

# Agents and their Actions

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In the past thirty years or so, the doctrine that actions are events has become an essential, and sometimes unargued, part of the received view in the philosophy of action, despite the efforts of a few philosophers to undermine the consensus.<sup>1</sup> For example, the entry for *Agency* in a recently published reference guide to the philosophy of mind begins with the following sentence:

A central task in the philosophy of action is that of spelling out the differences between events in general and those events that fall squarely into the category of human action.<sup>2</sup>

There is no consensus about what events are. But it is generally agreed that, whatever events may prove to be, actions are a species or a class of events.

We believe that the received view is mistaken: actions are not events. We concede that for most purposes, the kind of categorial refinement which is involved in either affirming or denying that actions are events is frankly otiose. Our common idiom does not stress the difference between actions and events, at least not in general terms, because it has no need to. Perhaps it sounds a little odd to say that some events are performed; but if we balked at describing, say, the abdication of Edward VIII as one of the politically significant events in Britain in 1936, it could not be for metaphysical reasons. And since actions, like events, are datable—though often, as we shall see, only imprecisely—actions are said to take place and to occur. But an important class of actions consist in moving something; indeed, according to many philosophers, every action consists in moving something. And when we consider

<sup>1</sup> The dissenting voices include G. H. von Wright, *Norm and Action* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963); K. Bach, 'Actions are not events', *Mind* 89 (1980); R. Stoecker, 'Reasons, Actions and their Relationship', in Stoecker (ed.), *Reflecting Davidson* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> S. Guttenplan (ed.), *A Companion to the Philosophy of Mind* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1994), 121. Cf. J. Kim and E. Sosa (eds), *A Companion to Metaphysics* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1995), 3.

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actions of this sort from a theoretical point of view it becomes imperative to distinguish between actions and events. Or so we shall argue.

So, in what follows, we shall defend the negative doctrine that actions are not events, criticize a number of related claims about the nature of agency and actions, and make some positive proposals of our own. Several of the points we shall be urging are not new; but we hope that by bringing them together, and organizing them properly in relation to one another, the received view may appear in a new and less favourable light. These points include the following: that agents do not cause their actions; that saying that an agent caused an event is not an elliptical way of saying that one event caused another; that if an agent  $\phi$ s by  $\psi$ ing, his  $\phi$ ing and his  $\psi$ ing are not typically one and the same action; that failing to  $\phi$  and refraining from  $\psi$ ing may be intentional, but are not actions; that some human actions are not intentional, regardless of how they are described; that there are inanimate agents; and that actions are not events. Most of these points, perhaps all of them, have been defended at one time or another; but there has been no attempt, so far as we are aware, to combine them in a single and coherent conception of agency. We hope to adumbrate such a conception, as well as undermining the received view; although we cannot pretend that we have painted it in exhaustive detail.

We shall begin, in section 1, by introducing the concept of agent causation. We shall argue that the concept of agency involves the notion of an agent's causing an event. But we shall examine and reject a view traditionally associated with the concept of agent causation, namely, that agents cause their *actions*; in our view, agents cause the *results* of their actions. In sections 2 and 3, we shall examine various considerations which have been thought to support the doctrine that actions in general and bodily movements in particular are events. In sections 4, 5 and 6, we shall say what we think actions are, and something about the significance that our view has for some other issues in the philosophy of action. Section 7 is concerned with inanimate agency.

Two doctrines which we do not seek to defend can be noted at this early stage. One is the doctrine that the concept of agent causation is in some sense more fundamental than the concept of event causation. The other is the doctrine that when the verb 'cause' appears between a term for an agent and a term for an event, it has a different meaning from the meaning it has when it appears between two expressions which denote events. The first doctrine, as it stands, is too vague for serious consideration, and we shall not attempt to sharpen it. Regarding the second, we believe that 'cause'

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expresses the same idea in both cases—as Anscombe put it, the idea of ‘derivativeness’.<sup>3</sup>

### 1. Agent causation

Without prejudice to the results of philosophical analysis, we can describe an agent as something or someone that makes things happen. And we can add that to make something happen is to cause an event of some kind, that is, to exercise the power to cause an event of that kind to occur. Our pre-theoretical talk of agency extends to animals and plants, and also to inanimate things. We say, for example, that beavers build dams, or that oxygen rusts iron. Indeed, inanimate substances are often described as agents of one sort or another: cleaning agents, analgesic agents, etc. The pre-theoretical view of what it is to be an agent that this sort of talk implies acknowledges that inanimate substances and living creatures incapable of acting voluntarily or intentionally can be agents. But it is common nowadays to find that philosophical discussions of agency are conducted on the assumption that it is only when an agent acts intentionally that we have a genuine instance of agency. An action by an inanimate agent is, according to this view, an *ersatz* action with an *ersatz* agent.

The view that genuine agency is invariably intentional has given rise to a variety of proposals for ‘spelling out the differences between events in general [and actions in particular]’. But the deepest division among philosophers on this matter is between those who claim that genuine agency can be understood in terms of causal relations between *events*, and those others—so-called agent causalists—who deny this. Philosophers who belong in the former category may, for example, hold that actions are movements of parts of the agent’s body which were caused in a particular way by events involving the agent’s intentions, beliefs and desires. Whereas the agent causalists will tend to argue that if an agent freely or intentionally caused an event, we cannot ‘reduce it to the case of an event being a cause’;<sup>4</sup> and hence, that the correct account of our concept

<sup>3</sup> G. E. M. Anscombe, ‘Causality and Determination’, repr. in Anscombe, *Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Mind* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981), 136. Since our concern is with the question of whether actions are events, we shall also ignore the question of whether states, states of affairs or facts are causes.

<sup>4</sup> D. Davidson, ‘The Logical Form of Action Sentences: Criticism, Comment and Defence’, in Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford University Press, 1980), 128.

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of agency is one which preserves for the *agent* the rôle of an action's cause. So on the one hand we have the view, roughly, that actions are events caused by intentions; and on the other the view, roughly, that they are events intentionally caused by agents.

Ironically, the attempts made by agent causalists to preserve a concept of agent causation which cannot be dissolved by analysis have generally involved a controversial doctrine which has contributed to making the very concept of agent causation appear unsound, namely, the doctrine that agents cause their actions. Richard Taylor puts it thus: 'for anything to count as an act there must be an essential reference to an agent as the cause of that act.'<sup>5</sup> Chisholm's view is more complex; but it is founded on the same idea.<sup>6</sup> We shall argue that the concept of agent causation, although widely disparaged, can be rehabilitated, by detaching it from the doctrines that agents cause their actions and that actions are events.

The traditional conception of agent causation is founded on the idea that actions are events caused by agents. But this idea is now widely thought to be untenable, and with good reason. For if an action is an event caused by an agent, then the question can be posed, whether causing *this* event is itself an action or not. If it is, then *ex hypothesi* it is an event caused by the agent, and we can ask again, whether causing this event is an action or not. If, as the question is repeatedly reiterated, the answer at every step is that the causing is an action, then an agent who performs one action performs an infinite series of actions: he causes his action; he causes the causing of his action; he causes the causing of the causing of his action; as so on. But this is absurd. On the other hand, if a causing of an event need not be an action, what principle can an advocate of the traditional conception of agent causation invoke, to distinguish between those causings of events which are actions and those which are not? Not the principle that a causing is not an action unless it is intentional, or free, or voluntary, since this does not halt the regress. For if the causing of an event was not intentional, then the event caused was not caused intentionally; but if actions are events caused by agents, then an intentional action is surely one that was intentionally caused. Hence, if an event was an action, and therefore *ex*

<sup>5</sup> R. Taylor, *Action and Purpose* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1966), 115. Cf. T. Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of Man* (Edinburgh: John Bell, 1788), I.v.50: 'the notion of efficiency .... is a relation between the cause and the effect, similar to that which is between us and our voluntary actions.'

