



PHILOSOPHY OF ACTION

AN ANTHOLOGY

EDITED BY JONATHAN DANCY AND CONSTANTINE SANDIS

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Philosophy of Action

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An Anthology

Edited by

Jonathan Dancy and Constantine Sandis

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*Fred Dretske and Jonathan Lowe died while this volume was in preparation.
It is dedicated to them.*

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Preface

Though all the great philosophers since Plato have included accounts of action in their philosophical systems, the philosophy of action only began to be conceived of as a discrete topic in philosophy towards the end of the last century. It is only recently that we have begun to find graduate classes devoted entirely to philosophy of action. The work of Wittgenstein has been seminal in this change, and with that in mind we have placed some especially influential passages from this work in Chapter 1, outside the six parts that follow. With this exception, the material in the volume is divided thematically rather than chronologically (though the various parts have been ordered chronologically where doing so makes sense).

While appreciating that readers often dip into anthologies with very specific purposes, we have grouped the papers we reprint here (all except John McDowell's chapter are already in print) into six parts. These are to some extent artificial, and certainly could have been done differently, but our aim was to offer a structure that might help in the design and development of a course on recent philosophy of action. That structure itself has led to some classic papers failing to find a place; most of them are mentioned in the Further Reading at the end of the introduction to each part.

Each part has an introduction designed to give students an overview of the material it contains that will help them navigate through it. The philosophy of action is a fast-growing field that cuts across a large number of philosophical and scientific discourses. We have tried to give a taste of some of the latest research

without prioritizing this over the work that has made the subject what it is.

A number of acknowledgments are due: many thanks to several anonymous referees for helping us with the selection and organization of the material included here. We also received sage advice on these matters from Maria Alvarez and John Hyman; Erasmus Mayr gave us timely and perceptive feedback on all of our introductions.

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Philosophical Investigations §§611–628

Ludwig Wittgenstein

611. “Willing – wanting – too is merely an experience,” one would like to say (the ‘will’ too only ‘idea’). It comes when it comes, and I cannot bring it about.

Not bring it about? – Like *what*? What can I bring about, then? What am I comparing it with when I say this?

612. I wouldn’t say of the movement of my arm, for example, that it comes when it comes, and so on. And this is the domain in which it makes sense to say that something doesn’t simply happen to us, but that we *do* it. “I don’t need to wait for my arm to rise – I can raise it.” And here I am making a contrast between the movement of my arm and, say, the fact that the violent thudding of my heart will subside.

613. In the sense in which I can ever bring about anything (such as stomach-ache through overeating), I can also bring about wanting. In this sense, I bring about wanting to swim by jumping into the water. I suppose I was trying to say: I can’t want to want; that is, it makes no sense to speak of wanting to want. “Wanting” is not the name of an action, and so not of a voluntary one either. And my use of a wrong expression came from the fact that one is inclined to think of

wanting as an immediate non-causal bringing about. But a misleading analogy lies at the root of this idea; the causal nexus seems to be established by a mechanism connecting two parts of a machine. The connection may be disrupted if the mechanism malfunctions. (One thinks only of the normal ways in which a mechanism goes wrong, not, say, of cog-wheels suddenly going soft, or penetrating each other, and so on.)

614. When I raise my arm ‘voluntarily’, I don’t make use of any means to bring the movement about. My wish is not such a means either.

615. “Willing, if it is not to be a sort of wishing, must be the action itself. It mustn’t stop anywhere short of the action.” If it is the action, then it is so in the ordinary sense of the word; so it is speaking, writing, walking, lifting a thing, imagining something. But it is also striving, trying, making an effort – to speak, to write, to lift a thing, to imagine something, and so on.

616. When I raise my arm, I have *not* wished it to rise. The voluntary action excludes this wish. It is, however, possible to say: “I hope I shall draw the circle faultlessly.” And that is to express a wish that one’s hand should move in such-and-such a way.

617. If we cross our fingers in a special way, we are sometimes unable to move a particular finger when someone tells us to do so, if he only *points* to the

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finger – merely shows it to the eye. However, if he touches it, we *can* move it. One would like to describe this experience as follows: we are unable to *will* to move the finger. The case is quite different from that in which we are not able to move the finger because someone is, say, holding it. One is now inclined to describe the former case by saying: one can't find any point of application for the will until the finger is touched. Only when one feels the finger can the will know where it is to engage. – But this way of putting it is misleading. One would like to say: "How am I to know where I am to catch hold with the will, if the feeling does not indicate the place?" But then how do I know to what point I am to direct the will when the feeling *is* there?

It is experience that shows that in this case the finger is, as it were, paralysed until we feel a touch on it; it could not have been known a priori.

618. One imagines the willing subject here as something without any mass (without any inertia), as a motor which has no inertia in itself to overcome. And so it is only mover, not moved. That is: one can say "I will, but my body does not obey me" – but not: "My will does not obey me." (Augustine)

But in the sense in which I can't fail to will, I can't try to will either.

619. And one might say: "It is only inasmuch as I can never try to will that I can always will."

620. *Doing* itself seems not to have any experiential volume. It seems like an extensionless point, the point of a needle. This point seems to be the real agent – and what happens in the realm of appearances merely consequences of this doing. "I *do*" seems to have a definite sense, independently of any experience.

621. But there is one thing we shouldn't overlook: when 'I raise my arm', my arm rises. And now a problem emerges: what is left over if I subtract the fact that my arm rises from the fact that I raise my arm?

((Are the kinaesthetic sensations my willing?))

622. When I raise my arm, I don't usually *try* to raise it.

623. "I want to get to that house at all costs." – But if there is no difficulty about it, *can* I strive at all costs to get to the house?

624. In the laboratory, when subjected to an electric current, for example, someone with his eyes shut says "I am moving my arm up and down" – though his arm is not moving. "So", we say, "he has the special feeling of making that movement." – Move your arm to and fro with your eyes shut. And now try, while you do so, to talk yourself into the idea that your arm is staying still and that you are only having certain strange feelings in your muscles and joints!

625. "How do you know that you've raised your arm?" – "I feel it." So what you recognize is the feeling? And are you certain that you recognize it right? – You're certain that you've raised your arm; isn't this the criterion, the measure, of recognizing?

[...]

627. Consider the following description of a voluntary action: "I form the decision to pull the bell at 5 o'clock; and when it strikes 5, my arm makes this movement." – Is that the correct description, and not *this* one: "... and when it strikes 5, I raise my arm"? — One would like to supplement the first description: "And lo and behold! my arm goes up when it strikes 5." And this "lo and behold!" is precisely what doesn't belong here. I do *not* say "Look, my arm is going up!" when I raise it.

628. So one might say: voluntary movement is marked by the absence of surprise. And now I don't mean you to ask "But *why* isn't one surprised here?"

Part I

Action and Agency

Introduction to Part I

1.

Although accounts of action have been central to most philosophical systems from Plato to Kant, it is only in recent years (following the writings of Wittgenstein and Anscombe, Chapters 1 and 11) that philosophy of action has come to be seen as a subject in its own right. We begin this volume with enquiries into what we might call the most basic question in this area of study: what is action?

One obvious suggestion is that action is bodily motion. But not all bodily motion is action; when you jog my arm, the motion of my arm is not an action of mine – I haven't moved my arm – and it isn't an action of yours, either. So what is the difference between those bodily motions that are actions and those that are not? The most popular strategy is to adopt a causal theory, whereby the distinction between actions and other forms of behavior lies in their causal origins; a sneeze, for instance, is typically not going to count as an action, because it has the wrong sort of cause. So which causes are of the right sort? Davidson's influential answer to this question identifies the causes of action with (the onset of) beliefs and pro-attitudes (such as desires, preferences, and values) that *rationalize* the action, that is, show how the action that is their effect made sense to the agent, and so can be thought of as the agent's reasons for doing what he did (see Chapter 19). Most sneezes

are not actions, because they are not caused by rationalizing beliefs and desires, but by such things as tickles. Davidson saw this account as an improvement on earlier views which identified the causes in question with inner acts of will. His view is a form of event-causalism (since the action is an event and its causes are events, too), and due to its prominence in the literature is frequently also referred to as 'the standard view'.

Event-causalism faces two general challenges. The first, recognized by Davidson himself, is that the right sort of cause (viz. a 'rationalizing' one) can bring about an action in the wrong sort of way (i.e. not in virtue of its rationalizing power). So we don't just need things of the right sort to do the causing, we need them to do their causing in the right sort of way. Davidson (Chapter 2) gives the now famous example of a climber who wants to rid himself of the weight and danger of holding another man on a rope, and who knows that the way to do this is to let go of the rope; but if this belief and desire together so unnerve him that his grip relaxes and the rope slips through his fingers, the loosening of the grip is something that happens to him rather than something that he does; so it is not an action of his even though it is caused by a rationalizing belief-desire combination (Davidson 1973). This has come to be known as the problem of deviant causes (addressed by Smith in Chapter 28).

