Agency and Actions

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Among philosophical questions about human agency, one can distinguish in a rough and ready way between those that arise in philosophy of mind and those that arise in ethics. In philosophy of mind, one central aim has been to account for the place of agents in a world whose operations are supposedly ‘physical’. In ethics, one central aim has been to account for the connexion between ethical species of normativity and the distinctive deliberative and practical capacities of human beings. Ethics then is involved with questions of moral psychology whose answers admit a kind of richness in the life of human beings from which the philosophy of mind may ordinarily prescind. Philosophy of mind, insofar as it treats the phenomenon of agency as one facet of the phenomenon of mentality, has been more concerned with how there can be ‘mental causation’ than with any details of a story of human motivation or of the place of evaluative commitments within such a story.

This little account of the different agenda of two philosophical approaches to human agency is intended only to speak to the state of play as we have it, and it is certainly somewhat artificial. I offer it here as a way to make sense of attitudes to what has come to be known as the standard story of action. The standard story is assumed to be the orthodoxy on which philosophers of mind, who deal with the broad metaphysical questions, have converged, but it is held to be deficient when it comes to specifically ethical questions. Michael Smith, for instance, asks: ‘How do we turn the standard story of action into the story of ‘orthonomous action’?, where orthonomous action is action ‘under the rule of the right as opposed to the wrong’.1 Smith is not alone in thinking that the standard story is

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1 This is Smith’s question in ‘The Structure of Orthonomy’, the paper he presented to the conference on which the present volume is based. The quotation from Smith below is taken from the handout he used at the conference.

At the conference Michael Smith responded to my own paper by saying that the standard story could be retold so as to avoid my objections to it. The present, much revised, version is aimed at showing that that which I find objectionable in the standard story cannot simply be evaded. I thank Michael for his contribution to discussion there, Tom Pink and Miranda Fricker for comments they gave me on a draft of the earlier version, and the editors for comments on a draft of the present version.
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correct as far as it goes but lacks resources needed to accommodate genuinely ethical beings. Michael Bratman is another philosopher who has this thought; and I shall pick on Bratman’s treatment of human agency in due course.

The standard story is sometimes encapsulated in the slogan: ‘Beliefs and desires cause actions’. In the version of Smith’s that I shall consider here, it says:

Actions are bodily movements that are caused and rationalized by an agent’s desire for an end and a belief that moving her body in the relevant way will bring that end about.

Smith’s unpacking of the slogan shows how reason is supposed to enter the story: the word ‘rationalize’ is used in conveying that which causes an action constitutes the agent’s reason for it. For the purposes of the present paper, it need not matter very much exactly how the story is formulated. My objection to the standard story will be that—despite the fact that the word ‘agent’ appears in definitions like Smith’s—the story leaves agents out. Human beings are ineliminable from any account of their agency, and, in any of its versions, the standard story is not a story of agency at all.

The claim I intend by saying that the story leaves agents out is not answered by adding states of mind of different sorts from beliefs and desires to the causes of bodily movements. For what concerns me is the fact, as I see it, that ‘belief-desire psychology’ as it is understood in the standard story can cover none of the ground where human agency is found, and cannot do so even when it is supplemented with further mental states. The popularity of the standard story then seems very unfortunate. It is not merely that that which supplements it inherits its crucial flaw. It is worse than that. For when the standard story is the base line for questions in moral

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2 This use of ‘rationalize’ is taken from Donald Davidson’s ‘Actions Reasons and Causes’, Journal of Philosophy, 60, (1967) 685–700, reprinted in his Essays on Actions and Events (Oxford University Press, 1980) 3–19, in which the seeds of the standard story were sown.

3 In ‘The Possibility of Philosophy of Action’, in Human Action, Deliberation and Causation, ed. Jan Bransen and Stefaan Cuypers (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1998), 17–41, Michael Smith defends the standard story, which he there calls the basic Human story, to the hilt. He aims to show just how widely the story has application (however much one might need to embellish it in order to deal with all of the various cases). My present concern, one might say, is not with any of the particular claims in that paper, but with the general picture of agency that lies behind it.
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psychology, a shape is imposed on those questions that they should never have been allowed to take on. Meanwhile the orthodoxy in philosophy of mind is silently reinforced.

