

ON THE THEORY OF ACTION

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This paper concerns several points of action theory. I begin with a discussion of Arthur Danto's thesis on basic and nonbasic action, clarifying and differentiating between the two. While Danto advances the notion of nonbasic action, Donald Davidson denies the existence of any action other than basic (or primitive) action. He claims all else to be only a redescription of primitive action; a claim challenged by the apparent confusion between language and descriptive language. Joel Feinberg's 'accordion effect' is also considered in Part I of the essay and, although I find the theory relatively sound, there are dangers to be acknowledged. In Part II, I discuss the notion of one act falling under several descriptions. Considered here are the theories of G.E.M. Anscombe, J.L. Austin and Davidson. I discuss objection to the theories advanced by the two latter and clarify the difference between the approaches taken to the problem by Anscombe and Davidson. Part III turns to the idea of finding intention in all actions and how that claim follows from the notion that all actions are basic. I consider cases of doing one thing by doing another (By Xing, he Y'd and Z'd) and the case of gesticulating while talking. I conclude with a discussion advancing the idea that actions are neither intentional or unintentional and that those two descriptions should be reserved for the results of action rather than the action themselves.

PART IARTHUR DANTO--BASIC AND NONBASIC ACTION

In his paper "Basic Actions and Basic Concepts" Danto writes:

If, as part of doing a I must do b, and as part of doing b I must do c..., and this is perfectly general, it follows that there can be no actions performed at all. This is not because one cannot perform an infinite number of actions in a finite time, but because the regression puts the beginning of any series logically out of reach. So if there are nonbasic actions, there must be actions where the agent acts directly; where, in order to do a, there is nothing x such that x causes a and the agent does x. And these are basic actions.¹

A typical example of a basic action would be raising one's arm. Danto goes on to note in another paper ("What We Can Do") that if there are any actions at all, there are basic actions. He says there are basic actions, but not all actions are basic:

If B is an action performed by a, then either (i) B is a basic action or (ii) B is the terminal effect of a causal series the originating member of which is a basic action.²

Danto distinguishes between action and basic action by comparing the way we raise our arms with the way we raise our hats: "the question I am concerned with is whether it is possible that we might move hats the way we do move an arm, not by causing them to move, but by just moving them--the way we move our arms: as basic actions."³ He notes that to move a hat as a basic action, the hat would have to be part of him and concludes that basic action must be performed with parts of the body.

Danto also finds (in ii above) that all nonbasic actions can be traced to an originating action, thereby claiming that it

is from basic actions that all other action finds its cause (a point to be contended by Feinberg who explains that these latter actions are expansions of basic action--this is to be discussed). Danto says one can by accident turn a key and by accident start an engine, but turning a key is a step only when done as part of doing something else when done for the reason of that thing being done. So, Danto writes, suppose being a basic action were in that way taking a step, and something then were a basic action only when part of a nonbasic action: as something counts as taking a step only in the context of a praxis (you cannot just take a step without this being part of something else).⁴ Because it might be argued that basic actions can be performed without being a step toward some further purpose (raising one's arm, for example), one should note that the above is to define basic actions in the context of nonbasic actions.

Basic actions are then, it seems, actions done directly by a human agent who uses parts of the (his own) body to perform such; and a basic action is often a step (the first step) of some further nonbasic action. Nonbasic actions are actions done indirectly by a human agent and find their origin in basic actions.

DAVIDSON--ALL ACTIONS ARE BASIC (PRIMITIVE)

I have taken pains to distinguish between basic and nonbasic action because it is here that Davidson and Danto part ways. Davidson proposes that the only cases of agency are bodily movements, construed as basic actions, and he denies the status of actions to what Danto terms nonbasic actions.⁵

Davidson writes:

...our primitive actions, the ones we do not by

4
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. 6

I should note here that 'mere movements of the body' does not mean movements such as one's heart beating or the spasm of one's muscle, or such bodily functions. Although the point is left, rather haphazardly, unclear by Davidson, I think he means 'mere movements of the body' to be synonymous with 'primitive actions.' Primitive actions to Davidson are basic actions to Danto (and simple actions to Feinberg).