The second challenge to event-causalism relates to the lack of any causal role played by agents themselves in all this. If actions are events caused by (the onset of) prior mental states and/or neural processes, we arguably lose sight of what, if any, role *we* play in all this. If we are not ourselves actively involved, are we really the agents of our own actions or are we mere vehicles for them? It seems insufficient for agency that the causes in question occur inside us. Our digestive processes, for example, are alien to our agency in a way in which our actions had better not be. This worry has come to be known as the problem of ‘the disappearing agent’; it affects any account that, like Davidson’s, understands actions as a species of events, viz. ones with a cause that is not identified with the agent. This problem is the focus of Hornsby’s contribution in this part (Chapter 6). (There are other challenges to the details of Davidson’s view, which are discussed in Parts IV and V.)

So an alternative strategy that is not event-causalist – and is sometimes even misleadingly described as non-causalist – identifies the cause with the agent himself (Chisholm 1964; Reid 1969; O’Connor 2000) rather than with some event. This idea, known as agent-causation, is thought to avoid the two problems discussed above. Agent-causalists disagree over whether the agent causes her action or whether the action consists in her causing a certain result (the latter is argued by Alvarez and Hyman in Chapter 5). But either way, there is the further question of whether an agent’s causing something should itself be understood as an event, and if so, what, if anything, brings about that event. (Ruben 2003 denies that there are such events as the causing of things by agents; O’Connor 2000 denies that they need further causes.)

Not everybody agrees that action is bodily motion with a particular kind of cause. For instance Frankfurt (Chapter 4) defends the non-causalist view that what makes a bodily motion of yours an action is that you are embracing it as your own and that it occurs under your guidance. On this account there can be actions that do not involve the causation of bodily motion at all, so long they are embraced by the agent in the relevant way. Examples of such actions might be pressing one’s hand against a door to keep it closed, refraining from apologizing, and

omitting to send a card. In addition, some ‘volitionist’ philosophers identify actions not with bodily motions, however caused, but with the inner causes of those motions, which they take to be acts of will or volitions. Other volitionists take actions to be complex events composed of volitions followed (causally or otherwise) by bodily movements; on this view neither the volition nor the bodily motion is itself an action. These and other related views will be considered in more detail in the introduction to Part II.

Whatever the causes of action may be, most of the above views seem to identify actions themselves with events of some sort. But some thinkers identify actions with processes rather than events. The precise difference between the two characterizations is contentious, but it is generally agreed that – unlike events – processes need not occur throughout or across a temporal stretch (Mourelatos 1978). Dretske (1988) argues that an action is the causal process of a mental/neural event causing a bodily event. More recent process-theorists inspired by Aristotle (e.g. Stout 1997) prefer to think of actions as non-causal processes. These are teleological processes defined by an end or goal that need not be achieved in order for it to be true that the process has taken place. One may, for example, be in the process of baking a cake without ever succeeding in baking one, or crossing the road without ever making it to the other side. So understood, there can be cake-baking or road-crossing processes without there having been a cake-baking or road-crossing event.

Whether actions are events or processes, it may seem that they are at least occurrences or happenings. In Anscombe’s terms, “I do what happens ... there is no distinction between my doing and the things happening” (1957: §29). On this outlook, the problem of action we have been dealing with is that of offering a way of distinguishing the doings of an agent from what ‘merely’ happens to him (see the chapter by Frankfurt in this part). But even this framework can be, and has been, rejected. Some philosophers take actions to be instances of relations (e.g. Hyman 2001). Others remind us that to act is to do something (e.g. bring about *x*) and then proceed to distinguish between the thing done (the deed?) and the event of one’s doing it (Macmurray 1938; Hornsby 1980; Ricœur 1986). This distinction is

often compared to that between the thing thought and one's thinking it, or between the thing said and one's saying it.

2.

The term 'basic action' was first introduced by Danto, in his 1963 paper "What We Can Do." Danto's goal was to identify the point at which agency begins (and arguably freedom and moral responsibility with it, but see the discussion of these issues in our introduction to Part VI). Danto's governing thought is that no matter how complex the action I am doing, there must always be a basic element to it, viz. something by doing which I do everything else that I am doing. But the notion of the basic needs careful handling everywhere in philosophy, not least in the case of basic action. Baier (1971) has raised the worry that there are at least eight kinds of basicness, some of which are a matter of degree rather than kind: causally basic, instrumentally basic, conventionally basic, ontologically basic, logically basic, genetically basic, ease basic, and isolation basic. If so, we need to be sure which one of these we are talking about. Danto's own example of a paradigmatic basic action is that of moving an arm "without having to do anything to cause it to move" (so pushing it with the other arm won't count). Volitionists, by contrast, maintain that such an action as moving one's arm is the effect of a volition; this volition is the basic action and its effect, the moving of the arm, is another action (done by means of the basic action of willing).

Chisholm has offered an alternative, teleological, definition of basic action intended to be neutral on these issues of causality: "A is performed by the agent as a basic act' could be defined as: the agent succeeds in making A happen, and there is no B, other than A, which he undertook to make happen with an end to making A happen" (Chisholm 1964: 617, n.7). But it seems odd to talk of succeeding in making one's own actions happen. In later works Danto himself replaces all talk of causal or temporal basicness with the notion of *mediation*: "Actions we do but not *through* any distinct thing which we also

do ... I shall call basic, and mediated ones are accordingly non-basic" (Danto 1973).

A remaining and persistent difficulty with any non-teleological view of basicness is that in order to locate those actions that are basic, we need a principle of action individuation. Anscombe (in §26 of *Intention*) and Davidson (in numerous works, including "Agency") famously argued that the basicness of an action is sensitive to our description of it. This account falls out of the more general position that actions are events with an indefinite number of descriptions, each of which will highlight some psychological and/or physical feature(s) of the event in question.

For example, suppose that Donald poisons the inhabitants by replenishing the water supply, and that he does the latter by operating the pump, which in turn he does by moving his arm in a particular way. Arguably, what we have here is not four actions but one action with four different descriptions, viz. those of poisoning, replenishing, pumping, and moving. (It is not equally plausible that all by-relations operate in this way; if I win an award by performing well in a contest, my performing well is not my winning.) One of these descriptions is the most basic description of the action, and the 'by-relation' may tell us which it is. Donald poisoned by pumping, he did not pump by poisoning.

So how many actions has Donald performed, four or one? As we have seen, Anscombe and Davidson argued that what we have here is not so much four actions as four different descriptions of one action. According to this 'reductionist' view, being basic is a matter of description. Davidson accordingly maintains that *all* actions are basic or 'primitive' under some description, since, strictly speaking, "we never do more than move our bodies: the rest is up to nature" ("Agency", p. 18 in this volume). By contrast, 'pluralists' or 'multipliers' such as Goldman (1970) and Thomson (1971) argue that each of the above descriptions picks out a different action, and that only one of them (at most) is basic. Hornsby (1979) rejects the labels 'unifiers' and 'multipliers' in favor of 'identifiers' and 'differentiators' on the grounds that the former pair serves to conflate identity criteria with *counting* questions that do not obviously apply to action.

3.

A related debate focuses not on the number of actions performed but on their spatio-temporal location. Suppose that Bob Marley shot the sheriff at time t^1 , but that the sheriff only died at a later time t^3 , before which – at time t^2 – Marley recorded his famous song. Did Marley kill the sheriff before or after recording his song (he certainly didn't do it while singing)? It seems as implausible to claim (with the differentiators) that Marley did not kill the sheriff until t^3 – after he had left the scene of the crime – as it would be to follow identifiers in maintaining that he killed the sheriff at t^1 – before the sheriff died. It is often objected (for instance by Bennett, Chapter 3) that the implausibility of the latter claim is not (genuinely) ontological but (merely) a linguistic oddity. We do not call a woman a mother before she has any children, yet we may, after the birth or adoption of her first child, legitimately speak of what this 'mother' did before she had any children. By the same token (or so the argument goes), while we cannot at t^1 (while the sheriff was still alive) truthfully say that Marley killed the sheriff, at t^3 (when the sheriff is dead) it becomes perfectly acceptable to talk of Marley 'killing' him at t^1 (before he died).

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Agency

Donald Davidson

What events in the life of a person reveal agency; what are his deeds and his doings in contrast to mere happenings in his history; what is the mark that distinguishes his actions?

This morning I was awakened by the sound of someone practising the violin. I dozed a bit, then got up, washed, shaved, dressed, and went downstairs, turning off a light in the hall as I passed. I poured myself some coffee, stumbled on the edge of the dining room rug, and spilled a bit of coffee fumbling for the *New York Times*.

Some of these items record things I did; others, things that befell me, things that happened to me on the way to the dining room. Among the things I did were get up, wash, shave, go downstairs, and spill a bit of coffee. Among the things that happened to me were being awakened and stumbling on the edge of the rug. A borderline case, perhaps, is dozing. Doubts could be kindled about other cases by embroidering on the story. Stumbling can be deliberate, and when so counts as a thing done. I might have turned off the light by inadvertently brushing against the switch; would it then have been my deed, or even something that I did?