Before I criticize Bratman's attempt to supplement the standard story (§3), I want to draw attention to what I shall call its events-based character, and to explain how and why that is a source of trouble (§1). Events-based accounts introduce a conception of the causal order in which agents have no place (§2). The causal role that agents actually occupy disappears in an account, which is events-based (§4).

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There are some ideas in the background of the standard causal story which I should start by spelling out. The basic idea is that there is a category of particulars called 'events', and that some of the things in this category—spatiotemporal things that can happen only once—merit the title actions. Thus any of the following may on occasion apply to an event: 'a mosquito's biting me', 'the chocolate's melting', 'Don's falling from the cliff', 'Jones's stealing the jewels', 'Helen's waving her right arm'. And, very likely, the last two phrases here—but (human action being implicitly understood) only these two—apply to events that are actions. As we have seen, bodily movements (some of them) are said to be actions in the standard story. That is because such things as stealing the jewels are things that people do by moving their bodies; and if Jones stole the jewels by moving his body thus and so, then his stealing the jewels is (the same event as) his moving his body thus and so. 'His stealing the jewels' describes a bodily event by allusion to an effect that it had.

Some of this is already controversial. And I need to set some controversies aside now in order to move on. There are philosophers who object to the whole idea that actions are events. I think that their objection will be easier to understand when some of its sources have emerged. (Without defending the idea that actions are events in the present paper, I would suggest that its innocence may be manifest when it is freed from everything with which it has so often and so readily been wrongly associated. Much of the opposition to the idea is explained [I believe] by the alacrity with which philosophers whose outlook is 'naturalistic' have moved from this idea to events-based accounts of agency: see §§4 and 5 infra.) Again, there

4 For a defence of the idea that actions are described in terms of effects they have and the thesis about the individuation that underlies this claim, see Davidson's 'Agency', reprinted in Essays on Actions and Events, cit. n.2, 43–61.
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are philosophers who allow that actions are events, but who draw upon a conception of events different from the standard story’s own. I hope that it will come to be evident that errors I find in the standard story are not a product of its conception of events as such (see n.14 below). Then again, there are those who allow that an action can be an event of someone’s moving their body but who don’t believe that such an event is a movement. They refuse to equate (say) a’s moving her leg with a’s leg’s movement. Here I agree, but leave expression of my own disbelief for much later because I want to avoid muddying the waters for the present. For the time being, then, let us simply follow the standard story in speaking as if bodily movements were the events which are redescribed in terms of effects or results they have—redescribed so as to reveal interesting things done by someone who moved their body in some way.

An account of action which is events-based, as I shall mean this, assumes more than that actions are such redescribable bodily movements. It also assumes that the phenomenon of human agency, and not just a category of events, is delimited when it is said which events are actions. And it takes it that the causal truths about agency can be formulated as claims about causation of, or by, an action—as claims about particulars. (See Smith’s version quoted above in which both of these assumptions are implicit.) An events-based account thus accords a very central role to events, having recourse to them both in marking out the phenomenon of agency, and in a causal depiction of it.

The events-based character of the standard story is what I shall criticize to begin with. One way to see the error of its first assumption is to think about failures to act (in a certain sense). One way to see the error of its second assumption is to think about how action-explanation works. I take each of these in turn now.

1.1 The key notion in much theory of action has been that of doing something intentionally. This is evidently the notion that has informed the standard story, which takes ‘believe’ ‘desire’ and ‘do intentionally’ to form a sort of conceptual trio. Behind the use of ‘intentionally’ is the thought that one keeps track of what is significant in someone’s life as an agent if one attends to what they intentionally do. That was one of Davidson’s principal claims in his paper ‘Agency’.5

5 Cited in previous note. That paper beings with the question ‘What events in the life of a person reveal agency?’. The question puts in place the assumption that the phenomenon of human agency will be delimited when it is said which events are actions.
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But someone can do something intentionally without there being any action that is their doing the thing. Consider A who decides she shouldn’t take a chocolate, and refrains from moving her arm towards the box; or B who doesn’t want to be disturbed by answering calls, and lets the telephone carry on ringing; or C who, being irritated by someone, pays that person no attention. Imagining that each of these things is intentionally done ensures that we have examples of agency in a sense that Davidson’s claim brought out. But since in these cases, A, B and C don’t move their bodies, we have examples which the standard story doesn’t speak to.

