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## Actions are not Events

KENT BACH

A common prejudice in action theory is that actions are events. Virtually no defence of this view is to be found, and hardly anyone has even considered an alternative. On all sides of the debate on individuation of action, it is innocently presupposed that actions are events, as in the context of arguments regarding times, places, and causes of actions. What I propose is that actions are not events but instances of a certain relation, the relation of bringing about (or making happen), whose terms are agents and events. There is, in fact, nothing new about this view, which was proposed both by von Wright and by Chisholm<sup>1</sup> long before individuation became a hotly debated issue. Because of the present impasse in that debate, this view needs to be reconsidered.

Three qualifications must be made about the relational view. First, to view actions as bringings about does not require accepting Chisholm's controversial Agency Theory, on which bringing about is an *irreducible* relation between agents and events. For even if we opt, as I do,<sup>2</sup> for some version of the Causal Theory of action, on which the relation essential to action is analysed in terms of a causal relation between events, we are not thereby committed to the view that actions *are* events. Second, we must not confuse the relevant sense of 'action', the sense in which a bringing about is an action, with the sense (if it is a genuine sense of 'action') in which the event brought about is an action. Suppose that Wilbur bends the spoke of a bicycle wheel. Our question is not whether the spoke's bending is an event—we may grant that<sup>3</sup>—but whether Wilbur's bending of the spoke is an event.<sup>4</sup> Notice that 'the bending of the spoke' is ambiguous between these intransitive and transitive readings. The gerundive forms of a great many action verbs are ambiguous in this way, e.g., 'opening', 'heating', and 'arousing', and taken intransitively surely they do designate events. 'Movement' (as in 'bodily movement')

1 Georg Henrik von Wright, *Norm and Action: A Logical Enquiry* (Humanities Press, New York, 1963), pp. 35–36; Roderick Chisholm, 'The Descriptive Element in the Concept of Action', *Journal of Philosophy*, lxi (1964), pp. 613–625.

2 Kent Bach, 'A Representational Theory of Action', *Philosophical Studies*, xxxiv (1978), pp. 361–79.

3 Despite the recent proliferation of theories about what events are, not everyone believes in events. For example, Neil Wilson (in 'Facts, Events, and Their Conditions', *Philosophical Studies*, xxv (1974), pp. 303–321) holds that events are truncated propositions and intends this thesis to be taken reductively. Obviously, if there are no events then actions are not events. That would trivialize my thesis, but I would then argue that actions are not whatever events are reduced to.

4 It might seem that we could mark the same distinction with 'doing' and 'deed'. However, Wilbur's deed was to bend the spoke, and what Wilbur was doing was bending the spoke. So it seems that the doing was the activity (of bending the spoke) and the deed the achievement (of having bent the spoke). Neither, however, is the spoke's bending (or having bent). That is what Wilbur brought about but it is not what he did.

is similarly ambiguous. Finally, a thorough defence of the claim that actions are not events would require a theory of what I am denying actions to be. Current theories of events are too numerous and complex to review here. Instead, I will make an assumption common to most theories, and beyond that rely on the reader's pretheoretic intuitions about events. I assume that events exist in space and time and that they enter into causal relations as causes and as effects.

A rare mention of the view that actions are not events occurs in Davidson's famous paper, 'The Logical Form of Action Sentences',<sup>1</sup> but his treatment is all too brief. First he considers Chisholm's representation of the form of action sentences as '*x* makes it happen that *p*'. Not only does (a suitable substituent for) '*p*' describe an event but, according to Davidson, 'It is natural to say that whole sentences of the form "*x* makes it happen that *p*" also describe events' (p. 87). He does not say why. Then he touches on von Wright's view that an action is not an event but rather the bringing about of an event. Davidson summarily dismisses this view as follows:

If I fall down, this is an event whether I do it intentionally or not. If you thought my falling was an accident and later discovered I did it on purpose, you would not be tempted to withdraw your claim that you had witnessed an event (p. 88).

