1 / Agency*

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

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

Some of these items record things I did; others, things that befell me, things that happened to me on the way to the dining room. Among the things I did were get up, wash, shave, go downstairs, and spill a bit of coffee. Among the things that happened to me were being awakened and stumbling on the edge of the rug. A borderline case, perhaps, is dozing. Doubts could be kindled about other cases by

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embroidering on the story. Stumbling can be deliberate, and when so counts as a thing done. I might have turned off the light by inadvertently brushing against the switch; would it then have been my deed, or even something that I did?

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

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

Philosophers often seem to think that there must be some simple grammatical litmus of agency, but none has been discovered. I drugged the sentry, I contracted malaria, I danced, I swooned, Jones was kicked by me, Smith was outlived by me: this is a series of examples designed to show that a person named as subject in sentences in the active, whether or not the verb is transitive, or as object in the passive, may or may not be the agent of the event recorded.[2]

1 See J. L. Austin, "A Plea for Excuses," in *Philosophical Papers* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1961), pp. 126–127.

2 The point is developed in Irving Thalberg's "Verbs, Deeds and What Happens to Us," *Theoria*, 33 (1967), 259–260.

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

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

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

even in this case, to say I spilled the coffee. Thus we must distinguish three situations in which it is correct to say I spilled the coffee: in the first, I do it intentionally; in the second I do not do it intentionally but it is my action (I thought it was tea); in the third it is not my action at all (you jiggle my hand).[3]

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

Can we now say what element is common to the cases of agency? We know that intentional acts are included, and that the place to look to find what such acts share with the others is at the coffee spillings and such where we can distinguish spillings that involve agency from those that do not. I am the agent if I spill the coffee meaning to spill the tea, but not if you jiggle my hand. What is the difference? The difference seems to lie in the fact that in one case, but not in the other, I am intentionally doing *something*. My spilling the contents

3 This threefold division should not be confused with Austin's subtle work on the differences among purpose, intention, and deliberation in "Three Ways of Spilling Ink," *Philosophical Review*, 75 (1966), 427–440.

of my cup was intentional; as it happens, this very same act can be redescribed as my spilling the coffee. Of course, thus redescribed the action is no longer intentional; but this fact is apparently irrelevant to the question of agency.

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

The possibility of this answer turns on the semantic opacity, or intensionality, of attributions of intention. Hamlet intentionally kills the man behind the arras, but he does not intentionally kill Polonius. Yet Polonius is the man behind the arras, and so Hamlet's killing of the man behind the arras is identical with his killing of Polonius. It is a mistake to suppose there is a class of intentional actions: if we took this tack, we should be compelled to say that one and the same action was both intentional and not intentional. As a first step toward straightening things out, we may try talking not of actions but of sentences and descriptions of actions instead. In the case of agency, my proposal might then be put: a person is the agent of an event if and only if there is a description of what he did that makes true a sentence that says he did it intentionally. This formulation, with its quantification over linguistic entities, cannot be considered entirely satisfactory. But to do better would require a semantic analysis of sentences about propositional attitudes.[4]

Setting aside the need for further refinement, the proposed criterion of actions seems to fit the examples we have discussed. Suppose an officer aims a torpedo at a ship he thinks is the *Tirpitz* and actually sinks the *Bismark*. Then sinking the *Bismark* is his action, for that action is identical with his attempt to sink the ship he took to be the *Tirpitz*, which is intentional. Similarly, spilling the coffee is the act of a person who does it by intentionally spilling the contents of his cup. It is now clearer, too, why mistakes are actions, for making a

4 For an attempt at such a theory, see my "On Saying That," *Synthèse*, 19 (1968–69), 130–146.

mistake must be doing something with the intention of achieving a result that is not forthcoming.

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

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

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

The extensionality of the expression of agency suggests that the concept of agency is simpler or more basic than that of intention, but unfortunately the route we have travelled does not show how to exploit the hint, for all we have seen is how to pick out cases of agency by appeal to the notion of

intention. This is to analyze the obscure by appeal to the more obscure – not as pointless a process as often thought, but still disappointing. We should try to see if we can find a mark of agency that does not use the concept of intention.

