The causal theory of action has been the standard view in the philosophy of action and mind. In the philosophy of mind, it is a piece of orthodoxy that is widely taken for granted and hardly ever questioned. In the philosophy of action, it has always had its critics. In this chapter, I will present responses to two challenges to the theory. The first says, basically, that there is no positive argument in favour of the causal theory, as the only reason that supports it consists in the apparent lack of tenable alternatives. The second challenge says that the theory fails to capture the phenomenon of agency, as it reduces activity to mere happenings (events and event-causal processes). This is often referred to as the problem of disappearing agency. A full defence of the causal theory should address both challenges. In the first part of this chapter, I will present what I take to be the core of the causal theory. In the second and the third part, I will then offer my responses to the two challenges. I will present a positive argument for the causal theory on the basis of considerations concerning the metaphysics of agency, and I will suggest that we own the agency that springs from our mental states and events by default.

My main aim is to show that there is no problem of disappearing agency, and we will see that my response to the first challenge will be conducive to this end. Let me point out, right at the start, that there are many controversial issues concerning the metaphysics of action and causation that are beyond the scope of this chapter. This means that I will have to make some substantial assumptions, especially in the first and second part.

1.1 Part 1: The standard theory

The causal theory of action, as I understand it, consists of two parts: a causal theory of the nature of actions and a causal theory of reason explanation. The former says, basically, that actions are events with a certain causal history (they are actions in virtue of this history). The latter is often stated by reference to Davidson’s claim that reason explanation is a “species of
causal explanation” (1980, p. 3). The core of the causal theory can then be unpacked as follows:

Causal theory of the nature of action (CTA): An agent-involving event is an action just in case it is caused by the right agent-involving mental states and events in the right way.

Causal theory of reason explanation (CTR): Reason explanations of actions are explanations in terms of the agent’s mental states and events that rationalize and causally explain their performance. In particular, a reason explanation of an action in terms of the agent’s mental states and events is true only if those states and events causally explain the action.

The right mental states and events, which CTA refers to, are mental attitudes that rationalize the performance of the action (such as desires, beliefs and intentions). The right way of causation is non-deviant causation. We will return to the issue of non-deviant causation in the third part. For now, consider the following clarifications.

Firstly, it is plausible to think that CTA and CTR stand or fall together, because it is plausible to assume that the mental states and events that CTA refers to are the same mental states and events that feature in reason explanations according to CTR. I will assume, throughout, that CTA and CTR do stand or fall together.¹

Secondly, the conjunction of CTA and CTR is only the skeleton of the causal theory. It is supposed to capture the common core of causal theories of action or, more generally, the core of the causal approach to agency. In the following, I will nevertheless refer to this core as a theory, for the sake of convenience.

Thirdly, the view is usually referred to as the causal theory of action. Strictly speaking, it is an event-causal theory. There are alternative causal theories of agency, and I shall refer to it as the event-causal theory, or the event-causal approach, in order to avoid misunderstanding. As I understand it, an event-causal theory is not committed to the claim that only events are causally efficacious entities. It may allow for the causal efficacy or relevance of states, dispositions and other standing conditions, and it may construe events as particulars or instantiations of properties. But it is committed to the claim that at least one event is among the causes of every effect. Events are thought to play a central role in every causal transaction, because events are the entities that initiate or trigger the occurrence of the effect. Another way of characterizing the kind of causation in question would be to say that it is efficient causation by events, states or property-instantiations (by substances) as opposed to both teleological causation and causation by substances (qua substances).

Fourthly, CTR makes no claims concerning the nature of reasons. In particular, it does not claim that reasons are identical with mental states or