Davidson makes such a claim in light of Joel Feinberg's accordion effect, and in an effort to individuate actions. Davidson is searching for the relationship between primitive actions and their consequences; as he puts it, the relationship between my moving my fingers and my shoelace's being tied. Davidson writes:

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. 7

Davidson claims this relationship is that of event causality and it follows naturally from the action whose mention includes mention of an outcome itself somehow includes that outcome.⁸ Feinberg's accordion effect finds its premise in such a statement and allows that a man's actions can be squeezed down to a minimum or else stretched out. Feinberg writes: "He turned the key, opened the door, he startled Smith, he killed Smith-- all of these are things we might say Jones did with one identical set of bodily movements."⁹ Here, a man's actions can be described

as broadly or narrowly as we please, thus the 'accordion' feature. Feinberg suggests we categorize acts into either simple or complex acts. Complex acts are comprised of simple acts; simple acts are what Davidson calls primitive acts. Simple acts require us to do nothing else; causally complex acts require us to do something else first, as a means.¹⁰ Danto would term such as basic and nonbasic acts, respectively.

Parenthetically, one may object to defining a simple act as an act which requires us to do nothing else first. Such objection would take this form: raising one's arm (a simple act) requires that certain activity take place in the brain and certain movements of the muscles take place; therefore, this is, somehow, what we do first in order to raise our arm. I think the challenge can be met effectively by noting that this neurological and muscle activity is precisely what raising one's arm is, and not a preceeding action to it.

Returning to the accordion effect, the theory suggests that Jones' operations here are one and the same event; however, Davidson claims that if the time span of the event is changed then it cannot be one and the same event.^{11*} On Feinberg's theory, Davidson says, the action of opening the door cannot be identical with the action of startling Smith. Davidson claims Feinberg himself supports this view when he makes the distinction between simple and complex acts. Davidson makes three objections to the accordion effect:

(page following)

*It should be noted here that Davidson uses the terms 'action' and 'event' interchangeably in his articles--Feinberg and Austin follow suit--a point attended to by Julia Annas in her paper "Davidson and Anscombe on 'The Same Action'." I have made no attempt at the distinction.

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. 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). 12

Davidson develops these points by first reiterating that Feinberg's inclination to treat "moving one's hand" and "opening the door" as one and the same action seems to be mistaken--both because of the time span involved and the claim that "one must first do something else to cause the door to open in order to open the door."¹³ Under Feinberg's theory, moving one's hand, hammering nails, nailing boards, and building a house can all be treated as one and the same action, for, according to the accordion effect, we can describe an action as broadly or narrowly as we please. One can speak of the originating simple act or the causally connected complex acts following (the accordion effect, much like Danto's basic-nonbasic idea, is limited to an originating simple action followed by complex actions. Complex actions are an expansion of the simple act and for this reason we can play the accordion as we like).

Austin supports the Feinberg theory and apparently falls into the same snare. According to Austin:

Stretches are different again: a single term descriptive of what he did may be made to cover either a smaller or larger stretch of events, those excluded by the narrower description being then called 'consequences' or 'results' or 'effects' or the like of his act. So here we can describe Finney's act either as turning on the hot tap, which he did by mistake, with the result that Watkins was scalded, or as scalding Watkins, which he did not do by mistake. 14

Note here that Austin claims we can describe the same act as either intentional or unintentional, a point also dealt with by Anscombe and to which I shall return later in this paper. Davidson objects to Austin in the same manner as he did to Feinberg saying: "The same strain is noticeable in Austin's pronouncement, for he speaks of different terms descriptive of what the man (Finney) did--apparently one and the same thing--but the terms 'cover' smaller and larger stretches of events. Events that cover different stretches cannot be identical."¹⁵ And so the problem arises: these happenings cannot be one and the same, yet to suppose them as numerically distinct creates several difficulties.

Davidson offers the example of the queen who pours the vial of poison into the king's ear, thereby killing him. Davidson says it does no good to think of killing as an action that begins when the movement of the hand takes place but ends later, for killing consists of the hand movement and one of its consequences. Two descriptions of the same event occur: the queen moved her hand in that way; she did something that caused the death of the king.* As Davidson prefers putting it: "The moving of her hand by the queen on that occasion was identical with her doing something that caused the death of the king."¹⁶ The killing, Davidson says, took no more time and did not differ from the movement of the hand. What we thought to be a more attenuated event is in truth not. In what appears a supporting notion for the Feinberg theory--that these events are one and the same--is soon to lead Davidson to

*The notion of one action falling under several descriptions is one developed more fully in Part II of this essay.

the pronouncement that there are only primitive actions.

The mistake we have made, Davidson goes on to illustrate, in thinking that killing a person differs from moving one's hand in a certain way lies in the confusion between a feature of a description of an event and a feature of the event itself. The mistake consists in supposing 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.¹⁷ The accordion, he says, is the action; the changes are in aspects described, or descriptions of the event. Davidson makes this final note on the issue:

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. 18

Such leads Davidson to conclude that the only actions there are are primitive actions--the rest is up to nature. An act is a simple act from which occur consequences, and that which Feinberg called a complex act (and Danto a nonbasic act) is in truth only a redescription of a simple act and those consequences. There are no further actions beyond the primitive, according to Davidson, only further descriptions.