<sup>6</sup> R. M. Chisholm, *Person and Object* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1976); Chisholm, 'The Agent as Cause', in M. Brand and D. Walton (eds), *Action Theory* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1976).

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*hypothesi* intentional, its causing must also have been intentional, and therefore *ex hypothesi* an action; and the regress is not avoided. But no other principle recommends itself, or has been recommended. It is therefore safe to conclude—at least *pro tem.*—that the doctrine that actions are events caused by agents is false.<sup>7</sup> An agent who acts causes an event; but actions are not events that agents cause.

The doctrine that actions are events caused by agents may appear especially convincing if we consider those actions which consist in moving parts of our bodies. It is clear that many actions are bodily movements. For example, A may raise his arms, wiggle his toes or flutter his eyelids; and if he does any of these things, he has performed an action. But it is equally clear that not every bodily movement is an action, because A's toes may wiggle without A wiggling them and his eyelids may flutter because he has a tic. Hence, to say that A moved part of his body, implies more than just that part of A's body moved; for it implies that A made it move, that A caused that bodily movement to occur. And hence—one may want to argue—what distinguishes those of A's bodily movements which are his actions from those which are not, is that he causes the first sort, but not the second. But if A causes the bodily movements which are his actions, it follows that he causes his actions.

So one might think. But as several philosophers have shown, arguments involving the term 'bodily movement' sometimes involve a fallacy of equivocation, because they disregard an ambiguity which affects the use of the term 'bodily movement' (or 'bodily motion', as some authors prefer).<sup>8</sup> The root of the ambiguity lies in the verb 'move', which has a transitive and an intransitive form.<sup>9</sup> Thus, in 'A moved B' it occurs transitively (e.g. 'The curate moved the lectern', 'The Commissioners moved the boundary', etc.); whereas in 'B moved' it almost always occurs intransitively ('The lectern moved', 'The boundary moved', etc.). Consequently, the phrase 'a movement of B' may either signify an action which consisted in making B move, in which case it will correspond to the transitive form of the verb; or it may signify B's moving, and correspond to the intransitive form.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. D. Davidson, 'Agency', repr. in *Essays on Actions and Events*, 52; Davidson, 'Problems in the Explanation of Action', in P. Pettit, R. Silvan and J. Norman (eds), *Metaphysics and Morality: Essays in honour of J. J. C. Smart* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 36; J. Hornsby, *Actions* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 101.

<sup>8</sup> Bach, *op. cit.*, 114–5; Hornsby, *Actions*, ch. 1; D. W. D. Owen, 'Actions and Bodily Movements: Another Move', *Analysis* 40 (1980), 33.

<sup>9</sup> The transitive verb (or form of the verb) 'move' is what grammarians call a causative, because 'A moved B' implies 'A caused B to move', where 'move' is the corresponding intransitive verb (or form). See Parsons, *op. cit.*, ch. 6.

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For example, 'a movement of B's finger' may signify an action which consisted in moving B's finger, or it may signify the result of such an action, that is, B's finger's moving. But if these two uses of such a phrase are not carefully distinguished, it is easy to arrive at the conclusion that agents cause their actions. For if A moves his finger, then he does indeed cause *a movement of his finger*; and his action certainly is *a movement of his finger*, and it is therefore easy to conclude that he causes his action. But if we bear the distinction in mind, it is evident that this argument is fallacious; for the movement of A's finger which he causes is not his action, since it does not correspond to the transitive form of the verb 'move': it is the result of his action, which corresponds to its intransitive form.<sup>10</sup> (We shall return to this subject in section 3.)

Does it follow that the concept of agent causation is unsustainable? We do not think so. What appears to be unsustainable is the doctrine that actions are events caused by agents. But it is possible to detach the concept of agent causation from this doctrine, for the claim that there is a defensible conception of agent causation implies only that an action is a causing of an event by an agent: there is no need to suppose, in addition, that this event is the agent's action, or that an action is itself an event.<sup>11</sup> In fact, as we shall argue below (section 4), the event in question is not the agent's action, but its result. But before we begin to discuss the nature of actions in positive terms, we shall examine the view that actions are events.

### 2. Actions and events

Although the doctrine that actions are events is widely accepted, it is not evidently true, and we do not know of a convincing argument

<sup>10</sup> Taylor, *op. cit.*, 122f. commits this fallacy; and Chisholm appears to commit a similar fallacy in 'Human Freedom and the Self', repr. in G. Watson (ed.), *Free Will* (Oxford University Press, 1982), 30, as follows:

whenever a man does something A, then (by 'immanent causation') he makes a cerebral event happen, and this cerebral event (by 'transeunt causation') makes A happen.

In its first appearance 'A' seems to signify an action, for example, a movement (transitive) of a part of the man's body; whereas in its second appearance, 'A' seems to signify the action's result, for example, a movement (intransitive) of a part of the man's body.

<sup>11</sup> Bishop and O'Connor also reject the doctrine that agents cause their actions; but they retain the doctrine that actions are events. J. Bishop, 'Agent Causation', *Mind* 92 (1983), 77; T. O'Connor, 'Agent Causation', in O'Connor (ed.), *Agents, Causes and Events* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 181.

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in its favour. The reader may be inclined to believe that Davidson's influential arguments about the logical form of action sentences strongly support the doctrine that actions are events. But in fact, what these arguments show, if they are sound, is that our talk about actions implies that there are events: they do not support the doctrine that actions are events. Davidson argues that we cannot transform action sentences into logical notation without quantifying over events; but he *assumes* that the events we need quantify over are the actions that these sentences report.<sup>12</sup>

The article about the logical form of action sentences does, however, include an independent and explicit argument to the effect that actions are events. Davidson argues as follows:

If I fall down, this is an event whether I do it intentionally or not. If you thought my falling was an accident and later discovered I did it on purpose, you would not be tempted to withdraw your claim that you had witnessed an event.<sup>13</sup>

But this argument fails on two counts. First, Davidson assumes that falling is something that can be done intentionally, or on purpose; but this is false. Pretending to fall is something that *must* be intentional, and making or letting oneself fall is something that *can* be intentional; but neither of these is the same as falling. If I fall, this cannot be intentional, since it is not something I do, but something that happens to me. Hence, 'I fell intentionally' can be true only if it is elliptical for 'I made (or let) myself fall intentionally.'

Secondly, Davidson argues that unless intentional actions are events, one can witness a fall that was not an accident without witnessing an event. But again this is false. It is undeniable that if you saw me fall, then you witnessed an event, whether my falling was an accident or not. But this is entirely consistent with the view that making or letting myself fall is not an event. If I made or let myself fall then I fell; and since that is an event, you witnessed an event if you saw it happen—whether or not it transpires that I made or let it happen intentionally.<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps some philosophers would argue that actions are events on

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Davidson, 'The Logical Form of Action Sentences: Criticism, Comment and Defence', loc. cit., 147. An argument by Hornsby is open to similar objections: see Hornsby, *Actions*, 3–4 & 133–35. These matters are examined in detail in M. Alvarez, 'Actions and Events: Some Semantical Considerations', forthcoming, where it is argued that the events we need to quantify over in order to formalize action sentences are the results of actions, and not actions themselves.

<sup>13</sup> Davidson, 'The Logical Form of Action Sentences', repr. in *Essays on Actions and Events*, 113.

<sup>14</sup> See also Bach, op. cit., 115.

