

# **ACTION AND GENERALITY**

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The philosophy of action defines itself by reference to a pair of canonical divisions. First, among events, a distinction is drawn between that which is a “mere event” and that which is an “action.” Then, a second distinction is drawn among actions, between that which is action in some qualified way—because it is unintentional, or unconscious, or unfree, or what have you—and that which is action unqualifiedly.

“The standard approach,” as Anscombe called it, is to take for granted the genus *event*, and to hunt for the differentia of action; or to take for granted the genus *action*, and to hunt for that of unqualified action. The negative aim of the dissertation is to argue against the standard approach; the positive aim is to develop an alternative.

I first distinguish three different forms of generality—forms that are associated with the traditional ideas of an accident, a category and an essence. I then ask: What kind of generality is exemplified by each of the two canonical divisions? The standard approach is viable only if both divisions exemplify what I call “accidental generality.” In fact, neither does.

The division of action into qualified and unqualified action is an example of what I call “essential generality.” I argue that, as in all such cases, the question, “What is unqualified action?” reduces into the question, “What is action?”

The other division is an example of what I call “categorical generality.” The concept “action” refers to a category of a distinctively practical kind: an agent must

*think* that what she is doing falls under this category, if, in fact, it does fall under it. Then any attempt to describe a differentia must be circular: sooner or later it must refer the agent's thought; and the agent's thought must in turn make reference to that which it needed to explain.

On the positive account defended here, an action is a certain sort of temporally-ordered system of ends and means. The claim is that the agent herself must think of what she is doing as being such a system—if, indeed, it is one.

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# 1.0 ACTION AND THE METHOD OF DIVISION

It is customary in the philosophy of action to proceed by a method of division; and two divisions have always seemed especially important. The first of these is a broad division within the class of things that happen. Some of the things that happen are the fruit of the human capacity to act; others plainly are not. Philosophers therefore commonly distinguish between that which is a “mere event” and that which is an “action.” The second of the two canonical divisions is within the category of action itself. Some actions, though they do involve the capacity to act, and therefore count among its revelations, nevertheless involve it only indirectly or imperfectly. A further distinction is therefore drawn, between that which is action in some qualified way—because it is unintentional, or idle, or addictive, or subconscious, or weak-willed, or compelled by force, or what have you—and that which is action unqualifiedly, or action *par excellence*.

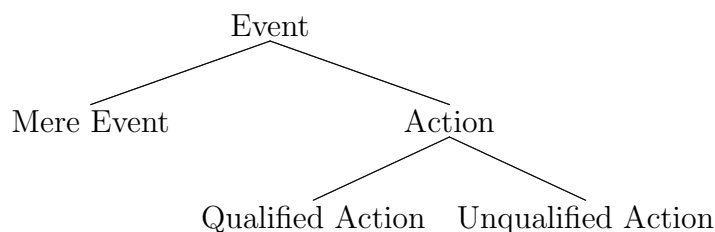


Figure 1

That both of these distinctions are legitimately drawn, and rightly placed at the center of the discipline, is perhaps beyond dispute. But in view of these distinctions,

the question does arise: What is the task of the philosopher of action?

One might suppose that a philosopher of action had primarily to account for the *difference* between an action and a mere event, or, again, the *difference* between qualified and unqualified action. And since both of the customary divisions are exhaustive, cutting what they divide into parts without remainder, this would amount to explaining how actions differ from events in general, and how unqualified actions differ from actions in general. And so, like the Stranger from Elea, one might suppose that the philosopher's task was to hound down the differentiae: to say what an event must be, over and above being an event, in order to be an action, or to say what an action must be, over and above being an action, in order to be an action in the full and proper sense.

Some such thought is implicit in a question that was famously posed by Wittgenstein: "What is left over if I subtract the fact that my arm goes up from the fact that I raise my arm?"<sup>1</sup> Wittgenstein's question appears to be concerned with the first of the two now familiar divisions, but it is easily redeployed in connection with the second: What is left over if I subtract the fact that I raise my arm from the fact that I raise it *intentionally*, or *rationally*, or *freely*, or ...? Of course, the idea of subtraction entails the idea of a corresponding addition. Wittgenstein's question therefore assumes a certain conception of what it is to be an action, according to which an action is, as it were, the arithmetic sum of an event and something else. So on the model of, for instance, this equation:  $7 + x = 12$ , we are invited to imagine this one:  $event + y = action$ , and also, by extension, this one:  $action + z = intentional\ action$ .

There is reason to think that in Wittgenstein's own opinion, the question he posed was deeply misguided, in which case he sought to expose it as such, and not to inaugurate a program of research.<sup>2</sup> Be that as it may, his question has come to serve

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<sup>1</sup>For the original passage see Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), §621.

<sup>2</sup>In reply to his own question, Wittgenstein writes: "When I raise my arm I do not usually *try* to raise it," §622. Whether or not it is true, the *point* of this remark is clearly to insist that the difference between the action of my raising my arm and the event of my arm's just going up cannot be explained by appeal to an inner state of *trying*, or (presumably) *willing*, or *intending*—an appeal

as a ritual starting-point for the prevailing sort of account in the philosophy of action. Indeed, even when it is not explicitly quoted, Wittgenstein's question appears to be lurking in the background, setting the agenda for the field at large.

The fundamental problem of action theory is typically conceived as that of explaining the contrast between two different kinds of event.<sup>3</sup> So, for instance, a seminal essay by Harry Frankfurt begins with the following pronouncement:

The problem of action is to explicate the contrast between what an agent does and what merely happens to him, or between the bodily movements that he makes and those that occur without his making them.<sup>4</sup>

Meanwhile, the contrast that is said to be in need of explication is often portrayed as being underwritten by a distinctive mark or property, which the philosopher of action must identify and describe. So, for example, a seminal essay by Donald Davidson begins with the following query:

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 action?<sup>5</sup>

Davidson's query and Frankfurt's pronouncement may be taken to imply that the principal task of the philosopher of action is to solve a Wittgensteinian equation.

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that is more or less inevitable the minute one attempts to say "what is left over." Of course, this does not settle whether Wittgenstein rejects one particular answer to the question "What is left over?" or, rather, the question itself. Those who interpret Wittgenstein as a behaviorist will tend to say that he rejects one particular answer—that he rejects an appeal to inner mental states, in favor of an appeal to "overt behavior," or "criteria." This interpretation remains influential partly because many philosophers would like to be charitable to Wittgenstein, and because they are at the same time convinced that there is no respectable reason to reject the question outright. It seems obvious to many philosophers both that there *must* be something left over, and that an account of action must appeal to this "something," whatever it is. This conviction sets the theme for the discussion that is to follow. On the topic of Wittgenstein's relation to behaviorism, see John W. Cook, "Human Beings," (1969).

<sup>3</sup>This conception of the problem is, of course, rejected by those philosophers who deny that actions are events. See for instance Maria Alvarez and John Hyman, "Agents and their Actions," (1998); Kent Bach, "Actions are not Events," (1980); G. H. von Wright, *Norm and Action*, (1963).

<sup>4</sup>Harry Frankfurt, "The Problem of Action," (1978).

<sup>5</sup>Donald Davidson, "Agency," (1971).

And that is in fact what most have tried to do.<sup>6</sup>

Admittedly, the precise terms of the equation are different for different philosophers. For Davidson, the starting-point is implicitly that of an event: this is what, supposedly, will bear the “mark” of action. Other philosophers begin from something rather more determinate. Some take for granted the idea of “behavior,” and ask what must be added to *that*.<sup>7</sup> But for others “behavior” is still too abstract. The most common starting-point is in fact the idea of a “bodily movement.” According to Arthur Danto, “An action [is] a movement of the body plus  $x$  ... and the problem ... is to solve in some philosophically interesting way for  $x$ .”<sup>8</sup> It is this conception of “the problem” that sets the stage for the most popular contemporary theory of action, according to which, as Michael Smith writes,

Actions are those bodily movements that are caused and rationalized by a pair of mental states: a desire for some end, where ends can be thought of as ways the world could be, and a belief that something the agent can just do, namely move her body in the way to be explained, has some suitable chance of making the world the relevant way.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>For a few prominent examples, see Alvin I. Goldman, *A Theory of Human Action*, (1970); Gilbert Harman, “Practical Reasoning,” (1976); John Searle, *Intentionality*, (1983); Myles Brand, *Intending and Acting: Toward a Naturalized Action Theory*, (1984); Fred Dretske, *Explaining Behavior: Reasons in a World of Causes*, (1988); Carl Ginet, *On Action*, (1990); Alfred Mele, *Springs of Action*, (1992); Michael Bratman, *Faces of Intention*, (1999); John Bishop, *Natural Agency: An Essay on the Causal Theory of Action*, (1989); J. David Velleman, *Practical Reflection*, (1989), and *The Possibility of Practical Reason*, (2000); Berent Eng, *How We Act: Causes, Reasons, and Intentions*, (2003).