Davidson recognizes and meets objection to this claim:

First, he notes that it can be objected that some actions we do require other in order to do them, and thus cannot be said to 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. Davidson does not deny we must do some actions before doing others, but he claims that hitting the bull's eye is still a primitive action for it consists in doing something to cause the bull's eye to be hit which under the right conditions, including weapon in hand, one can do by holding one's arms in a certain position and moving one's trigger finger.¹⁹

Second, Davidson answers the objection that primitive actions are often distinguished by the fact that we know we are doing them, and we may not know we are hitting the bull's eye. He answers that we can know that a certain event is taking place when described in one way and not know such when it is described in another.

Third, and finally, primitive actions do not seem to leave room for the concept of trying--for primitive actions are ones we just do. He answers that just as doing one thing may be just doing another, so in trying can trying to do one thing be simply doing another--I try to turn on the light by flicking the switch, but I simply flick the switch (an action I think Davidson would want to reduce further).

Davidson concludes his particular essay:

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. 20

I see Davidson's claim in this way: building a house would be nothing more than holding nails, hitting nails with hammers, and

so on which we do by performing basic movements with parts of our bodies. All actions which we perform then boil down to basic actions--the original simple act. The objection that we act in turning on the light by flipping the switch thereby performing a complex act (by first performing a simple or basic one) is answered thusly: all those consequences or occurrences we want to call nonbasic or complex acts are simply basic acts accompanied by effects and often falling under different descriptions. To say building a house is a complex act is only to redescribe a series of primitive acts the result of which was the house being built. So Davidson writes:

...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. 21 (*italics mine*)

Davidson's opposition to Feinberg ultimately lies then in this: Feinberg claims that several actions occur (simple and complex) and these actions can be described in any of several different ways, whichever we please. Davidson claims that one action occurs which may have several consequences, and it is these consequences we describe--but they all point back to one and only one original action, which is the only action that occurs.

OBJECTION TO DAVIDSON: THE DESCRIPTIVE LANGUAGE PROBLEM

A confusion arises in Davidson's line of thinking. He claims there are only basic or primitive actions--that all else is merely a description. The confusion that surfaces

is that Davidson wants to use language to define both his originating simple act as well as the consequences of that act, which suggests that some language (that used to describe the simple act) is the 'real' description while the language used to describe the complex action (or the effects of the simple action) is in some way not the 'real' description. So when we say "He moved his fingers in such-and-such a way" we are describing (and thus discovering) what really happened, while when we say "He turned on the switch" we are not describing what really happened--we are describing what really happened in another way, for what really happened was that he moved his fingers in such-and-such a way. It is as if turning on the switch really didn't happen. One can easily spot the confusion here.

Davidson is using the same language in two different ways. Some language is allowed to stand for truth while other language renders only description or redescription of truth. But which language is correct and what gives Davidson the authority to make that determination? X happens and is accompanied by several events: Davidson wants to use language to say X really happened but Y really didn't--Y is only a redescription of X. I do not see how he can say X is the correct way of describing what happened and Y is not--unless he is going to separate language in such a way as to allow some language to stand correctly and other language to stand falsely; but it is all language. If I move my fingers and flip the switch thereby turning on the light and alerting the prowler, what makes "I moved my fingers" the right description of what really happened while leaving "I alerted the prowler"

a false account of what really occurred, yet a correct re-description of what occurred. Many things happened here. If we are going to use the same language (and I do not see how we could not) to describe what occurred, then separating the 'right' language from the 'wrong' language is going to prove a much more difficult task than Davidson is going to admit. He is drawing an unwarranted conclusion that the description of the simple act tells us the real, true action that occurred while the description of the consequences tells us not what really and truly occurred, but only redescribes such.