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the grounds that although an agent can legitimately be described as the cause—or, strictly, the causer—of an event, ‘we understand this only when we can reduce it to the case of an event being a cause’.<sup>15</sup> For if this is true, sentences like ‘John killed Jim’ and ‘Sam caused a stir’ can be rescued from obscurity only by a paraphrase which says explicitly that such and such an event caused Jim’s death or caused a stir. And since a plausible paraphrase will need to preserve the implication that John and Sam were responsible for the events they caused, ‘John’s action caused Jim’s death’ and ‘Sam’s action caused a stir’ are the most conspicuous candidates. But deeming them satisfactory carries the implication that actions are events.

We doubt whether there is any reasonable prospect of explaining the concept of agency in terms of the concept of a causal relation between events. If we are right about this, the enthusiasm for this sort of paraphrase is unfounded and frankly specious. But in any case, it does not provide any rational support for the doctrine that actions are events.<sup>16</sup> On the contrary, one would need to assume that actions are events in order to accept that ‘Sam’s action caused a stir’ is a sentence in which an event is described as a cause. Indeed, far from supporting the doctrine that actions are events, reductionism about agency is sometimes implicitly founded on the assumption that the doctrine is true. For example, when Davidson claims that the concept of causation we make use of when we say that the author or agent of an event caused it is ‘the relation, whatever it is, that holds between two events when one is the cause of the other’, he supports the claim with the following argument:

For although we say that 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.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Davidson, ‘The Logical Form of Action Sentences: Criticism, Comment and Defence’, loc. cit., 128. Davidson writes there: ‘I see no objection to saying that agents are causes’; but we prefer to circumscribe the use of the noun ‘cause’ in a manner which accords more closely with idiomatic English. Since this excludes using the noun ‘cause’ in every case of agency, we prefer the less common, but unimpeachable, ‘causer’.

<sup>16</sup> Not every philosopher who argues that the concept of causation we make use of in attributions of agency is the concept of event causation also argues that actions are events. For example, Bach (op. cit., 114) denies that actions are events but still maintains that ‘the relation essential to action is analysed in terms of relations between events’, and describes the concept of agent causation as ‘controversial’.

<sup>17</sup> Davidson, ‘Agency’, loc. cit., 49. Since agents do not do events, what an agent does is not an event. We shall assume that Davidson meant to say that an agent’s *doing* what he does is an event.



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This argument is surely very weak. First, Davidson does not explain why we should accept that saying that John killed Jim is an elliptical way of saying that some act of John's—such as putting poison in the grapefruit—caused Jim's death; or why we should not prefer the view that saying that some act of John's caused Jim's death is an elliptical way of saying that John killed Jim by doing something—such as putting poison in the grapefruit. Secondly, even if it were true that saying that John killed Jim is an elliptical way of saying that some act of John's caused Jim's death, it would not follow that it is an elliptical way of saying that one event caused another, *unless* an act of John's is an event. Hence, if we assume that actions are events, the ellipsis Davidson claims to diagnose makes it plausible that the concept we make use of when we say that John killed Jim or that Sam caused a stir is the concept of a causal relation between two events. But the assumption that actions are events needs an independent argument to support it.

The reductionist doctrine would, of course, be a legitimate one if only events can cause events; but we are not aware of an argument which shows that this is true. There is a more plausible principle which is implied by the principle that only events can cause events, but does not imply it—namely, that every event that has a cause is caused by another event. And perhaps this is true. But whether it is true or false, it does not imply that actions are events. It does imply that if an agent causes an event  $e_2$ , there is another event  $e_1$  that causes  $e_2$ ; but it does not follow that  $e_1$  is the agent's action. And nor does the weaker principle imply that if an agent is described as the causer of an event, 'we understand this only when we can reduce it to the case of an event being a cause'. 'John caused Jim's death' and 'Sam caused a stir' appear to be perfectly comprehensible, regardless of whether we can provide them with a paraphrase which says that one event caused another; and the weaker principle does not imply that this appearance is deceptive.

We mention the weaker principle because the stronger one is sometimes confused with it. For example, J. D. Velleman appears to confuse the two in the following passage:

our scientific view of the world regards all events and states of affairs as caused, and hence explained, by other events and states, or by nothing at all. And this view would seem to leave no room for agents in the explanatory order.<sup>18</sup>

Velleman does not say why he regards this as a scientific rather than a philosophical view. But in any case, if it is true that 'our scientific

<sup>18</sup> J. D. Velleman, 'What Happens when Someone Acts?', *Mind* **101** (1992), 467.

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view of the world regards all events and states of affairs as caused, and hence explained, by other events and states, or by nothing at all', it does not follow that there is 'no room for agents in the explanatory order'. As we have seen, if all events are caused by other events and states, or by nothing at all, some events may also be caused by agents. It is the view that only events can cause events which seems to leave no room for agents, and which certainly implies that any talk which makes use of the concepts of an agent or of agent causation can be deemed significant only to the extent that it can be paraphrased by talk about events and their causal relations. But if this view leaves no room for agents, then by the same token, it leaves no room for actions either. Such a view of the world would be an incomplete one; but it is not, so far as we are aware, a view that is implied by any plausible theory in the natural sciences.

### 3. Bodily movements

Although philosophers have failed to argue convincingly that actions are events, they have not failed to explain what kinds of events they believe actions to be. Many have claimed that actions, or an important class of them, are bodily movements. But as we argued above (p. 5), the term 'bodily movement' is ambiguous, since it can correspond either to the transitive or to the intransitive form of the verb 'move'. We now propose to argue, first, that the claim that bodily movements are an important class of actions is true only if the term 'bodily movement' corresponds to the transitive form of the verb; and secondly, that the term is used to refer to an event only if it corresponds to the intransitive form of the verb. For the sake of convenience, following Hornsby, we shall use the subscripts 'T' and 'I' to indicate whether a phrase should be understood as corresponding to the transitive or intransitive form of a verb. Thus, we shall argue that bodily movements<sub>I</sub> are not actions; and that bodily movements<sub>T</sub> are not events. We shall take it to be uncontroversial that bodily movements<sub>T</sub> are actions; that bodily movements<sub>I</sub> are events; that *if* bodily movements<sub>I</sub> are actions, they are the same actions as the corresponding bodily movements<sub>T</sub>; and that *if* bodily movements<sub>T</sub> are events, then either they are the same events as the corresponding bodily movements<sub>I</sub>, or their causes. For example, if A raises his arm, A's raising his arm is an action; A's arm's rising is an event; if A's arm's rising is an action, it is the same action as A's raising his arm; and if A's raising his arm is an event, then either it is the same event as A's arm's rising or its cause.

Davidson is one philosopher who claims that, in some cases, 'my

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raising my arm and my arm rising are one and the same event.<sup>19</sup> But my raising my arm is my causing my arm to rise. Hence, if my raising my arm is an event, it is the same event as my causing my arm to rise. And hence, if my raising my arm and my arm's rising are one and the same event, then my causing my arm to rise and my arm's rising are one and the same event. But it cannot be plausible that causing an event to occur is not merely an event itself, but the very same event as the event caused. Davidson himself insists that 'To trip myself is ... not identical with what it causes [*sc.* my tripping].'<sup>20</sup> But this is precisely because my tripping myself is my causing my tripping, and my causing an event is not identical with the event caused, any more than my making or breaking a pot is identical with the pot I make or break.<sup>21</sup> Hence, if my raising my arm is an event, it is not the same event as my arm's rising: bodily movements<sub>T</sub> are not identical with bodily movements<sub>I</sub>. But since bodily movements<sub>I</sub> are not actions unless they are the same actions as the corresponding bodily movements<sub>T</sub>, bodily movements<sub>I</sub> are not actions.