It might be thought that the standard story needs to take the emphasis off bodily movements. And certainly it seems that the story would encompass more than it does if actions weren’t defined by reference to the body and its movements. If D’s temptation to take a chocolate was so powerful that she had to tense her muscles in order to hold herself back, then arguably ‘her refraining from taking a chocolate’ would apply to an event even though her body did not move: it would apply to D’s tensing her muscles, perhaps. Still to adapt the standard story in order to let in an example such as this would not address the real point here, which is that in cases like the three imagined, there simply is no event—no particular—which is the person’s intentionally doing the relevant thing. In the cases of A, B and C, that which ensures that something is done intentionally is not a matter of the occurrence of an event at all. Of course there will be plenty of events in the region of these agents at the time at which they do their things. But as the cases are imagined, none of these events is someone’s doing something intentionally. One might put the point by saying that ‘there is no positive performance’ on the part of A or B or C, and that when actions are taken to be events, they are ‘positive performances’.

Notice that one cannot put the point by saying that there are ‘negative actions’ on the parts of A, B and C. Of course not: where ‘action’ is taken in the standard story’s sense, there could not be any

* The doubt about assimilating actions to bodily movements mentioned a few paragraphs back is different. The question there was this: Assuming that an agent moved her body on some occasion when there was an action, then is it her bodily movement with which the action is to be identified? Here the question is this: Should the class of actions be so circumscribed that it is required that an agent move her body for there to be an event which is an action?
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such thing as a negative action.’ It is true that philosophers who are interested in categories such as omitting, refraining, letting happen sometimes speak of these as categories of ‘negative actions’. But then they don’t use the word ‘action’ as having application to events. It may put a strain on those who raise questions about ‘negative actions’ to use the word as the standard story does—which is what it is denied application as soon as there is no event which can be identified as an action. (This is why speaking of ‘a positive performance’ can help to make the point about the examples.) Still the strain is something that one has to put up with if one adopts the terminology of the standard story in order to evaluate it. The bodily movements of which the story speaks are spatiotemporal particulars. And in any of its versions, the standard story finds actions among such particulars—among events. To that extent, it fails to deal with examples where there is (in its own sense) no action. If such examples appeared to have been included in the story, perhaps that is because it is so easy to forget that ‘action’ is used there in a semi-technical, philosophers’ sense.

1.2 If it were a matter of its preferring one conception of agency to another, then the standard story could not be faulted for leaving out cases where there is no ‘positive performance’. And one can imagine someone thinking that there are reasons to hold on to a relatively narrow conception of agency, which treats the territory of agency as defined by the domain of the events which are actions. (It might, for instance, be thought that certain questions in metaphysics receive a particularly sharp formulation by reference to this domain.) Still the problem with the standard story’s narrow conception is not that it serves only certain purposes: it doesn’t even serve its own.

The reason why the standard story doesn’t serve its own purposes is that it purports to work with a rather general conception of agency, deriving from a model of action-explanation. We saw that proponents of the standard story take the notion of being intentionally done to provide a hallmark of agency. This is thought to provide a hallmark because of its connexion with ‘reason-explanation’—explanation which speaks about agents’ beliefs and desires. A’s, B’s and C’s cases count as agency on this reckoning, because one can construct tales of

7 There are no such things as negative particulars: cp. D. H. Mellor, The Facts of Causation (London: Routledge, 1995), pp.131-4. Notice that the presence of the word ‘not’ in a verb-phrase that applies to some agent need not correspond to there being no action: it could correspond to the occurrence of an action that is negatively described. Equally a positive description can sometimes be given of cases where there is no action (in the standard story’s sense): she spoiled the show by not turning up.
what each of them believed and desired which will appropriately explain their doing their things—not moving, letting the ’phone ring, not paying attention to X. So the standard story locates examples in a certain explanatory setting in order to characterize them as examples of agency, yet, by treating actions as events in accordance with the standard story, it ensures that there are cases that belong in that setting but don’t have a place in the story.