Many examples can be settled out of hand, and this encourages the hope that there is an interesting

principle at work, a principle which, if made explicit, might help explain why the difficult cases are difficult. On the other side a host of cases raise difficulties. The question itself seems to go out of focus when we start putting pressure on such phrases as “what he did,” “his actions,” “what happened to him,” and it often matters to the appropriateness of the answer what form we give the question. (Waking up is something I did, perhaps, but not an action.) We should maintain a lively sense of the possibility that the question with which we began is, as Austin suggested, a misguided one.¹

In this essay, however, I once more try the positive assumption, that the question is a good one, that there is a fairly definite subclass of events which are actions. The costs are the usual ones: oversimplification, the setting aside of large classes of exceptions, the neglect of distinctions hinted by grammar and common sense, recourse to disguised linguistic legislation. With luck we learn something from such methods. There may, after all, be important and general truths in this area, and if there are how else will we discover them?

Philosophers often seem to think that there must be some simple grammatical litmus of agency, but none has been discovered. I drugged the sentry, I contracted malaria, I danced, I swooned, Jones was kicked by me, Smith was outlived by me: this is a series of examples designed to show that a person named as subject in sentences in the active, whether

Davidson, D. (1971), “Agency,” in R. Binkley, R. Bronaugh, and A. Marras (eds.), *Agent, Action, and Reason* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press), 3–25. Reprinted with permission of the publisher.

or not the verb is transitive, or as object in the passive, may or may not be the agent of the event recorded.²

Another common error is to think verbs may be listed according to whether they do or do not impute agency to a subject or object. What invites the error is that this is true of some verbs. To say of a person that he blundered, insulted his uncle, or sank the *Bismark* is automatically to convict him of being the author of those events; and to mention someone in the subject position in a sentence with the verb in the passive tense is, so far as I can see, to ensure that he is not the agent. But for a host of cases, a sentence can record an episode in the life of the agent and leave us in the dark as to whether it was an action. Here are some examples: he blinked, rolled out of bed, turned on the light, coughed, squinted, sweated, spilled the coffee, and tripped over the rug. We know whether these events are actions only after we know more than the verb provides. By considering the additional information that would settle the matter, we may find an answer to the question of what makes a bit of biography an action.

One hint was given in my opening fragmentary diary. Tripping over a rug is normally not an action; but it is if done intentionally. Perhaps, then, being intentional is the relevant distinguishing mark. If it were, it would help explain why some verbs imply agency, for some verbs describe actions that cannot be anything but intentional; asserting, cheating, taking a square root, and lying are examples.

This mark will not work, however, for although intention implies agency, the converse does not hold. Thus spilling the coffee, sinking the *Bismark*, and insulting someone are all things that may or may not be done intentionally, but even when not intentional, they are normally actions. If, for example, I intentionally spill the contents of my cup, mistakenly thinking it is tea when it is coffee, then spilling the coffee is something I do, it is an action of mine, though I do not do it intentionally. On the other hand, if I spill the coffee because you jiggle my hand, I cannot be called the agent. Yet while I may hasten to add my excuse, it is not incorrect, even in this case, to say I spilled the coffee. Thus we must distinguish three situations in which it is correct to say I spilled the coffee: in the first, I do it intentionally; in the second I do not do it intentionally but it is my

action (I thought it was tea); in the third it is not my action at all (you jiggle my hand).³

Certain kinds of mistake are particularly interesting: misreading a sign, misinterpreting an order, underestimating a weight, or miscalculating a sum. These are things that strictly speaking cannot be done intentionally. One can pretend to misread a sign, one can underestimate a weight through sloth or inattention, or deliberately write down what one knows to be a wrong answer to an addition; but none of these is an intentional flubbing. To make a mistake of one of the mentioned kinds is to fail to do what one intends, and one cannot, Freudian paradox aside, intend to fail. These mistakes are not intentional, then; nevertheless, they are actions. To see this we need only notice that making a mistake must in each case be doing something else intentionally. A misreading must be a reading, albeit one that falls short of what was wanted; misinterpreting an order is a case of interpreting it (and with the intention of getting it right); underestimating is estimating; and a miscalculation is a calculation (though one that founders).

Can we now say what element is common to the cases of agency? We know that intentional acts are included, and that the place to look to find what such acts share with the others is at the coffee spillings and such where we can distinguish spillings that involve agency from those that do not. I am the agent if I spill the coffee meaning to spill the tea, but not if you jiggle my hand. What is the difference? The difference seems to lie in the fact that in one case, but not in the other, I am intentionally doing *something*. My spilling the contents of my cup was intentional; as it happens, this very same act can be redescribed as my spilling the coffee. Of course, thus redescribed the action is no longer intentional; but this fact is apparently irrelevant to the question of agency.

And so I think we have one correct answer to our problem: a man is the agent of an act if what he does can be described under an aspect that makes it intentional.

The possibility of this answer turns on the semantic opacity, or intensionality, of attributions of intention. Hamlet intentionally kills the man behind the arras, but he does not intentionally kill Polonius. Yet Polonius is the man behind the arras, and so Hamlet's killing of the man behind the arras is identical with his

killing of Polonius. It is a mistake to suppose there is a class of intentional actions: if we took this tack, we should be compelled to say that one and the same action was both intentional and not intentional. As a first step toward straightening things out, we may try talking not of actions but of sentences and descriptions of actions instead. In the case of agency, my proposal might then be put: a person is the agent of an event if and only if there is a description of what he did that makes true a sentence that says he did it intentionally. This formulation, with its quantification over linguistic entities, cannot be considered entirely satisfactory. But to do better would require a semantic analysis of sentences about propositional attitudes.⁴

Setting aside the need for further refinement, the proposed criterion of actions seems to fit the examples we have discussed. Suppose an officer aims a torpedo at a ship he thinks is the *Tirpitz* and actually sinks the *Bismark*. Then sinking the *Bismark* is his action, for that action is identical with his attempt to sink the ship he took to be the *Tirpitz*, which is intentional. Similarly, spilling the coffee is the act of a person who does it by intentionally spilling the contents of his cup. It is now clearer, too, why mistakes are actions, for making a mistake must be doing something with the intention of achieving a result that is not forthcoming.

If we can say, as I am urging, that a person does, as agent, whatever he does intentionally under some description, then, although the criterion of agency is, in the semantic sense, *intentional*, the expression of agency is itself purely *extensional*. The relation that holds between a person and an event when the event is an action performed by the person holds regardless of how the terms are described; and we can without confusion speak of the class of events that are actions, which we cannot do with intentional actions.

Perhaps it is sometimes thought that the concept of an action is hopelessly indistinct because we cannot decide whether knocking over a policeman, say, or falling down stairs, or deflating someone's ego is or is not an action. But if being an action is a trait which particular events have independently of how they are described, there is no reason to expect in general to be able to tell, merely by knowing some trait of an event (that it is a case of knocking over a policeman, say), whether or not it is an action.

Is our criterion so broad that it will include under actions many events that no one would normally count as actions? For example, isn't tripping over the edge of the rug just part of my intentional progress into the dining room? I think not. An intentional movement of mine did cause me to trip, and so I did trip myself: this was an action, though not an intentional one. But "I tripped" and "I tripped myself" do not report the same event. The first sentence is entailed by the second, because to trip myself is to do something that results in my tripping; but of course doing something that results in my tripping is not identical with what it causes.

The extensionality of the expression of agency suggests that the concept of agency is simpler or more basic than that of intention, but unfortunately the route we have travelled does not show how to exploit the hint, for all we have seen is how to pick out cases of agency by appeal to the notion of intention. This is to analyze the obscure by appeal to the more obscure – not as pointless a process as often thought, but still disappointing. We should try to see if we can find a mark of agency that does not use the concept of intention.

The notion of cause may provide the clue. With respect to causation, there is a certain rough symmetry between intention and agency. If I say that Smith set the house on fire in order to collect the insurance, I explain his action, in part, by giving one of its causes, namely Smith's desire to collect the insurance. If I say that Smith burned down the house by setting fire to the bedding, then I explain the conflagration by giving a cause, namely Smith's action. In both cases, causal explanation takes the form of fuller description of an action, either in terms of a cause or of an effect. To describe an action as one that had a certain purpose or intended outcome is to describe it as an effect; to describe it as an action that had a certain outcome is to describe it as a cause. Attributions of intention are typically excuses and justifications; attributions of agency are typically accusations or assignments of responsibility. Of course the two kinds of attribution do not rule one another out, since to give the intention with which an act was done is also, and necessarily, to attribute agency. If Brutus murdered Caesar with the intention of removing a tyrant, then a cause of his action was a desire to remove a tyrant and an effect was the death of Caesar. If the officer sank the

Bismark with the intention of sinking the *Tirpitz*, then an action of his was caused by his desire to sink the *Tirpitz* and had the consequence that the *Bismark* sank.⁵

These examples and others suggest that, in every instance of action, the agent made happen or brought about or produced or authored the event of which he was the agent, and these phrases in turn seem rendered by the idea of cause. Can we then say that to be the author or agent of an event is to cause it? This view, or something apparently much like it, has been proposed or assumed by a number of recent authors.⁶ So we should consider whether the introduction of the notion of causation in this way can improve our understanding of the concept of agency.