In the last fifteen years or so, considerations of this sort have made Davidson's view lose popularity in favour of the view that bodily movements<sub>T</sub> are events which cause bodily movements<sub>I</sub>.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps we should find this surprising. For we might expect the doctrine that actions are events to lose its allure, once it is conceded that A's raising his arm is not identical with A's arm's rising. For the concession is presumably the result of realizing that A's raising his arm is A's *causing* his arm's rising, and this fact surely has no tendency to suggest that A's raising his arm is an event. It is, after all, far from obvious that a causing, like the event caused, is itself an event.

Be that as it may, if bodily movements<sub>T</sub> are events which cause

<sup>19</sup> Davidson, 'Problems in the Explanation of Action', loc. cit., 37; see also 'The Logical Form of Action Sentences: Criticism, Comment and Defence', loc. cit., 124 & 128. We write, 'in some cases', because Davidson only defends this doctrine in relation to what he calls 'primitive actions, the ones we do not do by doing something else.' Davidson, 'Agency', loc. cit., 49. For arguments against Davidson's view, see J. Montmarquet, 'Actions and Bodily Movements', *Analysis* 38 (1978); Bach, op. cit.; Hornsby, *Actions*, ch. 1.

<sup>20</sup> Davidson, 'Agency', loc. cit., 47.

<sup>21</sup> It has been argued by David Lewis that an event may be a part of a larger event that it causes, e.g. a battle which starts a war. See D. Lewis, 'Causation', repr. in Lewis *Collected Papers*, vol. 2 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 173. But this has no tendency to support the claim that causing an event can be identical with the event caused.

<sup>22</sup> E.g., Hornsby, *Actions*; O'Connor, op. cit..

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bodily movements<sub>i</sub>, then either bodily movements<sub>T</sub> are events, perhaps neural events, which occur inside the agent's body, as for example Hornsby maintains in her book *Actions*;<sup>23</sup> or they are events of another sort, which do not—presumably events which have no location at all, if there are such events. The first alternative implies that bodily movements<sub>T</sub>, unlike their effects, are not normally perceptible without a special apparatus.<sup>24</sup> The second implies that bodily movements<sub>i</sub> are caused both by neural events and by events of another sort, and therefore raises the difficult question of how these two sorts of events are related. It also implies that bodily movements<sub>T</sub> can never be perceived, whatever sort of apparatus we are equipped with. But we can and do see people and animals moving their limbs without making use of any sort of apparatus; and seeing a person or an animal moving its limbs is seeing a bodily movement<sub>T</sub>. Hence neither alternative is tenable; and it follows that bodily movements<sub>T</sub> are not events which cause bodily movements<sub>i</sub>. We do not wish to deny that when an agent causes a bodily movement<sub>i</sub>, an event—perhaps in the agent's nervous system—causes the same bodily movement<sub>i</sub>; but the agent's action is not identical with this event. (We shall say more about events of this kind in section 5.)

In fact Hornsby considers the objection that if bodily movements<sub>T</sub> are events which occur inside the agent's body, they are normally imperceptible. In her book *Actions*, she writes as follows:

... the objector thinks that we see actions themselves, and I am inclined to agree. But he says 'If actions are inside the body, then we cannot see them.' Some doubt is cast on his conditional when we remember that to say that actions take place inside the body is not to deny that they take place in larger portions of space ... Perhaps then we see actions in virtue of seeing *some* place where

<sup>23</sup> Hornsby (*Actions*, 14) claims that 'all actions occur inside the body'. Later in the same essay (106), she claims that as we trace our way back along the sequence of events which led to a bodily movement<sub>i</sub>, 'there is a point in the neurophysiological sequence at which .... we no longer find events that the agent made happen, because at that point we find the action.' Hornsby (*ibid.*, 45) also claims that 'actions are tryings to move<sub>T</sub> the body or bring about bodily movements<sub>i</sub>', but we do not propose to discuss this claim here.

<sup>24</sup> For an interesting discussion of this and related matters, see the exchange between Lowe and Hornsby published in *Analysis*: E. J. Lowe, 'All Actions Occur inside the Body', **41** (1981); Hornsby, 'Reply to Lowe on Actions', **42** (1982); Lowe, 'Reply to Hornsby on Actions', **43** (1983); Hornsby, 'Events that are Causing: A Response to Lowe', **43** (1983); Lowe, 'A Note on a Response of Hornsby's', **44** (1984).

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they occur when they occur; perhaps we see actions in virtue simply of seeing the people whose actions they are at the time of their happening. Or again, perhaps we see actions in seeing their effects.<sup>25</sup>

Hornsby does not appear to decide which of these alternatives she wishes to endorse. Instead, she argues that the objection owes part of its force to the assumption that actions are bodily movements, and the rest, to a mistaken hypothesis about what we can and cannot see. But in fact no such assumption and no such hypothesis are needed in order to show that none of the alternatives mooted is satisfactory. For, first, I do not see an event in someone's nervous system in virtue of seeing some place where this event occurs when it occurs—such as Hyde Park or Washington Square. Secondly, I do not see an event in someone's nervous system in virtue simply of seeing him when the event occurs; any more than I see a door open inside a house in virtue simply of seeing the house when the door opens. And thirdly, I do not see an event in someone's nervous system in seeing its effects; any more than I see the piston of an engine move in seeing the car accelerate along a highway.

More recently, Hornsby has retracted the claim that actions are events which occur inside the agent's body, although she continues to maintain that 'the relation between an action of someone's moving her body and her body's moving is a causal one'.<sup>26</sup> But she has also argued that actions may after all be invisible; and that a theory of action can safely ignore the question of whether it implies that they are:

... nothing of moment has to revolve around the specific question of whether, among [the events which occur when there is an action], actions are visible. And it is arguable that we have no firm intuition on this specific question which is not dependent on some prior view of what actions are.<sup>27</sup>

But if, as Hornsby explicitly acknowledges, 'people see one another doing things', then the proposition that actions are visible is not merely an intuition: it is a fact.<sup>28</sup> For if A sees B salute an officer, then A sees a salute; and a salute is an action. If A sees B dive into a pool, then A sees a dive; and a dive is an action. And so on, for the myriad of actions which can have eye-witnesses—whether or not actions are among the events which occur when there is an action. Seeing a person doing something need not amount to witnessing an

<sup>25</sup> Hornsby, *Actions*, 103.

<sup>26</sup> Hornsby, *Simple Mindedness* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 232 n. 1 and 94.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

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action, because there are things we can do, such as trip or fall, which are not actions. But if what A does is to perform an action of some kind, then seeing A do it is seeing an action.

Since bodily movements<sub>T</sub> are not identical with bodily movements<sub>I</sub>, and they are not events which cause bodily movements<sub>I</sub> either, we conclude that they are not events.<sup>29</sup> But an objection might be raised at this point, which could be put as follows: You have argued that an event, for example A's arm's rising, can be caused both by an agent and by another event, such as an event in the agent's nervous system. But does this not raise precisely the difficulty that you raised in connection with the thought that bodily movements<sub>I</sub> can be caused both by neural events and by events of another sort, or at any rate an equally intractable one, viz. the difficulty of explaining how these two sorts of causes are related?

The answer to the objection is that the difficulty is not intractable precisely because the causes (strictly, the cause and the causer) are an event and an agent. We hold that if A's arm rose because A raised his arm, then A's arm's rising was caused by A. But we can explain why an agent like A is able to raise his arm to the extent that we can say what sorts of events cause A's arm to rise when A raises his arm, that is, to the extent that we can describe what Strawson nicely calls 'the micro-mechanisms of production'.<sup>30</sup> Just as we can explain why an acid has the power to corrode metal to the extent that we can say what sorts of events occur when it does so. (These events will be ones which involve other kinds of substance with their particular causal powers, which can be explained in their turn.) Hence, the explanations of an event which we give when we identify the agent that caused it and the events that caused it are not competing explanations, but complementary ones.

