

1

The nature of action

What is it for a person to act? It is easy to give examples. I act when I voluntarily move my limbs, when I open a door, when I speak or write, press keys on the keyboard, slice a melon, or throw a ball, when I mentally say a word or mentally rotate a visual image. But not all events or states of which a person is the subject are actions. There are, for instance, perceptions, sensations, desires, beliefs, feelings, unbidden thoughts, faintings, sneezings, tremblings, reflex actions, and states of passivity.¹ What distinguishes actions from these other sorts of things? What is the mark of action? Answering this question is not so easy.

REFORMULATING THE QUESTION

It is useful to have a standard way of referring (in English) to particular personal events and states, including actions. A suitable form of a singular noun phrase can be derived from any indicative active sentence that predicates of a person some event or state simply by changing the subject to its possessive form and changing the verb to the present participle. Thus the sentences “Sue suffered during the race” and “Tom started the engine five minutes ago” become, respectively, the singular noun phrases “Sue’s suffering during the race” and “Tom’s starting the engine five minutes ago”.

To be the canonical designator I want, such a noun phrase must pick out a particular personal event or state *uniquely*. A designator such as “My feeling a pain in my hand just now” and “Your turning off the heat this morning” may or may not pick out such a particular uniquely. It depends on whether or not I felt just one pain in a hand

1 Also among the nonactions are such items as not voting in the election, neglecting to lock the door, omitting to put salt in the batter, and remaining inactive. Such things have been called *negative actions*, largely because they can be the objects of choices and intentions. But they are not actions in the sense I am interested in here.

just now or whether or not there was just one occasion this morning when you turned off the heat. Usually it will be a contingent fact, and not something that follows from the descriptive content of a canonical designator, that just one particular happening or state in the life of the person satisfies it. Usually uniqueness of denotation will not be even contingently achieved without reference to a particular occasion, so I make a temporal index, like “just now” or “this morning”, a standard part of a canonical designator. Thus the form of a canonical designator is «*S*’s *V*-ing at *t*»,² where “*S*” is to be replaced by a phrase designating a person, “*V*-ing” is to be replaced by the present participle of a verb phrase “*V*”, and “at *t*” is to be replaced by a designation of a particular time.

Our question about action can now be formulated in the following way: If «*S*’s *V*-ing at *t*» uniquely designates a particular event, then it designates an action if and only if . . . what?

One answer that might be suggested is this: *V*-ing was something *S* did at *t* (or *S*’s *V*-ing at *t* was *S*’s doing something at *t*). Even if this answer is correct, it is not very informative. But some uses of “do” suggest that it is not even correct. Consider: “What was I doing while my house was being burgled? I was sleeping.” “What did I do when I saw that? I fainted.” “Then I did something that made everyone laugh. I blushed beet red.” Sleeping, fainting, and blushing are not (normally) actions of their subjects, but it appears that our language is willing to treat them as doings. It could be replied that these examples represent sloppy uses of “do”, that, for example, the first question could have been correctly answered, “I wasn’t doing anything, I was sleeping”. Such strict or emphatic use of “do” may, perhaps, be tied exclusively to action, but it still needs explicating. We still want to know what it is to do something.³

2 I will use double angle brackets (« and ») in the way Quine’s corner quotation marks have been used. That is, a sentence or other expression within double angle brackets is a variable whose values are all the expressions obtainable from the expression within the brackets by substituting permissibly for the individual letter variables in that expression. I will, however, sometimes omit double angle brackets and use a sentence form where strictly I should use that sentence form within the brackets followed by the words “is true”. It should be obvious where these things need to be read in.

3 The first chapter of Thomson (1977) has some interesting remarks on “do” and action.

IS TO BE AN ACTION TO HAVE A MOTIVE CAUSE?