<sup>7</sup>The term “behavior” is used to cover anything a person can be said *to do*—even, for instance, forgetting something. Kieran Setiya (2007) begins his account of intentional action as follows: “In the course of a typical day, I do a multitude of things: I breathe almost continuously; I blink from time to time; I look at things, pick them up, and put them down; I eat and drink; I read; I listen to music; and I forget something I meant to bring to the office. All of this counts as my behaviour—what I *do* in a minimal sense—but not all of it is done intentionally. [...] In what follows, I take for granted the idea of *doing* something, and ask what it is to do something *intentionally*,” p. 29. Having taken for granted the idea of behavior—or, of “doing something” in the thinnest possible sense—Setiya distinguishes two different kinds: there is, first, the exalted kind of behavior, which goes by the name of intentional action; and then there is all the rest, the latter being “mere” behavior. As he himself points out, his aim is to solve a familiar sort of problem: “Our question is roughly, ‘What is left over if I subtract the fact that I raise my arm from the fact that I raise my arm intentionally?’” *Ibid.*, p. 24, n. 8.

<sup>8</sup>Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, p. 5.

<sup>9</sup>Michael Smith, “The Structure of Orthonomy,” (2004), p. 165.

On this view, the value for the variable  $x$  in Danto's equation is a belief-desire pair that stands to a bodily movement in the appropriate causal and rational relations.<sup>10</sup>

There is no need to multiply examples any further; anyone familiar with action theory will recognize this as the usual method. By and large, philosophers of action have aimed to answer a version of Wittgenstein's question. And thus, they have assumed what the question itself assumes: namely, that there is some describable addendum in virtue of which an event is an action, or in virtue of which an action is action *par excellence*.

\*

G. E. M. Anscombe rejected this assumption and with it Wittgenstein's question. It is clear, moreover, that this rejection was a fundamental aspect of her thinking about action, and not a small or peripheral thesis, which an otherwise sympathetic reader might casually disregard. For Anscombe framed her whole account of intentional action in explicit opposition to the idea that an action is intentional in virtue of any "mere *extra* feature of events whose description would otherwise be the same."<sup>11</sup> The latter formulation appears to be a reference to Aristotle's definition of an accident as "something which may either belong, or not belong to some self-same thing."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Other philosophers take for granted something even more determinate than bodily movement: for them, the starting-point is a *purposeful* or *goal-directed* bodily movement. The editors of a recent collection of essays about action introduce their volume by describing a neurological disorder known as Anarchic Hand syndrome: "Patients with Anarchic Hand syndrome sometimes find one of their hands performing complex, apparently goal-directed movements they are unable to suppress (except by using their 'good' hand). Sometimes the anarchic hand interferes unhelpfully with intentional actions performed with the use of the other hand (it may unbutton a shirt the patient is trying to button up). Sometimes it performs movements apparently unrelated to any of the agent's intentions, such as (in one notorious example) a movement resulting in picking up some leftovers from somebody else's plate in a restaurant," (Roessler and Eilan, 2003, pp. 1–2). The editors ask, "What is the nature of the control that is absent in these cases, and whose absence fuels the intuition that they are not to be regarded as actions?" (Ibid., p. 2), and they present the essays contained in their collection as providing some sort of answer. But the point of describing this lurid pathology is presumably to remind the reader that there is such a thing as an event, which *is* behavior, and which *is* a bodily movement, and which *is* purposeful or goal-directed, but which nevertheless *fails* to be an action in the full and proper sense. In that case, presumably, the question must remain: "What is left over if I subtract the fact that I button my shirt from the fact that I do so—*archically*?"

<sup>11</sup>G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention*, (1963), p. 88. Cf. pp. 29–30, 84–89.

<sup>12</sup>*Topics*, 102b6–7.

In that case, Anscombe rejected what might be called an “accidental” account of intentional action.

Anscombe did not deny, of course, that various things are true of an action if and only if it is intentional, so that there are, if you like, many qualities, or features, that all and only intentional actions bear. What she denied is just that an action is intentional *in virtue of bearing* the putative qualities or features. She denied, in other words, that any such thing could explain what it is to be an intentional action. Speaking of the familiar Davidsonian account, she says: “Something I do is not made into an intentional action by being caused by a belief and desire, even if the descriptions fit.”<sup>13</sup> Anscombe is thus willing to allow, at least for the sake of argument, that the proposed descriptions “fit” their object. Her position is that, *even if they fit*, still, they do not explain.

The accidental account that Anscombe attributes to Davidson, and that she herself rejects, is the product of what she calls “the standard approach” in the philosophy of action.<sup>14</sup> This approach has two steps. The first step is preliminary, but nevertheless crucial: it is to isolate a putative genus under which the object of inquiry falls as a species, and to suppose that the genus has already been understood—not, perhaps, that we ourselves have understood it, but merely that it is the object of some prior investigation. The second step yields the substance of the accidental account: it is to explain how the salient species differs from everything else of the same genus. So understood, the standard approach might be brought to bear on either of the two canonical divisions: one might take for granted the genus *event* and hunt for the differentia of *action*; or one might take for granted the genus *action* and hunt for the differentia of, say, *intentional action*.

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<sup>13</sup>One might question whether Davidson really held the view that Anscombe here attributes to him, and my point is not to endorse her attribution. What matters is only that Anscombe’s interpretation of Davidson is a common one. It is particularly common among philosophers of action who defend accidental accounts. For Anscombe’s criticism of Davidson, see “Practical Inference,” reprinted in Rosalind Hursthouse, Gavin Lawrence and Warren Quinn (eds.), *Virtues and Reasons*, (1995), p. 3.

<sup>14</sup>Anscombe, “Practical Inference,” (1995), pp. 2-3.

Anscombe's opposition to the standard approach, and to the resulting accidentalist account, has never attracted much attention, not even from those philosophers, like David Velleman, who adopt such an approach, and who offer such an account, and who cite Anscombe as a major influence.<sup>15</sup> If her opposition is mentioned at all, it is usually dismissed as the expression of some purported "behaviorism," which she is supposed to have inherited from Wittgenstein.<sup>16</sup> Anscombe is called a "behaviorist," one gathers, because she openly opposes any attempt to account for intentional action by reference to mental states and other psychic phenomena. But to suppose that this rejection of psychologism explains her opposition to the standard approach is in fact to invert the order of her thought, and to overlook the fundamental object of her criticism. For Anscombe's claim is categorical: according to her, there is *no* feature—none whatsoever—in virtue of which an action is intentional. It follows as a mere trivial consequence of this claim that an action is not intentional in virtue of this or that particular feature. So, to take one instance, on par with any other: an action is not intentional in virtue of its being related thus-and-so to the agent's "inner states." Anscombe does not deny the existence of a definitive extra feature because she rejects a psychological account; rather, she rejects a psychological account because she denies the existence of a definitive extra feature.

Of course, if that is true, then for the same reason that Anscombe rejects psychologism, she must also reject behaviorism. After all, it *also* follows from her categorical claim—and every bit as trivially—that an action is not intentional in virtue of its being related thus-and-so to the agent's "overt behavior." Psychologism and behaviorism involve exactly the same commitment to a definitive extra feature, and differ over the question *which* feature is definitive. Both are thus equally good examples of the standard two-step approach, whereby we first isolate the genus of action, and then ask what distinguishes the special object of our interest from "action in general,"

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<sup>15</sup>See Velleman 2000 and 2007.

<sup>16</sup>For the charge of behaviourism, see for example Setiya 2007, p. 26.



or from “action *just as such*.”<sup>17</sup>

In fairness, though, it must be said that if Anscombe’s rejection of the standard approach has been misunderstood or neglected, she herself is in some part to blame, offering, as she does, almost nothing by way of explanation or defense. In fact she gives only one short argument. This appears in a single dense paragraph of *Intention*, §19, where she claims to establish that “we do not add anything attaching to the action at the time it is done by describing it as intentional.”<sup>18</sup> The argument itself is tremendously obscure.<sup>19</sup> But even if it could be clarified, and were sound, it would not tell decisively against the standard approach. For even if it somehow proved that there is no extra feature in virtue of which an event is an action, it would not explain what is most difficult to understand: namely, how there could fail to be one.