Davidson might argue that when several things happen we discover the 'real' action by tracing the causal connections to that which was performed not by doing something else. He assumes this leads us back to the body (mere bodily movements). Yet, consider this case. Suppose Joe is going to nudge John who will then move his (own) fingers in such a way as to flip the switch which turns on the light which signals the revolution. Joe nudges, John moves his fingers, the light goes on, etc. etc. (The John-to-Joe is an arranged activity here). Now there are two basic actions here, I think: 1) Joe's moving his elbow in such a way as to nudge John, and 2) John's moving his fingers in such a way as to flip the switch. Joe's nudging indeed signalled John to move his fingers, but John still did not move his fingers by doing something else first. John's moving his fingers caused the flip to switch, etc. So if we are to use Davidson's defense above and trace the action back causally to where we find that action performed not by doing something else, then we shall never get to Joe's elbow. And if we do

somehow get to Joe's simple action of nudging^{WITH} his elbow then in what fashion shall we account for John's moving his fingers? Must we bypass John's simple action and proceed to Joe's in order to find the simple action, or shall we stop at John's never to see Joe's (a dangerous proposition if we are to assign causal responsibility). Davidson, it would seem, says Joe nudged John and everything else that happened is simply a redescription of that; thus, John's moving his fingers is only a redescription of Joe's moving his elbow in such a way as to nudge John. If this is not downright false then it is very, very queer.

Even if Davidson finds defense to my above objection, I do not see how he is to escape the language description problem. He cannot treat simple acts as if they are non-linguistic or as if they carry their own set of descriptive language. All action is descriptive and this is what leads to Feinberg to allow us to use language in such a way as to describe an action in many of several ways--as broadly or narrowly as we please. There are, however, dangers to the accordion effect to which I now briefly turn my attention.

THE ACCORDION EFFECT: AN OBJECTION

My major objection to the accordion effect is that it lacks precision and can lose perspective of the action itself. Feinberg writes: "If Smith suffered a heart attack and died, we can say that Jones's opening the door caused his death, or simply that Jones killed him (by doing those things)." ²² The problem encountered is the difficulty in identifying the true

cause of Smith's death. It seems to me that the cause was his being startled, which was caused by the sudden opening of the door, which was caused by Jones. Feinberg's accordion effect places causal responsibility on either the opening of the door, the startling, or Jones, whichever ascription one ^{so} do desires.

This is much like my saying that my being upset could have been caused by either my party being cancelled, the rain, or the low pressure system--whichever I chose to blame. However, it is unlikely I would be upset if my party were not cancelled, in spite of the rain; therefore, the true cause of my being upset lies in my party's being cancelled--a truth seemingly quite easily lost in the music of the accordion. For with this accordion effect we can go so far as to say 'The low pressure system caused him to be upset', which I find a bit preposterous. If we are allowed to describe a man's actions in as broad a terms as we like (and even Davidson troubles himself to point out that the possibilities for expansion are without clear limit), then we would be justified in a very odd way in saying "Mrs. Manson's getting pregnant caused the death of Sharon Tate." Is this where the causal responsibility really lies? I think not.

What caused Jones to open the door? Let us suppose Jones' desire to see Smith caused him to open the door, which in turn was caused by his desire to give Smith a birthday present. We would find ourselves saying "Jones' desire to give Smith a birthday present caused Smith's death," which, I think, would be little more than a bit of rude humor. Feinberg speaks of 'causally connected sequences of events'--I think his accordion

effect is uncomfortably close to shouldering the causal relationship with a weight it cannot properly and realistically bear. However, if the attempt is made one should pay particular awareness to the dangers involved.

THE ROLE OF CONTEXT: A CONCLUSION TO PART I

Because action seems to lend itself to so many descriptions I would suggest that the context in which an action occurs plays an enormously significant role in describing action. For instance, if we are to advocate the idea of simple and complex action, then when are we to use each particular term? Perhaps the answer can be found by identifying the context in which the action takes place. If we consider the action of flipping the switch we might say that moving one's fingers is a simple action while flipping the switch is a complex action. However, if we consider further circumstances we may want to render flipping the switch the simple action and signalling the revolution the complex action.

I can foresee some objection to this (a Davidsonian challenge perhaps). One may want to say that the simple act will always be moving one's fingers (because it is the action done independently), and anything beyond that will be complex action (or, as has been discussed, redescription). In the account above, beginning on p. 10, I argued that all description is language and I challenged Davidson to justify how he describes a particular act as the act and all else as mere description of that act. For if all language is descriptive, who determines which description of action is correct? The logical

answer, I think, is that the context in which the action occurs determines the description that is correct. The description which best suits our needs in understanding what occurred will determine the propriety of describing an act in a certain way. Davidson may want to say "No, this is the only action that occurred", but I cannot see how he would say that without separating 'what really happened' and language. Such would indicate that the language best suited to our needs is the language we may employ in determining when an action has occurred. 'What really happened' and the description of what really happened do not, I think, exist independently of one another. What really happened and our understanding of it is had through whatever particular description best suits our needs. No one description is necessarily correct--we may have many descriptions and rely on the context to tell us which one to use.

