ABSTRACT. The causal theory of reasons holds that acting for a reason entails that the agent’s action was caused by his or her beliefs and desires. While Donald Davidson (1963) and others effectively silenced the first objections to the theory, a new round has emerged. The most important recent attack is presented by Jonathan Dancy in Practical Reality (2000) and subsequent work. This paper will defend the causal theory against Dancy and others, including Schueler (1995), Stoutland (1999, 2001), and Ginet (2002).

Dancy observes that our reasons are neither psychological states nor causes, and that our reasons can be both motivating and normative. I argue that these observations are fully compatible with the causal theory. According to the reductive version I develop for both cognitive and optative reasons, what it is for an action to be done for a reason is for certain beliefs and desires to cause the action in a particular way. Our reasons for action are the objects of some of those beliefs and desires. The causal process has two stages. This theory explains not only Dancy’s observations, but also many other facts about reasons that alternative theories leave unexplained. I argue against Schueler and others that the non-appetitive desires entailed by acting for reasons are no less distinct and independent causal factors than the beliefs entailed. I go on to rebut arguments that the relation between psychological states and actions cannot be causal because it is non-empirical, rational, normative, or non-deterministic, and that explanations in terms of psychological causes are incompatible with explanations in terms of reasons.

I make no claim here about the precise adequacy of the theoretical definitions I present. My goal is to show that a systematic theory along these lines is the most promising and fruitful approach to understanding an important aspect of human nature.2

I. PSYCHOLOGISM

One of Dancy’s main targets is “psychologism,” which he defines as the thesis that “our motivating reasons are psychological states of ourselves” (Dancy, 2000, p. 15). Motivating reasons are defined as the reasons for which we act, which may or may not be reasons for us to act. The latter must be good reasons, and so are norma-
Dancy focuses specifically on the motivating reasons given by substitution instances of the following form:

\[(1) \text{ A's reason for } \phi \text{ing is that } p. \text{ (Cognitive Reasons)}\]

It should be obvious that psychologism, so defined, is false. In true substitution instances of (1), “p” is generally replaced by a sentence describing an objective fact (or perceived fact), not a fact about my own mental state. Thus my reason for giving money to the Afghan Children’s Fund (ACF) was that Afghan children need help, not that I believe they need help nor that I want to help them. My reason was the children's condition, not mine. As a perfect example of an exception that proves the rule, Dancy cites the paranoid man who commits himself to a mental institution. His reason may well be that he believes everyone is out to get him. It will typically not be that everyone is out to get him – that would be a good reason for him to flee to the wilderness, perhaps, not to put himself in the hands of the psychiatric authorities.

The rejection of psychologism supports Dancy’s main thesis, which, he says, is that “one and the same reason can be both motivating and normative” (2000, p. 6, my emphasis; see also 103). Dancy calls this the “normative constraint” on a theory of reasons. That Afghan children need help was my reason for giving, and it was a good reason. If the fact that he wants to help is some man’s reason for giving, then his reason, being self-centered, is not nearly as good a reason. Satisfaction of the normative constraint, moreover, ensures that Dancy’s “explanatory constraint” is met. Any adequate theory of reasons, he insists, must “show that and how any normative reason is capable of contributing to the explanation of an action that is done for that reason” (2000, p. 101). A good reason for doing something can play a role in the explanation of that action in so far as it is capable of being the agent’s reason for doing it.

Dancy (2000, p. 1) characterizes reasons as “considerations in light of which agents act.” That Afghan children need help was certainly the primary consideration in light of which I donated money to the ACF. This characterization is true for all cases described by (1). But it tells us little about what reasons are. For “considerations in light of which” is at best a synonym of “reasons for which.” Dancy’s characterization only applies to one class of