What maintains the standard approach in its dominant position is not the idea that there *is* an extra feature, of the sort that Anscombe denied, so much as the idea that there *must* be one, as a matter of logical necessity. After all, one thinks, there clearly is a *difference* between action and everything else that happens. Well, then, mustn’t there be something that makes for the difference? Something in which the difference consists?—And if so, then is this not the explanation? And if not, then what is?

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<sup>17</sup>For Anscombe’s views on Wittgenstein and behaviorism, see her “Analytic Philosophy and the Spirituality of Man,” (2005).

<sup>18</sup>Anscombe, *Intention*, (1963), p. 28.

<sup>19</sup>The details of Anscombe’s argument are discussed by Rosalind Hursthouse in “Intention,” (2000), and by Candace Vogler, *Reasonably Vicious*, (2002), pp. 213–229. It is perhaps worth noting that, however the questions of detail are ultimately resolved, Anscombe’s argument will still be hampered by its limited scope, which is restricted to *intentional* action. The problem is that intentional action is not the only privileged kind of action towards which philosophers are wont to take the standard approach. There is also what Frankfurt calls “whole-hearted action” and what Velleman calls “autonomous action”—to mention just two examples among many. These and other similar kinds of action ultimately require a different treatment from intentional action, because they are opposed to a different sort of deficiency. Unintentional action fails to be action in the full and proper sense because it fails to express the will *directly*; by contrast, action that is not e.g. “whole-hearted” or “autonomous” fails to be action in the full and proper sense because it fails to express the will *perfectly*. This distinction will be developed in Chapter 3, below.

The question how to approach a distinction, if not by a method of division, is one that is raised by Marx in *The German Ideology*:

Man can be distinguished from the animals by consciousness, by religion, or by anything else you please. He begins to distinguish himself from the animals the moment he begins to produce his means of life, a step that is required by his physical organization. By producing his means of life, man indirectly produces his material life itself.<sup>20</sup>

The central opposition, here, between the ways that man “is distinguished” from the animals, and the way that man “distinguishes himself,” is easily taken for a mere rhetorical extravagance. What, after all, does it mean to say that man “distinguishes himself”? The polemical thrust is fairly clear. Marx confronts, or so he believes, a legitimate distinction illegitimately drawn. There are many ways of understanding the gulf between a human being and a mere brute, which, though they may appeal to genuine differences, are superficial and arbitrary. And a theory founded on such is an unscientific dogma. But there is a certain way of understanding the distinction, whose special claim to legitimacy is that it is not imposed on the world by a theorist. It is, in some sense, operative through, and creative of, the very object that the theory is about. So that the object of the theory “distinguishes itself.” This, I say, is the polemical thrust. The content of the claim is more difficult to pin down.

For Marx, the special importance of production derives from its causal role in maintaining human life. What explains the existence of human beings is in large part the production of food, clothing and shelter. Were it not for this, there would not be the kind of thing that a theorist prides himself on distinguishing from the animals—by appeal to religion or whatever you please. It is by producing their means of life that human beings maintain themselves, as the special kind of thing they are, from day to day, and from generation to generation. “Man begets man,” as Aristotle says.

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<sup>20</sup>Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, (1998), Part I, p. 37.

But then, “Horse begets horse,” as Aristotle also says. The self-sustaining character of human life-activity is by no means uniquely human. *Every* kind of organism procures its means of life. And yet, presumably, not every kind of organism “distinguishes itself.” In that case, there must be something special about the kind of activity by which human beings maintain their lives, and the kind of lives maintained by this activity.

Part of what it means to say that man “distinguishes himself” may be that man himself apprehends the distinction between the animals and himself.<sup>21</sup> That is certainly *not* true of a horse. And such a proposal forestalls the worry that what is said to be “special” about a human being’s self-maintenance may itself be chosen arbitrarily. For it assures us that the distinction is drawn by the very thing that is distinguished. And if the drawing of this distinction belongs to the thing itself, then it has not been imposed arbitrarily by a theorist.

But this requires care. For Marx explicitly rejects the attempt to distinguish man by appeal to “consciousness.” This, he thinks, is just another spurious differentia. So if part of the point of Marx’s claim is that man himself apprehends the distinction between himself and the animals, the importance of this cannot be that man apprehends the distinction *theoretically*, in his ideas about himself—in the thought, for instance, that he is no mere brute—the importance must be that he does so *practically*, in action, in producing his means of life, and through his means of life, himself.<sup>22</sup> Then

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<sup>21</sup>Compare Hegel: “Man is a thinker, and is universal, but he is only a thinker inasmuch as the universal exists *for* him. The animal is also *in itself* universal, but the universal does not exist *for* it as such; for it only the singular exists. The animal sees something singular, for instance, its food, or a man . . . . Nature does not bring *Nous* to consciousness of itself until man first doubles himself so as to be a universal for a universal. This first happens when man knows that he is ‘I’,” *Encyclopedia Logic*, 24, Zusatz 1.

<sup>22</sup>Shortly before the *German Ideology*, Marx had written: “Yet the productive life is the life of the species. It is life-engendering life. The whole character of a species—its species character—is contained in the character of its life-activity; and free, conscious activity is man’s species character. [...] The animal is immediately one with its life-activity. It does not distinguish itself from it. It is *its life-activity*. Man makes his life-activity itself the object of his will and of his consciousness. He has conscious life-activity. It is not a determination with which he directly merges. Conscious life-activity directly distinguishes man immediately from animal life-activity. It is just because of this that he is a species being. Or rather, it is only because he is a species being that he is a conscious

what proves the validity of this distinction, in contrast to others that might be drawn, is that this one alone is presupposed by the real existence of what is distinguished.

Whether this is in fact the significance of Marx's claim that man "distinguishes himself," I will not venture to say. I offer it only as a model of what I would like to say about action. For the gulf that separates what we are from other things in the natural world is akin to the gulf between what we do and the other things that happen. Action can be distinguished from other events by belief, by desire, or by anything else you please—but action, I think, distinguishes itself. The agent, in acting, draws precisely that distinction which philosophers of action have attempted to explain. She herself must think of what she is doing as an action, and as intentional, and not as a mere event. In that case, the apprehension of action's distinctive character is operative in the genesis of any event that has this character. An action is, thus, the kind of thing whose real existence requires it to be thought of as the kind of thing it is.

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Or so, at least, I will argue. The argument will proceed as follows. In Chapter 2, I will distinguish three different forms of generality. They are associated, respectively, with the traditional ideas of an accident, a category and an essence; I therefore speak of generality as either accidental, categorial or essential. The purpose of this preliminary foray into extra-practical territory is to raise the following question: What kind of generality is exemplified by each of the two canonical divisions drawn in the philosophy of action?

Both of the divisions present us with a contrast between something somehow general and something more specific: on the one hand, *event* and *action*; on the other hand, *action* and *unqualified action*. And in each case, the philosopher inquires about that which is more specific. But whether it is possible to do so by means of the standard approach must depend, in each case, on which form of generality is exemplified.

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being, i.e., that his own life is an object for him. Only because of that is his activity free activity," *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, p. 113.

It will emerge in the preliminary discussion of our three different forms that *one* kind of species-genus relation is mediated by an accident, and that, consequently, a species of this kind can be explained by reference to genus and differentia. However, it will also emerge that the other two forms are *not* so mediated, and that, consequently, they defy a method of division.

The recognition of two non-accidental forms of generality will enable us to understand the otherwise quite perplexing claim that an action is not intentional in virtue of “an extra property which a philosopher must try to describe.”<sup>23</sup> And once we have seen what it would amount to for Anscombe’s claim to be true, we will have overcome the greatest obstacle to accepting that it *is* true. For, as I mentioned, what secures the position of the standard approach is above all just the appearance that *there could not fail to be* an “extra feature.” But we will have encountered two different ways for there not to be anything of the sort.

