BECAUSE I FELT LIKE IT: AN EXPLANATION OF ARRATIONAL ACTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Allison A. Stuart: Because I Felt Like It: An Explanation of Arational Actions
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Explanations of intentional action typically involve a combination of a desire and a belief and some form of means-end reasoning. What is often overlooked is whether emotions provide an explanation of action, particularly when the action is intelligible only in terms of the emotion and is performed for no other reason than to express the emotion. The challenge of explaining such actions involves 1) providing an account of intentional action that does not require means-end reasoning, and 2) within that same account, explaining the significance of the emotion that is experienced. I argue that both of these desiderata can be accommodated by adopting a particular account of emotions.
To my Mother and Father, for their love and support.
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction................................................................................................................................1

The Standard Account................................................................................................................2

The Arational Account...............................................................................................................6

A Different Take on Emotions.................................................................................................9

A New Explanation of EA.........................................................................................................12

References................................................................................................................................23
Introduction

After what was a particularly long day for Jane, she is told by John, her husband, that he is cheating on her. Jane sits, in a bit of shock, as the fact sinks in: she has been betrayed, deceived, humiliated. The love Jane felt for John feels different in light of this news. Jane recalls memories of the day before when John had made her smile. Jane shakes her head as a frown emerges on her face and tears well up in her eyes. Jane is not simply sad, disappointed, crushed, or hurt. She feels all these things, but mainly she feels something more intense. Jane taps her heel in frustration, crosses her arms as her stomach turns, shakes her head, purses her lips and exhales in disgust. Jane, in short, is furious. She paces the room, pauses, turns, and acts. She kicks a table near her, and then kicks it again.

Why would Jane do such a thing? Why would she kick an inanimate object? She is clearly angry, but kicking the table does not change anything. It does not hurt or punish John, nor does it change the fact that he cheated or that this hurt her. Yet kicking the table does accomplish a couple of things: it demonstrates to John just how angry she is, and it also makes her feel a little less angry. It is also what she felt like doing. She was angry and she felt like kicking something; she kicked the table just because she felt like it.

Explanations of intentional action, regardless of whether such actions involve emotions, typically involve a combination of a desire and a belief and some form of means-end reasoning. What is often overlooked is whether emotions provide an explanation of action, particularly when the action is intelligible only in terms of the emotion and is performed for no other reason than to express the emotion. Expressive actions (hereafter: EA) are
distinctive not only because emotions accompany them, but also because they are difficult to explain when compared to other actions. Of the many ways to explain EA, I address two approaches: the standard account, where EA are explained in terms of belief/desire pairs and means-end reasoning, and the arational account, in which EA are explained by means of establishing emotions as a separate category by which to explain intentional action. The challenge of finding a compromise between these views involves 1) providing an account of intentional action that does not require means-end reasoning, and 2) within that same account, explaining the significance of the emotion that is experienced. I argue that both of these desiderata can be achieved by adopting another explanation of EA, one which is compatible with both the standard account and the arational account.

The Standard Account

   In the standard account, an intentional action is a combination of a desire to perform an action combined with an appropriate means-end belief.\(^1\) This account explains how an appropriately-related belief/desire pair motivates action. The individual acting from the belief/desire pair is in a psychological state that, from the agent’s perspective, establishes an explanatory role for why the agent was motivated to act.

   In order to explain an agent’s actions, one simply appeals to the appropriate belief/desire pair. For example, to explain why one would flip a light switch, one need only to appeal to the belief/desire pair that explains that the agent desires to turn on the light and

believes that flipping the light switch will accomplish that goal. Michael Smith has claimed that from the standard account, all other explanations simply supplement this basic story. Any additional explanations offered can be accounted for in terms of the already-established belief/desire pair. Thus, to claim that an action stems from something other than a belief/desire pair (an emotion, perhaps) is to take the standard account as given and then to add the additional information that helps give context to, or provide a more compelling explanation for, the act that has already been explained by the belief/desire pair.

The standard account is labeled as such for good reason; it provides an explanation for all intentional actions. Providing an explanation of any action, including EA, is accomplished simply by considering what the individual is doing when he acts. For example, to explain why a man is rolling in his deceased wife’s clothing, the obvious answer is that the man is rolling in the clothing because he desires to roll in the clothing and that he believes that he will achieve that goal by rolling in the clothing. This explanation is all that is needed because it “correctly identifies the man’s reasons for acting, in the sense of the belief/desire pair that produced his action, relatively bizarre though they may be.” However, Smith also notes that this explanation is “distinctly unsatisfying” because it lacks significant insight into why someone would want to roll around in a dead person’s clothes. At this point, in order to provide a satisfying explanation, Smith claims that the standard account can be supplemented

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2I borrow this example from Donald Davidson’s “Actions, Reasons, and Causes,” The Journal of Philosophy, 60 (1963), 686.