Davidson conveniently ignores the difference between reading the phrase 'my falling down' as an action description and as an event description. As an action description it could be paraphrased as 'my bringing about my falling down', in which 'my falling down' occurs as an event description. Clearly von Wright is not denying that my falling down is an event if I bring it about. Later it emerges that Davidson's real concern is the problem of specifying, in *non-action* terms, the event the agent brings about. If the sentence 'Jones batted an eyelash' must be unpacked, as Davidson claims, as 'Jones brought it about (or made it happen) that Jones batted an eyelash', then there is a problem all right. But why must it be unpacked thus? Why cannot the movement of Jones's eyelash be described in non-action terms? It turns out that Davidson admits this to be possible and that the problem is something else. Using examples like 'He walked to the corner', 'He carved the roast', 'He fell down', and 'The doctor removed the patient's appendix', Davidson remarks,

In each of these examples I find I am puzzled as to what the agent makes happen. My problem isn't that I can't imagine that there is some bodily movement that the agent might be said to make happen, but that I see no way automatically to produce the right description from the original sentence. No doubt each time a man walks to the corner there is some way he makes his body move; but of course it does not follow that there is some one way he makes his body move every time he walks to the corner (p. 119).

Unfortunately, Davidson gives no reason why, on the view (contrary to

1 In Nicholas Rescher, ed., *The Logic of Decision and Action* (University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh, 1966), pp. 81-95.

his own) that action sentences do not describe the same event as the sentences embedded in them, there must be a 'reasonably mechanical way' of deriving from an action sentence a description of the event brought about by the agent. It seems, then, that Davidson has failed to make a case against the view that actions are not events.

Now let us consider the sort of conundrum that arises when actions are construed as events, as on the familiar versions of the Causal Theory. Since it analyses actions in terms of events, this theory makes especially attractive the view that actions are events. By definition, any causal theory holds that the production of a change counts as the performance of an action just in case that change is caused in the right way by the right sort of psychological event. What constitutes 'right' here is where the various versions of the theory diverge, but they all agree that an action involves one event causing another. They diverge also on whether an action is to be identified with one, the other, or both of these events.

Let us begin with an example involving merely a bodily movement. Suppose I perform the formidable action of wiggling my finger. It is not enough that my finger wiggle, for that could be caused by an electrical shock or a muscle spasm. If the Causal Theory is right, I wiggled my finger only if a certain mental episode caused my finger to wiggle. Two distinct events are involved here, the mental episode and the finger's wiggling, and what is their relation to my action of wiggling my finger? In particular, is the action to be identified with one or the other of these events or with both? Each of these three possibilities has been defended. (1) A common view holds that the action of wiggling my finger just *is* the event of my finger wiggling, although, of course, this event counts as an action only if caused by the mental episode. (2) Prichard held that actions are not movements but causes of movements.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, he identified the action not with the event caused by the mental episode but with the mental episode itself (a willing or volition, on his view). Then the action of wiggling my finger is not, and does not include, the event of my finger wiggling, but is simply the willing that my finger wiggle. (3) A third view is that the action is the compound event consisting of the willing (or whatever you want to call the relevant mental episode) and the event willed. On all three views an action is an event—the only question is which one.

How do we answer this question? Imagine a situation in which someone is holding my finger tightly in her hand and it takes some effort—and time—before my finger begins to wiggle. How long did it take me to wiggle my finger? No problem there. It took as long as the time between my beginning to try to wiggle my finger and my finger's beginning to wiggle. But how long did I wiggle my finger? Let us assume it took two seconds before my finger began to wiggle and then it wiggled for one second. Did I wiggle my finger for one, two, or three seconds? The three views mentioned above give different answers. View (1) would say that while I tried to wiggle my finger for two seconds, I actually wiggled it for only one (the next) second. The next answer, that I wiggled

1 H. A. Prichard, 'Acting, Willing, Desiring', in *Moral Obligation* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1949), pp. 187–198.

my finger for two seconds, is based on the volitional view (2). A proponent would deny that his view is counterintuitive by disqualifying anyone's 'intuition' that I wiggled my finger not for two seconds but only for one, on the grounds that this intuition stems from confusing wiggling my finger with my finger wiggling. An advocate of view (3) would accept this, but he would deny that the action of wiggling my finger ended just when my finger began to wiggle. His answer would be that the action took three seconds, including both the time it took for my finger to start wiggling and the period during which it wiggled.