If there are, indeed, two forms of genus-species relation that are unmediated by an accident, then the standard approach in the philosophy of action depends on a significant, but uncritical assumption. The assumption is that each of the two canonical divisions presents us with an example of accidental generality. For it is only on this assumption that the standard approach is viable. If, however, the assumption is false, then the differences between one accidentalist theory and another—between, for example, the “belief-desire” model associated with Davidson and the “hierarchical” model championed by Frankfurt—these differences will turn out to be of very little significance, because no such theory can succeed in explaining its object.

Of course, I do not intend to leave it an open question. The negative aim of this dissertation is to vindicate Anscombe’s claim that the standard approach in the philosophy of action “leads us into inextricable confusions, and we must give it up.”<sup>24</sup> I will argue that there is no definitive extra feature, either of action, or of any privileged kind of action that a philosopher might care to discuss, the reason being

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<sup>23</sup>Anscombe, *Intention*, (1963), p. 84.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 29.

that neither of the two canonical divisions is a case of accidental generality.

I will treat the divisions in reverse order, starting in Chapter 3, with the distinction between qualified and unqualified action. The aim of this chapter is to argue that action theory is, in the first instance, ideal action theory. My position will be that the fundamental case of action—the one that exhibits its “essence,” if you like—is an action that is both intentional and also free from any defect or disturbance. In that case, the question “What is unqualified action?” is ultimately reducible to the question “What is action?” This is a possibility that we will have been prepared for by the preliminary discussion of essential generality.

In Chapter 4, I will turn to the distinction between a mere event and an action. The argument that this distinction cannot be understood by reference to an extra feature will occupy me for the rest of the dissertation. The leading idea will be that the concept “action” refers to a category that is *practical* in the following sense: an agent must deploy it in the course of bringing about whatever could fall under it. A practical category is one that, in Marx’s phrase, “distinguishes itself.” If “action” refers to such a category, then any attempt to describe a definitive extra feature is doomed to circularity. For a complete description of the putative feature must refer to the agent’s thought, and the agent’s thought must in turn make reference to precisely that which it wanted to explain.

The circle that arises in connection with an agent’s thought is, I think, just a special instance of a general, and not entirely unfamiliar phenomenon. It is in general the case that one falls into circularity whenever one tries to explain what is categorially more determinate by reference to its determinable genus and a differentia. The scope of this phenomenon is one we will survey in the preliminary account of categorial generality.

But this position is sure to encounter considerable resistance. For it amounts to the suggestion that a certain thesis defended by many—perhaps most—philosophers of action is *incompatible* with the method they employ. In general, philosophers of

action profess to believe that action is essentially self-conscious. But the argument entails that this is in fact what dooms the standard approach.

Overcoming the resistance will require us to consider what it is to represent an event as an action. The reason that a circle arises—according to the account of Chapter 4—is that an agent, in acting, must think of herself as doing precisely that: acting. Chapter 5 takes up the question what is involved in thinking of an event as an action, rather than a mere event. Certainly it cannot require a person to deploy the predicate “...is an action.” But if not as part of the explicit content of an agent’s thought, then in what other way does the category of action inform the agent’s thinking? I will argue that in order to think of an event as an action, one must think of it as having a distinctive kind of internal complexity. It is its possession of a certain temporal and purposive structure that characterizes an event as an action. The description of this structure is the main business of Chapter 5.

This dovetails with the positive aim of the dissertation. For my argument *against* the standard approach is at the same time an argument *for* a certain alternative. According to Anscombe, the task of the philosopher of action is to display what she calls “a form of description”<sup>25</sup>—“an order which is there wherever actions are done with intentions.”<sup>26</sup> Unfortunately, her remarks about this are just as elusive as her argument against an extra feature. One aim of Chapter 5 is, thus, to clarify and motivate the alternative approach.

Having tried to explain what it is to think of an event as an action, I will return, in the Conclusion, to the acting subject herself, and specifically to her thought that what she is doing is acting. For if action is a practical category, then all that is essential to it must be represented in the agent’s own thought.

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 84.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 80.

## 2.0 THREE FORMS OF GENERALITY

### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

Anscombe's rejection of the standard approach is predicated on the claim that intentional action cannot be explained by reference to "any mere 'extra feature' of events whose description would otherwise be the same."<sup>1</sup> But the meaning of this is not immediately clear.

To many it will seem that there *must* be an extra feature in virtue of which an event is an action, and in virtue of which an action is intentional; and this will seem to be the case for reasons having nothing to do with the philosophy of action or ethics, but purely as a matter of logical or metaphysical necessity. All sides agree that every action is an event, but not every event is an action; and every intentional action is an action, but not every action is intentional. Let us say that B is a "species" of A, and that A is conversely a "genus" of B, if something's being B entails that it is A, but something's being A does not entail that it is B. Then if the standard approach in practical philosophy appears, at first blush, utterly beyond criticism, the reason is in some part simply this, that *action* is a species of *event*, and *intentional action* of *action*.

But this alone cannot explain the allure of the standard approach. By itself, the fact that *action* is a species of *event*, and *intentional action* of *action*, does not support the standard approach in the least. It does, however, if it is combined with

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<sup>1</sup>Anscombe, *Intention*, (1963), p. 88.



the following common reflex assumption: that wherever there is a contrast between a species and its genus, there must also be a differentia in terms of which to understand the contrast. This idea appears at once so innocent and obvious that any claim to the contrary is apt to be met with bafflement. One is simply sure there must be *something* the presence of which accounts for the specificity of the species, and the absence of which explains the generality of the genus; and it is, at bottom, this idea that gives the standard approach its air of unquestionable legitimacy.

The aim of the present chapter is to dispute the common reflex assumption—to show that, in fact, there is not, for every difference, a differentia. I will attempt to describe three irreducibly different ways in which a species may fall under its genus. In the course of this discussion, it will emerge that one the three types of genus-species relation is mediated by a differentia; but also, importantly, that the other two are not. The result will be that *only* a species of the first variety can be explained by means of a two-step approach, whereby we first isolate the genus, and then identify a distinguishing mark. Species of the other two varieties defy explanation by genus and differentia; and their defiance takes a characteristic form: if one tries to explain them by means of the standard approach, the resulting account is inevitably circular.

## 2.2 ACCIDENTAL GENERALITY

There is, as I said, one type of species-genus relation that is mediated by a differentia. To borrow a famous example from Aristotle, every snub nose is a nose, but not every nose is snub: so *snub nose* is a species of *nose*. No special difficulty is posed by the equation:  $nose + x = snub\ nose$ . What is left over, if you subtract the fact that Socrates has a nose from the fact that he has a snub nose, is whatever it is to be concave. So here there is a definitive extra feature. Or, to take another example, this time from Chisholm, every brother is a male, but not every male is a brother. Again,

there is a straightforward solution to the equation:  $male + y = brother$ . What is left over, if you subtract the fact that I am a male from the fact that I am a brother, is whatever it is to be a sibling.

Let us consider the equations  $nose + concavity = snub\ nose$  and  $male + sibling = brother$  in a little more detail. That which is represented by the first term of each equation—i.e. the genus—is independent from that which is represented by the other two terms. It is “independent” in the following sense: in order to explain what a nose is, one need not mention, much less explain, what concavity is, or what a snub nose is; and in order to explain what a male is, one need not mention or explain what a sibling is, or what a brother is. Meanwhile, that which is represented by the second term of each equation—i.e. the differentia—enjoys exactly the same independence. One need neither explain nor even mention what a nose is, or what a snub nose is, in order to explain what concavity is; and one need neither explain nor mention what a male is, or what a brother is, in order to explain what a sibling is. By sharp contrast, that which is represented by the third term of each equation—i.e. the species—is utterly dependent on that which is represented by the other two terms. In order to explain what a snub nose is, one must not only mention, but explain *both* what a nose is *and* what concavity is; and in order to explain what a brother is, one must mention and explain *both* what a male is *and* what a sibling is.

Where the contrast between a species and its genus is mediated by an independent quality, or “accident,” and where, consequently, a two-step approach is required to account for the species, I will call the latter an *accidental species*. And the relation of an accidental species to its genus is what I will call *accidental generality*.

The account of an accidental species presupposes that of its genus, because the species is itself a secondary, or derivative kind of thing. Something belongs to an accidental species in virtue of belonging to the relevant genus, and not the other way around. Something is a snub nose in virtue of being *inter alia* a nose; it is not a nose in virtue of being a snub nose. And someone is a brother because he is a male, a male

who happens to be a sibling; he is certainly not a male because he is a brother. Here the genus is not only logically more abstract than its species, but also metaphysically more fundamental. This is one important form of generality and specificity. It is not, however, the only form.