The notion of cause may provide the clue. With respect to causation, there is a certain rough symmetry between intention and agency. If I say that Smith set the house on fire in order to collect the insurance, I explain his action, in part, by giving one of its causes, namely Smith's desire to collect the insurance. If I say that Smith burned down the house by setting fire to the bedding, then I explain the conflagration by giving a cause, namely Smith's action. In both cases, causal explanation takes the form of fuller description of an action, either in terms of a cause or of an effect. To describe an action as one that had a certain purpose or intended outcome is to describe it as an effect; to describe it as an action that had a certain outcome is to describe it as a cause. Attributions of intention are typically excuses and justifications; attributions of agency are typically accusations or assignments of responsibility. Of course the two kinds of attribution do not rule one another out, since to give the intention with which an act was done is also, and necessarily, to attribute agency. If Brutus murdered Caesar with the intention of removing a tyrant, then a cause of his action was a desire to remove a tyrant and an effect was the death of Caesar. If the officer sank the *Bismark* with the intention of sinking the *Tirpitz*, then an action of his was caused by his desire to sink the *Tirpitz* and had the consequence that the *Bismark* sank.[5]

These examples and others suggest that, in every instance of action, the agent made happen or brought about or produced or authored the event of which he was the agent, and these phrases in turn seem rendered by the idea of cause.

5 In "Actions, Reasons, and Causes," *Journal of Philosophy*, 60 (1963), 685–700, I developed the theme that to give a reason or intention with which an action is performed is, among other things, to describe the action in terms of a cause. In this essay I explore how the effects of actions enter into our descriptions of them.

Can we then say that to be the author or agent of an event is to cause it? This view, or something apparently much like it, has been proposed or assumed by a number of recent authors.[6] So we should consider whether the introduction of the notion of causation in this way can improve our understanding of the concept of agency.

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

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

Not every event we attribute to an agent can be explained as caused by another event of which he is agent: some acts must be primitive in the sense that they cannot be analyzed in terms of their causal relations to acts of the same agent. But then event-causality cannot in this way be used to explain

6 For example, Roderick Chisholm, "Freedom and Action," in *Freedom and Determinism*, edited by Keith Lehrer (New York: Random House, 1966); Daniel Bennett, "Action, Reason and Purpose," *The Journal of Philosophy*, 62 (1965), 85–96; Anthony Kenny, *Action, Emotion and Will* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963); Georg Henrick von Wright, *Norm and Action* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963); Richard Taylor, *Action and Purpose* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ:Prentice-Hall, 1966). Previous criticism of this kind of causal analysis of agency can be found in my "The Logical Form of Action Sentences," in *The Logic of Decision and Action*, edited by Nicholas Rescher (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1967) and Irving Thalberg, "Do We Cause our Own Actions?" *Analysis*, 27 (1967), 196–201.

the relation between an agent and a primitive action. Event-causality can spread responsibility for an action to the consequences of the action, but it cannot help explicate the first attribution of agency on which the rest depend.[7]

If we interpret the idea of a bodily movement generously, a case can be made for saying that all primitive actions are bodily movements. The generosity must be open-handed enough to encompass such "movements" as standing fast, and mental acts like deciding and computing. I do not plan to discuss these difficult examples now; if I am wrong about the precise scope of primitive actions, it will not affect my main argument. It is important, however, to show that in such ordinary actions as pointing one's finger or tying one's shoelaces the primitive action is a bodily movement.

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

In discussing examples like this one, Chisholm has sug-

7 Here, and in what follows, I assume that we have set aside an analysis of agency that begins by analyzing the concept of intention, or of acting with an intention, or of a reason in acting. These concepts can be analyzed, at least in part, in terms of event-causality. In the article mentioned in footnote 5, I try to show that although beliefs and desires (and similar mental states) are not events, we can properly say that they are causes of intentional actions, and when we say this we draw upon the concept of ordinary event-causality ("Actions, Reasons, and Causes," pages 693–695).

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

It does not seem to me that this is a clear or useful distinction: all of Chisholm's cases of making something happen are, so far as my intuition goes, cases of agency, situations in which we may, and do, allow that the person did something. When a person makes an event occur in his brain, he does not normally know that he is doing this, and Chisholm seems to suggest that for this reason we cannot say it is something that he does. But a man may even be doing something intentionally and not know that he is; so of course he can be doing it without knowing that he is. (A man may be making ten carbon copies as he writes, and this may be intentional; yet he may not know that he is; all he knows is that he is trying.)

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

8 Chisholm, "Freedom and Action."

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

The objection founders for the same reason as the last one. Everything depends on whether or not there is an appropriate description of the action. It is correctly assumed that unless the agent himself is aware of what he is doing with his body alone, unless he can conceive his movements as an event physically separate from whatever else takes place, his bodily movements cannot be his action. But it is wrongly supposed that such awareness and conception are impossible in the case of speaking or of tying one's shoelaces. For an agent always knows how he moves his body when, in acting intentionally, he moves his body, in the sense that there is *some* description of the movement under which he knows that he makes it. Such descriptions are, to be sure, apt to be trivial and unrevealing; this is what ensures their existence. So, if I tie my shoelaces, here is a description of my movements: I move my body in just the way required to tie my shoelaces. Similarly, when I utter words, it is true that I am unable to describe what my tongue and mouth do, or to name the muscles I move. But I do not need the terminology of the

speech therapist: what I do is move my mouth and muscles, as I know how to do, in just the way needed to produce the words I have in mind.