I think such treatment of actions would make Feinberg's accordion effect more comfortable. If asked what killed Smith, we would say very little if we answered "Jones's desire to give him a birthday present." Yet, we would say very much when answering "A heart attack." If requested, we could trace the causal sequence regressively until the context became absurd ("Jones's getting out of bed this morning," for example). If we keep the accordion effect in an understandable and proper context then we can, I think, discover what descriptions best tell us what took place. And I do not mean here redescriptions of an original action; I mean descriptions of what occurred. Those descriptions will, at least very often, tell us what action occurred.

PART IIANSCOMBE, AUSTIN AND DAVIDSON: ONE ACT UNDER SEVERAL DESCRIPTIONS

G.E.M. Anscombe in her book Intention lends a different approach to the idea of having one action under several different descriptions. In Section 23 she offers her example of a man pumping water into the cistern which supplies the drinking water for a household. Anscombe has four different descriptions of this intentional action: A) moving his arm up and down, B) operating the pump, C) replenishing the water supply, and D) poisoning the inhabitants. Anscombe writes:

If we say there are four actions, we shall find that the only action that B consists in here is A; and so on...For moving his arm up and down with his fingers round the pump is, in these circumstances, operating the pump...and...replenishing the water supply...and ...poisoning the household. So there is one action with four descriptions, each dependent on wider circumstances, and each related to the next as description of means to ends...if D is given as the answer to the question, "Why?" about A, B and C can make an appearance in answer to the question "How?". When terms are related in this fashion, they constitute a series of means, the last term of which is, just by being given as the last, so far treated as the end. 23

In her article "Davidson and Anscombe on 'The Same Action'." Julia Annas declares that Anscombe is not appealing, as Davidson does, to the idea that we have one action under different descriptions. Nor is Anscombe asserting that doing X is doing Y (as Davidson does with his bull's eye and Austin does with Finney). What Anscombe appeals to, Annas says, is that "we can say that we have one action under different descriptions if the descriptions are related as descriptions of means to descriptions of ends."²⁴ This is an important distinction from Davidson's angle for Davidson's theories fall under pressures

which Anscombe's thesis withstands. Annas illustrates the point by comparing the two philosopher's ideas.

Annas considers Davidson's claim that doing X is actually doing Y (e.g., raising one's arm, weapon in hand, and pulling the trigger to hit the bull's eye is hitting the bull's eye. Annas uses a different, but quite similar, example in her paper--the difference is negligible here.) By formalizing the statement we get:

$(\exists x) ((\text{Shot, I, the bull's eye, } x) \ \& \ (\text{With, a revolver, } x))$

and

$(\exists y) ((\text{Pointed, I, the gun, } y) \ \& \ (\text{Pulled, I, the trigger, } y))$

but since $x = y$, we ought, if Davidson is right, to be able to infer

$(\exists x) ((\text{Pulled, I, the trigger, } x) \ \& \ (\text{With, a revolver, } x))$

i.e., I pulled the trigger with a revolver

which is absurd.^{24*}

Annas claims that if action x is identical with action y--as Davidson asserts--the predicates of x will hold for y as well. Yet absurdities arise, and it is not just odd but downright false to say that I pulled the trigger with the revolver. Anscombe's thesis escapes the problem in this way:

Suppose the man's moving his arm up and down (A) is tiring. Is it true to say that poisoning the inhabitants is tiring? If it is true it is at least odd. But in fact we are not committed to these absurdities by Anscombe's principle that descriptions are descriptions of the same action if they are related as to form a means-end chain. For we can surely accept as independently true the principle that not everything that is true of the end is true of the means (and

Annas takes the argument from M. Cohen's paper "The Same Action," The Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, 1969-70. Davidson introduces the idea of logically structuring action sentences in his paper "The Logical Form of Action Sentences."

vice versa). So Anscombe does not have to say that everything that is true of A is true of D, where D is the end to which A is a means. 25

Supposing Davidson does find an answer to Annas' first objection (say, by distinguishing predicates of an action which apply to it directly from those which apply to it only in virtue of a further description--her suggestion), Annas has another challenge.

She claims that the notion of the same action under different descriptions is empty because no criteria of identity can be given for actions in general. Thus, there is no use in asking whether x is the same action as y for there can be no criteria of identity at this level of generality.