## 2.3 CATEGORIAL GENERALITY

### 2.3.1 The Categorical Species and its Genus

Every horse is an animal, but not every animal is a horse: so *horse* is a species of *animal*—as indeed one would expect. But to the question, “What is left over if I subtract the fact that Bucephalus is an animal from the fact that he is a horse?” no answer is forthcoming. For the question assumes that Bucephalus is a horse in virtue of something additional to—and thus separable from—his animality, whereas in fact his being a horse is nothing but the determinate form that his animality takes. In that case, however, there is no solution to the equation: *animal* +  $x$  = *horse*. Or, to take another example, everything red is colored, but not everything colored is red. About this case, A. N. Prior writes:

[W]e do sometimes call “the red” and “the blue” species of “the coloured”; though we do not do so [...] because the red possesses some quality added to or conjoined with its colour, and the blue possesses some different quality added to or conjoined with its colour—some quality which, in each case, might have been given first, and “coloured” added on afterwards. The colour of what is red is its redness; and the colour of what is blue is its blueness; we can say that the red and the blue agree in being coloured, but of their difference we can only say either that their colour is different, or that one is red and the other blue.<sup>2</sup>

If “the color of what is red is its redness,” then no version of Wittgenstein’s question is legitimate, here, because no value can solve for the equation: *color* +  $y$  = *red*.

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<sup>2</sup>A. N. Prior, “Determinables, Determinates, and Determinants (I),” (1949a), pp. 5–6. And compare his “Determinables, Determinates, and Determinants (II),” (1949b).

Following W. E. Johnson, and others, Prior calls *red* a “determinate” and *color* a “determinable.”<sup>3</sup> And though I will sometimes speak this way myself, I will in general prefer the terms “categorical species” and “categorical genus,” as these tend to give some indication—if only a very vague one—of the kind of specificity and generality that is at issue.<sup>4</sup>

No quality can account for the contrast between a categorical species and its genus—or, at any rate, no quality that is logically independent of the species. Concavity, the quality that distinguishes a snub nose from all the rest, is not a quality unique to snub noses: it belongs to many other sorts of thing, and has, as it were, a life of its own. But now, if there is a quality that distinguishes a horse from all other animals, it is a quality that nothing could possibly have—except a horse. On the one hand, obviously, no other animal could have it, or else the quality would not be distinctive. On the other hand, less obviously, nothing could have it except an animal. It is true that a horse differs from an octopus in various respects, and that in

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<sup>3</sup>The *locus classicus* of the determinable-determinate relation is the eleventh chapter of Johnson’s *Logic*, Vol. 1, (1921), pp. 173–185. Before Johnson, Brentano discussed the relation—the discovery of which he attributed to Aristotle—under the name “one-sided detachability” (or sometimes “one-sided separability”); see *The Theory of Categories* (1981), pp. 111–116; and *Descriptive Psychology* (1982), pp. 12–19. Brentano’s view is discussed by Chisholm in “Brentano on One-Sided Detachability,” (1987), pp. 153–159. Chisholm introduces the idea to action theory in “Adverbs and Subdeterminates,” (1985), pp. 324–328. For a general discussion of the topic, see Prior’s two articles of 1949, cited above. See also John Searle, “Determinables and the Notion of Resemblance,” (1959); David Armstrong, *A World of States of Affairs*, (1997), pp. 48–63; and Eric Funkhouser, “The Determinable-Determinate Relation,” (2006), pp. 548–569. The idea has been put to work outside of action theory by, for instance, Stephen Yablo, “Mental Causation,” (1992); see also Timothy Williamson, *Knowledge and its Limits*, (2000), 1–48.

<sup>4</sup>A word about terminology. The relation between *nose* and *snub nose* shares something in common with the relation between *color* and *red*; and it is most natural to characterize what is common by saying that the first term in each pair is general and the second is specific; I therefore speak of a “genus” and of a “species” in both sorts of case. In order to mark that something is different in the second sort of case, I have elected to speak of a “categorical genus” and of a “categorical species.” I used to speak instead of a “determinable genus” and a “determinate species,” but gave it up. The problem with the latter is that the adjective “determinate” is a synonym for “specific,” and “determinable” is a synonym for “specifiable,” which just means “general.” And it obviously carries no information to speak of a “general genus” and of a “specific species,” which is what the terms “determinable genus” and “determinate species” amount to.

Not everything that I call a “categorical species” is itself a category, in the traditional sense: *horse*, for example, is not. But *horse* is a determination of a category—namely, *substance*—and on these grounds it is fitting, I think, to call it a categorical species.

many of these it also differs from an iceberg: e.g. in respect of its weight, smell, texture, volume, temperature and flamability. But a horse also differs from an octopus in ways that it could only differ from another animal: e.g. in respect of its organs and members, and in respect of its manner of nourishing itself, and of reproducing, and of moving itself from place to place. The latter are differences internal to the genus. Just as what is red and what is blue differ in respect of color, and what is a square and what is a circle differ in respect of shape, and what is over here and what is over there differ in respect of place, so, too, what is a horse and what is an octopus differ in respect of animality. And this is the respect that matters, if what we aim to understand is the nature of a horse; this is the respect in which we must reveal it as “distinct.” Now given that only what is an animal can be alike or different in respect of animality, and given that whatever is indistinguishable from a horse in respect of animality is a horse—given all that, it is clear that if there is, in fact, a quality that distinguishes a horse in the salient respect, this must be a quality that nothing could possibly have except a horse. And similarly, if there is, in fact, a quality “added to or conjoined with” a thing’s being colored, in virtue of which it is red, this must be a quality that only a color could possess, and only red among colors.

No such quality could ever fulfill the explanatory function of a differentia, because it is logically dependent on the explanandum. Since such a quality can only belong to one kind of thing, an account of the quality will have to make reference to this very kind of thing: there is, by hypothesis, no other way for the intellect to grasp it. But then it will be circular to appeal to such a quality in an account of the kind of thing to which it belongs.

Because of this, an account of a categorial species must be altogether different from an account of an accidental species. It is necessary, as we saw in the previous section, to proceed from a prior understanding of the genus, *nose*, to a posterior understanding of the species, *snub nose*, by way of an understanding of an independent quality. But there is no similar passage from *animal* to *horse*, or from *colored* to *red*. Thus the two-

step approach, by which we first explain (or assume) the genus, and then distinguish the object of inquiry from everything else within that genus, is impossible with respect to a categorial species.

The need, here, for a different kind of account reflects a different metaphysical order: whereas an accidental species is posterior to its genus, a categorial species is prior. Earlier we saw that something belongs to an accidental species in virtue of belonging to the relevant genus: a person is a brother, for instance, because he is *inter alia* a male. But something belongs to a categorial genus in virtue of belonging to one or another categorial species thereof. So, for instance, a surface is colored because it is red, or because it is blue; it is not red, or blue, because it is colored. And Bucephalus' being a horse does not consist in his being an animal; rather, his being an animal consists in his being a horse. The categorial species, though less abstract, is more fundamental than its genus.

W. E. Johnson marks the same contrast where he distinguishes two different ways in which several species can be joined under a common genus: in one kind of case, the *similarity* of the species is the ground of their unity; in another kind of case, their *difference* is the ground. The obvious kinship of a snub nose and an aquiline nose derives from something they share in common: viz. being a nose. But, according to Johnson, “what is most prominently notable about red, green and yellow is that they are different, and even, as we may say, opponent to one another.”<sup>5</sup> The contrariety, or “opponent” difference, of *red* and *green* is to be contrasted with the “mere otherness,” as Johnson puts it, of e.g. *red* and *square*. Johnson continues:

What is here true of colour is true of shape, pitch, feeling-tone, pressure, and so on: the ground for grouping determinates under one and the same determinable is not any partial agreement between them that could be revealed by analysis, but the unique and peculiar kind of difference that subsists between the several determinates under the same determinable, and which does not subsist between any one of them and an adjective under some other determinable.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Johnson, *Logic*, Vol. I, (1921), pp. 175–176.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 176.

Johnson’s point is not, I think, to deny that there is similarity as well as difference among the species of a categorial genus. His point is simply that their difference is the predominating element: it is that through which alone we see them as similar.