<sup>29</sup> This conclusion does depend on the assumption that if bodily movements<sub>T</sub> are events, then either they are the same events as the corresponding bodily movements<sub>I</sub>, or their causes. We said that we would take this to be uncontroversial. But in fact there have recently been attempts to defend the idea that a bodily movement<sub>T</sub> is a larger event of which the corresponding bodily movement<sub>I</sub> and a mental or neural event which causes it are parts. The influence of these ideas has been limited, and we shall not discuss them here. But we note that they imply that bodily movements<sub>T</sub> are partly perceptible and partly imperceptible. (Hornsby (*Actions*, 103) rightly observes that if her own theory of action implies that actions are invisible, theories of this sort imply that actions are not events which 'take place in their entirety "strictly before our very eyes"'.) Cf. O'Connor op. cit..

<sup>30</sup> P. F. Strawson, 'Causation and Explanation', in B. Vermazen and M. B. Hintikka (eds.), *Essays on Davidson: Actions and Events* (Oxford University Press, 1985), 122.

### 4. What actions are

We have not denied that actions are events because we propose to revive the doctrine that verbs of action are relational expressions, comparable to 'is taller than', 'is above' or 'is the father of'. We are happy to follow Aristotle in assigning actions to a category *sui generis*; although we also believe that a sentence which reports an action entails that an agent and an event stand in the relation 'is the causer of'. For example, 'Brutus killed Caesar' entails that Brutus was the causer of Caesar's death, and 'The sun bleached the curtain' entails that the sun was the causer of the curtain's bleaching. Our view is that to act is to exercise a causal power—to cause, bring about or effect an event. But the exercise of a causal power is neither an event, nor the relation between agent and event that it entails.<sup>31</sup> Sometimes it is more convenient to say that the agent brought about a state of affairs, or that he brought an object into existence, than to say that he caused an event. For example, parking one's car is bringing it about that one's car is parked, and throwing a pot (on a potter's wheel) is, portentous as it may sound, bringing a pot into being. But in such cases, the inception of the state of affairs and the object's coming into being are events which the agent caused.

An agent does not normally cause his actions: he causes the *results* and at least some of the *consequences* of his actions. The idea that actions have results and consequences is familiar from our everyday talk about agency; but, following von Wright, we shall use the terms 'result' and 'consequence' in a technical sense.<sup>32</sup> An action, although the phrase is a clumsy one, is a causing of an event by an agent; the result of an action is that very event; and its consequences are effects of its result.<sup>33</sup> Thus, a killing is a causing of a death; the result of a killing is the death caused; and its consequences are effects of that death. Similarly, the result of the sun's melting the chocolate is the chocolate's melting, and its consequences are effects of the chocolate's melting, e.g. the tablecloth's becoming stained. Hence, an action is of such and such a kind if and only if its *result* is of the corresponding kind: an action is a killing if and only if its

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Bach, *op. cit.*, 119; Bishop, *op. cit.*, 71f.

<sup>32</sup> von Wright, *op. cit.*, 39. The distinction between the result and the consequences of an action is similar to one Reid draws between the immediate and more remote effects of a power, except that Reid's distinction is explicitly restricted to 'the effects of human power': Reid, *op. cit.*, I.vii.61.

<sup>33</sup> Strictly, an action is a causing of an event by one or more agents. More than one agent can jointly perform a single action, for more than one agent can jointly cause a single event. We shall ignore this complication, since as far as we can tell, it does not materially affect the argument.

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result is a death, a raising of an arm if and only if its result is a rising of an arm, a melting<sub>T</sub> of a piece of chocolate if and only if its result is a piece of chocolate's melting<sub>I</sub>, and so on.

The result of one action may be a consequence of another. For example, if Jessica opens a trap by pulling a lever, the trap's opening is caused by the lever's motion. The trap's opening is therefore the result of Jessica's opening the trap and a consequence of her pulling the lever. But the result and consequences of a single action must be distinct events. Suppose, for example, that Mary makes Fred blush. If Fred is the Secretary of State, then Fred's blushing and the Secretary of State's blushing are one and the same event; Mary's making Fred blush and Mary's making the Secretary of State blush are one and the same action; and the Secretary of State's blushing is the result, not the consequence, of Mary's making Fred blush.

The distinction between these two kinds of cases—that is, between cases which involve two descriptions of the same action, and cases which involve descriptions of two actions, the result of one of which is the consequence of the other—is often marked in our common idiom with the prepositions 'in' and 'by'. Thus, Jessica opened the trap *by* pulling the lever; but *in* making Fred blush Mary made the Secretary of State blush. But there are also many instances, some of which involve legal, social or ad hoc conventions, in which idiom alone does not record whether two events, and therefore two actions, are involved, or only one. For example, we would normally say that Jean gave the signal *by* opening<sub>T</sub> the window, even if the window's opening<sub>I</sub> *is* the signal, and hence Jean's opening<sub>T</sub> the window and Jean's giving the signal are one and the same action.

These examples make implicit use of a criterion of identity for actions, which can be formulated explicitly as follows. Let ' $A_1$ ' and ' $A_2$ ' be two expressions each of which refers to an action:  $A_1$  is the same action as  $A_2$  if, and only if, the result of  $A_1$  is the same event as the result of  $A_2$ . This contradicts the popular view that whenever an agent  $\phi$ s by  $\psi$ ing, his  $\phi$ ing is the same action as his  $\psi$ ing, but we do not regard that as a defect in the proposal. We hold that when an agent  $\phi$ s by  $\psi$ ing, his  $\phi$ ing *may* be the same action as his  $\psi$ ing, as it is in the last example mentioned in the last paragraph; but that when the result of an agent's  $\phi$ ing is the effect of the result of his  $\psi$ ing, as it is if he opens a trap by pulling a lever, then his  $\phi$ ing and his  $\psi$ ing are distinct actions because they have distinct results.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Ontologically parsimonious philosophers need not be alarmed: as indicated above (n. 12), we also believe that the most effective formalization of action sentences requires quantification over events, but not over actions themselves.



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Davidson and others, who have denied this, were right to reject the view that if Jessica opens a trap by pulling a lever, her opening the trap and her pulling the lever are related either as cause and effect or as whole and part.<sup>35</sup> But they were wrong to infer that these actions must therefore be identical.

(We mention, in parenthesis, that the popular view—the view that if an agent  $\phi$ s by  $\psi$ ing, his  $\phi$ ing is the same action as his  $\psi$ ing—is likely to appear especially tempting if one believes that agency is invariably intentional. For if Jessica opens a trap by pulling a lever, she may intend to pull the lever without intending to open the trap. Hence, if we want to insist that her opening the trap was an intentional action—at least *qua* action of some kind or other—one, and perhaps the only, way of doing so is to claim that if an agent  $\phi$ s by  $\psi$ ing, his  $\phi$ ing and his  $\psi$ ing are the same action, which may be intentional *qua*  $\psi$ ing and unintentional *qua*  $\phi$ ing. We shall argue in due course that agency is not invariably intentional. In the meantime, we simply note that it is perfectly consistent to deny that if an agent  $\phi$ s by  $\psi$ ing, his  $\phi$ ing and his  $\psi$ ing are the same action, whilst acknowledging that a single action, such as one man's causing another man's death, may be intentional *qua* killing and unintentional *qua* parricide.)

Davidson argues that if an agent  $\phi$ s by  $\psi$ ing, his  $\phi$ ing is the same action as his  $\psi$ ing with the following example. Suppose that the queen moves her hand in such a way as to pour poison in the king's ear:

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 [in this sort of case] between causing the death of a person and killing him.