4Ibid.

5Ibid., 22.

6Ibid.
by contextualizing the relatively bizarre belief/desire pair with respect to the emotions that the man is experiencing (in this case grief over his deceased wife). On Smith’s account, emotions are dispositions that cause these seemingly bizarre belief/desire pairs. The emotions also provide additional information as to why one would perform EA. By noting that the agent is in a certain disposition, the standard account explains why one may have bizarre belief/desire pairs in the first place. Regardless of the action, any explanation offered as an additional or alternative explanation for action can be accounted for with belief/desire pairs.7

While it is possible that emotions are dispositions to form desires to act in seemingly bizarre ways, it is also possible that emotions explain some actions and that the belief/desire pairs are merely added to the explanation in order to accommodate the standard account. If this is the case, then the standard account provides an explanation for each action, albeit one that may be notably vacuous. By claiming that there is an explanation for each action is terms of a belief/desire pair that can accompany any number of dispositions (not to mention other beliefs and desires), that pair does little to explain the action other than to establish that belief/desire pairs may accompany all actions. In this respect, the belief/desire pairs may often provide no real explanation for action aside from being an underlying mechanical process that causes an action, while what one would consider the actual explanation for the action rests elsewhere.

The best reason to accept the standard account when considering EA is that the standard account is a unified account of action and it therefore has more explanatory force

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7Ibid, 18.
than any other account. Yet in spite of its simplicity and elegance, when considering the
phenomenology of EA, the standard account is difficult to accept because belief/desire pairs
do not readily accommodate the feelings experienced in the “grip” of an emotion. Further, it
is not obvious that it is possible to explain EA without direct reference to being in an
emotional state. It is not evident that there are desires that characteristically accompany any
emotion, nor that any emotion disposes one to have specific desires.

Emotions may contribute to an explanation for why one performs EA, but EA cannot be
explained without a belief/desire pair. Although it may continue to feel as though emotions
are the cause of (and the best way to explain) EA, it remains that belief/desire pairs are the
only essential components. This explanation may be compelling to a proponent of the
standard account, but for those not convinced that belief/desire pairs explain all actions,
problems remain. First, this explanation largely eliminates the explanatory force of the
phenomenology experienced when performing an EA; it cannot account for explanations of
EA in terms of being “in the grip” of an emotion, except to say that this causes a belief/desire
pair. Second, this explanation “over-intellectualizes” EA by claiming that they always
involve beliefs and means-end reasoning. The standard account does not adequately consider
the phenomenology of EA, and it does not provide a reason for characterizing emotions as
dispositions that cause belief/desire pairs. Although the standard account provides an
explanation for EA, EA can also be explained as a separate category of intentional action
independent of beliefs and desires.
The Arational Account

On the other end of the spectrum, the simple answer is that emotions explain actions. How else could EA be explained? Rosalind Hursthouse claims that EA, such as the grieving man’s rolling in his deceased wife’s clothing, are not based on any particular belief, nor are they performed in order to achieve a certain goal. Although Hursthouse does not claim that EA are based on beliefs or means-end reasoning, she claims that while they may not be rational, they are intelligible when considered as part of an emotional experience. It may be unclear, or even a bit strange, that rolling in clothing is one of the EA performed by the grieving man, but it is intelligible why he is acting in such a way: he acts this way because he is grieving. Since such actions are intelligible in terms of emotions; they are not irrational. At the same time, however, they clearly are not rational according to typical accounts of rationality.