These considerations show, I think, that the bare concept of a species is, in the words of Kit Fine, “insensitive to source.”<sup>7</sup> If all we know is that A is a genus of which B is a species, it always makes good sense to ask: What is the source of the truth of it that, *as we know*, every B is at the same time also an A? Is it the case that something is a B, because it is, among other things, an A? Or is it, perhaps, that something is an A, because it is, for instance, a B? Does the species in question transpire from its genus, or the genus from its species?

It must be borne in mind that nothing depends on any putative example of categorial generality; all that matters, here, is the reader’s recognition of a second intelligible pattern—a pattern that could in principle receive many diverse instantiations. Even if it is false, it is at least intelligible, and therefore also arguable, that *human being* is a categorial species of *rational being*, *water* of *liquid*, *four* of *number*, *private property* of *property*, *bread* of *food*, *knife* of *instrument*, *chess* of *game*, *seeing* of *knowing*, and *walking home* of *going home*. And the history of philosophy is rich with apparent examples. Take, for instance, Frege’s distinction between concept and object. These, he says, are “logically simple” and cannot be given proper definitions.<sup>8</sup> But they surely *could* be given proper definitions, and not just Frege’s “hints,” if they were accidental species of some common prior genus—if, that is, we could first grasp of the nature of an “entity,” and if we could then divide the class of such things in two, distinguishing the ones with holes from the ones without.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>See Kit Fine, “Essence and Modality,” (1994), p. 9.

<sup>8</sup>Gottlob Frege, “Concept and Object,” (1952), 42–43.

<sup>9</sup>This point is made by Michael Thompson in, “The Representation of Life,” in *Action and Life*, (2008), Chapter 2. In that essay, Thompson addresses the question whether *life* can be given a real definition. Thompson argues against the idea that *organism* is an accidental species of *material substance*. His view is (as I would put it) that the former is a categorial species of the latter, and, moreover, that the former is a logical category, just as the latter is said to be in a tradition that descends from Aristotle. Thompson’s view will be discussed below, in Section 2.3.2.

Or take Aristotle's doctrine of the categories. It is a well-known thesis of his that no differentia mediates the contrast between *being* and, for instance, *being human*, or *being six feet tall*.<sup>10</sup> Thus we cannot explain what substance is, or what quantity is, by first explaining "being in general," and then pointing to an attribute of being that distinguishes one way of being from the rest. To paraphrase Prior, we can say that substance and quantity agree in being categories, but of their difference we can only say either that their category is different, or that one is substance and the other quantity.

Consider as a final example the distinction we are presently drawing, the distinction between *categorical species* and *accidental species*. These latter would appear to be categorical species, not accidental species, of *species*. In that case, the notion of generality and specificity with which we began *is itself an abstraction*—an abstraction that transpires from various prior concrete forms of generality and specificity. And if there are, in fact, such prior concrete forms, it ought to be clear that they cannot be given proper definitions, or subjected to analysis: it is only through the perception of their "unique and peculiar kind of difference"—triggered, perhaps, by an artful array of examples—that we are so much as able to form the idea of a kinship or bond between them.<sup>11</sup>

Suffice it to say that if there is any such thing as a categorical species, then the common reflex assumption is false: there is not, for every difference, a differentia; not every contrast drawn between something somehow general and something more specific is mediated by an extra feature; and not every object of inquiry is suited to a method of division.

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<sup>10</sup>The Aristotelian dictum that "being is not a genus" means, I think, that being is not what I would call an *accidental* genus. See *Posterior Analytics*, 92b14; see also *Metaphysics*, B.3, 998b22.

<sup>11</sup>If *accidental species* and *categorical species* are categorical species of *species*, then it is hopeless to try to expound the contrast by drafting a list of conditions that are necessary and sufficient for a species to be categorical. The latter project, which was first undertaken by Searle (1959), was later developed by John Woods, "On Species and Determinates," (1967); it has been criticized by Richmond H. Thomason, "Species, Determinates and Natural Kinds," (1969).



### 2.3.2 The Irreducibility of this Form

But is this really a second form of genus-species relation, or might it somehow be reducible to the first? One reason to be suspicious is that many of the formulas that philosophers use to explain the idea of categorial generality seem not, in fact, to secure its logical distinctiveness. When introducing the categorial genus, one inevitably wants to say, for example, that there is no such thing as color in the abstract, or color in general, but only specific colors, like red and blue and yellow. However, this leaves it unclear why one should not *also* say that there is no such thing as a nose in general, but only a nose of this or that shape: after all, every nose is either concave, or convex, or some shape in between. It does not help to add that a snub nose and an aquiline nose differ in respect of something that is unrelated to their genus—namely, shape—whereas red and blue differ in respect of color. For what is to prevent one from saying that noses of different shape differ, not only in respect of shape, but also in respect of being a nose?

Another reason to be suspicious is that attempts to elucidate categorial generality tend to focus on the example of color. They do so, presumably, because it is in connection with color that the existence of a second form of genus-species relation seems most plausible. Faced with the question, “What distinguishes red from other colors?” we are stunned and speechless; we gape. But we have no difficulty answering the question, “What distinguishes a snub nose from other noses?” And this is a very striking contrast. It is natural to think that what explains our inability to answer the first question is the fact that there is nothing that stands to a color as concavity stands to a snub nose. But this is perhaps too quick. If we cannot say how red is different from other colors, the explanation may just be that color is a subject on which we can say hardly anything. We cannot give a discursive account of red, either by reference to genus and differentia, or by any other means—we simply cannot give one. It therefore proves little that, when we try to say what differentiates a color, we find ourselves at a loss for words.

Besides, color is an exceptional case. One typically has something, and often a great deal to say about how a categorial species is different from its congeners. Sissy Jupe, in the Dickens novel *Hard Times*, “was thrown into the greatest alarm” when asked to give the definition of a horse—much to her schoolmaster’s horror: “Girl number twenty unable to define a horse! Girl number twenty possessed of no facts, in reference to one of the commonest animals!” And yet, however things may stand with Sissy Jupe, we do not expect a philosopher to be dumbstruck, but to reply in the manner of white-eyed Bitzer:

Quadruped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive. Sheds coat in the spring; in marshy countries, sheds hoofs, too. Hoofs hard, but requiring to be shod with iron. Age known by marks in mouth.<sup>12</sup>

But now, what has Bitzer given, if not the definition of a horse, by reference to genus and differentia? For let us suppose that what Bitzer says is true, and that the qualities he adduces really do distinguish a horse from all other animals. In that case, it is difficult to see how his mention of them is any different from the mention of concavity in connection with a snub nose. So perhaps after all there *is* something “left over” when we subtract the fact that Bucephalus is a horse from the fact that he is animal: the metaphysical remainder is just whatever would answer to a true account of the sort provided by Bitzer. In that case, there cannot be any deep distinction between the way that *horse* is related to *animal* and the way that *snub nose* is related to *nose*.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>“Thus (and much more) Bitzer,” in Chapter 2 of *Hard Times*, by Charles Dickens.

<sup>13</sup>This is evidently Searle’s opinion (1959). He treats the relation between being an animal and being a specific kind of animal as a paradigm case of accidental generality. Here is the way he introduces the contrast between the two kinds of generality (note that he uses “species” as I use “accidental species”): “A species is marked off within a genus by means of differentia. Thus, e.g., the class of humans (species) is included within the class of animals (genus) but marked off from other classes within that class in that each human possesses other properties—forty-eight chromosomes, a certain shape, etc. (Philosophers always say that the differentia is rationality. It is not of course but for shorthand let us suppose that it is)—which constitute the differentia. And it is the possession of these differential properties as well as membership of the genus which entails of each human that it is human. No analogous specification of a species *via* differentia exists for the relation of determinates to determinables. Both species and determinates are included within genus and determinable respectively—all humans are animals and all red things are coloured—but whereas we

And this is a problem that arises systematically. Whenever one has something to say about what differentiates the species, determinate specification threatens to collapse back into the accidental.<sup>14</sup>

What we need to consider in the face of this threat is the logical character of *what one has to say* about how a categorial species is different from its congenics. Recall that the original argument for the distinctiveness of categorial generality depended on the idea that the contrast between a categorial species and its genus cannot be drawn by reference to a quality that is independent of the species. If that is right, then although it may be possible to adduce a list of qualities distinctive of a categorial species, the adduced qualities must be such as to logically depend on the species; in that case, however, they cannot contribute to a non-circular account of it.