Clearly it can, at least up to a point. For an important way of justifying an attribution of agency is by showing that some event was caused by something the agent did. If I poison someone's morning grapefruit with the intention of killing him, and I succeed, then I caused his death by putting poison in his food, and that is why I am the agent in his murder. When I manage to hurt someone's feelings by denigrating his necktie, I cause the hurt, but it is another event, my saying something mean, that is the cause of the hurt.

The notion of cause appealed to here is ordinary event-causality, the relation, whatever it is, that holds between two events when one is cause of the other. For although we say the agent caused the death of the victim, that is, that he killed him, this is an elliptical way of saying that some act of the agent – something he did, such as put poison in the grapefruit – caused the death of the victim.

Not every event we attribute to an agent can be explained as caused by another event of which he is agent: some acts must be primitive in the sense that they cannot be analyzed in terms of their causal relations to acts of the same agent. But then event-causality cannot in this way be used to explain the relation between an agent and a primitive action. Event-causality can spread responsibility for an action to the consequences of the action, but it cannot help explicate the first attribution of agency on which the rest depend.⁷

If we interpret the idea of a bodily movement generously, a case can be made for saying that all primitive actions are bodily movements. The generosity must be open-handed enough to encompass

such "movements" as standing fast, and mental acts like deciding and computing. I do not plan to discuss these difficult examples now; if I am wrong about the precise scope of primitive actions, it will not affect my main argument. It is important, however, to show that in such ordinary actions as pointing one's finger or tying one's shoelaces the primitive action is a bodily movement.

I can imagine at least two objections to this claim. First, it may be said that, in order to point my finger, I do something that causes the finger to move, namely contract certain muscles; and perhaps this requires that I make certain events take place in my brain. But these events do not sound like ordinary bodily movements. I think that the premisses of this argument may be true, but that the conclusion does not follow. It may be true that I cause my finger to move by contracting certain muscles, and possibly I cause the muscles to contract by making an event occur in my brain. But this does not show that pointing my finger is not a primitive action, for it does not show that I must do something else that causes it. Doing something that causes my finger to move does not cause me to move my finger; it *is* moving my finger.

In discussing examples like this one, Chisholm has suggested that, although an agent may be said to make certain cerebral events happen when it is these events that cause his finger to move, making the cerebral events happen cannot be called something that he does. Chisholm also thinks that many things an agent causes to happen, in the sense that they are events caused by things he does, are not events of which he is the agent. Thus if moving his finger is something a man does, and this movement causes some molecules of air to move, then although the man may be said to have caused the molecules to move, and hence to have moved the molecules, this is not something he did.⁸

It does not seem to me that this is a clear or useful distinction: all of Chisholm's cases of making something happen are, so far as my intuition goes, cases of agency, situations in which we may, and do, allow that the person did something. When a person makes an event occur in his brain, he does not normally know that he is doing this, and Chisholm seems to suggest that for this reason we cannot say it is something that he does. But a man may even be doing

something intentionally and not know that he is; so of course he can be doing it without knowing that he is. (A man may be making ten carbon copies as he writes, and this may be intentional; yet he may not know that he is; all he knows is that he is trying.)

Action does require that what the agent does is intentional under some description, and this in turn requires, I think, that what the agent does is known to him under some description. But this condition is met by our examples. A man who raises his arm both intends to do with his body whatever is needed to make his arm go up and knows that he is doing so. And of course the cerebral events and movements of the muscles are just what is needed. So, though the agent may not know the names or locations of the relevant muscles, nor even know he has a brain, what he makes happen in his brain and muscles when he moves his arm is, under one natural description, something he intends and knows about.

The second objection to the claim that primitive actions are bodily movements comes from the opposite direction: it is that some primitive actions involve more than a movement of the body. When I tie my shoelaces, there is on the one hand the movement of my fingers, and on the other the movement of the laces. But is it possible to separate these events by calling the first alone my action? What makes the separation a problem is that I do not seem able to describe or think how I move my fingers, apart from moving the laces. I do not move my fingers in the attempt to cause my shoes to be tied, nor am I capable of moving my fingers in the appropriate way when no laces are present (this is a trick I might learn). Similarly, it might be argued that when they utter words most people do not know what muscles to move or how to hold their mouths in order to produce the words they want; so here again it seems that a primitive action must include more than a bodily movement, namely a motion of the air.

The objection founders for the same reason as the last one. Everything depends on whether or not there is an appropriate description of the action. It is correctly assumed that unless the agent himself is aware of what he is doing with his body alone, unless he can conceive his movements as an event physically separate from whatever else takes place, his bodily movements cannot be his action. But it is wrongly supposed that such

awareness and conception are impossible in the case of speaking or of tying one's shoelaces. For an agent always knows how he moves his body when, in acting intentionally, he moves his body, in the sense that there is *some* description of the movement under which he knows that he makes it. Such descriptions are, to be sure, apt to be trivial and unrevealing; this is what ensures their existence. So, if I tie my shoelaces, here is a description of my movements: I move my body in just the way required to tie my shoelaces. Similarly, when I utter words, it is true that I am unable to describe what my tongue and mouth do, or to name the muscles I move. But I do not need the terminology of the speech therapist: what I do is move my mouth and muscles, as I know how to do, in just the way needed to produce the words I have in mind.

So there is after all no trouble in producing familiar and correct descriptions of my bodily movements, and these are the events that cause such further events as my shoelaces' being tied or the air's vibrating with my words. Of course, the describing trick has been turned by describing the actions as the movements with the right effects; but this does not show the trick has not been turned. What was needed was not a description that did not mention the effects, but a description that fitted the cause. There is, I conclude, nothing standing in the way of saying that our primitive actions, at least if we set aside such troublesome cases as mental acts, are bodily movements.

To return to the question whether the concept of action may be analyzed in terms of the concept of causality: what our discussion has shown is that we may concentrate on primitive actions. The ordinary notion of event-causality is useful in explaining how agency can spread from primitive actions to actions described in further ways, but it cannot in the same way explain the basic sense of agency. What we must ask, then, is whether there is another kind of causality, one that does not reduce to event-causality, an appeal to which will help us understand agency. We may call this kind of causality (following Thalberg) *agent-causality*.

Restricting ourselves, for the reason just given, to primitive actions, how well does the idea of agent-causality account for the relation between an agent and his action? There is this dilemma: either the causing by an agent of a primitive action is an event

discrete from the primitive action, in which case we have problems about acts of the will or worse, or it is not a discrete event, in which case there seems no difference between saying someone caused a primitive action and saying he was the agent.

To take the first horn: suppose that causing a primitive action (in the sense of agent-causality) does introduce an event separate from, and presumably prior to, the action. This prior event in turn must either be an action, or not. If an action, then the action we began with was not, contrary to our assumption, primitive. If not an action, then we have tried to explain agency by appeal to an even more obscure notion, that of a causing that is not a doing.

One is impaled on the second horn of the dilemma if one supposes that agent-causation does *not* introduce an event in addition to the primitive action. For then what more have we said when we say the agent caused the action than when we say he was the agent of the action? The concept of *cause* seems to play no role. We may fail to detect the vacuity of this suggestion because causality does, as we have noticed, enter conspicuously into accounts of agency; but where it does it is the garden-variety of causality, which sheds no light on the relation between the agent and his primitive actions.

We explain a broken window by saying that a brick broke it; what explanatory power the remark has derives from the fact that we may first expand the account of the cause to embrace an event, the movement of the brick, and we can then summon up evidence for the existence of a law connecting such events as motions of medium-sized rigid objects and the breaking of windows. The ordinary notion of cause is inseparable from this elementary form of explanation. But the concept of agent-causation lacks these features entirely. What distinguishes agent-causation from ordinary causation is that no expansion into a tale of two events is possible, and no law lurks. By the same token, nothing is explained. There seems no good reason, therefore, for using such expressions as “cause,” “bring about,” “make the case” to *illuminate* the relation between an agent and his act. I do not mean that there is anything wrong with such expressions – there are times when they come naturally in talk of agency. But I do not think that by introducing them we make any progress towards understanding agency and action.

