

## Research Article

# Donald Davidson's Theory of Action in Relation to Responsibility: Addressing Crisis of Social Development in Africa

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An obvious challenge facing Africa today is the developmental crisis. Even with the continents' human and natural resources, Africa is still considered the most underdeveloped continent. What explanations can be given for this problem? What really is the central causative factor to Africa's underdevelopment? Some scholars blame it on African predicaments like the slave trade, colonialism, neo-colonialism, etc, and for some others Africa underdeveloped Africa which can be proved through Donald Davidson's standard action theory which proposes that the notion of intentional action is more fundamental than the notion of action and that there is a close connection between intentional action and acting for a reason (belief+desire). This paper argues that though the African predicaments play a strong, devastating role that facilitated developmental backwardness, but the blame should today squarely be put on Africans themselves or otherwise Africans are denied agency and autonomy. Expectations from the paper are the exposition of the weakness of the African political class towards political will to truly serve as the cause of the situation, and of how Davidson's theory of action could resolve the ugly situation. By adopting critical thinking, analytical and expository methods, the paper reinstates that African politicians and governments should be held accountable for Africa's underdevelopment.

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## Introduction

The African continent is ravished by developmental crises despite its huge mineral and human resources. Many scholars have attributed this crisis of social development to external factors like the slave trade, colonialism, arbitrary partitioning of African geographical territories, devastating historical experiences, foreign manipulations, and so forth (Rodney 30–31). Though some countries of other continents of the world experience similar challenges bedevilling Africa, it seems that Africa's case is peculiar when compared to the rest of the world. This can be buttressed by the disturbing fact that African countries have always been the world capital of poverty-stricken countries. The questions that agitate the mind are: why is Africa grossly underdeveloped? Do Africans lack the mental capability to better lot as many people most of whom are non-Africans insinuate, or are there some external factors that hinder Africans' creativity? Who should be put to blame for Africa's underdevelopment?

It is in addressing these questions that this paper argues that, though external factors as pointed out above cannot be ignored as responsible factors for Africa's developmental backwardness, the blame should today be squarely put on Africans themselves. It is the position of the paper also that problems like the denial of deliberation, purpose, free will, intentionality and choice to Africans, equally are other hindering causative agents to Africa's developmental crisis.

Applying critical thinking, analytical and expository methods, the paper is expected to trace the root cause of Africa's woes to intentional actions of the African political class and their citizens because they are agents and conscious originators of purposeful deliberate action as purported in Davidson's theory of Action.

The paper is structured in sections to include the abstract that contains a brief summary of the paper, the introduction which tries to present an expanded form of the abstract, a section making an exposition and analysis of the validity and indispensability of Donald Davidson's theory of action to Africa's crisis of development. It makes the case that the actions of Africans are causally efficacious and as such affect developments at all levels including social spheres. It tries to suggest a new paradigm on how Africa's social underdevelopment especially Nigeria, can be halted by holding that if individuals come to the realization of how their reasons and intentions hugely affect social development, it may perhaps act as a spring for better mind development and more carefulness on intentions since they affect agent's social living. From this, it dares to place emphasis on the fact that man is a moral being and should guide his actions because he is accountable for them; hence it

concludes by stating that Africans are responsible for Africa's social development woes. This is followed by a section where Davidson's theory is applied to Africa's underdevelopment crisis, and then, the concluding section.