Instead, Hursthouse refers to EA as arational actions and claims that such actions cannot be explained by the standard account, because it only explains actions in terms of belief/desire pairs and means-end reasoning. Hursthouse claims that EA constitute a unique category of intentional action, separate from the category of actions that can be explained on the standard account. EA are performed because one is “in the grip” of an emotion, rather than because one experiences an emotion and then forms relevant desires and beliefs that explain the EA. On the arational account, it is emotions that cause EA, so therefore neither desires and beliefs, nor means-ends reasoning, nor rationality are needed in

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9Ibid.
10Ibid.
order to explain EA. EA can be explained simply by determining the emotion that one is
gripped by. The mere fact that one was in the grip of an emotions explains EA as much as
anything else does.\textsuperscript{11}

Hursthouse’s arational account does much to distinguish EA from other types of
actions, but her account only recognizes that we act in such ways, that these actions are
intentional actions, that they do not involve means-end reasoning, and that typical accounts
of rationality do not apply. She does not, however, provide a description of how or why
there is this type of action or how emotions are accounted for in her arational account.
Following Hursthouse, Sabine Döring rejects the standard account and argues in support of
the arational account by arguing that EA comprise an irreducible category of action and
defining emotions as analogous to sense-perception.\textsuperscript{12}

Döring offers a characterization of EA in which a “distinctive motivational force is
exhibited by emotions,” which is understood as “affective perception.”\textsuperscript{13} Affective perception
is explained by recognizing the intentionality of emotions and by claiming that emotions are
directed at that which \textit{represents} the emotion that is experienced; each emotion has related
“formal objects” that, when perceived, cause the affect associated with the emotion they
represent.\textsuperscript{14} Formal objects thereby restrict the features to which a particular emotion can be
directed toward, limiting the intentionality of emotions.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{11}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{13}Ibid., 220.
\textsuperscript{14}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{15}Ibid., 221.
If, for example, a child is afraid of a dog, Döring would note that a formal object that represents fear must be part of the child’s affective perception, causing her to feel fear. Features such as the dog’s bared teeth, aggressive stance, or growls are possible candidates for the formal objects of fear in this case. The features are such that without them, the dog cannot be considered fearful. Döring accounts for perceptions having an affective component by adding the qualification that one’s affective perception includes not only recognition of formal objects, but also the “representational content” that is part of one’s affective perception. Thus, that the girl fears the dog is “subject to a correctness condition” based on their representational content of the affective perception.¹⁶

The child may perform EA as part of the fear she experiences after perceiving the dog. Most likely, she will act in such a way that illustrates her fear and this action, being arational, may or may not be one that leads to her avoidance of the dog. For example, the girl may perform EA such as screaming, crying, or cowering when afraid. One would hope (for her safety) that she would also act in such a way as to avoid the dog. However, such an action may or may not be one of the many possible EA that the child performs. She may calmly walk away from the dog in response to the fear she feels, while at the same time avoiding the dog. Yet she also may perform EA such as crying, and only following that have a distinct desire to avoid the dog, along with a belief that calmly walking away is the best option available to her in order that she avoids the dog. In short, avoiding the dog may not be among the EA that the girl performs.

Döring’s account of emotions (and EA), however, undermines the contribution of EA as a separate category of actions which do nothing other than merely express an emotion.

¹⁶Ibid.
For what if the little girl did not try to avoid the dog, but instead just stood there crying? It may be intelligible that she would cry when afraid, but, intelligible or not, crying does not help one avoid dangerous-looking dogs. Thus, one challenge to the perceptual account is that EA are not only arational but that they are irrational. If EA are only actions that express an emotion, and furthermore are such that they might not contribute to the action one would hope to take when encountering certain situations, then EA perhaps should not be praised as a unique category of action. Instead, they should be recognized but summarily dismissed as a rather useless type of action.

A Different Take on Emotions

For an account of emotions that will accommodate Hursthouse’s description of EA I consider Peter Goldie’s account of emotion. I will use his account of emotions to develop a theory of EA that adequately accommodates Hursthouse’s description of arational actions. Goldie’s account is unique in that it is amenable to the standard account, since it maintains that emotions can be explained in terms of belief/desire pairs, it notes the relevance of beliefs to emotions without insisting that they cause every emotion, and it incorporates the features that made the perceptual account appealing as an account of emotions that does not require either desires or beliefs when explaining EA.

Like Hursthouse and Döring, Goldie rejects accounts that over-intellectualize emotions, which he calls the “add-on” approach to emotions.17 In an add-on approach, EA are explained exclusively by beliefs and desires, leaving feelings to be added on at the end. Goldie characterizes emotions as involving several elements including “perceptions,

thoughts, and feelings of various kinds, and bodily changes of various kinds.” The thoughts and feelings involved in an emotion have a “directedness” towards objects that accounts for their intentionality, which is fundamental to any emotion.