Davidson's answer to this is not clear, Annas says. In his article "The Individuation of Events" Davidson suggests that events are identical iff they have all the same causes and same effects, though he never spells out how to apply this idea in determining conditions for same actions. As noted previously in this paper, Annas points out that Davidson uses the phrase 'same action under different descriptions' and 'same event under different descriptions' interchangeably in his articles.²⁷

Anscombe escapes this new problem again through use of the means-end chain. Her argument is that the only action B consists in here is A, and so on, suggesting that it is perhaps misleading to say that A, B, C and D are all the same action; one should say only that A is the same action as B, B the same action as C and so forth.²⁸ Thus, we are not committed to the meaningless search for criteria for same action

20
in general. Annas writes:

...the analysis, being based on the idea of a means-end series, follows the direction of practical reasoning. It seems to us more natural to identify two stages in practical reasoning via a stage yet to be attained... Since Anscombe's treatment here does not require an answer to the question "How, in general, do we individuate actions?" it is not liable to the problems besetting Davidson on this score. 29

This meticulous attention paid by Anscombe to description of the same actions is perhaps where the accordion effect can be improved. It makes no logical sense to me to say that A is B and B is C but A is not C, but this tightening up of the descriptions of the action keep it, I think, in a safer perspective and properly consider the context. For if we considered A and D to be the same action and a policeman walked by and asked us what we were doing we could not give him either A or D as the answer expecting him to maintain the same perspective of our action. There is a sense in which moving one's arm up and down and poisoning the inhabitants is the same action. But there is also a very real sense in which they are not. Again, the context and the knowledge needed to understand the action determine the proper description.

THE SAME ACTION INTENTIONAL UNDER ONE DESCRIPTION AND UNINTENTIONAL UNDER ANOTHER: PROBLEMS

Although Anscombe's means-end relationship saves her thesis from such objection mentioned above, it cannot avoid the challenge in cases where an action is intentional under one description and unintentional under another. Anscombe writes in Section 6:

(page following)

Since a single action can have many different descriptions...it is important to notice that a man may know that he is doing a thing under one description and not under another...for this reason, the statement that a man knows he is doing X does not imply the statement that, concerning which is also his doing X, he knows that he is doing that thing. 30

Annas considers the case of pushing a table and making a ruck in the carpet--the former an intentional act, the latter done unintentionally. Why, she asks, should we say that these are two descriptions of the same action? Annas claims that pushing a table is not a means to making a ruck in the carpet, nor vice versa (at least, not in this case). Because of this lack of means-end chain there is not the same way of making sense of the 'same what?' question--making a ruck in the carpet is not the same act of pushing as pushing a table, the resources available in the pumping example are not there.³¹ So, Annas concludes, Anscombe's claim on this point may fall prey to the same problems Davidson's claim fell to earlier, namely the problems of predication:

Consider on this point the case Austin purports.

re: So here we can describe Finney's act either as turning on the hot tap, which he did by mistake, with the result that Watkins was scalded, or as scalding Watkins, which he did not do by mistake.

Here Austin claims we can describe Finney's act (singular) as either X or Y, X being by mistake and Y being not by mistake. I think Annas would object to Austin the same way she did to Davidson. Furthermore, in the case of Austin one act is said to be both mistaken and not mistaken. Therefore, a concept and its contrary are applied at the same time to a single incident. Thus, X is both p and -p, which is self-contradicting at best. I think the clear solution to such an

objection is to suggest that X can be described as p under certain conditions and in certain contexts, depending on the needs the description must satisfy, and as -p under other descriptions, contexts and needs. But this neither meets Annas' objection, nor, more interestingly, solves the problem of whether an unintentional action can occur. For it is tempting to assert that Finney moved his fingers, or even turned on the hot tap, an intentional action not done by mistake. Everything else that occurred, particularly the unintentional, was the consequences of his original simple action. It is to the question of unintentional action that I now turn my attention.

PART III

ALL ACTIONS ARE INTENTIONAL

In this section I will first defend the claim that all actions are intentional, then I will show objection to it and conclude with a discussion on why actions are neither intentional or unintentional.

A.I. Melden in Free Action^{*} gives an example of an arm rising (we observe this) and claims that asking one's intention for such an action is not justified. It would seem that when one moves a bodily part--even for no reason--intention is present. Our bodily parts do not simply move of their own accord (of course, they can move in the cases of eye twitches or muscle spasms, but this is not what I mean here. I mean one's own bodily movements that one is responsible for--moving an arm, crossing a leg, etc. This also rules out bodily movements occurring during sleep, such as sleep-walking.