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

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

Restricting ourselves, for the reason just given, to primitive actions, how well does the idea of agent-causality account for the relation between an agent and his action? There is this dilemma: either the causing by an agent of a primitive action is an event discrete from the primitive action, in which case we have problems about acts of the will or worse, or it is not a discrete event, in which case there seems no difference between saying someone caused a primitive action and saying he was the agent.

To take the first horn: suppose that causing a primitive

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

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

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

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

The accordion effect will not reveal in what respect an act is intentional. If someone moves his mouth in such a way as to produce the words "your bat is on hackwards," thus

9 Joel Feinberg, "Action and Responsibility," in *Philosophy in America*, edited by Max Black (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1965).

10 The formulation in this sentence is more accurate than some of my examples. Suppose Jones intentionally causes Smith intentionally to shoot Clifford to death. We certainly won't conclude that Jones shot Clifford, and we may or may not say that Jones killed Clifford. Still, my formulation is correct provided we can go from "Jones's action caused Clifford's death" to "Jones caused Clifford's death." There will, of course, be a conflict if we deny that both Jones and Smith (in our story) could be said to have caused Clifford's death, and at the same time affirm the transitivity of causality. We could, however, preserve the formula in the face of a denial that under the circumstances Jones could be said to have caused Clifford's death by saying that under the circumstances the transitivity of causality also breaks down. For further discussion of the issue, see H. L. A. Hart and A. M. Honoré, *Causation in the Law* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1959); Joel Feinberg, "Causing Voluntary Actions," in *Metaphysics and Explanation*, edited by W. H. Capitan and D. D. Merrill (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1965); and J. E. Atwell, "The Accordion-Effect Thesis," *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 19 (1969), 337–342.

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

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

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

The accordion effect is interesting because it shows that we treat the consequences of actions differently from the way

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

At this point I abandon the search for an analysis of the concept of agency that does not appeal to intention, and turn to a related question that has come to the fore in the discussion of agent-causality and the accordion effect. The new question is what relation an agent has to those of his actions that are not primitive, those actions in describing which we go beyond mere movements of the body and dwell on the consequences, on what the agent has wrought in the world beyond his skin. Assuming that we understand agency in the case of primitive actions, how exactly are such actions related to the rest? The question I now raise may seem already to have been settled, but in fact it has not. What *is* clear is the relation between a primitive action, say moving one's finger in a certain way, and a consequence such as one's shoelaces being tied: it is the relation of event-causality. But this does not give a clear answer to the question of how the movement of the hands is related to the action of tying one's shoelaces, nor for that matter, to the question of how the action of tying one's shoelaces is related to one's shoelaces being tied. Or, to alter the example, if Brutus killed Caesar by stabbing him, what is the relation between these two actions, the relation expressed by the "by"? No doubt it is true that Brutus killed Caesar because the stabbing resulted in Caesar's death; but we still have that third event whose relations to the others are unclear, namely the killing itself.

It is natural to assume that the action whose mention includes mention of an outcome itself somehow includes that outcome. Thus Feinberg says that a man's action may be "squeezed down to a minimum or else stretched out" by the accordion effect. "He turned the key, he opened the door, he startled Smith, he killed Smith – all of these are things we

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

The idea that opening a door requires prior causal activity, a movement that causes the door to open, is not Feinberg's alone. He quotes J. L. Austin in the same vein: "... a single term descriptive of what he did may be made to cover either a smaller or a larger stretch of events, those excluded by the narrower description being then called 'consequences' or 'results' or 'effects' or the like of his act."[14] Arthur Danto has drawn the distinction, in several articles, between "basic acts," such as moving a hand, and other acts that are caused by the basic acts, such as moving a stone.[15]

11 Feinberg, "Action and Responsibility," p. 146. I am concerned with an issue that is not central in Feinberg's excellent paper. Even if my *caveats* are justified, his thesis is not seriously affected.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 145.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 147.