Goldie describes actions as EA if they cannot be “better explained” by anything other than the emotion that caused the action. Following Smith, he also attempts to account for EA within the standard account. Yet instead of describing emotions as a disposition that explains why one develops certain belief/desire pairs, Goldie appeals to what he calls “primitively intelligible” desires in order to account for seemingly bizarre actions and account for the lack of “means-end” reasoning in EA.

Primitively intelligible desires are no different than any other desires that one may have, except that they cannot be expressed because of societal norms. The difference is illustrated by considering a woman who scratches out the eyes in a photograph of her enemy. There is no “rational end” to this action, because the woman does not believe that this EA will harm the actual eyes of her enemy. Yet she nonetheless performs such EA because of her primitively intelligible desire to scratch out the real-life eyes of her enemy. Goldie claims that the reason the woman does not just scratch out the actual eyes of her enemy is that she believes that it is wrong to do so. Because of this belief, her primitively intelligible desire is then “sublimated” to another desire directed toward something that

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18Ibid., 13.
19Ibid., 16-19.
20Ibid., 43.
21Ibid.
22Ibid.
23Ibid.
represents her enemy. By acting on the symbolic representation, the primitively intelligible
desire is “vented” through directing her actions toward a representation of her initial desire.

What is appealing about Goldie’s description of emotions is that he provides a middle
ground between the standard account and the arational account. The only notable drawback
to Goldie’s theory is his explanation for EA. Although he insists that emotions are separate
from desires, he accounts for EA in terms of a desire, albeit a primitive one which, he claims,
makes it an “emotional desire.” An emotional desire is a conative state that has the
motivational role of a desire (as described by the standard account) but also involves an
emotion along the lines of the perceptual account—except that it emphasizes the primitive
aspects of the emotion that do not involve beliefs or desires. The primitive account explains
the affective quality of the desire and why it is a desire for something culturally unacceptable
or otherwise considered inappropriate, which then must be vented by acting on a symbolic
representation. The sublimation process may occur in some instances, but even in such cases
it remains that there must be a desire in order to make the action intelligible, which
potentially undermines the importance of the emotion. Goldie’s account cannot explain all
EA since many (if not most) EA do not involve the symbolic representation that is involved
in the sublimation process.

Additionally, it is unclear why the sublimation process requires an emotion if it occurs
because of a primitive desire. If this sublimation process occurs automatically, then the
desire could be sublimated into one that is considered more appropriate and is achieved via

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24Ibid.
25Ibid.
26Ibid., 23-25.
means-ends reasoning. The woman could have the desire to scratch her enemy’s eyes out and determine how to act in order to achieve that goal, but given that it is not acceptable to follow through with that action because of a conflict with a held belief, she sublimates the desire to a relevantly similar—and culturally acceptable—desire and action. Although the primitive desire is described as involving emotions, it does not involve emotions by necessity, and Goldie may have provided an explanation of EA that does not have involve an emotion.

Although Goldie claims to be explaining EA, it is difficult to determine why one would always need a symbolic representation of an object to harm (one with which he was angry) rather than simply harming the object itself. If you have an emotionally charged primitive desire to kick your broken-down car, then why not just kick it? (This reasoning will apply to most, if not all, cases where the EA in question do not violate any norms—and the subset of such EA is surely a large proportion of all EA.)

A New Explanation of EA

In order to provide an explanation for EA, I propose that the notion of a primitive desire be abandoned and that emotion can explain EA independent of desires. It is clear that when considering emotions directed toward objects such as cars, not all EA require a symbolic representation that the feelings are directed towards. In fact, some EA seem even more bizarre when considered in regards to this process, such as not just kicking the car, but instead feeling frustrated at the car and at a later time expressing your frustration toward a representation of the car.
I also propose to reaffirm the theoretical utility of beliefs. Unless one adheres strictly to a perceptual/primitive account of emotions, which I have argued undermines the significance of EA, there is no need to reject beliefs as part of EA. For both the standard and the arational account, beliefs help to explain, justify, or make EA intelligible. However, it is clear that there are perceptual/primitive emotions that are experienced without, and at times in spite of, beliefs. Consider, for instance, a man who is afraid of a snake. He may be told that the snake cannot hurt him and that he should not be afraid, and he may firmly believe that the snake cannot harm him and that he should not be afraid. Yet he may continue to feel fear directed at the snake. If the emotion is a genuine perceptual/primitive emotion, then it might not be altered by any beliefs.

For instances of perceptual/primitive emotions, the emotional response occurs prior to and without the need of any beliefs. However, once the perceptual/primitive emotion is experienced, it is often explained or justified in terms of beliefs. Regarding the persistent fear of snakes, one might claim that the man is worried that the snake actually is poisonous or that he just believes that snakes are creatures that one should not bother. Yet these beliefs play no role in causing the emotion, and they are only considered after the initial emotional response.27

While there are often beliefs that are associated with emotions, beliefs are not always essential for emotions. Sometimes they are, as in the case of the man rolling in his deceased wife’s clothing because of his grief. If not for the belief that his wife was deceased, it is

27Ibid., 18.
unclear why the man would have that emotional experience. Yet that one has such related beliefs in no way makes the emotions reducible to or dependent upon the beliefs. An entire host of intentional states could occur in relation to the man rolling in the clothing: an irrational desire to do so, a wish that by doing so his wife would not have died, the hope that by expressing his grief others will grieve with him, or an emotion that he is so overcome by that he acts simply because of how that emotion makes him feel.

Furthermore, the consideration of a belief does not entail that the belief is the cause of the emotion. Cognitive theories may build upon perceptual/primitive accounts because once one has perceived something as fearful and had the associated fearful feelings, one will also have a belief about what caused the fear, namely that it is something that it is fearful and causes negative emotions. Once the man had the fearful experience with the snake, he believes that the snake caused the fear. His belief that snakes are fearful could make it appear the he is afraid of snakes because of his belief that they are fearful, but for perceptual/primitive emotions, the only reason the man has this belief is because of his emotional experience.

The man certainly could gain his belief that snakes are dangerous from a different source, but it remains that his emotion is not necessarily caused by the belief. Many people are told that snakes are dangerous, harmful, and cause fear, yet when they encounter a snake, they consider these beliefs and do not have an emotional reaction. Perceptual/primitive accounts of emotions carve out a unique source of emotions. This category can be subsumed under the cognitive approach as soon as beliefs are formed about what caused the

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26This is, of course, on the assumption that he was informed of his wife’s death and thereby formed the belief and not that he watched her die, in which case his emotion could be based on his perception and not caused by his belief that she has died.
perceptual/primitive emotion. However, it seems that for most of our emotional experiences, and especially for our emotional experiences that result in bizarre actions, there is no reason to assume that we are not consciously aware of our beliefs about the intentionality of our emotions, including the emotions that cause EA.

Although I have referred to actions such as rolling around in a deceased loved-one’s clothing as “seemingly bizarre,” assume for a moment that this action is, in fact, bizarre. This may make it difficult to make any sense of why the man is rolling in the clothing or how it relates to his grief. This is likely why actions are so often explained in terms of emotions. The action is not something that most people would consider reasonable or rational, perhaps even as EA. But if the grief is taken into account, it makes the action intelligible, because performing EA when gripped by an emotion is a common experience yet one that may seem rational to the individual who is experiencing the emotion. This is why EA are referred to as seemingly bizarre. EA are quite bizarre except to the person in the grip of the emotion.

What would be undeniably bizarre is if the man rolling in the clothing claims that he has no idea why, or perhaps even that, he was rolling in the clothing. If all the man claimed to believe was the fact that his wife has died, and then he is suddenly rolling in her clothes, this action would cease to be arational and would be clearly irrational. This example is obviously a simplification of any charitable description of why one would roll in his deceased wife’s clothing. But in order to give him the charitable interpretation that he acted because of his grief, there must be either a belief that would cause such an emotion or a belief that would make it intelligible after the fact, even if that belief is simply that one had an emotional experience.
Hursthouse failed to acknowledge the significance of beliefs and given the sometimes-bizarre aspects of EA, one can only hope that the person experiencing the emotion is not acting solely on his emotion. If this were the case, then there would clearly be no need for many EA. In the case of the woman who scratched out the eyes of her enemy in a photograph, if she were to have felt whatever caused her to scratch out her enemy’s eyes and not had occurent beliefs that she should not perform that action, the result might be a photograph in perfect condition and a woman (the enemy) who has been blinded. In short, without beliefs we might just perform EA. Yet most people do not act only on the emotion they are experiencing at any given moment. Any number of beliefs or desires could be considered before even EA, characterized by being in the grips of an emotion, are performed.

What is at stake in the characterization of EA is not whether they involve an emotion, since they clearly do, or what kind of emotion explains EA, since experience of the emotion causes the action regardless of the cause of the emotion, or whether EA require either an adjustment to the standard view or an altogether separate category of intentional action. All of these concerns are relevant, but with an inclusive definition of emotion and the acceptance of emotions as a cause of intentional actions that can be integrated with desires or beliefs (either by desires or beliefs causing emotions, or emotions causing desires, or any relevant combination therein), EA are not an inexplicable category of intention action. They are just actions that are difficult to resolve in terms of the standard account, as Hursthouse illustrated. However, what is remarkably overlooked about Hursthouse’s account is that while she does argue that EA cannot be accounted for on the standard account, her characterization of why they cannot be accounted for is not that the actions are intentional or that they are caused by an emotion. If these were the key features, Hursthouse would surely call them “emotional
actions” or “affective intentional actions.” Instead, she calls these actions arational. Defining them in terms of how they relate to how we reason or how we define rationality is just as crucial to providing an account of EA as any other component considered.

What is significant when considering EA is what to make of actions that are seemingly devoid of rational considerations, yet are meaningful and intelligible because they are based on an emotional experience. Because explanations of action are largely dependent on desires and beliefs, and they are specified from distinctly personal viewpoints, it is difficult to advocate that the only way to maintain the value of this personal perspective regarding emotions is to disregard equally personal perspectives that involve one’s beliefs and desires. Further, when considering EA (such as skipping when happy or kissing a loved one), it is not crucial to determine whether aspects other than the emotion can cause, or prevent, an EA. Yet when considering a woman so enraged that she feels compelled to literally scratch out another woman’s eyes, there is a component that is missing in analyses currently offered.

EA in which one physically harms someone meet Hursthouse’s criteria of being an intentional action, occurring when in the grips of an emotion and not relying on means-end reasoning. While granting the first two criteria, given the example of the woman who sublimates her violent EA, I shall reconsider whether means-end reasoning must be excluded from accounts of EA. If people were to perform EA strictly in relation to how they felt, it would be surprising that EA are considered such unique and seemingly rare occurrences. But since EA do seem to occur rarely, either people have remarkably few emotional experiences, in which case EA are simply rare occurrences, or Goldie’s point about sublimation should be given further consideration.
If we assume that people have emotional experiences quite frequently and also note that very few of these emotions result in EA, then what happens when most emotional experiences occur? It is possible that most of these experiences do not cause EA, but this seems phenomenologically inaccurate. What most likely occurs is that we sublimate many, if not the majority, of EA. Returning to Jane’s kicking the table out of the anger she experiences directed at her unfaithful husband, there are surely many options involving the act of kicking that could be directed at the source of her anger; that is, she could kick John, for instance, and it would be intelligible why she would do so.

It is also intelligible that she kicks the table, because of her anger directed towards John. There appear to be three possible explanations for why the table would be the recipient of Jane’s EA. First, perhaps for Jane, the table is a symbolic representation of John, so that when kicking the table she vents her EA along the lines that Goldie proposed. It is unclear how or why a table would be symbolically representative of John, but it is certainly possible. Second, perhaps Jane was in the grips of anger and just kicked whatever was nearby, and it is merely a lucky coincidence for her husband that he was not nearby. This account is also intelligible, but lacks the intentionality of Jane’s emotion. If she is just kicking anything, why not just make the slight effort to kick the object of her anger? Again, just kick John. Third, and what I deem to be the most plausible possibility, is that perhaps she was, acting on her EA about to kick John, but she decided against it.

The (potential) problem with the third possibility is that it is not amenable with Hursthouse’s claim that EA are arational because they do not involve means-end reasoning. However, at this juncture, it is not clear why that is something significant to explaining EA. Hursthouse was convinced that EA could not be accounted for on the standard account
because the standard account did not recognize any causal role that being in the grips of emotion can result in EA. However, regardless of whether the standard account can make room for emotions as a conative state in addition to desires that causes actions, there is no compelling reason to insist that EA cannot involve means-end reasoning, for it appears that they so often do.

This is not straightforwardly a criticism of Hursthouse’s account of EA. All she claims is that EA do not involve means-end reasoning. And surely some do not and apparently all need not. But since, as has been argued, many of them do involve means-end reasoning, it will be helpful to sketch a brief picture of what the proposed account looks like. If we assume that Jane is not immune to her ability to reason about her situation, her anger would make her EA intelligible. Yet the anger might be a means to achieving a desired end. If she is overwhelmed with the need to kick her unfaithful husband, maybe that is all she really wants, and maybe a kick would do her, and maybe him, some good. But assume that she has larger goals in mind beyond any component of her situation, including her husband and her emotional experience.