Causality is central to the concept of agency, but it is ordinary causality between events that is relevant, and it concerns the effects and not the causes of actions (discounting, as before, the possibility of analyzing intention in terms of causality). One way to bring this out is by describing what Joel Feinberg calls the “accordion effect,”⁹ which is an important feature of the language we use to describe actions. A man moves his finger, let us say intentionally, thus flicking the switch, causing a light to come on, the room to be illuminated, and a prowler to be alerted. This statement has the following entailments: the man flicked the switch, turned on the light, illuminated the room, and alerted the prowler. Some of these things he did intentionally, some not; beyond the finger movement, intention is irrelevant to the inferences, and even there it is required only in the sense that the movement must be intentional under some description. In brief, once he has done one thing (move a finger), each consequence presents us with a deed; an agent causes what his actions cause.¹⁰

The accordion effect will not reveal in what respect an act is intentional. If someone moves his mouth in such a way as to produce the words “your bat is on backwards,” thus causing offence to his companion, the accordion effect applies, for we may say both that he spoke those words and that he offended his companion. Yet it is possible that he did not intend to move his mouth so as to produce those words, nor to produce them, nor to offend his companion. But the accordion effect is not applicable if there is no intention present. If the officer presses a button thinking it will ring a bell that summons a steward to bring him a cup of tea, but in fact it fires a torpedo that sinks the *Bismark*, then the officer sank the *Bismark*; but if he fell against the button because a wave upset his balance, then, though the consequences are the same, we will not count him as the agent.

The accordion effect is limited to agents. If Jones intentionally swings a bat that strikes a ball that hits and breaks a window, then Jones not only struck the ball but also broke the window. But we do not say that the bat, or even its movement, broke the window, though of course the movement of the bat caused the breakage. We do indeed allow that inanimate objects cause or bring about various things – in our example, the ball did break the window. However, this is not the

accordion effect of agency, but only the ellipsis of event-causality. The ball broke the window – that is to say, its motion caused the breakage.

It seems therefore that we may take the accordion effect as a mark of agency. It is a way of inquiring whether an event is a case of agency to ask whether we can attribute its effects to a person. And on the other hand, whenever we say a person has done something where what we mention is clearly not a bodily movement, we have made him the agent not only of the mentioned event, but of some bodily movement that brought it about. In the case of bodily movements we sometimes have a brief way of mentioning a person and an event and yet of leaving open the question of whether he was the agent, as: Smith fell down.

The accordion effect is interesting because it shows that we treat the consequences of actions differently from the way in which we treat the consequences of other events. This shows that there is, after all, a fairly simple linguistic test that sometimes reveals that we take an event to be an action. But as a criterion it can hardly be counted as satisfactory: it works for some cases only, and of course it gives no clue as to what makes a primitive action an action.

At this point I abandon the search for an analysis of the concept of agency that does not appeal to intention, and turn to a related question that has come to the fore in the discussion of agent-causality and the accordion effect. The new question is what relation an agent has to those of his actions that are not primitive, those actions in describing which we go beyond mere movements of the body and dwell on the consequences, on what the agent has wrought in the world beyond his skin. Assuming that we understand agency in the case of primitive actions, how exactly are such actions related to the rest? The question I now raise may seem already to have been settled, but in fact it has not. What *is* clear is the relation between a primitive action, say moving one's finger in a certain way, and a consequence such as one's shoelaces being tied: it is the relation of event-causality. But this does not give a clear answer to the question of how the movement of the hands is related to the action of tying one's shoelaces, nor for that matter, to the question of how the action of tying one's shoelaces is related to one's shoelaces being tied. Or, to

alter the example, if Brutus killed Caesar by stabbing him, what is the relation between these two actions, the relation expressed by the "by"? No doubt it is true that Brutus killed Caesar because the stabbing resulted in Caesar's death; but we still have that third event whose relations to the others are unclear, namely the killing itself.

It is natural to assume that the action whose mention includes mention of an outcome itself somehow includes that outcome. Thus Feinberg says that a man's action may be "squeezed down to a minimum or else stretched out" by the accordion effect. "He turned the key, he opened the door, he startled Smith, he killed Smith – all of these are things we might say that Jones *did* with one identical set of bodily movements," Feinberg tells us. It is just this relation of "doing with" or "doing by" in which we are interested. Feinberg continues: "We can, if we wish, puff out an action to include an effect."¹¹ Puffing out, squeezing down, stretching out sound like operations performed on one and the same event; yet if, as seems clear, these operations change the time span of the event, then it cannot be one and the same event: on Feinberg's theory, the action of opening the door cannot be identical with the action of startling Smith. That this is Feinberg's view comes out more clearly in his distinction between simple and causally complex acts. Simple acts are those which require us to do nothing else (we have been calling these primitive actions); causally complex acts, such as opening or shutting a door, or startling, or killing someone, require us to do *something else* first, as a means.¹² Thus Feinberg says, "In order to open a door, we must first do something else which will *cause* the door to open; but to move one's finger one simply moves it – no prior causal activity is required."¹³ He also talks of "causally connected sequences of acts."

The idea that opening a door requires prior causal activity, a movement that causes the door to open, is not Feinberg's alone. He quotes J. L. Austin in the same vein: "... a single term descriptive of what he did may be made to cover either a smaller or a larger stretch of events, those excluded by the narrower description being then called 'consequences' or 'results' or 'effects' or the like of his act."¹⁴ Arthur Danto has drawn the distinction, in several articles,

between “basic acts,” such as moving a hand, and other acts that are caused by the basic acts, such as moving a stone.¹⁵

It seems to me that this conception of actions and their consequences contains several closely related but quite fundamental confusions. It is a mistake to think that when I close the door of my own free will *anyone* normally causes me to do it, even myself, or that any prior or other action of mine causes me to close the door. What my action causes is the closing of the door. So the second error is to confuse what my action of moving my hand does cause – the closing of the door – with something utterly different – my action of closing the door. And the third mistake, which is forced by the others, is to suppose that when I close the door by moving my hand, I perform two numerically distinct actions (as I would have to if one were needed to cause the other). In the rest of this paper I develop these points.¹⁶

There is more than a hint of conflict between two incompatible ideas in Austin and Feinberg. As we noticed before, Feinberg shows some inclination to treat moving one’s hand and opening the door (and startling Smith, etc.) as one and the same action, which is somehow stretched out or contracted; but he also says things that seem to contradict this, especially when he claims that one must first do something else to cause the door to open in order to open the door. The same strain is noticeable in Austin’s pronouncement, for he speaks of different terms descriptive of *what the man did* – apparently one and the same thing – but the terms “cover” smaller or larger stretches of events. Events that cover different stretches cannot be identical.¹⁷

There are, I think, insuperable difficulties that stand in the way of considering these various actions, the primitive actions like moving a hand, and the actions in describing which we refer to the consequences, as numerically distinct.

It is evident that the relation between the queen’s moving her hand in such a way as to pour poison in the king’s ear, and her killing him, cannot be the relation of event-causality. If it were, we would have to say the queen caused herself to kill the king. This is not the same as saying the queen brought it about, or made it the case, that she killed the king; these locutions, while strained, do not seem clearly wrong, for it is not

clear that they mean anything more than that the queen brought herself to kill the king. But then the locutions cannot be causal in the required sense. For suppose that by moving her hand the queen caused herself to kill the king. Then we could ask how she did this causing. The only answer I can imagine is that she did it by moving her hand in that way. But this movement was by itself enough to cause the death of the king – there was no point to a further action on the part of the queen. Nor is there any reason (unless we add to the story in an irrelevant way) why the queen should have wanted to cause herself to kill the king. What she wanted to do was kill the king – that is, do something that would cause his death. Is it not absurd to suppose that, after the queen has moved her hand in such a way as to cause the king’s death, any deed remains for her to do or to complete? She has done her work; it only remains for the poison to do its.

It will not help to think of killing as an action that begins when the movement of the hand takes place but ends later. For once again, when we inquire into the relation between these events, the answer must be that the killing consists of the hand movement and one of its consequences. We can put them together this way because the movement of the hand caused the death. But then, in moving her hand, the queen was doing something that caused the death of the king. These are two descriptions of the same event – the queen moved her hand in that way; she did something that caused the death of the king. (Or to put it, as I would rather, in terms of a definite description: The moving of her hand by the queen on that occasion was identical with her doing something that caused the death of the king.) Doing something that causes a death is identical with causing a death. But there is no distinction to be made between causing the death of a person and killing him.¹⁸ It follows that what we thought was a more attenuated event – the killing – took no more time, and did not differ from, the movement of the hand.

The idea that under the assumed circumstances killing a person differs from moving one’s hand in a certain way springs from a confusion between a feature of the description of an event and a feature of the event itself. The mistake consists in thinking that when the description of an event is made to include reference to a consequence, then the consequence

itself is included in the described event. The accordion, which remains the same through the squeezing and stretching, is the action; the changes are in aspects described, or descriptions of the event. There are, in fact, a great many tunes we can play on the accordion. We could start with “The queen moved her hand” and pull to the right by adding “thus causing the vial to empty into the king’s ear”; and now another tug, “thus causing the poison to enter the body of the king”; and finally (if we have had enough – for the possibilities for expansion are without clear limit), “thus causing the king to die.” This expression can be shortened in many ways, into the centre, the left, or the right components, or any combination. For some examples: “The queen moved her hand thus causing the death of the king” (the two ends); or, “The queen killed the king” (collapse to the right); or “The queen emptied the vial into the king’s ear” (the centre). There is another way to pull the instrument out, too: we could *start* with “The queen killed the king,” adding “by pouring poison in his ear,” and so on – addition to the left. Many of these expressions are equivalent: for example, “The queen killed the king by pouring poison in his ear” and “The queen poured poison in the king’s ear thus causing his death.” And obviously the longer descriptions entail many of the shorter ones.