14 Austin, "A Plea for Excuses," p. 145.

15 Arthur Danto, "What We Can Do," *Journal of Philosophy*, 60 (1963),

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

There is more than a hint of conflict between two incompatible ideas in Austin and Feinberg. As we noticed before, Feinberg shows some inclination to treat moving one's hand and opening the door (and startling Smith, etc.) as one and the same action, which is somehow stretched out or contracted; but he also says things that seem to contradict this, especially when he claims that one must first do something else to cause the door to open in order to open the door. The same strain is noticeable in Austin's pronouncement, for he speaks of different terms descriptive of *what the man did* – apparently one and the same thing – but the terms "cover"

435–445; "Basic Actions," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 2 (1965), 141–148; "Freedom and Forbearance," in *Freedom and Determinism*. Chisholm endorses the distinction in "Freedom and Action," p. 39.

16 Danto's view that if I close the door by moving my hand, my action of closing the door is caused by my moving my hand, has been ably criticized by Myles Brand, "Danto on Basic Actions," *Noûs*, 2 (1968), 187–190; Frederick Stoutland, "Basic Actions and Causality," *Journal of Philosophy*, 65 (1968), 467–475; Wilfrid Sellars, "Metaphysics and the Concept of a Person," in *The Logical Way of Doing Things*, edited by Karel Lambert (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969).

My target is more general: I want to oppose any view that implies that if I do *A* by doing *B* then my doing *A* and my doing *B* must be numerically distinct.

smaller or larger stretches of events. Events that cover different stretches cannot be identical.[17]

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

It is evident that the relation between the queen's moving her hand in such a way as to pour poison in the king's ear, and her killing him, cannot be the relation of event-causality. If it were, we would have to say the queen caused herself to kill the king. This is not the same as saying the queen brought it about, or made it the case, that she killed the king; these locutions, while strained, do not seem clearly wrong, for it is not clear that they mean anything more than that the queen brought herself to kill the king. But then the locutions cannot be causal in the required sense. For suppose that by moving her hand the queen caused herself to kill the king. Then we could ask how she did this causing. The only answer I can imagine is that she did it by moving her hand in that way. But this movement was by itself enough to cause the death of the king – there was no point to a further action on the part of the queen. Nor is there any reason (unless we add to the story in an irrelevant way) why the queen should have wanted to cause herself to kill the king. What she wanted to do was kill the king – that is, do something that would cause his death. Is it not absurd to suppose that, after the queen has moved her hand in such a way as to cause the king's death, any deed remains for her to do or to complete? She has done her work; it only remains for the poison to do its.

It will not help to think of killing as an action that begins when the movement of the hand takes place but ends later. For once again, when we inquire into the relation between these events, the answer must be that the killing consists of

17 There is further discussion of these issues in my "The Individuation of Events," in *Essays in Honor of Carl G. Hempel*, edited by Nicholas Rescher *et al.* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1970).

the hand movement and one of its consequences. We can put them together this way because the movement of the hand caused the death. But then, in moving her hand, the queen was doing something that caused the death of the king. These are two descriptions of the same event – the queen moved her hand in that way; she did something that caused the death of the king. (Or to put it, as I would rather, in terms of a definite description: The moving of her hand by the queen on that occasion was identical with her doing something that caused the death of the king.) Doing something that causes a death is identical with causing a death. But there is no distinction to be made between causing the death of a person and killing him.[18] It follows that what we thought was a more attenuated event – the killing – took no more time, and did not differ from, the movement of the hand.

The idea that under the assumed circumstances killing a person differs from moving one's hand in a certain way springs from a confusion between a feature of the description of an event and a feature of the event itself. The mistake consists in thinking that when the description of an event is made to include reference to a consequence, then the consequence itself is included in the described event. The accordion, which remains the same through the squeezing and stretching, is the action; the changes are in aspects described, or descriptions of the event. There are, in fact, a great many tunes we can play on the accordion. We could start with "The queen moved her hand" and pull to the right by adding "thus causing the vial to empty into the king's ear"; and now another tug, "thus causing the poison to enter the body of the king"; and finally (if we have had enough – for the possibilities for expansion are without clear limit), "thus causing the king to die." This expression can be shortened in many ways, into the centre, the left, or the right

18 See footnote 10. The argument goes through if the claim of this sentence is weakened by adding "in the case where a person is killed by doing something that causes his death."

components, or any combination. For some examples: "The queen moved her hand thus causing the death of the king" (the two ends); or, "The queen killed the king" (collapse to the right); or "The queen emptied the vial into the king's ear" (the centre). There is another way to pull the instrument out, too: we could *start* with "The queen killed the king," adding "by pouring poison in his ear," and so on – addition to the left. Many of these expressions are equivalent: for example, "The queen killed the king by pouring poison in his ear" and "The queen poured poison in the king's ear thus causing his death." And obviously the longer descriptions entail many of the shorter ones.