It follows, Davidson argues, that 'the killing ... did not differ from the movement of the hand.'<sup>36</sup> Davidson also asks, rhetorically:

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 complete?<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Davidson, 'Agency', loc. cit., 56ff. Danto argues that they are related as cause and effect, while Austin and Ginet argue that they are related as whole and part. See A. Danto, 'Basic Actions', repr. in A. White (ed.), *The Philosophy of Action* (Oxford University Press, 1968), 50f.; J. L. Austin, 'A Plea for Excuses', repr. in Austin, *Philosophical Papers* (Oxford University Press, 1961), 149; C. Ginet, *On Action* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), ch. 3.

<sup>36</sup> Davidson, 'Agency', loc. cit., 58.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 57f. See also G. E. M. Anscombe, 'Under a Description', repr. in Anscombe, op. cit. note 3, 215f.

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Neither the argument nor the question proves its point.<sup>38</sup> The argument is a *petitio*, because the question, whether doing something that causes a death is identical with causing a death, is precisely what is at issue. If the queen does something that causes a death, then, to be sure, she causes a death, and *vice versa*; but this logical equivalence does not imply that her doing what she does—in this case, her moving her hand—is *identical* with her causing a death. It is, and remains, natural to suppose that causing one event is as distinct from causing another event as one event is from another.

But, one might protest, there is surely a difference between the case where the result of one action (a death) is the consequence of another (a movement of a hand), and the case where two actions (a killing and a movement of a hand) have nothing to do with each other. Surely, the second case is the one in which there really are distinct actions—the case, one might say, in which the agent was *busier*. The answer to this objection is that we do indeed want to mark the difference between the two cases, but the difference is simply this: only in the first case was the result of one action the consequence of the other. As Davidson suggests, we leave it to nature to unfold the consequences of our actions, and can busy ourselves with other matters while it does so. But it does not follow that the two sentences ‘The queen moved her hand’ and ‘The queen killed the king’ describe the same action if nature ensures that the result of the second ensues upon the result of the first.

As for the question, ‘Is it not absurd ...’, it simply fails to prove that the killing ‘did not differ from the movement of the hand’. There was nothing more for the queen to do, because she killed the king by moving her hand, and not by moving her hand and then doing something else, say, flaring her nostrils. But this is no reason to believe that her moving her hand and her killing the king were one and the same action. If we consider events instead of actions, the weakness of the argument is just as plain. If one event—say, the white ball’s striking the red ball with a certain force—is all that needs to happen for another event—the red ball’s beginning to move—to happen, it does not follow that only one event occurred.

### 5. Basic actions

The preposition ‘by’ has been used to single out a class of actions which is thought by many philosophers to deserve special attention, namely ‘basic’ or ‘primitive’ actions—‘the ones we do not do by

<sup>38</sup> Similar points to the ones which follow are made in Ginet, *op. cit.*, 59ff.

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doing something else', as Davidson puts it.<sup>39</sup> The queen killed the king by pouring poison into his ear, and she poured poison into his ear by moving her hand in the right way at the right moment. But did she move her hand by doing something else, or was her moving her hand a basic action?

Perhaps the question of which actions, if any, are basic is an interesting one in its own right; but there is little doubt that it has attracted as much interest as it has, for a quarter of a century or more, because the doctrines that actions are events and that if an agent  $\phi$ s by  $\psi$ ing, his  $\phi$ ing and his  $\psi$ ing are one and the same action, together invest the question with a singular and fundamental importance. If these two doctrines were true, and if, for example, it transpired that our basic actions—'the ones we do not do by doing something else'—are events which occur in our nervous system, it would follow that *every* action is an event in the agent's nervous system, and a significant part of the task of 'spelling out the differences between events in general and those events that fall squarely into the category of human action' would have been accomplished.<sup>40</sup> Obviously, we do not believe that the question of which actions are basic has *this* significance, for we deny that actions are events, and we deny that if an agent  $\phi$ s by  $\psi$ ing, his  $\phi$ ing and his  $\psi$ ing are one and the same action. However, the question can be put. And, Wittgenstein assures us, when a question can be put, so can its answer.

We propose that an action be described as basic if, and only if, its result is not the consequence of—that is, the effect of the result of—another action by the same agent. Which actions are these? Among those who assume that the class of basic actions can be neatly circumscribed, the most popular candidate is a subclass of bodily movements<sub>T</sub>. We shall argue that some bodily movements<sub>T</sub> are indeed basic actions; and we shall comment inconclusively on the question of whether all basic actions are bodily movements<sub>T</sub>.

It is indisputable, and not disputed, that not all bodily movements<sub>T</sub> are basic actions, because it is possible to move one part of one's body by moving another. As we have often been reminded, one can raise one's left arm with one's right arm. But if an agent raises an arm directly, is this a basic action, or is it the consequence of another action by the same agent?

Against the view that actions of this sort are basic actions, one can object that we move our limbs by doing other things, for example, by causing certain events to occur in our brains, which cause our limbs to move. If these events in our brains are results of our

<sup>39</sup> Davidson, 'Agency', loc. cit., 59.

<sup>40</sup> See above, n. 2.

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actions, then movements<sub>i</sub> of our limbs are consequences of other actions we perform, and movements<sub>T</sub> of our limbs are therefore not basic actions.

But is the objection convincing? Davidson dismisses it, arguing that 'doing something that causes my finger to move ... *is* moving my finger.'<sup>41</sup> We have denied that this is true; but be that as it may, it is a poor reason for Davidson to give, for as we have seen, he also argues, on exactly the same grounds, that in the example he gives, the queen's moving her hand *is* the queen's killing the king. But he does not deny that killing the king is something that the queen does by doing something else, namely, moving her hand.

This much is certain: if A raises his arm directly, events of certain kinds occur in A's brain and nervous system, which cause A's arm to rise. But it does not follow immediately that if A raises his arm directly, this is not a basic action. For this conclusion to follow, we need an additional premise, namely, that if A raises his arm directly, he causes these events to occur in his brain and nervous system.

The question of whether this premise is true turns on where we divide the agency of complex agents and the agency of their parts, and in particular, the agency of human beings and the agency of parts of their bodies. As Harré and Madden point out, it is the business of science to explain the powers and liabilities of things and substances, including human beings and other living things, partly by reference to their structure, and partly by reference to the powers and liabilities of their constituent parts.<sup>42</sup> But philosophy too sometimes needs to ensure that the powers and actions of agents are not confused with the powers and actions of their parts. Hence, if we want to maintain that when an agent moves a limb directly, its motion is not the consequence of another action of his, we shall need to argue that the events in his brain and nervous system which cause his limb to move are not caused by the agent himself, but by parts of his body.

It would certainly be a mistake to suppose that one *cannot* cause events to occur in one's brain. One can—by passing one's hand in front of one's eyes, for example, or by biting one's tongue. But these events will be ones which were caused by, and not causes of, the motion of one's hand or the pressure of one's teeth. (If one's body is in good working order, every bodily movement<sub>i</sub> will cause events to occur in one's brain, and so every bodily movement<sub>T</sub> will number such events among its consequences.) So these examples do not sup-

<sup>41</sup> Davidson, 'Agency', loc. cit., 49f.

<sup>42</sup> R. Harré and E. H. Madden, *Causal Powers* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975), 105.

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port the view that if I raise my arm directly, I cause the events which cause my arm to rise.