But this welter of related descriptions corresponds to a single descriptum – this is the conclusion on which our considerations all converge.¹⁹ When we infer that he stopped his car from the fact that by pressing a pedal a man caused his automobile to come to a stop, we do not transfer agency from one event to another, or infer that the man was agent not only of one action but of two. We may indeed extend responsibility or liability for an action to responsibility or liability for its consequences, but this we do, not by saddling the agent with a new action, but by pointing out that his original action had those results.

We must conclude, perhaps with a shock of surprise, that our primitive actions, the ones we do not do by doing something else, mere movements of the body – these are all the actions there are. We never do more than move our bodies: the rest is up to nature.

This doctrine, while not quite as bad as the bad old doctrine that all we ever do is will things to happen,

or set ourselves to act, may seem to share some of the same disadvantages. Let me briefly indicate why I do not think that this is so.

First, it will be said that some actions require that we do others in order to bring them off, and so cannot be primitive: for example, before I can hit the bull’s eye, I must load and raise my gun, then aim and pull the trigger. Of course I do not deny we must prepare the way for some actions by performing others. The criticism holds only if this shows some actions are not primitive. In the present example, the challenge is to demonstrate that hitting the bull’s eye is a primitive action. And this it is, according to the argument I have given; for hitting the bull’s eye is no more than doing something that causes the bull’s eye to be hit, and this, given the right conditions, including a weapon, I can do by holding my arms in a certain position and moving my trigger finger.

Second, it is often said that primitive actions are distinguished by the fact that we know, perhaps without need of observation or evidence, that we are performing them, while this is not a feature of such further events as hitting a bull’s eye. But of course we can know that a certain event is taking place when it is described in one way and not know that it is taking place when described in another. Even when we are doing something intentionally, we may not know that we are doing it; this is even more obviously true of actions when described in terms of their unintended begettings.

Finally, it may seem a difficulty that primitive actions do not accommodate the concept of trying, for primitive actions are ones we just do – nothing can stand in the way, so to speak. But surely, the critic will say, there are some things we must strive to do (like hit the bull’s eye). Once more the same sort of answer serves. Trying to do one thing may be simply doing another. I try to turn on the light by flicking the switch, but I simply flick the switch. Or perhaps even that is, on occasion, an attempt. Still, the attempt consists of something I can do without trying; just move my hand, perhaps.

The same fact underlies the last two answers: being attempted and being known to occur are not characteristics of events, but of events as described or conceived in one way or another. It is this fact too that explains why we may be limited, in our actions,

to mere movements of our bodies, and yet may be capable, for better or for worse, of building dams, stemming floods, murdering one another, or, from time to time, hitting the bull's eye.

We may now return to the question of the relation between an agent and his action. The negative result we have reached is this: the notion of cause has nothing directly to do with this relation. Knowledge that an action *a* has a certain upshot allows us to describe the agent as the cause of that upshot, but this is merely a convenient way of re-describing *a*, and of *it*, as we have seen, there is no point in saying that he is the cause. Causality allows us to re-describe actions in ways we cannot re-describe other events; this fact is a mark of actions, but yields no analysis of agency.

To say that all actions are primitive actions is merely to acknowledge, perhaps in a misleading way, the fact that the concept of being primitive, like the concept of being intentional, is intensional, and so

cannot mark out a *class* of actions. If an event is an action, then under some description(s) it is primitive, and under some description(s) it is intentional. This explains why we were frustrated in the attempt to assume a basic concept of agency as applied to primitive actions and extend it to further actions defined in terms of the consequences of primitive actions: the attempt fails because there are no further actions, only further descriptions.

The collapse of all actions into the primitive, which is marked in syntax by the accordion effect, leads to a vast simplification of the problem of agency, for it shows that there is a relation between a person and an event, when it is his action, that is independent of how the terms of the relation are described. On the other hand, we have discovered no analysis of this relation that does not appeal to the concept of intention. Whether intention can be understood in terms of more basic or simpler ideas is a question with which I have not tried to cope in this paper.

Notes

1. See J. L. Austin, "A Plea for Excuses," in *Philosophical Papers* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1961), pp. 126–127.
2. The point is developed in Irving Thalberg's "Verbs, Deeds and What Happens to Us," *Theoria*, 33 (1967), 259–260.
3. This threefold division should not be confused with Austin's subtle work on the differences among purpose, intention, and deliberation in "Three Ways of Spilling Ink," *Philosophical Review*, 75 (1966), 427–440.
4. For an attempt at such a theory, see my "On Saying That," *Synthese*, 19 (1968–69), 130–146.
5. In "Actions, Reasons, and Causes," reprinted in this volume as Chapter 19, I developed the theme that to give a reason or intention with which an action is performed is, among other things, to describe the action in terms of a cause. In this essay I explore how the effects of actions enter into our descriptions of them.
6. For example, Roderick Chisholm, "Freedom and Action," in *Freedom and Determinism*, edited by Keith Lehrer (New York: Random House, 1966); Daniel Bennett, "Action, Reason and Purpose," *The Journal of Philosophy*, 62 (1965), 85–96; Anthony Kenny, *Action, Emotion and Will* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963); Georg Henrick von Wright, *Norm and Action* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963); Richard Taylor, *Action and Purpose* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966). Previous criticism of this kind of causal analysis of agency can be found in my "The Logical Form of Action Sentences," in *The Logic of Decision and Action*, edited by Nicholas Rescher (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1967) and Irving Thalberg, "Do We Cause our Own Actions?" *Analysis*, 27 (1967), 196–201.
7. Here, and in what follows, I assume that we have set aside an analysis of agency that begins by analyzing the concept of intention, or of acting with an intention, or of a reason in acting. These concepts can be analyzed, at least in part, in terms of event-causality. In the article mentioned in footnote 5, I try to show that although beliefs and desires (and similar mental states) are not events, we can properly say that they are causes of intentional actions, and when we say this we draw upon the concept of ordinary event-causality ("Actions, Reasons, and Causes," pages 183, 192).
8. Chisholm, "Freedom and Action."
9. Joel Feinberg, "Action and Responsibility," in *Philosophy in America*, edited by Max Black (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1965).

10. The formulation in this sentence is more accurate than some of my examples. Suppose Jones intentionally causes Smith intentionally to shoot Clifford to death. We certainly won't conclude that Jones shot Clifford, and we may or may not say that Jones killed Clifford. Still, my formulation is correct provided we can go from "Jones's action caused Clifford's death" to "Jones caused Clifford's death." There will, of course, be a conflict if we deny that both Jones and Smith (in our story) could be said to have caused Clifford's death, and at the same time affirm the transitivity of causality. We could, however, preserve the formula in the face of a denial that under the circumstances Jones could be said to have caused Clifford's death by saying that under the circumstances the transitivity of causality also breaks down. For further discussion of the issue, see H. L. A. Hart and A. M. Honoré, *Causation in the Law* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1959); Joel Feinberg, "Causing Voluntary Actions," in *Metaphysics and Explanation*, edited by W. H. Capitan and D. D. Merrill (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1965); and J. E. Atwell, "The Accordion-Effect Thesis," *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 19 (1969), 337–342.
11. Feinberg, "Action and Responsibility," p. 146. I am concerned with an issue that is not central in Feinberg's excellent paper. Even if my *caveats* are justified, his thesis is not seriously affected.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 145.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 147.
14. Austin, "A Plea for Excuses," p. 145.
15. Arthur Danto, "What We Can Do," *Journal of Philosophy*, 60 (1963), 435–445; "Basic Actions," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 2 (1965), 141–148; "Freedom and Forbearance," in *Freedom and Determinism*. Chisholm endorses the distinction in "Freedom and Action," p. 39.
16. Danto's view that if I close the door by moving my hand, my action of closing the door is caused by my moving my hand, has been ably criticized by Myles Brand, "Danto on Basic Actions," *Noûs*, 2 (1968), 187–190; Frederick Stoutland, "Basic Actions and Causality," *Journal of Philosophy*, 65 (1968), 467–475; Wilfrid Sellars, "Metaphysics and the Concept of a Person," in *The Logical Way of Doing Things*, edited by Karel Lambert (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969).
- My target is more general: I want to oppose any view that implies that if I do *A* by doing *B* then my doing *A* and my doing *B* must be numerically distinct.
17. There is further discussion of these issues in my "The Individuation of Events," in *Essays in Honor of Carl G. Hempel*, edited by Nicholas Rescher *et al.* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1970).
18. See footnote 10. The argument goes through if the claim of this sentence is weakened by adding "in the case where a person is killed by doing something that causes his death."
19. This conclusion is not new. It was clearly stated by G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1959), §§23–26. I followed suit in "Actions, Reasons, and Causes."