*P. 185

23

I am concerned here with action by a conscious person for WHICH one is responsible.) Certainly one can raise one's arm for no reason, but the arm does not just rise--one still raises it. One would suffer a shock of surprise if one's arm did not move when the attempt was made (no matter how unaware one was in making such an attempt, I think one would become very aware upon the failure of such). One may not intend to swat a fly or signal the revolution, but one still did intend to raise one's arm. Perhaps there was no reason to raise it, but raise it he did and it is difficult to see how if such was not intended. For if he did not intend to raise it then I would think he had no control over it--which he clearly did have. Whenever this element of control is considered (which is almost always) then it would seem that one must intend to do what he does.

Consider the case of one's gesticulating while talking. Such a case on the surface may seem to challenge the above claim. I would think that one has control of some sort of what one is doing, although perhaps barely conscious of it. Yet it is impractical to assert that while I am talking I am also thinking to myself "I will move my hand up, now I will move it back down, now sideways, now up again," and so on. I know from experience I do not do this. When I am gesticulating while talking I do not think about what I am doing--I simply do it. I do not do it from habit or automatically--for I do not gesticulate every time I talk. I do so perhaps for emphasis or to explain something better. In any case, it does seem odd that I have any intention for what appears to be just a plain, authentic action.

The only way I can see that gesticulating is an intentional action is if we consider it in the sense that I mean to do it. My meaning to do it would not require wanting or desiring to do it--no pro-attitude here--but would only require that my hand is not moving by itself. I am moving it, though barely conscious perhaps of doing so. If in the course of gesticulating I found myself unable to move my hands it would be because all along I was aware of them moving, was in truth trying--intending--to move them. Otherwise, I would not even notice if they failed to move when I attempted to move them. But I think I would notice this failure, and I think the reason is that I intended to move them all along.

Enc Berent on this subject writes:

Suppose I move my hand over my forehead to chase away a bee and thereby make a gesture which a member of a secret society that happens to be passing by takes to be a salute. It is quite clear that it is false to say of me that I saluted that person. It is immaterial whether I know how to perform that secret salute or not. As long as I had not intended to salute, I cannot be said to have saluted. 32

If applied to the case above, does this mean that I can not be said to have gesticulated if I did not intend to? If yes, then I can never take any action at all unless I intend to take it (or at least be said to have taken it). And if no, then why can I not be said to have saluted?

This returns us to the problem of doing X intentionally and doing (simultaneously) Y unintentionally. No matter how we make our conclusions on the issue there is still a ruck in the carpet that did not just appear, Finney has been scalded, and someone--like it or not--has been saluted. Indeed, I may not even realize I talk with my hands and yet do it all the

time.

The serious confusions surface here because of the difficulty in determining when an intention has been had when an action occurs. There is also the difficult determination of when to assign an action to a person who did not intend such an action--or even had any knowledge that such action was occurring. Because of this confusion I turn to the writing of J.W. Meiland.

ACTIONS ARE NEITHER INTENTIONAL NOR UNINTENTIONAL

In his article "Are There Unintentional Action?," Meiland proposes that the terms 'intentional' and 'unintentional' are to be applied not to the action itself but rather to the results of the action. Meiland writes:

One action--for example, buying a loaf of bread--can have many results. In addition to the loaf's then being in the agent's possession, the action also could also have as results: (a) the serious depletion of the grocer's supply of bread; (b) the making of the buyer's bag of purchases to bulky to carry easily; (c) the saving of the life of his child who is suffering from malnutrition and so on. The action of buying a loaf of bread could have these results. But the buyer need not intend that any of these results should occur (that is, need not have any of these as his ends) in order for it to be truly said of him that he is buying a loaf of bread. Let us call results of this kind "extrinsic results." 33

Meiland goes on to explain that some ends must be present in order for a certain action to be performed--for instance, the buyer of a loaf of bread must intend for the bread to be in his possession--otherwise he is not performing the action of buying a loaf of bread. Results of this kind Meiland calls "intrinsic results."

Meiland recognizes the possible redundancy in saying

"He is buying a loaf of bread in order to have it in his possession" (for this is what buying a loaf of bread is), but he explains that such a redundancy will preclude one from thinking that the agent wants the bread for some other purpose. He also recognizes that an agent can buy a loaf of bread for some other purpose--perhaps for someone else. But this, he says, is not the same as buying it to have in one's possession.