Matters are complicated by actions going beyond bodily movements. Suppose that by moving his finger a camper presses the trigger of his gun, fires the gun, thereby shooting, with the intention to kill, an attacking coyote. However, the coyote does not die for 24 hours. When did the camper kill the coyote? When he fired the gun? When the coyote died? Or did the killing take a whole day even though, it might be argued, the camper did nothing (relevant to the death of the coyote) after firing the gun (or even after simply moving his finger)? If the action of killing the coyote is to be identified with the event of the coyote dying, then the camper killed the coyote a day after he fired the gun. He himself could have been killed before then. If the action of killing the coyote is identical with the action of firing the gun, then he killed the coyote a day before the coyote died. And if the action is to be identified with the whole series of events culminating in the death of the coyote, then the killing took a whole day.

Matters are further complicated by the question of how many actions were performed. Obviously the camper moved his finger, pressed the trigger, fired the gun, shot the coyote, and killed the coyote, but do these count as one action, five, or what? Clearly there were tokens of five types of action, but this leaves open how many actions were performed: one, one per type (i.e., five), or some number in between? If it took the camper longer to kill the coyote than to fire the gun, or if he killed the coyote a day after he fired the gun, those two actions cannot be the same. But as mentioned above, if his firing the gun was identical with his killing the coyote, then he killed the coyote a day before the coyote died.

Action theorists are familiar with further individuation puzzles concerning location and causation. Plenty of ink has been spilled over these conundrums, but I will not review them there. Suffice it to say that they arise only on the supposition that actions are events. This is reason enough to consider an alternative to that view, though obviously a view cannot be rejected simply because it generates endless philosophical controversy. As noted earlier, we need not accept the Agency Theory, which entails that actions are not events, rather than the Causal Theory, which reduces the relation of bringing about to a causal relation between pairs of events. Even supposing that actions are causings, it does not follow that actions are events. Indeed, as Wilson has argued (*ibid.*, p. 318), one event's causing another is not itself an event, even though it involves events causally related. Clearly we cannot identify the causing with either the cause or the effect, and even if we suppose that these two events combine to form a composite event, it is odd, to say the least, to

describe that composite event as the causing of one event by another (or even as the *following* of one event by another). Interestingly, that causings are not events has led both Kim and Davis to consider the possibility that *non-basic* actions are not events. Kim remarks, 'The action event of Brutus's killing Caesar thus threatens to turn into a relation, a causal relation between two events.'<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Davis asks,

Can we really add an action of praising Sue together with the resulting change in Sue and say the combination is itself an action, an action of making Sue happy? Actions are events; but this pair seems to remain a pair of events, not a larger event.<sup>2</sup>

It turns out that Davis, insisting that actions are events, opts for an identity theory, on which the only actions are basic actions; they admit of non-basic redescriptions in terms of changes caused by them. However, unlike Davidson, Davis identifies basic actions not with bodily movements but with volitions. Unfortunately, as he himself admits, he has not shown decisively that volitions are actions. If it should turn out that they are not, then the line of reasoning that led him as far as the claim that no events other than volitions are actions would lead ultimately to the conclusion that no actions are events.

Whether we construe actions as irreducible bringings about or ultimately as causings, we are relieved of the need to assign times and places to them, though of course the events they involve are datable and locatable. It is not clear that we can—or need to—individuate actions, for how would we go about answering questions like 'How many actions did *x* perform at *t*?' or 'How many things did *x* do at *t*?' Did our camper perform one action or five? Did he do one thing or five? The relational view requires these questions to be recast. We can ask how many events the camper brought about, and the answer is five (at least). However, we need not say how many actions he performed, i.e., whether his moving his finger, his pressing the trigger, his firing the gun, his shooting the coyote, and his killing the coyote count as one action or five. In a sense he did not perform a series of actions one after another but in one stroke brought about a series of events one after another. He killed the coyote by shooting the coyote by firing the gun by pressing the trigger by moving his finger. But this is just another way of saying that he brought about, i.e. (on the Causal Theory) that a certain mental episode caused, his finger to move, which caused the trigger to be depressed, which caused the gun to fire, which caused the coyote to be shot, which caused the coyote to die. Once we have specified all the relevant events in the act sequence and have described them as stemming from a mental episode in the way appropriate to action, we have said all we need to say about which actions were performed and what the agent did.