Shooting, Killing and Dying

Jonathan Bennett

I

There was a duel at dawn between A and B. A shot B, who lingered on until dusk of that day, and then died of his bullet-wound. Certain background conditions are satisfied (it doesn't matter now what they are) which make it right to say not just that A caused B's death but that he killed him. So, A shot B and killed him. This seems to be structurally different from "A shot B and he kicked him," but what is this structural difference? How does the shooting relate to the killing?

Conflicting answers to this question are plausible.

On the one hand, at noon on the fatal day B is still alive; so he has not yet been killed; but he has already been shot; and so his being shot is distinct from his being killed, and therefore A's shooting of him is distinct from his killing of him.

On the other hand, it seems wrong to say that A performed two distinct actions with regard to B – shooting him and killing him. If A dropped dead (with a bullet from B's pistol in his heart) just as his bullet entered B's body, it would be clearly wrong to say that later in the day A *did* anything to B; and yet we could still argue that by noon B has not yet been killed although by dusk he has been.

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There is a small tangle here. In the fine presentation of the problem by Judith Jarvis Thomson, all the materials for a definitive solution are presented.¹ Indeed, Mrs. Thomson actually states the view which, I shall argue, solves the problem; but unfortunately she introduces it with the operator "It would be merely fanciful to say that ...".² I shall argue that it is not fanciful at all.

The solution I shall defend is as follows. A performed only one action with regard to B; at dawn, when it was performed, the action was a shooting; and it became a killing at dusk, when B died.

Mrs. Thomson is surely right in saying that there is no short, fully satisfactory answer to the question "Precisely when on the fatal day did A kill B?"³ The answer "At dawn" suggests that B died at dawn; the answer "At dusk" suggests that A did something at dusk; and no other short answer is even a starter. But that does not imply that our notion of the time of a killing is rendered loose or hazy by the time-lag between the initial action and the resulting death. Nor do I infer – as Mrs. Thomson seems to – that in answering the above question we must present the facts in terms of movements and causes, not using "kill" or any of its cognates. We may answer in that way, but we do not have to. For we can instead say: "A performed at dawn an action which at dusk became the killing of B."

Of the proffered short answers to the question "When on the fatal day did A kill B?," the better one is "At dawn"; but it is not fully satisfactory because it

can be taken to mean that at dawn A performed an action which was *then* a killing of B. To the slightly different question “When on the fatal day did the killing of B occur?”, the answer “At dawn” might be less misleading and could be absolutely correct. It may be that the questioner knows that there was an action which has come, by the time of his asking the question, to qualify as a killing of B; he has the action in his ontology under that description; and he is asking when *that action* occurred. In that case, the right answer is “At dawn.” Of course, if one thinks that the questioner may not know that B took hours to die, and one wishes to guard him against error about this, further explanation may be needed. I don’t contend that the answer “At dawn” could not mislead; only that it might not mislead and would sometimes be correct.

What was the situation at noon? Well, B was alive, and so he had not yet been killed. But it does not follow that the killing of B had not yet occurred. In fact, the action in question – the one we refer to as “the killing of B” – had occurred, but was not yet a killing. This mops up both difficulties: on the one hand, at noon B was still alive; on the other, at noon nothing remained to be *done*.

II

On this theory, the action acquires a new characteristic long after it has been completed. I distinguish (a) an action’s *immediate* characteristics, which it has at the time when it occurs, from (b) its *delayed* characteristics, which it acquires at some later time.

One might wonder how an action or event could have delayed characteristics. Once it has occurred or been performed, it is all over and done with; it no longer exists, is no longer part of the world’s furniture; and so – one might think – it is too late now for there to be any change in its characteristics. But that argument would be clearly wrong, as can be seen by noticing how *objects* can acquire characteristics after they have ceased to exist – as when a man becomes notorious after his death. This is possible because notoriety is a relational characteristic, which an object can acquire purely through alterations in other things (people). Similarly, to call an action a “killing of B” is

to say, in part, that it causes B’s dying; this is a relational property of it, which it may acquire long after the action has been performed and in that sense after it has ceased to exist.

Furthermore, there are some uncontroversial examples of events having delayed characteristics. The composer of *Parsifal* was born in 1813; so in 1813 someone gave birth to the composer of *Parsifal*; but that act of giving-birth did not merit that description until about 1880 when *Parsifal* was composed. We know about the event, and know that it did eventually qualify as the birth of the composer of *Parsifal*, and so we can properly refer to it through that description. But it didn’t merit that description when it occurred; and this could be made explicit if the need arose.

III

Sometimes we have a description D of a particular event E, attributing to E certain characteristics of which some were immediate and some delayed. (Any characteristic’s status as “delayed” may result from D’s meaning, or be a matter of fact about E, or be borderline between those two. It doesn’t matter.) If D does not explicitly separate the immediate from the delayed amongst the characteristics it attributes to E, we can replace it by a description D* which does explicitly make this separation. In doing this, I shall say, we *split* the description D.

So D* must attribute to E exactly the characteristics attributed to it by D. If the two descriptions differ in logical force, it is because D* implies of some attribute of E that it was delayed, while D merely implies that E did have that attribute at some time. And the two may have exactly the same logical force, differing only in that D *implies* whereas D* *explicitly states* that a certain characteristic of E was a delayed one.

There is sometimes a certain indeterminacy in the notion of “the time when the event occurred”; and even when something clearly is a delayed characteristic of an event, the delay may be so brief as not to merit attention in any normal context. But I am merely explaining how to perform a split in cases where there are delayed characteristics and one *does* want to say explicitly what they are.

IV

Here is a simple example. At a certain time, Smith was (D) *submitting the winning entry* in the poetry competition. If the competition was not corrupt, we can split this by saying that Smith was (D*) *submitting the entry which later became winning*; and this can be modified to yield the more idiomatic "... which later became the winning one" or "... which later won the competition." In this example the split goes especially smoothly, because D has the form "Verbing the Adjective Noun," with the adjective expressing all and only the delayed characteristics; so that the split can be performed simply by substituting (D*) "Verbing the Noun which later became Adjective," and then rewording slightly to keep it colloquial.

Splits can be more complicated than that. For example, (D) "giving birth to the composer of *Parsifal*" splits into (D*) "giving birth to the child who [or: something which] later became the composer of *Parsifal*." Here, D does not contain an adjective expressing all and only the delayed characteristics of the event. Still, things are not too bad; for there is a noun phrase which expresses the delayed characteristics and no others, and so we can split (D) "Verbing the Noun-phrase" into (D*) "Verbing the Noun-phrase* which later became Noun-phrase," leaving the verb untouched. We shall come to still trickier cases in a moment.

In both those examples, an event acquires a characteristic because it involves an enduring object (a poem, a person) which acquires a characteristic. This is not the only way it can happen, however. For example, (D) *uttering a famous insult* will ordinarily be (D*) *uttering an insult which later becomes famous*. In such a case, what becomes famous is not an object (the sentence) but rather an action (the insulting, the uttering of the sentence in certain circumstances). Incidentally, I see no significance, for present purposes, in the fact that that example involves an indefinite rather than the definite article.

V

I am now placed to slide quickly from my examples back to my main topic. A *famous insult* is relevantly like a *fatal shooting* which in turn is relevantly like a *killing*.

Just as an insult becomes famous through becoming widely known and talked about, so a shooting can become fatal through a death's arising from it; and so someone's performing (D) *a fatal shooting* can be his performing (D*) *a shooting which later became fatal*. This may sound slightly odd or strained; but I contend that there is no error in it, and that it shows how the occurrence at dawn of a fatal shooting can involve the world at dusk as well as at dawn.

Now consider the description "a killing," as applied to the case described at the start of this paper. Here the split is even less mechanical and straightforward, because the elements we want to separate – the immediate part pertaining to dawn and the delayed part which became true of the action only at dusk – are embedded in the single word "kill." But here again the split can be made accurately and helpfully, even if with some violence to colloquial naturalness.

It won't do to replace (D) *a killing* by (D*) *a killing of someone who later died*. That, among other defects, does not give a clean split – it masks the fact that "kill" itself pertains to dusk as well as to dawn. We could replace D by (D*) *a shooting of someone who later died*. That splits cleanly and in the right place, and it fits the facts of the case as presented. But it does so by eliminating "kill" and its cognates entirely, whereas we want to make the split while keeping "kill" at work. Also, although in our example A did kill B by shooting him, we are trying to devise a split of (D) *a killing*, not of the more specific *a killing by shooting*. It must be remembered that D* is to attribute to the event only characteristics which D attributes to it, differing at most in what it implies about *when* certain characteristics came to apply to the event. So we cannot allow a D* which implies that B was shot, when D does not imply this.

The right way to split (D) *a killing*, as applied to our original case, is to replace it by (D*) *an action which later became a killing*.

This is not fanciful. It is perhaps a little strained; but I have tried to show that this is a kind of strain which is present in lesser degree in other, less controversial cases of splitting. The aim of the examples is to create a presumption that the unnaturalness of "an action which later became a killing" results from superficial and accidental features of our language, and that it is not evidence that that splitting of "a killing" is incorrect.

