviour (that a person's behaviour consists of the things she does, e.g. the moving of her body); the conflating view of action (that a person's actions consist of the things she does, e.g. her moving of her body); the conflating view of reasons (that the reasons for which we act are reasons why our actions occur); the conflating view of reasons for action (that the reasons for which we act are reasons for which our actions occur); the conflating view of things done (that what I am doing is my doing it); and the conflating view of doings (that my

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doing x is identical to the event of my doing x). Chapter 3 focuses on two important conflatations regarding action explanation (that whatever explains why we act explains why our actions occur), which, in combination with the conflating view of reasons leads to the further erroneous belief that the reasons for which we act explain why our actions occur. Chapter 4 moves to some important issues in the theory of motivation, issues that exercised philosophers during the 1980s and 1990s, due mainly to their implications for a proper interpretation of moral phenomena. In this chapter, we are informed about the conflating view of motivation (that a reason for being motivated to act is a reason for bringing it about that one is so motivated), a view which combined with the conflating view of reasons leads to the erroneous view that whatever motivated us to act is the reason why our action occurred; the conflating view of reasons explanation (that the reasons for which we act can explain why we act), a view which in combination with the conflating view of action leads to the erroneous view that the reasons for which we act can explain why our actions occur; and the conflating view of motivational production (that what motivated an action most is identical to whatever produced it in a psychologically explanatory way to be further specified). Chapter 5 discusses the relations between accounts which apparently move at different explanatory levels, and it proposes a novel way of understanding current work in experimental psychology; in this context, the author identifies the conflating view of nested reasons (that a reason why A took x to be a reason to ϕ is a reason that explains why A subsequently ϕ -d), a view which in combination with the conflating view of reasons leads to the erroneous view that a reason why A took x to be a reason to ϕ is a reason for which A subsequently ϕ -d, that is, nesting reasons are agential reasons. Chapter 6 provides a careful, sympathetic and balanced criticism of Jonathan Dancy's distinctive approach to action, while chapter 7 takes issue with Fred Dretske's important argumentation, giving the author the opportunity to identify two further conflating views, one regarding triggering structures (that actions or events are causally triggered by their explanatory structures) and the other concerning triggering reasons (that the reasons for which we act are the causal triggers of our actions). The first appendix briefly but illuminatingly discusses issues in the ontology of action, with reference to Davidson, Hornsby, and Dancy. Finally, the second appendix, that usefully compares Hume and Collingwood, addresses questions in the methodology of historical explanation.

As it happens, the two appendices are not mere afterthoughts, but quite substantial in their purview, and among the best sections of the book, along with sections of chapter 5 (on nested explanations), the whole of chapter 6 (on Dancy), and the concluding sections of chapter 7 (on triggering and structuring causes). In each of those parts, Sandis strays from his *via negativa* (of pointing to others the errors of their ways) and puts forward positive proposals for the issues under consideration. I value Sandis' constructive ideas and wish for further applications of his general approach to the large number of specific issues that keep arising in the ever expanding field of action explanation. Readers of a different predilection might find the strongly negative agenda that guides the book's narrative, more to their taste. Either way, this is a really engaging book, which amply repays close reading.