Meiland characterizes the relation between actions and their intrinsic results as follows: "for a result x to be an intrinsic result of an action y, a necessary condition of the agent's performing the action y is that he intend (have as one of his ends) the result x."³⁴

Meiland also claims that when one scratches one's head and thereby starts the revolution, then it is implausible to say that starting the revolution was one's unintended action. Meiland sees here one action with both intrinsic results (say, scratching an itch) and extrinsic results (starting the revolution). Extrinsic results can either be intended or unintended, and in this particular case would be unintended.³⁵

Meiland explains:

But it cannot be the case that an action is intentional if and only if its intrinsic result is intended, and unintentional if and only if its intrinsic result is not intended. We have seen that if x is an intrinsic result of action y, then in order to be performing y, the agent must intend x. This is what the expression 'x is an intrinsic result of y' means. Intending x is a necessary condition of performing y. Therefore, the agent's not intending x entails that the agent is not performing y. It does not mean that y is an unintentional action. Rather, it means that the action y is, so to speak, 'nonexistent.' The agent is not performing an unintentional action called y; rather he is not performing y at all. It follows from this that there are no unintentional actions. 36

Meiland admits this would make the phrase 'intentional action' redundant. He finally concludes that the use of 'intentional' and 'unintentional' should be used to indicate the status of the results of actions performed--not to describe the action itself. Therefore, in the case of starting the revolution we would say "I scratched my head causing the unintended result that the revolution started."

Meiland also addresses the problem of the gesticulating hand. He uses the example of 'running':

...another way of showing that the use of 'intentional' and 'unintentional' does depend essentially on the status of results is to show that these terms have no application in cases where there are no intrinsic results. One such case is that of 'running.' 37

Meiland explains that when one performs certain bodily movements one is running and there is no need to refer to any intrinsic results (one need not even traverse a distance since one can 'run in place'). Both 'He ran intentionally' and 'He ran unintentionally' represent improper usage and the two terms cannot be used in connection with 'running' because 'running' (at least here) has no intrinsic results to be intended or unintended.

One can see how this applies to gesticulating. One can simply gesticulate, without any intended or unintended results. One has no end in mind when one gesticulates. Both 'He gesticulated intentionally' and 'He gesticulated unintentionally' become nonsense.

In this paper I have attempted to discuss certain philosophical points on action that, I think, have generally

garnered the largest share of philosophical limelight. Such problems have naturally raised different thoughts and I have set out to pit the most interesting claims against one another, and while doing so entering my own objections and conclusions for the record. I realize I am here treading the waters of a very deep lake and invite you to throw me a stone or a life preserver wherever you see fit.

LIST OF WORKS NOTED

¹Arthur Danto. "Basic Actions and Basic Concepts"
The Review of Metaphysics, Vol. XXXII, No. 3 (March 1979), p. 471.

²Arthur Danto. "What We Can Do" Journal of Philosophy,
Volume 60 (1963), p. 436.

³Danto, p. 439.

⁴Danto, "Basic Actions and Basic Concepts," p. 477.

⁵Danto, p. 478.

⁶Donald Davidson. Actions & Events. (Clarendon Press,
Oxford: 1980), p. 59.

⁷Davidson, p. 58.

⁸Davidson, p. 58.

⁹Joel Feinberg. "Action and Responsibility" from
The Philosophy of Action ed. by A.R. White (Oxford University
Press, Oxford: 1968), p. 106.

¹⁰Feinberg, p. 105.

¹¹Davidson, p. 56.

¹²Davidson, p. 56.

¹³Davidson, p. 57.

¹⁴J.L. Austin. "Plea for Excuses" from The Philosophy
of Action ed. by A.R. White (Oxford University Press, Oxford:
1968), p. 40.

¹⁵Davidson, p. 57.

¹⁶Davidson, p. 58.

¹⁷Davidson, p. 58.

- ¹⁸Davidson, p. 59.
- ¹⁹Davidson, p. 60.
- ²⁰Davidson, p. 60.
- ²¹Davidson, p. 61.
- ²²Feinberg, p. 106.
- ²³G.E.M. Anscombe. Intention, (Basil Blackwell, Oxford: 1957), Section 23.
- ²⁴Julia Annas. "Davidson and Anscombe on 'The Same Action'" Mind Vol. LXXXV, No. 338 (April, 1976), p. 253.
- ²⁵Annas, p. 254.
- ²⁶Annas, p. 255.
- ²⁷Annas, p. 255.
- ²⁸Annas, p. 256.
- ²⁹Annas, p. 256.
- ³⁰Anscombe, Section 6.
- ³¹Annas, p. 256.
- ³²Enc Berent. "On The Theory of Action" The Journal of the Theory of Social Behavior, Vol. 5, No. 2 (1975), p. 155.
- ³³J.W. Meiland. "Are There Unintentional Actions?" The Philosophical Review Vol. LXXII, No. 3 (July 1963), p. 377.
- ³⁴Meiland, p. 378,
- ³⁵Meiland, p. 379.
- ³⁶Meiland, p. 380.
- ³⁷Meiland, p. 381.

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