Another answer is that *S*'s *V*-ing at *t* was an action if and only if it was caused (in the right sort of way) by a combination of desire, or intention, and belief (of an appropriate sort).⁴ The two parenthetical qualifications indicate ways in which this suggestion needs filling out, ways that are not entirely obvious. For instance, the required desire or intention cannot always be simply the desire or intention to *V*, for *S*'s *V*-ing at *t* could have been a completely unwanted and unintentional action. Nor, of course, can *S*'s *V*-ing at *t* always be made an action by the mere fact that it was caused by a desire or intention of *S*'s: *S*'s passing out might have been brought about by *S*'s desire to have another drink.

However this view is filled out, it faces difficulties. If the required motive is supposed to precede the action, then counterexamples are easy to come by. Many a time, for example, I have voluntarily crossed my legs for no particular reason. No antecedent motive, no desire or purpose I expected thereby to serve, prompted me to do it. It was an unpremeditated, spontaneous end in itself, but it was an action if anything is. If the view tries to cover this sort of case by allowing that the desire or intention causing the action need not have preceded but may only have accompanied the action, beginning when it did, then counterexamples are not common occurrences but are nevertheless possible, as we shall see shortly.

Even prior to any concern with how well it fits the data, this sort of analysis seems unsatisfactory. According to it, what makes a personal event an action is something *outside* that event (namely, how it was caused). It seems intuitively preferable, other things being equal, to have an account in which the mark of an action is intrinsic to it, in which an event is an action because of what it is in itself.

This is not to deny that there are important connections between the concept of an action and the concept of an explanation of an action in terms of the agent's reasons for doing it. For one thing, it is important that actions, and only actions, can have that sort of explanation. For another thing, a creature can count as an agent, as one who sometimes acts, only if actions explicable by its antecede-

⁴ This sort of analysis is suggested in chapter 3 of Goldman (1970) and at the end of essay 1 in Davidson (1980). Davidson speaks (p. 19) of "states and changes of state in persons which, because they are reasons as well as causes, *constitute* certain events free and intentional actions" (emphasis mine).

ent motives are characteristic of it. It could not be right to regard a number of events having the same subject as all of the actions of that subject if none of those events were actions that the subject did out of certain motives it had, if that subject never acted in order to satisfy its antecedent desires or carry out its antecedent intentions. Such an “agent” is not conceivable. So even if I am right in maintaining that the mark of an action is intrinsic to it, the relevant intrinsic features mark an event as an action only if that event occurs in the right surroundings. The surroundings required are not, however, a matter of how that particular event was caused – not that *it* must have arisen out of the subject’s motives – but a matter rather of its having the right sort of entity as its subject. And that is a matter of there being enough events like it in that subject’s history that do have that sort of cause (and, one could add, that have some minimal coherence among them and their explanations). This requirement is already taken care of for my analysis by the stipulation that it is an account only of what marks *personal* events as actions, where personal events are those of which persons are the subjects. For nothing can count as a person unless rational agency, acting for reasons, is characteristic of it.

Although it is not necessary for an action to have an explanation in terms of the agent’s motives for doing it, it seems fair to say, in light of the conceptual connections that do obtain, that a complete account of the nature of action should include an account of that sort of explanation. I offer one in Chapter 6.

IS TO ACT ALWAYS TO CAUSE SOMETHING?

Another answer to our question of what marks a personal event as an action, which has appealed to many philosophers (for example, R. Chisholm, R. Taylor, Judith Thomson, M. Zimmerman⁵), is this: *S*’s *V*-ing at *t* was an action of *S*’s if and only if it was (that is, consisted in) *S*’s causing something. This is an intrinsic account; it is not to be confused with saying that *S*’s *V*-ing at *t* was an action if and only if *it* (*S*’s *V*-ing at *t*) was caused by *S*, or with saying that it was an action if and only if it caused something. To act is to cause

⁵ See Chisholm (1966) and Chisholm (1976a), Taylor (1966), Thomson (1977), and Zimmerman (1984).

something: This is appealing, but it is not very informative. We need to know what it is for a person to cause something.

I will consider that question in a moment, but first, I want to dispose of putative counterexamples to the sufficiency of this account, cases where, allegedly, a person causes something but does not thereby or therein engage in any action. Suppose that at a crowded party someone backs into me, causing me to lose my balance and knock over the drink on the table I was standing next to. Didn't *I* knock the drink over? Didn't I cause it to fall over? Yet my doing so was surely no *action* of mine. According to one philosopher,⁶ when one hiccups involuntarily one makes, that is, causes, a sound; yet one's hiccuping involuntarily is not an action.