Still, there will be those who insist on individuating actions. Currently on the market are three kinds of theory: fine-grained, coarse-grained, and

- 1 Jaegwon Kim, 'Events as Property Exemplifications', in Myles Brand and Douglas Walton, eds., *Action Theory*, (D. Reidel, Dordrecht, Holland, 1976), p. 173.
- 2 Lawrence H. Davis, *Theory of Action* (Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1979), p. 35.

identity theories.<sup>1</sup> All three misconstrue actions as events, and it is no wonder that the debate goes on unabated. Perhaps we can give solace to proponents of each theory by suggesting three different ways of counting actions (for those who insist on it), each reasonable in its own right. (1) One way to count actions is to count as one each token of each type of action performed. This results in counting as distinct those actions involving the same event differently described. Just as Goldman's fine-grained theory would have it, wiggling one's finger quickly and wiggling it crossly would count as two act-tokens. (2) Another way to count actions is to count one action for each event brought about, even when for a given event more than one type of action is thereby instantiated, as in the example of wiggling one's finger quickly and wiggling it crossly. Of course, this second way of counting requires a solution to the problem of individuating events. (3) Finally, to satisfy identity theorists we could count as one action any maximal set of actions counted in way (2) which are related by an unbranching sequence of by-relations. This way of counting captures the idea that the camper made one effort in doing five things. Thus, moving his finger, pressing the trigger, firing the gun, shooting the coyote, and killing the coyote count jointly as one action. However, if the camper killed the coyote by shooting it and then stabbing it, killing the coyote would not belong to the relevant maximal set and hence would not be included in the one action comprising everything from the camper's moving his finger to his shooting the coyote.

These three ways of counting actions capture, respectively, what is emphasized by each of the three theories of individuation, but of course I do not offer them as a serious ontological proposal. Surely there are not three equally good but incompatible ways of counting entities of the same sort, in this case actions. But if actions are instances of a relation, we are not obliged to produce a theory of individuation of actions.

Instances are not individuals and not subject to quantification. Imagine the silliness of a debate over whether, in the case of a red, round ball, there is one instance or two. There is an instance of redness and an instance of roundness, but one and the same individual, the ball, is an instance of both. Rather than get mixed up in such a debate, we can simply say that one individual is an instance of both properties, that is, that the ball is red and round. Similarly, we need not worry about individuation in the case of actions, construed as instances of the relation of bringing about between agents and events. Since an action is performed if and only if someone has brought about an event, we need not count actions but only agents and events.<sup>2</sup> As in the example of the

1 Prominent versions of each have been formulated by Goldman, Thomson, and Davidson, respectively. See Alvin Goldman, *A Theory of Human Action* (Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1970); Judith Jarvis Thomson, *Acts and Other Events* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, N.Y., 1977); Donald Davidson, 'Agency', in Robert Binkley *et al.*, eds., *Agent, Reason, and Action* (University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1971), pp. 3-25.

2 Metalinguistically, the claim is that expressions of the form 'A's bringing about *e*', as well as gerundive forms of action verbs generally, do not refer.

camper, we need not worry about the fact that the agent stands in the relation of bringing about to a number of different events and wonder how many instances of that relation, how many bringings about, there are. We need not argue over whether there is one bringing about for each event brought about or, since these events form a causal sequence, there is just one bringing about of them all.<sup>1</sup> We know that the agent brought them about and that they form this sequence. This is all we know and all we need to know.

Finally, what about actions and causal relations? Since actions are not events, they do not enter straightforwardly into causal relations—they are neither causes nor effects. This is perfectly consistent with the Causal Theory of action, which does not say that actions are caused but only that an action is performed if a change is caused (in the right way) by a mental episode of the right sort. On the Causal Theory the relation of bringing about is reducible to a relation between a pair of events, one of which causes the other. Then we could, I suppose, speak of actions being caused, in the (dubious) sense that the first event in that pair is caused and it in turn causes the second. Similarly, we could speak of actions having effects in the (equally dubious) sense that the second event in the pair has an effect. However, it would be more accurate, and less misleading, to speak only of those events themselves as being caused or as having effects. So, for example, if we wanted to know why someone did something, we would seek an explanation of the mental episode that caused what was done; and if we wanted to know the consequences of an action, we would look to the effects of what was done. Actions themselves, not being events, are neither causes nor effects.

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1 A more general statement would take into account not just causal but the other sorts of 'level generation' identified by Goldman, *ibid.*, pp. 20-48.