Suppose, however, that—in the course of an experiment, for example—A raised his arm because he wanted events of the these kinds (whatever they may be) to occur, and they did. Does it follow that he caused them to occur? If so, raising his arm was not, on this occasion, a basic action, and it will be difficult to maintain that it ever is. For even if there are some kinds of events one cannot cause unless one wants to the kinds of events which occur in one's brain are not among them. But the only pertinent difference between this case and the case where A raises his arm to reach a shelf or hail a taxi is in his reason. Hence, if A caused the events which caused his arm to rise during the experiment, it is reasonable to infer that he causes the corresponding events whenever he raises his arm directly, and hence that raising one's arm directly is not a basic action.

But in fact, if A raised his arm because he wanted events of the these kinds to occur, and they did, it does not appear to follow that he caused them to occur. It follows that had he not wanted events of these kinds to occur, he would not have raised his arm, or at any rate, not for the same reason. And it follows that he ensured, or made certain, that events of these kinds had occurred, by raising his arm. But notice: 'had', not 'would'. I can ensure that such and such a kind of event *will* occur by performing an action of which it is sure to be a consequence; and I can ensure that such and such a kind of event *has* occurred either by performing an action of which it is the result, or by discovering that it is sure that it has occurred, or—as in the present case—by performing an action whose result is sure to be an effect of an event of that kind. But unless it can be shown that the third way is a variant of the first, there is no reason to accept that A caused the events which caused his arm to rise.

For these reasons, we doubt whether we ourselves, as opposed to parts of our bodies, cause the events in our brains which cause our limbs to move, when we move our limbs directly. But if we are right about this, where exactly does the boundary lie between those events which should be attributed to the agency of human beings, and those which should be attributed to the agency of parts of their bodies? Contractions<sub>1</sub> of our muscles seem to be as close to the boundary as it is possible to get, but on which side do they lie? We feel unsure, perhaps because the boundary is a vague one. But in any event, contractions<sub>1</sub> of our muscles are movements<sub>1</sub> of parts of our bodies, so we see no reason to deny that some basic actions are bodily movements<sub>T</sub>.

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Are all basic actions by human beings bodily movements<sub>T</sub>? If an action is a causing of an event by an agent, then it may seem possible to argue that they are not, as follows.

Consider so-called 'negative acts' or acts of omission. As we have seen, one can open a trap by pulling a lever or poison a king by moving one's hand; but one can also burn a sauce by failing to take it off the hob, improve one's health by desisting from smoking, or damage it by fasting. If, as we have argued, to act is to cause or bring about an event, then we can comfortably acquiesce in the simple-minded view that not doing something is not doing something. More precisely: acts of omission are not actions. For although the fact that A failed to  $\phi$  may explain the fact that such and such an event occurred or failed to occur, failing to cause, or refraining from causing, an event of some kind is not an instance of causing an event to occur.

But if acts of omission are not actions, it may appear to follow that not all basic actions are bodily movements<sub>T</sub>. For if A burnt a sauce because he forgot to take it off the hob, A's burning the sauce appears to have been a basic action—an action whose result was not the consequence of another action by the same agent—since forgetting to do something is not an action, and since A need not have burnt the sauce by doing anything other than forgetting to take it off the hob. But since burning a sauce is not a bodily movement<sub>T</sub>, it follows that not all basic actions are bodily movements<sub>T</sub>.

If this argument is sound, then basic actions by human beings form a heterogeneous class, of which a subclass of bodily movements<sub>T</sub> is merely an important subclass. But it is far from obvious that the argument is sound, for it is surely possible to object that if A's failing to cause, or refraining from causing, an event are not actions, then neither are A's letting the sauce burn, or allowing it to burn. For letting an event occur, or allowing it to occur, is nothing other than failing to prevent it or, perhaps, failing to do anything to prevent it. It would not follow that letting or allowing are not themselves things we do, sometimes intentionally, and for which we can be held to account, deemed culpable or deserve credit. But it would follow that the kind of examples we have been considering are not counter-examples to the doctrine that all basic actions are bodily movements<sub>T</sub>.

The objection is unconvincing as it stands. For if A's failing to cause, or refraining from causing, an event are not actions, it does not follow immediately that A's failing to prevent an event is not either. For 'A failed to cause B's death' does not entail that an event of any particular sort occurred, and hence it cannot entail that A caused an event to occur. If the same is true of 'A failed to prevent

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B's death', as it certainly is of 'A failed to do anything to prevent B's death', then it does not describe an action. But arguably, 'A failed to prevent B's death' entails that B died; and if it does, then we can certainly ask whether it also entails that A caused B's death. And we can, in any case, ask whether 'A failed to prevent B's death and B died' entails that A caused B's death.

One plausible answer is that it does, but only in conjunction with some other premise or premises, concerning A's duties or obligations. For example, we may be willing to say that A caused B's death if B died because A failed—whether intentionally or not—to fulfil a duty of care towards her. But it is also plausible to argue that in these circumstances, although A let B die, he did not cause her death. For we can concede that A's letting B die was something A did, and that he may have done it intentionally, and that he is certainly (*prima facie*) culpable, without conceding that it was an action.<sup>43</sup>

There are, to be sure, subtle questions to be answered here. But they are not our subject. What does concern us, is that however these matters should be treated, the question of how we should decide the scope of basic human actions turns in part on whether the concept of agency should be deemed to embrace all or some instances of 'negative' as well as 'positive' causal responsibility for events. The doctrine that an action is a causing of an event does not imply any particular conclusion in this matter. But it does imply that any indeterminacy in the application of the verb 'cause' will be matched by a corresponding indeterminacy in the concept of agency; and that if, in certain circumstances, A's letting someone or something die is tantamount to A's causing their death, then, in those circumstances, it is an action of A's. And if not, not.

## 6. Actions and locations

If actions are causings of events by agents, where and when do they take place? The doctrine that actions are events gives rise to a familiar quandary about the temporal and spatial location of actions. If all actions are bodily movements<sub>T</sub>, then a murder may already have taken place a month before the victim dies, and in a place where he has never set foot; but if the victim's death is part of a murder, a murderer may die a month before he has killed his victim, and part

<sup>43</sup> Someone's doing something intentionally need not be an action, for refraining from causing a stir is something one can do intentionally. Cf. Davidson 'Agency', loc. cit., 46 (our emphasis): 'a person does, *as agent*, whatever he does intentionally under some description.'

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of his action may occur where he has never been.<sup>44</sup> But although we avoid this quandary by abandoning the doctrine that actions are events, do we not also commit ourselves to the implausible view that actions take place nowhere and at no time?

It is undeniable that many actions are performed at times and in places which we can readily identify as precisely as we normally identify the place where a substance is to be found, or the time at which an event occurred. For example, A may pour a glass of water at three-fifteen, in the kitchen, by the sink. But if A  $\phi$ d by  $\psi$ ing, and if the results of these two actions occur in different places or at different times, then the only direct answer to the question, where A  $\phi$ d, which is dictated by the nature of the case, will be one which is sufficiently imprecise to embrace both events—the results of A's  $\phi$ ing and of his  $\psi$ ing. (The qualification 'which is dictated by the nature of the case' is needed because legal arrangements may sometimes require a more precise answer than they are strictly entitled to. If they do, then where possible we gerrymander: perforce, and therefore with a clear philosophic conscience, since neither logic nor metaphysics can avail.<sup>45</sup>)

For example, if the queen poisoned the king last Tuesday in Elsinore and the king died last Thursday in Horsholm, then the queen killed the king last week in Denmark. This is a *direct* answer. But we can always answer the question, where and when an agent performed an action, indirectly: that is, by locating one or more events and one or more other actions by the same agent. Thus: 'Where and when did the queen kill the king?' 'She poisoned him last Tuesday in Elsinore; and he died last Thursday in Horsholm.' This answer provides more precise information than the direct one; but although it implies that the queen killed the king last week in Denmark, it does not say explicitly where or when the killing took place.