Of course, this would have to be argued case by case. We find the material for two such arguments in Michael Thompson's essay, "The Representation of Life."<sup>15</sup> In that essay, Thompson attempts to give what he calls a "logical" treatment of the idea of life—an account on which an organism is, not just different, but categorically different from other kinds of substance. Thompson is opposed to the idea that "living things are just some among the concrete individuals we think about, marked off from others in quite definite ways." On his view, thought about the living is characterized by a distinctive form, rather than just a distinctive content, and his positive aim is to articulate that form. His corresponding negative aim is to argue that life cannot be given a real definition, or metaphysical analysis. According to him, it is impossible to explain what it is for something to be alive by reference to a list of qualities that

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can say "all humans are animals which are rational", how could we fill the gap left for a difference in "all things are coloured things which are . . ."? The only word which presents itself as a candidate is "red" itself!" p. 142.

<sup>14</sup>The problem here is not that categorial generality will cease to be of interest if it turns out that the only examples of it are ones like color, about which we are utterly speechless. After all, philosophers who have recognized determinability only in a narrow range of cases have still considered it an important logical phenomenon—and rightly so. The problem is rather that we risk being distracted by idiosyncratic features of certain examples. If our speechlessness about color is not essential to categorial generality, then we do well to consider examples about which one has something to say. Otherwise, we are bound to misunderstand even the case of color.

<sup>15</sup>In Thompson 2008.

differentiate the living. If he is right, there is no solution to the equation: *substance* +  $x$  = *organism*.

In arguing for this negative point, Thompson considers a list of qualities that might be thought to differentiate an organism. The list is drawn from a standard college biology textbook and includes such things as that organisms are highly organized—meaning, roughly, that they have many parts—and that they grow, and move and reproduce. One by one, Thompson argues that the items on the list fail to contribute to a real definition, and always for the same reason. The reason is (as I would put it) that a characteristic like growth is itself subject to determination. Organisms grow, but so does the national debt; so does an icicle; and so does a pile of dirty laundry. What is characteristic of an organism is presumably not something common to every sort of growth—supposing even that there *is* something common—but a certain particular kind of growth. And there seems to be no way of specifying this kind except by appeal to the idea of an organism. For what is characteristic of an organism is, as one might say, organic growth.

If the genus *substance* is related to the species *organism* in exactly the same way that *growth* is related to *organic growth*, and *movement* to *organic movement*, and *part* to *organic part*, then it seems impossible to define an organism by reference to any of these terms—nor, indeed, by reference to a conjunction of all of them. Suppose, for instance, that we tried to define an organism as a substance having parts. The “parts” to which we appealed would have to be understood either determinately or determinably. If our appeal was to specifically organic parts—i.e. to organs—then our attempt to give a real definition would be ruined by circularity. On the other hand, if we appealed to “parts” in the generic sense that cars and poems both have parts—invoking what is common to a carburetor and a stanza—our account would fail for the opposite reason, namely, that it was too abstract. In the latter case it would contain too little information to satisfy the metaphysical ambition which led us to search for differentiae in the first place. After all, someone who knew only that

an organism is a substance with “parts,” generically understood, would have no idea what an organism is.

Nor does it help to conjoin the qualities that are supposed to differentiate life. For each of them must be understood either determinably or determinately. If any is taken determinately we fall back into the circle; so all must be taken determinably. Suppose, then, that we tried to define an organism as a substance associated with generically-understood “parts,” generically-understood “movement” and generically-understood “growth.” Rather than reducing the original obscurity, this merely compounds it by multiplying the respects in which we must cleave to abstraction. For now we must frame a conception of a substance that has “parts” in a sense broad enough to cover the parts of a crystal and those of a wristwatch, and that “moves” in a sense broad enough to cover the movement of a comet and that of a wind-blown leaf, and that “grows” in a sense broad enough to cover the growth of a stalactite and that of a star. The more determinable qualities we invoke—the more complete and many-sided our abstraction—the more it becomes clear that we have failed to advance beyond the general idea of a material substance.

If an argument of this general shape is sound, then the list of qualities distinctive of life cannot contribute to a real definition: the items on the list are all in the same boat, logically speaking, as what they are meant to distinguish.

It is part of Thompson’s doctrine that the logical category denoted by “life” is a category of forms of life. To represent something as alive—and thus, as falling under the genus *organism*—is, he thinks, to see it as belonging to a concrete life-form, or species, like *horse*. On Thompson’s view, the relation between being a horse and being an animal is very different from that between being an organism and being a substance: with *substance* and *organism* we have two categories, one of which is subordinate to the other; with *organism* and *horse* we have a category and a concrete form—a form that is, though indeed something general, at the same time also in certain way particular; the sort of thing that used to be called an *infima species*. But

this difference need not prevent its being the case that we have, here, two examples of categorial generality. And, in fact, there seem to be a number of striking similarities.

Consider, for instance, that someone attempting to define a horse will inevitably appeal to the horse's parts and vital processes: one will say, like Bitzer, that a horse has four *feet* and forty *teeth*, and that it *eats* grain and *sheds* in the spring. But the appeal to a part or vital process can only contribute to a real definition if something's being a "foot," say, or "eating," is available to thought in advance of its being that of a particular kind of animal. Such an appeal thus quietly assumes that something's being a "foot" is like its being "four in number," or that something's being "shedding" is like its being "in April." And this assumption appears unjustified. For whatever it is that leads one to say (ineptly) that there is no such thing as an animal in general, but only an animal of this or that kind, will also make one want to say that there is no such thing as a foot in general, but only that of, e.g., a horse, a clam or a mosquito. And while it is true that each of these animals has a foot—and each as much as any other—their feet are as different as the animals themselves, and different in the same way. Being a foot, like being an animal, would seem to be something determinable, so that the genus *foot* is related to the species *equine foot* in exactly the same way that the genus *animal* is related to species *horse*. In that case, if we tried to define a horse as a four-footed animal, the "foot" to which we appealed would have to be understood either determinably or determinately. But if what we appealed to was something common between the feet of every footed creature, it would be too abstract to serve the purposes of a real definition: it would not carry enough information to adequately characterize the equine foot. But how can one specify what is distinctive about a horse's foot without appealing to—a horse?

Let us try. In order to distinguish the equine foot from other feet, we might try saying that a horse has, in particular, a hoofed foot. But so of course do other animals. The genus *hoofed foot* is evidently one of the same sort as *foot*. And just like *foot*, the genus *hoofed foot* is related to the species *equine foot* as a determinable

to a determinate. We might then try saying that a horse has, not just a foot, and not just a hoofed foot, but a hoofed foot of such-and-such a size and of such-and-such a shape. But this does not seem to help. For even if there were no animal apart from a horse whose foot fit the given description, this would only show the poverty of earthly fauna. As a matter of fact, there is more than one kind of animal in existence with hoofed feet; but this is only a contingent profusion in the variety of species: the horse might have been the only one. And if, as a matter of fact, the horse is the only kind of an animal in existence with hoofed feet of such-and-such a size and of such-and-such a shape, this is nothing but a contingent deficiency. After all, another such an animal might have evolved, and might still yet. It happened once, why shouldn't it happen again? And if it *did* happen again, then, just in virtue of its separate genesis, the animal in question would not be a horse, and its foot would not be a horse's foot. But the same must go for any other merely physical or chemical description of a horse's foot. It must always define a categorial genus under which something other than a horse's foot could conceivably fall. This is not the case with respect to an accidental species: a nose that is concave is *ipso facto* a snub nose; a sibling that is male is *ipso facto* a brother. But, obviously, one cannot define a horse as an animal with feet of such-and-such a sort, if this description might apply equally well to an animal that is *not* a horse. And this is a problem that will arise with respect to any vital part or process: it will be impossible to shore up the purported "definition" against counter-examples, because there will always be the recalcitrant possibility of another categorial species falling under the same categorial genus.

It seems, then, that the only way to say what differentiates the vital part or process of a horse is by reference to a horse. But, on pain of circularity, we cannot appeal to a horse in the definition of one. Then whether we are considering the relation between *animal* and *horse* or that between *substance* and *organism*, the attempt to define the categorial species by reference to genus and differentia appears to founder for the same reason: we cannot frame a sufficiently determinate conception of the differentia

that is logically independent of the species.

In the end, the case of color is really not so exceptional after all. It is true that we can say much about the distinctive character of a horse, and nothing about that of redness. But what we can say about a horse does not contribute to a real definition—and so, from a certain point of view, may as well be nothing. Like the color red, a horse is not the sort of thing that *has* a definition; and should someone nevertheless ask us to provide one, the only appropriate response would be the stunned silence of girl number twenty.