We might well have had, instead of the substantive “killing,” only the noun-phrase “killing action,” this being grammatically like “fatal shooting.” Then we could, with no strain or unnaturalness, split (D) “a killing action” into (D*) “an action which later became killing.”

Davidson has argued persuasively that statements about actions and events have an underlying form expressible in quantifications over events.⁴ For example, “Brutus stabbed Caesar with a knife” is argued to have the form “ $(\exists x)(x \text{ was a stabbing} \ \& \ x \text{ was by Brutus} \ \& \ x \text{ was of Caesar} \ \& \ x \text{ was with a knife})$.” If this view is correct, as I suspect it is, then splitting becomes boringly simple in all cases. For example, $(\exists x)(x \text{ was by A} \ \& \ x \text{ was of B} \ \& \ x \text{ occurred at dawn} \ \& \ x \text{ became a killing at dusk})$.

VI

Mrs. Thomson says that the “fanciful” view here defended “would be a misleading fancy in any case, ... for while A is shooting B he is killing him.”⁵ I contend that if as A is shooting B someone says “A is killing B,” and in fact B does not die until several hours later, then what the speaker says is false. As we look back on the situation, with the aid of hindsight, we may not be struck by the falsity of the comment that as A was shooting B he was killing him, because we know that what A was doing did eventually become a killing of B. This is like our acceptance of “As the French fleet approached, Nelson was sending his famous signal,” even though we know that at that time the signal was not famous.

The briefer the delay between the shooting and the dying, the feebler will be our sense of the falsity of the comment that as A was shooting B he was killing him. If the delay is brief enough, the comment becomes not merely passable but true; for otherwise we should be trapped in a present in which nothing could happen because it had no duration. For example, by strict enough standards we can say that A’s trigger-pulling *became* a B-shooting, this being a delayed characteristic of it, and that while the bullet was in the air A had shot at B but had not yet shot him. But this delay is too short to be worth mentioning in most normal contexts, and some

delays are too short to be worth mentioning in any normal context.

As well as the brevity of the delay between shooting and dying there is a related parameter, namely the degree of inevitability, at the time of the shooting, that B will die as a result of being shot. In proportion as one is confident that B will die of being shot, one is likely to tolerate “A is killing B”; and it may be that if one is entitled to complete confidence (i.e. if it is by ordinary standards inevitable) that B will die as a result of being shot, then the comment “A is killing B” will be not just tolerable but actually true. Similarly, as Mrs. Thomson has pointed out to me, a wound can be “fatal” at the time it occurs, if it is certain to lead to the victim’s death; and the same may be true of a shooting’s being “fatal,” despite my previous implication to the contrary.

But mere inevitability-of-upshot, without brevity-of-delay, will not make it true (and to many ears will not even make it tolerable) to say that as soon as A has shot B he “has killed him.” This is because we have no firm obstacle to the move from “A has killed B” to “B has been killed” and thence to “B is dead.” There is, admittedly, a rather florid usage in which one may say something of the form “A has killed B” although one knows that B is still alive. Mrs. Thomson calls this “the ‘Hollywood’ use of language”;⁶ and I have found examples of it in a bad poem by Browning and (used in a moment of high excitement by one of the characters) in a fine chapter by Tolstoy.⁷ I agree with Mrs. Thomson that the usage in question is an extravagance: while B is alive it cannot be strictly true that anyone has killed him.

If A shoots B at 8 a.m., and B is certain to die as a result at some time between 8:02 and 8:03 a.m., then it may be literally true that as A is shooting B he is killing him. And if in this case we ask about the situation at 8:01 a.m. we have the sort of difficulty to which Mrs. Thomson has called attention: we want to say both that A has killed B (because he was killing him and has finished) and yet that B has not yet been killed (because he is still alive). This is a situation for which we are not fully conceptually fore-armed; but, as usual when we are not fore-armed, this is because we haven’t much need to be. Just because the interval between the shooting and the dying is brief, there will usually be no occasion for seeking correct descriptions during that interval;

and only philosophers will care much, later, about the question of what description would have been correct between the shooting and the dying.

VII

I have just three more remarks to offer.

(1) Mrs. Thomson discusses the question of when the killing of B ended. I say that it ended when the shooting of him ended, whenever that was. Similarly, the (obstetrical) delivering of the composer of *Parsifal* ended whenever the delivering of young R. Wagner ended, on a day in 1813; and not, of course, in 1880.

(2) Davidson says: “Hamlet, in killing the king, avenges, among other murders, his own.”⁸ This seems right. The king did murder Hamlet, and he didn’t get away with it: vengeance was exacted, and Hamlet exacted it. But Davidson goes on: “This he could not do if he had not already been murdered.” I agree with Mrs. Thomson in being reluctant to swallow the idea that Hamlet fought a whole sword-fight after being murdered.⁹ What, then, are we to say about this case? I say that Hamlet avenged several actions by the king, including one which was already an attempted murder

and which would later become a murder of Hamlet. So the action was available as a possible object of vengeance, and yet Hamlet had not yet been murdered and so could be the avenger. If we must pin it down very hard, then at the time of Hamlet’s stabbing the king, Hamlet’s murder had occurred but Hamlet had not yet been murdered; but of course this sounds most peculiar, and it would be absurd to offer it without an accompanying explanation – namely that an action had occurred which would later become the murder of Hamlet.

(3) Legal procedures confirm my account. A shoots B and is charged with assault; then B dies and the charge is altered to one of homicide. This is because what A did has become homicide. There is a law against a certain class of actions which is partly defined by the relational property of causing-a-death; and A’s action, although completed before even the first charge was laid, has acquired that relational property and thus come to fall under that law. The fundamental logic of this is the same as in a case where I am charged first with keeping an animal which is a nuisance, and then – under a different law – with keeping a dangerous animal, because my dog’s character has deteriorated: it was a nuisance but has become a danger. Similarly, what A did was an assault, and has become a killing.

Notes

1. Judith Jarvis Thomson, “The Time of a Killing,” *The Journal of Philosophy*, LXVIII, 5 (March 1971): 115–132. I have been helped by Mrs. Thomson’s comments on an earlier version of the present paper.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 132.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 122–123.
4. Donald Davidson, “The Logical Form of Action Sentences,” in N. Rescher (ed.), *The Logic of Decision and Action* (Pittsburgh, 1967); and several other papers. [Added in 1990: I no longer find that work of Davidson’s

“persuasive”. It is refuted in Jonathan Bennett, *Events and their Names* (Indianapolis, 1988), chapter 11.]

5. Judith Jarvis Thomson, *op. cit.*, p. 132.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 120.
7. R. Browning, “Incident of the French Camp,” last stanza. L. Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, Book IV, chapter 5.
8. Donald Davidson, “The Individuation of Events,” in N. Rescher *et al.* (eds.), *Essays in Honor of Carl G. Hempel* (New York, 1970), note 16.
9. Judith Jarvis Thomson, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

The Problem of Action

Harry G. Frankfurt

I

THE problem of action is to explicate the contrast between what an agent does and what merely happens to him, or between the bodily movements that he makes and those that occur without his making them. According to causal theories of the nature of action, which currently represent the most widely followed approach to the understanding of this contrast, the essential difference between events of the two types is to be found in their prior causal histories: a bodily movement is an action if and only if it results from antecedents of a certain kind. Different versions of the causal approach may provide differing accounts of the sorts of events or states which must figure causally in the production of actions. The tenet they characteristically share is that it is both necessary and sufficient, in order to determine whether an event is an action, to consider how it was brought about.

Despite its popularity, I believe that the causal approach is inherently implausible and that it cannot provide a satisfactory analysis of the nature of action. I do not mean to suggest that actions have no causes; they are as likely to have causes, I suppose, as other events are. My claim is rather that it is no part of the nature of an action to have a prior causal history of any particular kind. From the fact that an event is an

action, in my view, it does not follow even that it has a cause or causes at all, much less that it has causal antecedents of any specific type.

In asserting that the essential difference between actions and mere happenings lies in their prior causal histories, causal theories imply that actions and mere happenings do not differ essentially in themselves at all. These theories hold that the causal sequences producing actions are necessarily of a different type than those producing mere happenings, but that the effects produced by sequences of the two types are inherently indistinguishable. They are therefore committed to supposing that a person who knows he is in the midst of performing an action cannot have derived this knowledge from any awareness of what is currently happening, but that he must have derived it instead from his understanding of how what is happening was caused to happen by certain earlier conditions. It is integral to the causal approach to regard actions and mere happenings as being differentiated by nothing that exists or that is going on at the time those events occur, but by something quite extrinsic to them – a difference at an earlier time among another set of events entirely.

This is what makes causal theories implausible. They direct attention exclusively away from the events whose natures are at issue, and away from the times at which they occur. The result is that it is beyond their scope to stipulate that a person must be in some particular relation to the movements of his

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