## Donald Davidson's Standard Theory of Action

The standard theory of action is a defence of the position which says that rationalization is a species of causal explanation. A reason rationalizes an action only if it leads to the agent seeing something they perceive, or think they perceive, in their action. Put differently, there must be an indication/specification of exactly what it is about the action that the agent finds appealing. Davidson does not as Melden does, say that an action (raising one's arm for instance) can be identical with a bodily movement (one's arm going up for instance). Instead, Davidson's standard theory of action is a distinction between a 'description of an action', a 'description of something done voluntarily, but unintentionally', and a 'description of something done involuntarily and unintentionally' (Davidson<sup>a</sup> 12, 14). He considers the nature of action to be such that it is a combination of two features otherwise thought to be incompatible: one, is the view that action-explanations are causal explanations of the movements of bodies and the things which they cause; and two, is the view that action-explanations show actions to have been performed for a reason(s) (justifying function). Thus, we embark on rendering an exposition of the standard theory of action as espoused by Donald Davidson who argues that there is a causal relation and link between actions, beliefs and desires or pro-attitudes such that beliefs and (or) desires are reasons why an individual performs a certain act and both or any of these rationalizations make an action to be considered an intentional one. Suffice it to say therefore that the justificatory reason may differ from the particular reason that prompted the action, and this reason must be causal. Giving it an extensive explanation, here we set out to relate the standard theory of action with the African way of rationalizing actions to the end that Africans employ beliefs and (or) desires to explain or justify their actions.

In his essay *Actions, Reasons and Causes*, Davidson develops this explanation of action which shows that in attempts to explain an action performed by an agent, it is necessary to indicate a primary reason for its performance, and the agent uses the proposition of C1 (R is a primary reason for which an agent performs an action A under the description D only if R consists of a pro-attitude of the agent towards actions with a certain property, and a belief of the agent that A, under the description D, has that property) (Davidson 14) to explain. It is these primary reasons that provide the ingredients to

create a practical syllogism that conforms to the action, and then this, from the viewpoint of the agent, shows what is to be said for it. Thus, if Ukwuoma raises his hand, for instance, in order to signal Ugwu and believes that the raising of his hand could achieve his desire, then the practical syllogism that conforms to his action is put as follows: Signalling Ugwu is desirable; raising his hand is signalling of Ugwu; therefore, raising his hand is desirable. Each action possesses a primary reason such that it is minimally rational, that is, shown to be justified from some aspect of the agent's perspective. This makes the action open in a way that given other attitudes of an agent, the same action can be shown to be irrational all things being considered.

Davidson identifies actions with events and specifically certain bodily movements, which can be re-described in terms of their effects (for instance, Asiegbu moving his finger to flip a switch). On this ground, actions are intentional or unintentional under a particular description Asiegbu turning on the light through movement of his finger to flip the switch but not alerting the burglar through this one and the same act). Davidson uses the argument of C2 (a primary reason for an action as its cause) to combine the view that action explanation provides reasons that justify an action from the viewpoint of the agent. What this means is that an agent may have more than one reason justifying an action but only one can be indicated in explaining it, and since this is so, the one that explains it must stand in some relation to the action above that of justificatory role. So, it is the best pair of belief and desire that explains the action that causes it, and therefore, the best candidate is the causal relation (Davidson<sup>b</sup> 3-4).

Beliefs and desires are events of an agent that rationalize his/her action because they give others reasons the agent has in acting while allowing them to re-describe the intention with which the agent acts. To say that an agent can do a particular act under a specific circumstance is to say that s/he has desires and beliefs that can rationalize that particular action given that specific condition. This removes the problem of several actions and states only one symmetric action. So also, the question of 'if the agent can perform such action' is quelled. What an agent does perform intentionally is what s/he is free to carry out and has sufficient reasons for performing. In applying the logical form of sentences, Davidson tries to show how we can get the logical form of simple sentences about actions as clearly and precisely as possible. It is also an attempt to display how the meanings of action sentences depend on their structure. The argument of Davidson is that a causal relation implies the existence of strict laws belonging to a closed system of laws and ways of describing events, and that no such laws exist that govern the happenings of events described in psychological terms. Therefore,

there are actions that can be explained through references to reasons, yet the laws that link them are not known. Davidson also presents an argument attempting to prove that the main empirical thrust of an explanation in decision theory (decision theory purports to describe a static situation: the pattern of a person's attitudes and beliefs at a moment), or of a reason, comes from the attributions of desires, preferences or beliefs (Davidson<sup>a</sup> 67, 68, 91, 213, 222).