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These considerations may help to explain some of the things that philosophers have wanted to say about the contrast between categorial and accidental generality. Earlier I noted the tendency to characterize the generality of a categorial genus by saying, for instance, that there is no such thing as an animal in general, but only an animal of this or that kind, or that there is no such thing as a color in general, but only different colors. What a claim like this expresses, I think, is that the species in question are prior to the genus, and not the other way around. The distinctive priority of such a species consists in the fact that, as we have just seen, it is differentiated by qualities that cannot be characterized independently of it. If a species of this sort were not available to thought in advance of its genus, we could not think of it at all.

But the question arose whether the same thing could also be said about a paradigm case of accidental generality—whether one could say, for instance, that there is no such thing as a nose in general, but only a nose of this or that shape. If successful, such a move would assimilate the relation between *animal* and *horse* to that between *nose* and *snub nose*. The answer is that the same thing cannot be said, because, in the relevant sense, there *is* such a thing as a nose in general.

The question “What is it?” if asked in reference to Socrates, might receive the answer: A fleshy, Greek, pale human being. But there is intuitively another way of hearing the question on which the true answer is simply: a human being. For that



is what he *really* is, or what he is *most of all*. This, at any rate, was Aristotle's judgment:

If one is to say of the individual man what he is, it will be in place to give the species or the genus (though more informative to give the species than the genus); but to give any of the other things would be out of place—for example, to say pale or runs or anything like that.<sup>16</sup>

According to Aristotle, there is a certain sense of the question “What?” in answer to which it is relevant to mention both that Socrates is an animal, and that he is a human being, but *not* that he is fleshy, Greek or pale. This is consistent with acknowledging the obvious sense in which the statement “Socrates is a Greek human being” is more specific and informative than “Socrates is a human being.” The point is just that there is a way of hearing the question “What?” according to which the first statement is *not* more informative—according to which the most informative thing that one can say about Socrates is that he is a human being. To be indifferent to a difference is sometimes appropriate. And if Aristotle is right, then, although every human being is Greek, or Persian or what have you, there is an important sense in which every human being is a human being in general, or a human being simpliciter.

The same point could be put by saying that a Greek and a Persian differ only accidentally, and not in respect of what each of them is. If there were anything like a science of the human, it would be indifferent to the contrast between a Greek and a Persian—as indifferent as chemistry is to the contrast between gold from China and gold from Peru. All gold is from someplace or other, but not to the chemist: to the chemist, all gold is gold in general. Chinese gold and Peruvian gold do not differ in

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<sup>16</sup> *Categories*, 2b30. And compare: “It is clear, too, on the face of it that the man who signifies what something is signifies sometimes a substance, sometimes a quality, sometimes some one of the other types of predicate. For when a man is set before him and he says that what is set before him is a man or an animal, he states what it is and signifies a substance; but when a white colour is set before him and he says that what is set there is white or is a colour, he states what it is and signifies a quality. Likewise, also, if a magnitude of a cubit be set before him and he says that what is set there is a cubit or a magnitude, he will be describing what it is and signifying a quantity. Likewise, also, in the other cases; for each of these kinds of predicate, if either it be asserted of itself, or its genus be asserted of it, signifies what something is,” *Topics*, 103b27-34.

respect of what each of them most of all is; they do not differ with respect to being gold—no more than a persian and a Greek differ in respect of their humanity.

And as with Socrates so also with his nose. The question “What is it?” might elicit the answer: a pale, Greek, concave human nose. But there is a sense of the question according to which the true answer is simply: a human nose. Those who study the anatomy of the nose are utterly indifferent to the difference between one that is pale and one that is dark, or between one that is Greek and one that is Persian, or between one that is concave and one that is convex. Such differences are nothing to an anatomist, because they are not differences in respect of being a nose—or, if you like, in respect of nasality. If the anatomist is right to be indifferent to such differences, then there *is* such a thing as a nose in general. A nose in general is what every actual particular nose—whether snub, or aquiline or something in between—*really* is, or is *most of all*.

To say this is not, of course, to explain the relevant sense of the question “What?” but only to point out that the question is intelligible: one sees the kind of indifference to a difference that it calls for. And in doing so, one cannot help but register the distinction between categorial and accidental generality. After all, that to which the question “What?” requires us to be indifferent is precisely an accident, or extra feature—the sort of quality that mediates the contrast between an accidental species and its genus. This means that the contrast between categorial and accidental generality is presupposed by the intelligibility of the relevant sense of this question.

It also brings out the intimate relation between these forms of generality. I suggested earlier that *categorial species* and *accidental species* are categorial species of *species*. If that is true, then they are categorial species of a very special sort, and constitute what we might call “reciprocal forms,” in that the understanding of each must make reference to the other. In this respect, they are like Frege’s categories of concept and object, and like Aristotle’s categories of action and passion. Not every pair of categorial species is like this. The tarantula and the horse are, we have sup-

posed, two categorial species of animal, each of which could exist, and be understood, without the other. But it is in some sense through reflection on categorial generality that we come to understand the accidental, and vice versa. And just as each of these two forms sheds light upon the other, both of them are illuminated by a third.

## 2.4 ESSENTIAL GENERALITY

### 2.4.1 The Essential Species and its Genus

All pure gold is gold, but not all gold is pure: so *pure gold* is a species of *gold*. And every perfect circle is a circle, but not every circle is perfect: so *perfect circle* is a species of *circle*. Nevertheless, it is pointless to ask, in either case, “what is left over” if the genus is subtracted from the species. For there is nothing extra that gold must be, over and above being gold, in order to be pure: the “purity” of pure gold is just its being gold—gold and gold alone. There is, then, no solution to the equation:  $gold + x = pure\ gold$ . And similarly, there is no solution to the equation:  $circle + y = perfect\ circle$ . For, again, there is nothing that a circle must be, over and above being a circle, in order to be perfect: the “perfection” of a perfect circle is its unimpeachable circularity. I will call a species of this third variety an *essential species*.

It came out in the previous section that the contrast between a categorial species and its genus cannot be drawn by reference to a quality that is independent of the species. The situation now is precisely the reverse: the contrast between an essential species and its genus cannot be drawn by reference to a quality that is independent of the genus.

Suppose, for instance, that there was some quality that distinguished pure gold from all other gold. The only “other” gold is impure, so the imagined quality would have to distinguish pure gold from impure gold. But the difference between pure

gold and impure gold is that the latter is composed, in part, of something that is not gold. So the quality would have to determine, for each part, whether it was gold or not. But if there was in fact a quality that could discriminate between what is gold and what is not, this would be the differentia of *gold*, which is the genus. Or, again, suppose there was a quality that distinguished a perfect circle from all other circles. The difference between a perfect circle and an imperfect circle is that the latter is, in some respect, not circular. So the imagined quality would have to determine, for every respect in which a shape can fail to be circular, whether it was circular or not. And if there was in fact a quality that could make the required discrimination, this quality would be the differentia of *circle*, which again is the genus.

A two-step approach is therefore impossible. We began by observing that one must explain an accidental species by first explaining its genus and then explaining its differentia. Next we observed that one cannot explain a categorial species as one would an accidental species, because even if a categorial species had a differentia, it would be impossible to explain this “quality” until we had explained the species: so an account of the differentia would come too late. The point to observe now is that one cannot explain an essential species as one would an accidental species, because even if an essential species had a differentia, there would be nothing left to say about it once one had finished explaining the genus: so an account of the differentia would come, as it were, too early.

This reflects a third distinctive order of priority. An essential species is neither posterior to its genus, like an accidental species, nor prior to its genus, like a categorial species. If, as it seems, to be pure gold is to be gold and gold alone, then there cannot be any priority, either way, between the species *pure gold* and the genus *gold*. And if to be a perfect circle is to be in no way uncircular, then the species *perfect circle* is neither more nor less fundamental than the genus *circle*. In that case, an essential species and its genus are coeval.

## 2.4.2 The Irreducibility of this Form

**2.4.2.1 Positive, Negative and Doubly-negative** The suspicion will perhaps have formed that essential generality is nothing but an illusion. In everyday life, we are happy to say that a wedding ring is gold, though we admit that it isn't *pure* gold; and similarly, we are happy to say that the ring is a circle, though we admit that it isn't a *perfect* circle. But this, it seems, is only a loose way of speaking. