

# Explaining Actions

*Common Sense Confronts Cognitive Science*

Peter Carruthers

cover blurb (draft)

People routinely explain the actions of themselves and others using a common-sense framework of beliefs, desires, emotions, and decisions. Such every-day action-explanation relies on an implicit theory of the contents and structure of the mind. And when armchair philosophers of mind generate their thought-experiments and arguments they, too, rely on the same implicit theory (at least in part). But like other implicit theories such as common-sense physics, common-sense psychology can be importantly mistaken in its assumptions. The goal of *Explaining Actions* is to assess how much of common-sense thought about the mind is true, and how much is false. It reviews findings and theoretical models from cognitive science to argue that there are more types of action and action-explanation than common-sense allows, and that both the folk and armchair-philosophers are importantly mistaken about the types of mental state that the human mind contains. Drawing on decades of work as a philosopher of cognitive science, Carruthers shows what is right, and what is wrong, about our ordinary views of the mind, while explaining the science with his usual clarity and accessibility.

*Explaining Actions* will be of interest to all philosophers who draw on folk-psychological assumptions and concepts in their work, whether in philosophy of mind, epistemology, moral psychology, or ethics. It will also be of interest to a general academic readership, as well as to cognitive scientists wanting to see for themselves the “big picture” of the mind that emerges out of their field.

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DRAFT

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for little Dara  
— *always on the move* —

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## Preface

This book grew out of what had originally been intended as a collection of new and previously-published papers, to be entitled *Real Minds: They Aren't What You Think*. But two very thoughtful readers convinced me that the project wasn't really viable. I am grateful to them for their advice. The volume as it stood was too uneven in its pacing and tried to cover too many topics, among other problems. In consequence, I decided to drop the re-printing of the previously published papers and instead to expand and add to some of the newly-written material. The result is this book.

The book's goal is to see how much of our common-sense thinking about actions and their explanation can survive once we fully engage with and take seriously the evidence from the cognitive sciences. It turns out that there are many ways in which folk-psychology slices things too thickly or too thinly, gets the order of explanation back-to-front, offers explanations of action that are mistaken, mis-characterizes the nature of the explanatory mental states involved, and so forth—as do those philosophers who rely mostly on common-sense beliefs and armchair intuitions in their theorizing about the mind.

The book makes no attempt to demonstrate folk-psychology's commitments in any detail, however. That would require expertise in experimental philosophy that I don't possess, as well as a very different sort of book. Rather, I leave it to my readers to judge which of the book's conclusions they do or do not find surprising. I can, however, draw on decades of experience of listening to and reading the work of armchair philosophers of mind. (There are still, unfortunately, far too many of these. And although most will now acknowledge the relevance of scientific findings for their work, significantly fewer take the time to engage with the science at all deeply. As the saying goes, "a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing.") I therefore cite and critique claims made by armchair-philosophers where it seems pertinent and useful to do so.

In previous books I have discussed other areas in which common sense and cognitive science clash. Specifically, I have shown how our access to many of our own mental states is interpretative in nature (not wholly unlike our access to the mental states of other people), contrasting with the claim that we have direct self-knowledge of our own thoughts (which is assumed by the folk and endorsed by many philosophers; Carruthers 2011). And I have argued that the range of types of conscious mental state is actually narrower than either common sense or most philosophers will allow (Carruthers 2015b). Here our focus is more narrowly on the variety of kinds of action, as well as the types of mental state and process that should be called upon to explain them.

The philosophy of action is often run together with the question of free will. But I will say nothing substantial about the latter in this book. While I am myself a compatibilist about free will, I don't propose to argue for that here; and I remain agnostic among the specific forms that compatibilism can take. All the same, knowledge of the differing kinds of action and their scientific explanations, of the sort that this book provides, may be useful fodder for those interested in issues having to do with free will and moral responsibility. But beyond making a few remarks in passing here and there, I propose to leave it to others to work out the implications of our best science for those topics.

I have tried throughout to describe the current scientific consensus on the issues I discuss—or at least the dominant or best-supported view—although in some cases I have been forced to extrapolate from existing findings. I try to be judicious in giving citations, and where possible I cite meta-analyses or review papers in top scientific journals. I also try to avoid scientific technicalities where possible, and provide explanations of neuroscientific terms when I am forced to employ them. And of course, given the scope and range of the topics to be discussed, I have had to paint with a broad brush. Moreover, on some matters of terminology I have had to make choices, since there is little consistency in the field. This is especially true of terms like “affect,” “emotion,” “valence,” “appraisal,” and other terms employed in affective science and neuroscience. My use of terminology throughout should be regarded as stipulative. I don't believe anything substantive turns on my choices.



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