For Davidson, even though philosophers have written so much on causes and causal relations, their ideas are intelligible only when assumed that causes are individual events, and causal relations hold between them. He cites statements that events can be explained and predicted but only insofar as they have repeated characteristics, and not in them being particulars. He further posits that claims in the theory of action, analysis of action sentences and causal statements are unworkable unless we can speak of the same action, or event under different descriptions. For him, it is singular terms and not sentences as a whole that refer to events since sentences ordinarily say that at least one event of a certain kind occurs without referring to any particular one of them. He thinks the individuation of events poses no difficulty that is worse in principle than the problems posed by the individuation of material objects and that there is every good reason to believe that events exist (Davidson<sup>a</sup> 135-137, 152). Davidson acknowledges Hempel's position (Hempel 1-24) on the causal theory of action but questions his view as to whether explanations that rationalize actions make an essential appeal to laws. But for Davidson, the law backing the causal relation between an action and its reason needs not to be spelt out for the validity of its explanation. So causal relations are not subsumed under law hence they are described in intentional terms. Also, there are no law-like generalizations relating desires and beliefs and the actions they cause. This is because rationality, which constitutively governs the attributes of these desires and beliefs, is uncodifiable, and the mental is inextricably holistic. Davidson reiterates that the standard theory of action emphasizes the role of causality in understanding action, and urges that an adequate belief and desire could explain and be the reasons for an action, only if they cause it. The difference, if any, that may exist between Hempel's idea and that of Davidson is a concern with the exact way in which laws are involved in explaining actions by mentioning the event's reasons (Davidson<sup>a</sup> 211-213).

Motives, says Davidson, can also explain actions when they are the causes of the actions, and in a very special way. So, reasons explain actions only if the reasons are efficacious in the situation behind the actions. For example, Ngwoke has a motive to destroy a pot and believes that by smashing the pot on the wall, he will cause the pot to brake. He carries out this action, but the pot fails to brake, and then,

having heard an unpleasant remark as a result of the sound of the pot, angrily he turns swiftly around, accidentally hitting the pot and causing it to brake. In this scenario, the motive is not the cause of the action but can be attributed to a different reason. Davidson thus criticizes Hempel who thinks rationality is a character trait by saying that people without rational traits are still agents, and have reasons and motives upon which they act. Moreover, even the most rational person can do things for poor reasons. Thus, Davidson's argument is that to make 'reason-explanation' to rest on laws is to seek if a person's reasons will result in the right causal explanation for any action. Davidson reinforces Hempel's view that 'reason-explanations' are not different in their general logical character from explanations in physics or elsewhere. However, he holds that the laws that are implicit in 'reason-explanation' are the generalizations embedded in attributions of attitudes, beliefs and traits (Davidson<sup>a</sup> 215-217, 223).

What could be said about this section is that the paper makes a case that Africa is suffering from social underdevelopment evident in its poor living conditions, lack of basic infrastructural facilities in all sectors of the economy, unemployment, high mortality rate, political instability, insecurity of lives and property, corruption and insurgency as well as high rate in poverty among the people. In fact, one in every three Africans lives below the global poverty line. Deducing from this, it is therefore not surprising that Africa makes up 70 percent of the global poor, and the number keeps rising (Augustine 1-9).

## **Davidson's Standard Action Theory and Africa's Crisis of Social Development**

It is unfortunate that rather than squarely facing challenges, Africans engage in 'blame games'; accusing everybody and everything for their failures to effectively manage African affairs. Today, it is because of the colonial masters, negative past experiences and diabolic forces; tomorrow, it is globalization, technology and marginalization; and who knows what the reason would be the next day! The blame games that characterize the African question of backwardness in both mental and physical development and as well as in other factors like politics, economy, religion, etc., have undoubtedly hindered African wellbeing (Ugwu 287-318).

