The occurrence or apparent occurrence of incontinent actions challenges several influential views in ethics and the philosophy of mind, e.g., Hare's prescriptivism and the Socratic idea that we always act in the light of the imagined greatest good. It also raises, as I shall explain, an interesting and instructive problem for proponents of causal theories of action. But whereas Socrates and Hare attempt to avoid the difficulties with which akrasia confronts them by denying — wrongly, I shall argue — that there are akratic actions ([15], 352a–358d; [13], Ch. 5), the causal theorist need not take this unhappy tack. In this paper I shall argue that the truth of a causal theory of action (CTA) is compatible with the occurrence of akratic actions and, in particular, with akratic actions against what I shall call a “here-and-now” intention — i.e., an intention of the agent to do an A here and now. I shall suggest that akratic actions of this type plainly do occur, and I shall attempt to explain how they might be accommodated by a causal theory of action.

The question to which this paper is addressed is motivated by Donald Davidson's attempted resolution of “the logical difficulty” of akrasia in his influential article, 'How is weakness of the will possible?' [11]. In his introduction to a recent collection of his essays, Davidson observes that “Causal theories of action are challenged by intentional actions that are contrary to the actor's best judgment. For if reasons are causes, it is natural to suppose that the strongest reasons are the strongest causes” ([5], p. xii). It is this challenge — though he does not make this explicit there — that his paper on akrasia is designed to meet. He attempts to meet it by arguing that the occurrence of akratic actions is compatible with the truth of a pair of principles which “derive their force” from a “very persuasive,” causal “view of the nature of intentional action and practical reasoning” ([11], p. 102; [5], p. 31). But, as we shall see, these principles jointly entail that akratic action of the type just described never occurs. And if they entail something false, one who finds a CTA attractive, as I do, will surely want to ask whether a
CTA depends upon these, or any, principles which have the result that there are no akratic actions against here-and-now intentions.

I. THE CAUSAL THEORY

By a causal theory of action (CTA), I mean any theory of action which makes the following claim:

(C) For all actions $A$, $A$ is an intentional action only if $A$'s agent had a reason for $A$-ing and (his having) that reason was a cause of his $A$-ing.1

(A closely associated claim, endorsed by any CTA, is that to explain an action by citing the reason(s) for which it is done is to give a causal explanation of the action.) C, of course, provides us only with a necessary condition of an action's being intentional. A sufficient condition is not difficult to locate. That an action is done for a reason is, I suggest, a sufficient condition of its being an intentional action. But what it is for an action to be done for a reason is a notoriously difficult matter. A causal theorist will want to give a causal account. But the account cannot be this, that an action $A$ was done for a reason just in case the agent had a reason for doing $A$ and his having that reason was a cause of his $A$-ing; for the causal connection between an agent's reason for doing $A$ and his $A$-ing might be inappropriate. (See [9], p. 153; [5], p. 79.) For example, a chemist who is working with cyanide near his colleague's cup of tea may desire to kill his colleague and believe that he can do this by dropping some cyanide into the tea (which desire and belief constitute a reason for his dropping some cyanide into the tea), and this desire and belief may so upset him that his hands shake, with the accidental result that he drops some of the poisonous substance into the tea. This, of course, is an instance of the problem of "wayward causal chains."

Fortunately, a detailed examination of sufficient conditions of an action's being intentional is unnecessary for my purposes in this paper. For, as we shall see, what is distinctive about incontinent action is not the nature of the causal connection between the action and the reasons for which it is done, but rather that the agent acts for certain reasons rather than for others. Thus, e.g., akratic action poses no special difficulty for the idea that a sufficient condition of $A$'s being intentional is that its agent had a reason for $A$-ing and that his having this reason was, "in a certain characteristic way" ([12], pp.