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

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

This doctrine, while not quite as bad as the bad old doctrine that all we ever do is will things to happen, or set ourselves to act, may seem to share some of the same disadvantages. Let me briefly indicate why I do not think that this is so.

19 This conclusion is not new. It was clearly stated by G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1959), pp. 37–47. I followed suit in "Actions, Reasons, and Causes."

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

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

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

The same fact underlies the last two answers: being attempted and being known to occur are not characteristics of events, but of events as described or conceived in one way or

another. It is this fact too that explains why we may be limited, in our actions, to mere movements of our bodies, and yet may be capable, for better or for worse, of building dams, stemming floods, murdering one another, or, from time to time, hitting the bull's eye.

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

To say that all actions are primitive actions is merely to acknowledge, perhaps in a misleading way, the fact that the concept of being primitive, like the concept of being intentional, is intensional, and so cannot mark out a *class* of actions. If an event is an action, then under some description(s) it is primitive, and under some description(s) it is intentional. This explains why we were frustrated in the attempt to assume a basic concept of agency as applied to primitive actions and extend it to further actions defined in terms of the consequences of primitive actions: the attempt fails because there are no further actions, only further descriptions.

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

Comments

BY JAMES CORNMAN

There are several very interesting points that Professor Davidson makes in his paper, and, although I shall not discuss them all in detail, I would at least like to highlight some of them with a few comments. In order of appearance they are as follows. First, Davidson defines, or at least provides necessary and sufficient conditions for, "Person *P* is the agent of event *a*" in terms of *P*'s intentions and descriptions of *a*. I shall discuss this point in detail and try to show that, as I understand Davidson's views, he faces objections to both the "if" and the "only if" parts of his definition.

Second, Davidson hints in passing (p. 9) that the difference between a situation in which someone raises his arm and one in which his arm merely goes up is not the occurrence of an act of will in the former but not the latter case, but rather is the occurrence in the former of a certain kind of cause of his arm going up, such as a desire to get something from a shelf. This point opens up a whole fascinating and relatively untapped area, but I can here make only a few sketchy remarks. I tend to agree with Davidson that the difference in the two situations is a difference in cause. Where I am more skeptical is in agreeing with Davidson's classification of such differentiating causes as desires (p. 9). I tend more to let the classification be determined by scientists, leaving open the question of whether they classify the relevant event as a brain process, or a desire, or perhaps some postulated theoretical entity that fits neither of those two classifications.

Third, Davidson makes the most interesting point that, although the ordinary concept of event-causality is needed for a satisfactory account of agency, agent-causality conceived as something irreducibly different from event-causation is of no value for such an account. He states a dilemma to show this (p. 13). We can reconstruct it as follows: either the event

of *P* causing *a* is different from the action of *P* being agent of *a* or it is not. If it is different, then to avoid an infinite regress the event of *P* causing *a* is not an action of *P*. Thus this alternative posits an event that accompanies every action but which is distinct from every action. Davidson sees no reason to do this, for that would be explaining agency by "an even more obscure notion, that of a causing that is not a doing" (p. 13). If the event and the action are identical, however, Davidson finds no gain over merely saying that *P* is the agent of *a*, and thus positing agent-causality is again unjustified. I have doubts about both horns of the dilemma. First, if my sketchy comments on the second point are roughly correct, there may be a distinguishing kind of cause, whether desire, brain process, or whatever, that accompanies all cases of action (because it causes the event) but which is itself not an action. This cause might be a desire, as Davidson claims, but it might also be an event of desiring or even a brain event. If either of the latter is correct, then it could be argued that agent-causation is reducible to regular, "unobscure" event-causation, because my causing an event would be identical with some desiring or some brain event causing the event. But if, as Davidson claims, it is a desire that causes the event, then, I should think, because a desire is not an event, agent-causation is not reducible to event-causation. Nor would it be reducible, if, to explain the particular events of which people are agents, scientists postulated an ego or some other kind of subject, a subject which, for example, so affected brain events that in, and only in, such cases would they cause those particular bodily events. But even so, it is not clear that this kind of causing is doomed to obscurity. It might be explicated scientifically.

Concerning the second horn of the dilemma, Davidson is correct in saying that if one takes this horn one has neither explained nor helpfully analyzed *P* being the agent of *a* merely by saying that *P* causes *a*, but this does not show that there is no need for agency-causation as irreducibly different

from event-causation. Nor does it preclude that such a causal concept might come to be part of a respectable scientific explanatory theory. At most it shows that there is no need for the three relations: *P* is the agent cause of *a*, *e* is event cause of *a*, and *P* is the agent of *a*. On this view of agency we do not need both the first and third relations, but Davidson has not shown that we do not need at least one. And if we do need one, then no matter which it is, someone who grasps the second horn could claim that that relation is indeed agent-causation. On my part I think the most we should say here is that we *may* need more than mere event-causation to explain agency, but also we may not. The decision about whether there is such a need or not does not seem to be purely a philosophical decision.