Well, a proponent of the standard story might acknowledge that there are more explanations in the ‘belief-desire’ style than there are events (sc. ‘positive performances’) about which his story could be told, but respond by suggesting that action-explanation comes in two sorts. The suggestion would be that there are explanations in which the occurrence of an event—of a bodily movement—is explained and the standard story can straightforwardly be told; and there are, in addition, explanations in which the standard story cannot be told, although some other, related story, which also mentions ‘beliefs and desires’, no doubt can. But the suggestion is actually not at all plausible. For when we ask why someone did something, expecting to learn about what they thought or wanted, we don’t always need to consider whether or not there was a positive performance on their part; explanation can carry on in the same vein, whether there was or not. One might discover that it was because she wanted to wreak revenge on the producer that she spoiled the show, and it not matter very much whether, for example, she put a sleeping tablet into the principal performer’s drink (so that her spoiling the show was an event that was her putting …) or she simply failed to turn up (so that there was no event, or at least no bodily movement of hers, that was her spoiling the show). Either way, we say that she spoiled the show because she wanted to wreak revenge; and it makes no odds here whether the case is of such a sort that we can construct a statement ‘Her wanting to wreak revenge caused [an event which was whatever bodily movement was] her Φ-ing’.

In the version of Smith’s that we looked at, the standard story contains such causal statements as: ‘Her desiring … and her believing … caused and rationalized a bodily movement’. Simplifying a bit, we can say that the standard story’s causal statements are on the following style and pattern:*

* The simplification assumes that Φ is a cause of that of which d and b are a cause. It is actually unclear how the ‘and’ of ‘d and b caused m’ (a desire and a belief caused a movement) is supposed to work: cp. nn.13 and 15 infra. But I take it that those who tell the standard story will assent to ‘Desires cause actions’, just as they assent to ‘Desires and beliefs cause actions’.
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(SS) Her desire ... caused [an event which was] her bodily movement.

What we have just seen is that it is sometimes impossible to find a statement in this style, and implausible that we should be looking for statements in two different styles. That surely suggests that our focus should be on the sort of causal claim which comes naturally and which applies in every case:

(*) She did such and such because she desired....

Causal statements like this hardly need defence: they are statements of a kind that we commonly recognize to be true.¹

One may wonder now why causal claims like (SS), which are part of the standard story, should ever have been made. For even where there is an event of the agent’s doing something, its occurrence is surely not what gets explained. An action-explanation tells one about the agent: one learns something about her that makes it understandable that she should have done what she did. We don’t want to know (for example) why there was an event of X’s offering aspirins to Y, nor why there was the actual event of X’s offering aspirins to Y that there was. What we want to know is why X did the thing she did—offer aspirins to Y, or whatever.¹⁰ When we are told that she did it because she wanted to help in relieving Y’s headache, we learn what we wanted to know.

¹ I cannot defend the idea that action-explanation is causal in the present paper. About it, I would say what I say, in n.5 supra about the idea that actions are events

¹⁰ I don’t think that I need to take issue with Davidson’s claims in ‘The Logical Form of Action Sentences’ [reprinted in his Essays on Actions and Events, cit. n.2]: one can accept that some of the sentences that give the explanantia of some action-explanations implicitly contain an existential quantifier whose domain is events, without thinking that any of the explanations is focused on the occurrence of an event. The objection that may be raised here will be that someone who allows any sort of equivalence between ‘a Φ-d’ and ‘there was an event of a’s Φ-ing’ is compelled to think that action-explanation is the explanation of events’ occurrences. But I think the objection relies on a failure to appreciate the hypersensitivity of ‘explains why ...’ contexts. Consider that there may be circumstances in which we are interested to know why Mary stole the bicycle, and other circumstances in which we are interested to know why Mary stole the bicycle; and different answers to the questions will satisfy our interests in the different circumstances. (See Jonathan Bennett, §14 of Events and Their Names (Oxford University Press, 1988) 32–3 for a spelling out of this example.) My claim is that when someone seeks an action-explanation, typically what she is interested to know is why someone did something.
Now the standard story’s proponents say that ‘Actions are caused by a desire and a belief of the agent’. So they not only take the occurrence of a particular to be causally explained when an action-explanation is given, they also assume that items in a realm of particulars are what do the explaining. Hence their recurrent talk of ‘belief-desire pairs’ as causes, and of beliefs and desires as ‘token’ states. This is not the place to issue a challenge to the very idea of token states as they figure in the philosophical orthodoxy. But we can notice that those who treat a state of mind a person was in—wanting to help, as it might be—as if it were a particular inside that person, appear to confuse two quite different uses of ‘state’. And it is surely the events-based character of the standard story which gives rise to the idea that action-explanations record truths about causally-related particulars. Only when events are on the scene would there be any incentive to move from (SS) to (SS). (*) gives the form of some action-explanations as normally understood; (SS) purports to see particulars standing in a relation of ‘cause’.