In short, the doctrine that an action is a causing of an event by an agent does not imply that actions have no spatial or temporal location. It implies that their location will often be imprecise, and that

<sup>44</sup> We do not propose to discuss these problems, or the various attempts in the literature to make one of the alternatives appear plausible: Bach, op. cit., 116f. and Ginet, op. cit., ch. 3 include useful summaries.

<sup>45</sup> An interesting letter on this subject from Stephen Kobrin appears under the heading 'Taxation and Location', in *The Economist*, 21–27 June, 1997. Kobrin asks: 'Does an Indian programmer's repair of software on a computer in London (via a satellite link) take place in Bangalore or London? The answer [he says] is that the question is no longer relevant. The very idea of geographical jurisdiction may therefore no longer be meaningful.' And he notes that 'Property is becoming increasingly intangible and consumption difficult to locate precisely (even if consumers are not).'



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if an action was performed at such and such a time and in such and such a place, then its result occurred at the same time and in the same place.

### 7. Inanimate agents

Many philosophers who deny, as we do, that if an agent is described as the cause of an event, 'we understand this only when we can reduce it to the case of an event being a cause', have nevertheless compromised with the reductionist tendency, by arguing that the range of application of the concept of agency is tightly circumscribed—limited in fact to intentional human agents alone, or at any rate to animate agents. Chisholm, for example, claims that 'If we consider only inanimate natural objects, we may say that causation, if it occurs, is a relation between *events* or *states of affairs*.'<sup>46</sup> We disagree. As we noted at the beginning of this article, our pre-theoretical talk about agents and their actions acknowledges that inanimate substances and living creatures incapable of acting voluntarily or intentionally can be agents. Our arguments have focused on human agency, but at several points we have mentioned actions by inanimate agents, and implicitly signalled our view that agency is to be found throughout the natural world.

The principal consideration which has been thought to favour restricting the term 'agent' in such a way as to exclude inanimate things appears to be the idea that inanimate would-be agents do not so much act as react, and are, strictly speaking, only ever passive. Taylor, for example, urges a distinction between things which are self-movers (agents) and things which are passive, always acted upon (patients). He argues that traditionally the term 'agent' meant 'something that acts to bring about changes', and was contrasted with 'patient', something acted upon; and he claims, accordingly, that the term 'agent' was used of 'self-moving beings (i.e. animals, men and God) but was denied of inanimate matter'.<sup>47</sup>

Taylor says nothing about plants or about bodily organs; but it is clear that while oaks and kidneys are not animals, men or Gods, they are not inanimate matter either: they are living and they grow. So it is not clear whether Taylor would regard them as agents or as

<sup>46</sup> Chisholm, 'Human Freedom and the Self', loc. cit., 28. Cf. Reid, op. cit., I.v.51: 'Nothing we perceive without us affords any good ground for ascribing active power to any inanimate being.' See also Taylor, op. cit., 19ff.; A. Donagan, *Choice. The Essential Element in Human Action* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), 167ff.; O'Connor, op. cit., 173.

<sup>47</sup> Op. cit., 14. See Reid, op. cit., I.v & I.vi, espec. 53f.

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patients. But if we set this difficulty aside, the argument remains unsatisfactory.

First, the dichotomy between agents and patients does not apply to entities *tout court*, but only in relation to a particular action or activity. For example, a boxer may be an agent *qua* punching his opponent and a patient *qua* bearing his opponent's brunts. Secondly, the idea that inanimate nature is purely passive may appear plausible if we think of simple mechanical transactions involving sticks and stones; but it surely appears less plausible if we think of stuffs or things with which we readily associate active causal powers, such as acid or radium, a volcano or the sun. In fact, even in relation to a particular action, we cannot identify a purely active agent and a purely passive patient. For actual instances of agency are always located in a complex network of action and reaction constrained by the natures of the things involved and by the circumstances in which they find themselves. It is not in the nature of anything, except perhaps God, to be purely active or purely passive. Every instance of agency involves *intrinsic* and extrinsic factors, that is, the natures and powers of the things involved on the one hand, and their circumstances on the other. And as Harré and Madden point out, 'reference to intrinsic states emphasizes agency, and to extrinsic circumstances emphasizes passivity'.<sup>48</sup> Thus, the idea that inanimate things are always purely passive is plausible only if the role of extrinsic factors is emphasized in the case of inanimate things to the point of obliterating the importance of their own causal powers. Taylor's dichotomy between agents and patients is therefore unconvincing: inanimate things have causal powers whose exercise is agency.

Philosophers who have no tendency to suppose that the distinction between a power and its exercise is without foundation but are nevertheless convinced that the inanimate substances are incapable of action misunderstand the difference between inanimate agency and human agency. Human beings not only have the power to bring about events, but can also choose whether or not to do so, and choose for reasons. Inanimate things cannot, but it does not follow that they have no causal powers or that they are not genuine agents.<sup>49</sup> Taylor claims that the fact that 'it never makes sense to say

<sup>48</sup> Op. cit., 83. Cf. Strawson, op. cit., 126: 'Our concepts of types of individual thing or substance .... are concepts of things with characteristic dispositions to act or react in certain ways in certain ranges of circumstances. Emphasizing that last phrase, we might say, with pardonable exaggeration, that all action is reaction.' The point we are concerned with is that, pardonable as it doubtless is, it is an exaggeration.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Reid, op. cit., I.v.44: 'Power to produce any effect implies power not to produce it.'

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that it is up to a volume of acid whether it dissolves a lump of zinc' shows that a volume of acid cannot be an agent.<sup>50</sup> But the argument is a *non sequitur*. It follows that a volume of acid cannot choose whether or not to exercise its power to dissolve a lump of zinc; not that it does not have the power at all. But the possession and exercise of the power to make something happen—such as to make a lump of zinc dissolve—is sufficient to make the volume of acid an agent.<sup>51</sup>

To acknowledge this is not, as it has sometimes been supposed, to revert to an animistic or anthropomorphic conception of nature which endows inert matter with intentions and purposes; it is simply to acknowledge that intentional agency is a special kind of agency, and not the only kind there is.<sup>52</sup> The difference between a volume of acid which dissolves a lump of zinc and the man who drops the zinc into the acid is the difference between two kinds of agent and two kinds of event: each agent has the power to cause an event of the sort attributed to its agency, but only one can choose whether or not to exercise the power it has, and choose for a reason. This is not the difference between a pseudo-agent and a genuine agent.<sup>53</sup> Again, if human beings can act, that is, can cause events, without being caused to do so, whilst inanimate agents are always caused to cause events, it does not follow that only human beings are agents. Rather, it follows that the explanations of actions by inanimate agents and of voluntary actions by human beings are different kinds of explanation. Whether this is because the first are causal explanations, while the second are not, is a question with which we have not tried to cope in this paper.

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<sup>50</sup> Op. cit., 56.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Donagan, op. cit., 167ff.

<sup>52</sup> Strawson, op. cit., 123 makes essentially the same point with characteristic subtlety, arguing that there may be a grain of psychological truth in the thought that some kind of anthropomorphism is, at least sometimes, involved in the attribution of causal powers to inanimate agents, but that this is 'a matter of no [theoretical] consequence'.

<sup>53</sup> As Kenny remarks, it is not always easy to identify genuine agency in the inanimate case, and it is often difficult to identify the exact agent. But he adds: 'Wherever we can talk of substances in nature, wherever we can talk of natural kinds, we can talk also of natural agency and natural powers.' A. J. P. Kenny, *Will, Freedom and Power* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975), 46. See also A. R. White, *Grounds of Liability* (Oxford University Press, 1985), 25f.