Davidson's fourth point is also controversial and, on the face of it, blatantly false. He says that "our primitive actions, the ones we do not do by doing something else, mere movements of the body – these are all the actions there are" (p. 23). This claim seems clearly false because people do such actions as sinking ships, and, it seems clear, such actions are not "mere movements of the body." But this is where Davidson disagrees. His view is that all actions such as sinking ships are identical with the actions of causing ships to sink, and all actions of causing ships to sink are identical with primitive actions, that is, with bodily movements. Now there may be something wrong here, but if there is, it is not blatant. Indeed the issues here are rather subtle, too subtle to grasp easily. However, because one of the problems that arises for Davidson in adopting his "if and only if" definition of "*P* is the agent of event *a*" arises because of his reduction of all actions to bodily movements, I shall defer discussion of this reduction until later when more details of his view are made available.

DEFINITION OF "*P* IS THE AGENT OF EVENT *a*"

Toward the beginning of his discussion of agency, Davidson concludes that perhaps "being intentional is the relevant distinguishing mark" of agency (p. 5). But he points out that it can be true to say that an event is done intentionally when described in one way, but false when described in another way. Thus he first states his mark of agency in the following way: "A man is the agent of an act if what he does can be described under an aspect that makes it intentional" (p. 7). This is less than clear, but I think it can be clarified and seen to be true. Davidson, himself, clarifies it soon after in an "if and only if" definition which provides, thereby, not only a mark of agency but also a mark of the absence of agency. He says: "A person is the agent of an event if and only if there is a description of what he did that makes true a sentence that says that he did it intentionally" (p. 7). I shall assume this is Davidson's final statement and shall try to do four things: first, clarify it symbolically; second, restate it without quantification over descriptions; third, cast doubt on intentionality as a necessary condition of agency; and fourth, cast doubt on conjoining the true claim that being intentional is a sufficient condition of agency with other claims Davidson makes in his paper.

The first two tasks can be completed quickly. We can avoid talk of being "under aspects," of descriptions *making* sentences true, and of sentences *saying* things by using the following symbolism:

D1 P is the agent of event $a \equiv (\exists x)$ ($Dxa \cdot$ "P did y intentionally" is true if x is substituted for "y"),

where $Dxa = x$ is a description of a. This I think is clear enough, but I should like also to unpack "P did y intentionally" somewhat. I shall interpret it as "P did y with the intention of doing y." This makes clearer which conditions a description must fulfil as a value of the variable "y" in

order to meet Davidson's marks of agency and non-agency.

One bothersome thing about Davidson's definition is that it quantifies over descriptions. Not only might it be preferred not to quantify over such entities unless it is necessary, but also it can be doubted that a person is an agent of an event only if there is some description to describe it. It seems at least possible that people be agents and there be no language, and thus no descriptions. I know that some people would think this is not possible, and it surely is a debatable point. Rather than argue it here, however, I shall attempt to restate Davidson's definition in such a way that only events are quantified over – something Davidson thinks is necessary anyway. If my proposal succeeds, then, because it avoids the debate about quantification over descriptions, we can disagree with Davidson when he claims that "to do better [than his formulation] would require a semantic analysis of sentences about propositional attitudes" (p. 7).

In Davidson's definition, descriptions of the event a are referred to, and it is only required that there be some description of a that results in a true sentence when substituted in "P did y intentionally." But why can we not talk in the material mode rather than the formal mode and refer to some event that is identical with a rather than to some descriptions of a? What we would get is:

D2 P is the agent of event $a \equiv (\exists x)$ $(Ex \cdot P$ did x intentionally $\cdot x = a)$,

where $Ex = x$ is an event. We might go one step further if we interpret "P did x intentionally" in the way I have suggested, that is, as "P did x with the intention of doing x." We might, then, replace Davidson's definition with:

D3 P is the agent of event $a \equiv (\exists x)$ $(Ex \cdot P$ did a with the intention of doing $x)$

It certainly seems that the definiens of 1 entails the definiens of 2, but the converse seems false because the first entails that

there be descriptions and the second seems not to. The only objection to the entailment would arise if someone were to show that a conjunction of sentences, such as "'*e*' is a description of *a*," and "'*P* did *e*' is true," do not entail that $e = a$. And although this objection might be developed (depending, among other things, on how "a description of" is interpreted), I shall not do so here, because I do not think that Davidson makes any of his points depend on it. We can also say that on my interpretation of "*P* did *x* intentionally" both the definiens of 1 and 2 entail that of 3, because substitution of extensionally equivalent terms for the *first* occurrence of *x* in "*P* did *x* with the intention of doing *x*" is *salva veritate*. But the definiens of 3 seems not to entail that of 1 because of the latter's quantification over descriptions; nor does it entail the definiens of 2 because the latter but not the former entails that $x = a$.

