PHILOSOPHY OF ACTION

AN ANTHOLOGY

EDITED BY JONATHAN DANCY AND CONSTANTINE SANDIS

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Philosophy of Action

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

Contents

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.

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1

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).

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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 handing 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).

A different strategy is to distinguish between the *cause* of the sheriff's death, namely the shooting, from the logically related (yet distinct) *causing* of his death, namely the killing. While it is arguably acceptable to conceive of both these things as 'events' of people acting, it would be problematic to think of the causing of an event as something which could itself be brought about. Finally, it has been argued (e.g. by Dretske 1988) that while causings can be located in time and space, we cannot always do so in a fine-grained manner. To *insist* on a more precise temporal location is as silly as insisting that the killing must have also had a spatial location which is smaller than, say, that of a tin of soup. If Marley shot the sheriff in March 1973 (before recording his song about it in April 1973), and if the sheriff (unlike the deputy) did not die until November 1973 (after the hit record was released), then we can truthfully (and informatively) say that Marley killed the sheriff in 1973, though we cannot be any more specific than that. Finally, the temporal location of any given event at a certain time does not imply that it must have been occurring continuously throughout that period (consider chess matches, for example).

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2

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.

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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, *intensional*, 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 hackwards," 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,