

PHIL 5983: Action Theory Seminar  
Prof. Funkhouser  
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Davidson, "Agency"

- Q: What distinguishes *happenings* from *doings* (agency)?
  - There is a distinction here, but there still are difficult and vague cases:

Waking up is something I did, perhaps, but not an action. (43)
  - Grammatical considerations cannot settle questions of agency. Perhaps, instead, *intention* is the mark of agency? Davidson claims that intention entails agency, but the converse does not hold. (45)
- Davidson's positive account of agency:

... a man is the agent of an act if what he does can be described under an aspect that makes it intentional. (46)
- Note the opacity of intentions: the same act can be intended or not under different descriptions. One consequence of this is that mistakes can be our actions, even though we do not intend to perform them under the true, mistake-referring description.
- Davidson asks the further question: Can we account for agency without invoking the obscure notion of *intention*? (47) This is a quest for a more reductive account of action. In the end, Davidson fails to find any such account.
- But, here is one proposal: To be an agent is simply to cause an event.

Objection:

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 analysed in terms of their causal relations to acts of the same agent. But then event causality cannot in this way be used to explain 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. (49)

- Davidson is fairly liberal when it comes to judging what events manifest agency — see the last full paragraph, p. 50. He also defends the view that our primitive actions are bodily movements.

- Here is another proposal for accounting for agency: Our primitive actions are to be explained by a special kind of causality — *agent causality*. On this proposal, non-primitive actions are still to be explained by event causality.

- But Davidson raises a dilemma for this proposal. Basically, Davidson charges that to say that an agent caused an action (directly, by agent causality) is simply to say that he is the agent of the action. But this does not explain agency (let alone in causal terms). See the middle of p. 52.

- The “accordion effect”: The chain of consequences that follow from our more basic actions and also count as our actions. Davidson says that we needn’t intend all of these effects in order to count as their agent. But, intention is needed at some earlier stage.

- Davidson gives up seeking an analysis of agency that is independent of intention. A new question: How is an agent related to her non-primitive actions? (55)

- Non-primitive actions can be said to be performed *by* the performance of (more) primitive actions. But Davidson thinks that many confusions lurk here.

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. 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). (56)

- Whereas others might distinguish between the event that is, say, a trigger-pulling and the (coincident) event that is a killing, Davidson claims that this

is only one event. The consequences in terms of which this event can be described (e.g., the resultant death) are not part of the action/event.

○ So, here is a nice statement of his position that only bodily movements are actions:

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. (59)

○ Primitiveness (for actions), like intention, is intensional. (61)