One thing is clear about these three different proposals: that 3 commits one to the least and, it seems, 1 commits him to the most. This is part of the reason why I, at the moment at least, prefer 3. However, I have not had time to go into the matter in sufficient detail. Consequently I shall say no more about 3, but from here on will work with 1 and 2, ignoring the difference about quantification over descriptions.

EXAMINATION OF INTENTIONALITY AS A NECESSARY CONDITION OF AGENCY

Although Davidson began by looking for a mark of agency, we have seen he has also given us a mark of non-agency, that is, a necessary condition of agency. He claims that a person *P* is the agent of an event *a* only if there is some description, *x*, of *a* such that "*P* did *x* intentionally" is true. It seems to me that although a person *P* is the agent of an event *a* only if *P* did *a*, it is not required that he intentionally did some event that is identical with *a*. Part of my problem is that I have

difficulty distinguishing between being the agent of an event and doing it. Of course, if there is no difference then Davidson's definition is of little value. But even assuming there is a difference, I think there are cases of agency where there is no description, x, of the event such that "P did x intentionally" is true. The clearest class of cases are those of negligence, where a man is the agent of an event, although he intended to do nothing whatsoever. The man who starts a forest fire by absent-mindedly dropping a lighted match or by flipping away a cigarette out of habit often has no intention at the time at all. He may not intend to drop the match, throw it away, or anything else. He just failed to think about or pay any attention to what he was doing. He may, of course, sometimes have some intention at the time, but it may be irrelevant to what he did. He may be intending to cut down a tree, for example, and his concentration on that might explain his negligence. In such cases I would claim that the person is the agent of the event of the forest fire beginning, and that there is no description, x, of that event such that "He did x intentionally" is true. Therefore, I conclude that intentionality as stated in definition 1, and also in 2 and 3, is not a necessary condition of agency, at least as I understand agency. Consequently all three definitions fail.

EXAMINATION OF INTENTIONALITY AS A SUFFICIENT CONDITION OF AGENCY

Nothing we have said shows that intentionality is not a sufficient condition of agency. Indeed, as stated in definition 3, I think it is. However, although I also think that as stated in definition 1, intentionality is sufficient for agency, I find that when this half of 1 is conjoined with other claims by Davidson, implausible conclusions result. There is, in short, a problem internal to Davidson's theory of agency.

The problem arises from Davidson's way of arguing for

his claim that all human actions, even those described in terms relating to the consequences of bodily movements, are identical with primitive actions which are bodily movements. He argues by way of example. He considers the case of the queen killing the king by pouring poison in his ear. Davidson claims that the event of the queen killing the king is identical with the event of the movement of her hand in pouring the poison in his ear. What he says is:

> But then in moving her hand, the queen was doing something that caused the death of the king. These are two descriptions of the same event – the queen moved her hand in that way; she did something that caused the death of the king. (Or to put it, as I would rather, in terms of definite descriptions: The moving of her hand by the queen was identical with her doing something that caused the death of the king.) Doing something that causes a death is identical with causing a death. But there is no distinction to be made between causing the death of a person and killing him. It follows that what we thought was a more attenuated event – the killing – took no more time, and did not differ from, the movement of the hand (p. 22).

On the assumption that Davidson uses this example to illustrate a more general argument, it would seem that we can state his argument as follows:

1 Doing something that causes a death is identical with causing a death.
2 There is no distinction between causing the death of a person and killing him.

Therefore,

3 Doing something that causes the death of a person is identical with killing him.
4 All doings of something that causes a death are bodily movements.