Although Davidson does not engage in the discussion on Africa's development, the attendant crisis, and whether Africans are even people capable of human actions, this paper argues using Davidson's

standard story of action that Africa and indeed the agents that constitute its geographical territory are to be blamed, held responsible for the woes that have befallen the continent and its failures as far as development is concerned. We bear in mind that the key concepts in agency include: the individual, action, will, intentionality, choice, freedom, deliberation, purpose, etc. The argument therefore is: If Africans are humans, then the problem of agency can be attributed to them; the Africans are humans and their explanation of action conforms to Davidsonian standard theory (action is caused by a pair of beliefs and/or pro-attitudes); therefore, Africans are agents and should be held culpable for their actions. Africa's crisis and underdevelopment are a result of these actions. Augustine refers to these as "indigenous causatives of African underdevelopment" (Augustine 1).

Development on its own is a process that creates growth, progress, positive change or the addition of physical, economic, environmental, social and demographic components. The purpose of development is a rise in the level and quality of life of the people, and the creation or expansion of local regional income and employment opportunities, without damaging the resources of the environment. Development is visible and useful, not necessarily immediately; and includes an aspect of quality change and the creation of conditions for a continuation of that change. Through the years, professionals and various researchers have developed a number of definitions and emphases for the term 'development'. Amartya Sen, for example, develops the 'capability approach', which defined development as a tool enabling people to reach the highest level of their ability, through granting freedom of action; that is, freedom of economic, social and family actions, and so on. This approach becomes a basis for the measurement of development by the Human Development Index (HDI), which is developed by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in 1990. But development is not only physical; it is also mental. In fact, mental development precedes physical development because, through mental development, the physical one is ensured. One who lacks mental development cannot give what could be physically visible.

Be that as it may, the question thus is 'how developed is the African?', 'how has his/her development shown in his/her life and physical structures around him/her?'. The African understanding of development as a crucial concept in life has been an awkward one; and this has become worst among those who should drive African affairs economically, politically, religiously, etc.: the African leaders. Development for most Africans is the quick one, the one that fetches material acquisition, social and political fame and power, economic 'notice-me', the one that boosts personal ego to the detriment of social welfare and the positive image of the majority in the African society. It is based on this

understanding of what development means and implies, and the subsequent actions that portray the reality of this understanding that non-Africans with prior biased minds towards the African have posited that the African is half-human and incapable of right reason, and therefore, whatever evil meted against him is justified hence s/he is counted off from being human as they are (Ugwu & Abah 40-49). The concept of 'development' to many Africans is ephemeral and physical in conception and pitifully, this leaves even the physical development rationally baseless. That is to say that most physical aspects of the development lack rational basis and justifications being there in terms of economic, social, educational, and otherwise contributions.

The point under emphasis here is in the practical life of many Africans, especially the leaders. Because the majority of them lack this mental and ideal understanding of development, they have through the exercise of their political powers, kept Africa in darkness but would in turn keep blaming the African predicaments which Africa should have started showing liberation from them for a long time ago. At this point, it should be understood that the paper laments for the unfortunate understanding and definition of development in terms of wealth accumulation, buildings owned and properties acquired, comfort and leisure. This poses causal relations that enforce actions such as stealing, embezzlement of public funds, fraud and corruption of various degrees and drive its social development. The result of this mentality is greed because as long our actions conform to this causal relation the society celebrates it without recourse to the means and its effects on the continent's development (Okolo<sup>a</sup> 13-15). Let us take instances in Nigeria's political arena to illustrate this stance. Godwin Obaseki, the governor of Edo State, took the action of leaving the All Progressive Congress (APC) in order to satisfy his desire (retaining power) and joins the opposition party, the People's Democratic Party (PDP) following his belief that so doing will satisfy his desire thereby rationalizing his reasons. What about the extant national chairman of the APC, Adams Oshiomhole, who supported Ize-Iyamu in the APC governorship ticket for the Edo State election and discrediting Godwin Obaseki? The irony of the matter is that in 2016 same Oshiomhole endorsed Obaseki calling him "God's sent," "the people's choice". By the same token, he referred to Ize-Iyamu as a thief, fraud, liar and one unworthy of leadership. In 2020 same man calls Obaseki what he called Ize-Iyamu and calls the latter what he calls the former. Ize-Iyamu is not left out in this scenario as he moves from one party to the other; acting for the sole purpose of gaining power. In fact, he explicitly rationalizes his reasons as the "words and command of God". This is the same 'god' that revealed to him that he would clinch power under the PDP in 2016, now telling him otherwise in 2020. The interest in these scenarios is to show that there is



a causal relation between the African belief and pro-attitudes with their actions. African actions are therefore the result of the belief+desire model as enunciated by Davidson. They are therefore to be held responsible for Africa's underdevelopment both in infrastructural and moral.

Davidson argues that beliefs and desires are the basic intentional reasons for the actions of humans. The preceding paragraph has pointed to the fact that African state actors rationalize their actions through the application of the pair of belief and desire. This is the truth about their actions, and it is supported by Velleman's argument. Velleman argues that beliefs aim at the truth, at least, in the normative sense that a belief is correct if it is true and incorrect otherwise. He adds that the fact that belief aims at the truth may help to explain not only why a belief is correct if and only if it is true, but also what counts as a reason for belief. Hence, such reasons are "considerations that appear to guarantee or probability the truth of belief"; they are "indicators of truth." One may retort just as Velleman took note too that while it is clear that belief aims at the truth in the normative sense, it is a matter of dispute whether it must be governed by an "inclination" towards the truth, or that the biological function of belief is to represent things as they are (Velleman 180-185). However, taking that this is true of the African way of explaining action, to deny African statesmen and their citizenry culpability will be to hold to the view that they do not know what they are doing or lack rationality. This very argument is poised uneasily between truism and absurdity (Dunn 121).

If an action meets the standards of practical reason or if it answers to be the most reason for an action, then we have a reason explanation. When an agent acts for reasons, she always acts intentionally (Setiya 339-393). Therefore, deliberate and conscious action is an exclusive feature of the human being and social processes can be interpreted as an expression of the individual, of her characteristics, objectives and desires and the African is a human being. Society is a specific product of human actions, which can create social structures based on individuals' preferences, without the influence of structures. To this, Morselli affirms that, according to methodological individualism, the features of society are incorporated within the individual such that society is a collective of individuals and the burden of the interpretation of development and change falls on the individual and on the motivations for her actions (Morselli 6-11).

Following Davidson, intentional action is action-done-for-reasons. And it does seem clear that a connection with reasons is a mark of intentional action as he says, "no reason that cannot be inferred from the fact that the action was done intentionally; no reason, in other words, besides wanting to do it" (Setiya 343). However, it is widely believed that, by comparison with other developing regions,

Africa's post-independence development record has been one of failure; the region's record has indeed been poor. These have been blamed on Africa's colonial history (Frankema). But for many political scientists, Africa's crisis and underdevelopment can be traced to 'personal rule' models of African political systems which are particularly persuasive, seeing that the position of modern African rulers and their governments is maintained by patron-client relationships, largely based on familial and ethnic loyalties. Followers are rewarded with preferential access to loans, import licenses, contracts and jobs. Institutional rules and constitutional checks are swept aside in the struggle to maintain power, the pursuit of personal aggrandizement and short-term political advantage, leading to economic irrationality (Briefing Paper). In other words, the actions of the people follow from their desires (ostentatious living) and belief that means should be geared towards the satisfaction of their desires and goals. The ends to which African actions are prompted rest on materialism, acquisitions, momentary gains and pleasure. Because the action is borne out of the belief that one without material acquisition is disregarded and then the desire to be accepted and to be looked upon in the society, the African agent places more values in the ends which their agential actions are meant to satisfy than in their responsiveness or culpability. Simply put, actions are generated from the belief that "money is everything" because of the respect it accrues-'a key to everything on earth'. There is therefore less emphasis on the means but on the purpose, goal or end of agential actions of Africans. All actions are geared towards attaining this cheap honour and the result is underdevelopment since the actions are borne out of consumerism instead of productivity. It is this belief and desire pair that produce action that has resulted in less attention on the holistic development of agents in Africa and also on structures and businesses that yield lasting dividends. This is also why individuals reaching certain national positions display attributes of greed and act for the sole purpose and goal of remaining in power. This leaves institutions like education which foster development unattended to while recruitments and positions are sorted out on ethnic lines and affiliations (Okolo<sup>b</sup> 12-19).

## **Recommendation and Conclusion**

Noting that teleological causal explanations do not display the element of justification provided by reasons, some philosophers have concluded that the concept of cause that applies elsewhere cannot apply to the relation between reasons and actions, and that the pattern of justification provides, in the case of reasons, the required explanation. Davidson grants that reasons alone justify actions in the course of explanation, but argues that it does not follow that the explanation is not necessarily causal.

What Davidson attempts to do is to show the relationship that exists between the problem of analyzing freedom to act and the problem of defining intentional actions. He also emphasizes that not just any causal connection between rationalizing attitudes and a wanted effect is enough to guarantee that producing the wanted effect was intentional.

The moral judgment of a value or desire does not disqualify it from providing an explanatory reason. Obviously, we find this being applied in legal cases (Davidson<sup>a</sup> 17, 70, 72, 76). If the situation of Africa is to be changed then the belief and desires of the Africans must be reoriented because these determine their actions, and this may be achieved through a new educational philosophy that emphasizes intrinsic desires more than extrinsic desires and also a refining of beliefs. Education emancipates men from their ignorant beliefs and capricious desires while helping them to critically reappraise their goals, ends, means, intentions, choices, and strengthen their will. Thus, true development is not only seen in quantity as in increase of gross national product (GNP), reserve money; not only in catching up with the modernized world in terms of technology and infrastructure but also in creativity; to be self-reliant. Roosevelt surmises this stance when he says that true development lies “in the joy of achievement in the thrill of creative effort. Thus, there should be a promotion of indigenous technology. Nigeria, for instance, has abandoned all its refineries and structures that aid production, most of which are presently in ruin. In its place they are dependent on the developed, importing almost everything. To keep blaming the West and colonizers for Africa’s crisis and underdevelopment is not only to deny ourselves responsibility but also to deny ourselves agential actions, to deny ourselves reason and to indeed confirm the notion of the White man that Africans are not humans but brutes who act strictly on passions and desires. Yes, all men are animals but higher animals and to distinguish ourselves, we must seek the good things of the mind; promote moral values; re-educate ourselves on the preference of beliefs and desires. This kind of development demands a change in mental outlook and emphasis on intrinsic and worthy individual beliefs and desires (Okolo<sup>b</sup> 21-23, 27-40). It has been made vivid that the African has a false notion of development viewing it as only in material terms.

What I have tried to contribute following Okolo is that development also entails dignity of the human person, raising the standard of living of the people, self-fulfilment, provision of man’s basic needs and being guided by sound ethical principles, and creative labour. It is not in travelling and touring the world and affording all the luxuries life can offer, for the African politicians have these yet, Africa is underdeveloped. Therefore, leadership is essential for true development because they have to use their

positions to instil qualities that engender it. Where this fails to be done then leadership as well as individual citizens should be held responsible for African woes and development crises and failures since it is its impotence and mental state coupled with belief and desires that have brought this condition upon it. Africa's backwardness summarizes Okolo is traceable to this "squandermania mentality" (Okolo<sup>a</sup> 57-59, 62-63, 92, 100, 104).

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