To me, however, these do *not* seem to be genuine examples of a person's causing something. The movement of my body knocked the drink over but, since *I* did not cause that movement, I did not cause its effect, the drink's falling over. Speaking strictly, it is false that *I* knocked over the drink, just as false as it would be if I had been unconscious and someone else had used my arm to knock it over. Similarly with my involuntary hiccuping. Since I do not cause the movements in my body involved in my hiccuping, I do not cause the sound those movements cause, any more than I cause the sound my stomach makes when it "growls".

One could have a different sort of worry about whether causing something is sufficient for acting. One might think that I could, by an action of mine, cause some event so remote from that action that it would be implausible to speak of *my causing that event* as also an *action* of mine. Suppose, for example, that in the course of a walk through a field, I picked up a largish stone and then dropped it a few steps further on. The stone remains where I dropped it, and a year later, another man walking through that field trips over it. It might seem that I, by moving the stone a year earlier, caused this man to trip; yet it seems wrong to add my causing this man to trip to the list of unfortunate actions I have performed. I think the correct response to this worry is to agree that the man's tripping is part of no action of mine but to disagree that I caused his tripping. Insofar as it is wrong to say that one of my actions consisted in my causing his tripping, it is also wrong to say that I caused his tripping. Although

⁶ Davis (1979, p. 5).

my action of moving the stone did contribute to the factors causing him to trip, it was not a sufficiently central or proximate factor – at any rate, not the right sort of factor⁷ – to count as the, or a, cause of his tripping, and therefore not such as to make it the case that by that action I caused his tripping.

So far, then, the thesis that action consists in causing something is undamaged. But what is it for a person to cause something? In anything properly described as *X*'s causing something, where *X* is any sort of enduring thing, a certain structure must be discernible. There must be an event or state of affairs *E* that is the thing caused, and *X* must have a relation to *E* that merits being described as *X*'s causing *E*. The effect *E* is only a part and not the whole of what constitutes *X*'s causing *E*. There must also be a causal relation between *X* and *E*.

In many sorts of action – most that we have occasion to talk about – such a structure is easily discerned. In *S*'s opening a door, for example, the caused event is the door's opening. *S*'s relation to that event, in virtue of which *S* causes it, is *S*'s voluntarily exerting her body in connection with the door in such a way as thereby to cause the door to open.

In such cases, the relation between *S* and the event *E* in virtue of which *S* causes *E* consists in *S*'s being the subject of another event *C* (typically a voluntary exertion of *S*'s body) and *C*'s causing *E*. This imitates the pattern in cases where an *inanimate* object *A* is said to act upon an object *B* and cause it to undergo some change (“A tree caused the roof of my car to collapse”). This means that *A* is the subject of some change that causes the change in *B*. And it is plausible to think that this must always be what is meant when any enduring thing – even a person – is said to cause a certain event. Let us call this the *event-causation* analysis of “*X* causes *E*”: *X* causes *E* if and only if there is an event *C* such that *X* is the subject of *C* and *C* causes *E*.

It is easy to see, however, that this analysis is not sufficient for the case of a person's causing something. For a person *S* to cause *E*, it is not enough for *S* to be the subject of just any sort of event that causes *E*. When someone else pushes my body and thereby causes

⁷ It would be a far from trivial task, which I will not undertake here, to give an informative account of what makes an action the right sort of factor in causing an event to make it true to say that the agent thereby causes that event. A number of interesting and relevant points are made in Hart and Honore (1959, part I).

it to knock over a vase, I am the subject of my body's motion. But this does not mean that I cause what it causes. For I did not cause *it*: It was not I who moved my body. The person suffering from a seizure is the subject of the events in his brain that cause the spasms of his body, but it is not the case that *he* causes those spasms, for he does not cause those brain events.