Therefore,

5 All killings of persons (and any other actions) are bodily movements.

If we take these three premisses that I have extracted from Davidson's argument we can combine them with other plausible premisses to derive conclusions that are counterexamples to Davidson's version of intentionality as a mark of agency. Consider the case of Jones who wires a switch incorrectly because he was given an incorrect wiring diagram, and, as a result, a moon rocket explodes on take-off, killing its crew. He, by wiring the switch the way he did – something he did intentionally, did something that caused the death of the crew. But I should think that we would not say that he performed the action of killing them nor that he was the agent of their dying. If, however, we conjoin the preceding with Davidson's premiss 4 we can conclude that this doing of something that caused death of the crew is one of Jones's bodily movements. Clearly it must be those movements that can be described by talking of his wiring the switch intentionally. Furthermore, by Davidson's premisses 1 and 2, we can conclude that his doing something that caused the death of the crew is identical with killing them. Thus Jones's killing the crew is the same as the bodily movements Jones performed intentionally. This meets the antecedent of Davidson's intentionality mark of agency. But if human agency is to be more than the agency expressed in "The rocket explosion killed the crew," then Jones was not *the* agent, nor even *an* agent of the crew's death. Thus the consequent is not met. We have found a counterexample to Davidson's intentionality mark of agency using Davidson's own statements.

Fortunately, Davidson can avoid this problem by modifying premiss 2 in a way that does not affect his argument justifying 5. The counterexample works only if Davidson accepts:

2A Causing the death of someone is killing him.

This is entailed by 2, i.e., there is no distinction between causing the death of a person and killing him. But the counterexample does not work if Davidson states merely:

2B Killing someone is causing his death.

The counterexample requires that we infer from doing something that causes death to causing death and then, via 2A, to killing the person. But 2A – and therefore 2 – is false, as the rocket example illustrates. However, 2B, which I think is true, is all Davidson's argument needs. Let me, then, state and then examine Davidson's argument when put in a form using 2B and a reasonable revision of 1.

2B Killing someone is causing his death.
1A Causing someone's death is doing something that causes his death.

Therefore,

3A Killing someone is doing something that causes his death.
4 All doings of something that causes a death are bodily movements.

Therefore,

5 All killings of someone are bodily movements.

EXAMINATION OF REVISED FORM OF DAVIDSON'S ARGUMENT

I think we can agree that premisses 1A and 2B are true. We can also agree that the argument is valid when the ambiguous phrase "killings of someone" in conclusion 5 is interpreted in one way, although it is invalid when interpreted differently. The phrase "a killing," just like the phrase "an action," can mean either a doing, i.e., activity of someone, or the object of the activity (perhaps what Davidson calls the "upshot") (p. 25). The latter, whether a killing of a person, or a sinking

of a ship, or whatever, is often not a bodily movement even if the activities of killing, sinking, etc. are. They occur when someone dies or a ship sinks and thus often after the bodily movements that cause them. I mention this meaning of "action," etc., only to point out that we do distinguish among these "upshot" actions of a person and do not reduce them to bodily movements. But since for the activity sense of "killing" the argument is valid, let us concentrate on the argument with "killing" so interpreted.

My doubts about the argument centre on premiss 4 even once we interpret bodily movements broadly, as Davidson suggests (p. 11), to include motionless actions and mental acts. Perhaps we should coin a term such as "person-event" rather than use "bodily movement" in order to avoid confusion. But, even so, there is the obvious objection that the blowing up of the rocket by Jones, which is doing something that causes the crew's death, is not one of Jones's bodily movements. How is Davidson to refute this objection? He certainly cannot merely assume it is true because the very doubts one has about his argument's conclusion apply here also. If his conclusion about killing someone needs to be established, then so also would a parallel claim about blowing up things.

I do not know how Davidson might try to establish premiss 4. What I wish to do in ending this paper, is to state an argument that purports to disprove 4 with the hope that this will stimulate a discussion that will clarify the issues surrounding the question of whether all killings, and indeed all actions of any kind, are, as Davidson claims, bodily movements.

AN ARGUMENT TO DISPROVE PREMISS 4

The argument I shall present centres on Davidson's concept of primitive action. I shall use two premisses derived from

what he says about such actions and another one which, on the face of it, seems to be true. The argument is as follows:

6 If a doing of something that causes a death is also a bodily movement, then it is a primitive action.
7 All primitive actions are actions which persons do not do by doing something else (see p. 19 and p. 22).
8 Some doings of something that causes a death are actions which persons do by doing something else.

Therefore,

9 Some doings of something that causes a death are not bodily movements, i.e., premiss 4 is false.

Incidentally, a parallel argument would apply to Davidson's conclusion, 5. Premiss 7 is explicitly stated by Davidson and I think it is true. As I understand the relationship between bodily movements and primitive actions that Davidson espouses, I think he would also agree to 6. And, so far as I can see, it is true. Premiss 8 also appears to be true. It surely seems true of some doings that cause a death (such as someone's blowing up of a rocket), that the person does something else to accomplish the death (such as pushing a button or a dynamite plunger). I suspect that it is here that Davidson will disagree, but it is not clear to me what his reasons for this might be.