In spite of her intense emotional experience, she likely has occurent desires, such as avoiding spending more of her time on this man, or dealing with the consequences if she kicked him. She also likely has occurent beliefs. Maybe she believes that he is not worth the trouble or that she should just move on. Or maybe she simply believes that it is wrong to physically harm other people, including people who make her very angry. She may not have any options available to her that align with her occurent desires and beliefs that simultaneously allow her perform EA toward the object of her emotion. So, she kicks a table.
By this account, EA differ from any other action in only two ways. First, they have an intense emotional component. Second, there often is not a means by which one can perform EA without discounting other significant aspects of one’s psychology (or there may be no ordinary action that adequately expresses how one feels, as in the loss of a loved one).

Hursthouse might respond by claiming that if Jane has this much restraint, then she must not be “in the grips” of emotion. But this seems to depend on what sort of EA is being considered. If it is a perceptual/primitive EA, then that might be the case. If Jane was adequately lost in the grips of her anger, then even she may not be aware of how she acts. Hursthouse might also reply that this account simply relegates EA back to the standard account, because now they are just like any action: a desire paired with a belief.

For Jane’s case, that may indeed be the best explanation. But what Hursthouse fails to recognize is that the emotions that cause EA continue to have a significant causal role regarding actions, even when accounted for in terms of beliefs and desires. If Jane were not angry, she would never have the desire to express her emotion and the derivative desire to kick the table as a means to expressing her emotion. If we continue to define an arational action as that by which an emotion provides the best explanation, then Jane’s action qualifies. The best explanation for why she kicked the table is because she wanted to express her emotion. She may have wanted to express it to show her husband that she was angry, or to assert herself in some way, or, as often seems to be the case, because Jane just needs to express her emotion because she feels better when she does.

I do not have an explanation for why EA alleviate emotions. For now, I will return to Hursthouse’s account and note that even with the utilization of means-end reasoning, EA are still arational because of the complex nature of emotions. In light of Jane’s options, the
rational action for her to take is to kick the table. This just also happens to be a relatively bizarre EA or a means by which to express her emotion as either a demonstration of her anger to her husband or as an attempt to alleviate the emotion. Even though two of these possibilities involve means-end reasoning, this does not make them rational by any robust definition. In an “all-things-considered” sort of rationality, kicking the table is simply not the sort of action that is generally considered rational. There must be better ways to alleviate an emotion, and better ways to show her husband she is angry, and ways to avoid being in the grips of emotion, at least to the degree that one starts kicking things.

A final criticism that Hursthouse might raise is whether Jane minimizes the importance or significance of her emotional experience when she performs the EA her anger causes. Here, I bite the bullet. Sure, Jane does minimize the significance of her emotional experience by kicking the table. But Jane’s EA does not appear to be atypical so far as EA go; we all find ourselves in situations like hers from time to time. Many EA are caused by primitive emotions, and they are not called primitive without good reason. They are visceral, irrational, non-cognitive responses that are marked by intense physiological changes. What person with even a bit of rationality would think it best to perform any and all EA that happen to accompany whatever emotion grips him? At some point, intelligibility may not be enough, and “just because you felt like it” will still be an explanation, albeit one that very few people will accept even if they think you were acting irrationally, instead of just arationally.

And this would provide a fine closing point, except that the majority of this project, along with most of the literature on EA, focuses on negative emotions. But these are only a few examples of EA. Positive EA abound: kissing a loved one, smiling when happy,
skipping, humming, etc. Negative emotions get the lion’s share of the attention because they are the ones that we hope we can somehow control or rationalize or sublimate or, failing any of these, at the very least explain and justify. But who would ever ask why one would hug someone he cares for? Here it would be bizarre to say that you desired to express your affection and believed a hug would accomplish that goal, or that you were gripped by affection and uncontrollably hugged your friend, or perhaps worst of all that you hugged your friend as an attempt to demonstrate that you care, as if she would only know through a calculated effort on your part. For positive emotions, the beliefs and desires just aren’t needed because if you are gripped by a positive emotion and express it, any appropriate EA will do. And for these EA, any attempt to rationalize, justify, explain, or make your EA intelligible are not needed; because you felt like it is a more than sufficient explanation.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