It will have to suffice here to have questioned the conception of action-explanation that an events-based account characteristically leads to. First, a causal explanation of why someone did something could not always be the explanation of an event’s occurrence (for want sometimes of a ‘positive performance’). Secondly, an action-explanation doesn’t ever seem to be focused on saying why an event occurred. Once these points are appreciated, perhaps the habit of thinking that action-explanations mention items which combine with one another in the production of an event will start to be undermined.

11 Helen Steward’s challenge, in Part II of The Ontology of Mind: Events, Processes and States (Oxford University Press, 1997), is devastating. There is no ontological category into which can be lumped both the things which those who tell the standard story call ‘states’ and the things which they call ‘events’.

12 ‘Cause’ is sometimes used in such a way that any ‘because’-statement (or, perhaps, any ‘because’-statement which is genuinely causal) licenses a statement of the form ‘C causes E’. I needn’t quarrel with this usage, insofar as ‘Q because P’ might be equivalent to ‘C causes E’ where ‘C’ and ‘E’ abbreviate ‘the fact that P’ and ‘the fact that Q’. My quarrel here is with the move from ‘Q because P’ to ‘c caused e’, where ‘c’ and ‘e’ are taken to name something in the category of particulars.

13 A different way to undermine this habit is to show that there are no intelligible causal statements which mix together things in a category of events with things in a category of conditions (where so-called ‘token’ states would need to be reckoned in the category of conditions). This is the
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The foregoing is meant to indicate that agency is misconceived in an events-based account of it. Examples where there is no ‘positive performance’ suggest that the account leaves things out, and they point towards the impossibility of accommodating agency to its view about the operation of causality. Perhaps that view—of causality operating through items linked in causal chains—is the correct view of causal truths in some areas. But the truths that make up the phenomenon of agency seem not to belong in a world in which causality operates only in such a manner.  

I come now to a more direct way of showing that agency cannot be captured if one takes this view of causality’s operation. I suggest that if one attempts to locate agency within the confines of such a view, one fails.

Consider Hume on the subject of bodily movements’ production:

We learn from anatomy, that the immediate object of power in voluntary motion, is not the member itself which is moved, but certain muscles, and nerves, and animal spirits, and, perhaps, something still more minute and more unknown, through which the motion is successively propagated, ere it reach the member itself whose motion is the immediate object of volition. [T]he power, by which this whole operation is performed is, to the last degree, mysterious and unintelligible. … [W]e have no power [to move our limbs]; but only that to move certain animal spirits, which, though they produce at last the motion of our limbs, yet operate in such a manner as is wholly beyond our comprehension.  

I hope that it will be evident now that the view about the operation of causality that I put into question need not be founded in the standard story’s conception of events. At the outset of §1, I noted that some philosophers draw on a different conception: an example would be Jaegwon Kim. The criticisms of the standard story in §1 have relied upon a specific conception of events (upon the only conception, I should say, which allows that they are genuinely particulars). But I believe that my claims against “events”—based accounts have application also when “events” is understood in different (but all of them philosophically familiar) ways.

An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding (1748), §7.1

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Conclusion of an argument of Davidson’s ‘Causal Relations’ (reprinted in his Essays on Actions and Events, cit. n.2, 149–62). For a spelling out and endorsement of the relevant argument, see Helen Steward, ‘On the notion of cause “philosophically speaking”’, in Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, XCVII, 1997, 125–40. From the perspective of Steward’s article, it must seem an irony that Davidson’s writings about action should so much have influenced those who tell the standard story.