What is missing in these cases? Is there a sort of event such that if and only if *S* is the subject of an event of that sort, and it causes *E*, then *S* causes *E*? We may be tempted to say yes, of course, the sort of event in question – the cause event in a person's causing something – must be an *action* of that person. If we say this, however, then we cannot hold that acting consists in causing something without getting caught in an unfortunate regress. *S*'s causing something always consists in an action of *S*'s causing it, and this action of *S*'s always consists in *S*'s causing something. Given that nothing can cause itself, this entails that every action contains an infinite, beginningless nesting of distinct action–consequence pairs. Although such a thing may not be a logical impossibility, we have no reason to think that it exists in any action, and it is not credible that it should be required in every action.⁸ Perhaps there is no event of the sort required by the event–causation analysis; perhaps this analysis does not always apply to a person's causing something.

At any rate, it is clear that at least one of the following three theses must be wrong: (1) the thesis that action consists in causing something, (2) the thesis that the *event*–causation analysis always applies to a *person's* causing something, or (3) the thesis that when a person causes something, the cause event must be an action. (Theses [3] entails thesis [2], but not the converse.) For these three together do yield the unacceptable regress. Some philosophers would have us retain (1) and give up (2) and (3).⁹ A person may cause one event by causing another that causes it, but in the basic case, according to these philosophers, a person causes an event *E*, not in virtue of causing, or being the subject of, another event that causes *E*, but in virtue of a special causal relation that obtains between the person

⁸ As Christopher Hughes has pointed out to me, it could be argued that, since any finite temporal interval is infinitely divisible, any volitional activity occupying an interval can be thought of as likewise infinitely divisible. But this argument, even if sound, does not show what is here said to be incredible: that any chunk of volitional activity contains an infinite sequence of action–consequence pairs.

⁹ See Chisholm (1966) and Taylor (1966, ch. 9).

as *such* and *E*. This special causal relation – which has been dubbed *agent causation* – is supposed to be sui generis and not reducible to event causation. The relatum on the cause side of agent causation is just *the agent*, brutally and irreducibly. These philosophers would propose, then, that a person *S* causes *E* if and only if either *S* agent causes *E* or *S* causes some other event that causes *E*. One who subscribes to this analysis can hold to thesis (1) without getting into the regress.

But many philosophers will wonder whether we really must posit such a thing as agent causation in order to defend (1). Maybe we could retain (2), as well as (1), and avoid the regress by denying (3), that *S* causes *E* only if an action of *S*'s causes *E*. Can we find a case of *S*'s causing something where that thing is caused by some event (of which *S* is the subject) that is not an action?

It might be thought that voluntary exertion of the body must be such a case. Consider, for example, *S*'s voluntary exertion of force forward with her arm (say, in order to open a door). By *voluntary* here, I mean simply the opposite of *involuntary*: A voluntary exertion of the body is simply an exertion that occurs in the familiar way exertions do when they are experienced as not involuntary, as directly controlled (which does not require that the exertion be antecedently deliberated or *freely* willed or even intentional). Such a voluntary exertion of the body is a clear case of an action. It seems also to be a case of *S*'s causing something, namely, her arm's exerting force. For this could have occurred without its being a case where *S* exerted a force with her arm, without its being exertion *by S*, and this is to say that it could have occurred without being caused by *S*. *S*'s voluntarily exerting force with her arm requires something in addition to the arm's exerting force. It might seem that the additional thing needed cannot be any *action* of *S*'s that causes the arm to exert force. It might seem that there is no such action, that there is no action that is to *S*'s arm's exerting force as is her exerting force with her arm to the door's opening. We will see later that this is not so. But if you thought it was so, and you wanted to hold to theses (1) and (2), what sort of event could you suggest as the nonaction cause in voluntary exertion?

Two candidates seem initially plausible: (a) an occurrent intention or desire that the exertion occur forthwith or (b) an appropriate sort of brain event. The problem with suggestion (a) is that it is possible for a person to exert a limb voluntarily without in any way wanting

or intending the exertion to occur. Suppose that *S* is convinced that her arm is paralyzed; she believes that the motor-neural connections to her arm have been disrupted in such a way that she can make no voluntary exertion at all with it. She might nevertheless *try* (or, as we might better say, *will*) to exert her arm just in order to see what it is like to will an exertion ineffectually, and she might do this while not intending or wanting any such exertion actually to occur, perhaps even while wanting it very much *not* to occur. But it happens that she is completely mistaken about the motor-neural connections to her arm; they are actually in normal working order. To her surprise, when she tries she succeeds: She voluntarily but unintentionally exerts her arm. This shows that the specified sort of desire or intention need not be present in voluntary exertion.

In response to this difficulty, suggestion (a) might be modified to read: The event cause in voluntary exertion is always an occurring desire or intention to exert, *or to will to exert*, forthwith. But a voluntary exertion could occur in the way just described quite spontaneously, without being preceded or accompanied by any distinct state of desiring or intending even to try (or to will ineffectually) to exert, and it would still be an action, a purely spontaneous one. Or it is conceivable that a voluntary exertion, unaccompanied and unpreceded by any desire or intention for it, could be caused by external stimulation of the brain. (Such voluntary exertions would be actions of the person, though there would be a point in saying that a person's actions that are externally manipulated in this way are "not really her own" actions.) So neither the original nor the modified version of suggestion (a) gives a correct answer to the question of what could be the nonaction event cause ingredient in voluntary exertion.

Incidentally, the sorts of cases just described provide the counterexamples, promised earlier, to the view that *S*'s *V*-ing at *t* was an action if and only if it was caused in the right sort of way by desire or intention, they show that there *need* be no relevant desire or intention, either antecedent or concurrent, that causes a voluntary exertion.

Suggestion (b), that some sort of brain event is the nonaction cause in voluntary exertion, is based on the empirical hypothesis that any voluntary exertion is voluntary in virtue of a specific sort of brain process that causes activation of the motor neurons to the muscles. This hypothesis is, I take it, well supported by now. Someone

might object to this suggestion, however, that the event-causation analysis of *S*'s causing an event *E* makes it a *conceptual* requirement of *S*'s causing *E* that there be some other event of which *S* is the subject that causes *E*. Thus the event cause of a limb's exerting force should be something that would be known to be there by anyone who grasps the concept of a person's causing her limb to exert and knows that the concept applies in her own case. But a brain event does not fill this bill. People who know nothing about how bodily exertions are caused by neural processes are quite justified in their confidence that they cause their body's exertion; but this would not be so if what constitutes the conceptually required cause is a sort of neural event of which they have no inkling. To this objection it might be replied that, if the brain process is identical to a mental process, then subjects who know that they are making voluntary exertions *are* aware of the required event-causes, whether or not they know that these causes are brain events. This reply may succeed in refuting that argument against suggestion (b), but there is still no basis for accepting suggestion (b) unless there is a plausible candidate for this mental process that is not mental *action*, and it is doubtful that there is.

Although the facts about the brain processes specific to voluntary exertion may show that it fits the event-causation analysis, they do not necessarily show that no *action* is the event cause of the body's exertion. In fact, a good case can be made for the contrary. A sort of brain process counts as specific to voluntary exertion in the way required – as involved in causing the body's exertion just when that exertion is voluntary – only if it has the following feature: If such a brain process occurs but, owing to some unusual circumstance, fails to cause the normal exertion, then it must seem to the subject that she has at least tried to make the exertion. (In the special sort of case described earlier, where she neither wanted nor intended to make the exertion, we should perhaps put it this way: She did what would be trying to make it in the normal circumstance of her intending to make it.) But to try to act is to *act*¹⁰ (though it is not

10 This is a proposition that seems to me to be intuitively very hard to deny, even for the case where the trying to exert results in no bodily exertion at all and is therefore just a mental event. But at least one philosopher has denied it. See Zimmerman (1984, pp. 81–2).

In an earlier version of this chapter I had written, "to try is to act". I thank Christopher Hughes for pointing out that this simpler statement is not equivalent to "to try to act is to act", because intentionally *not* acting in a certain way can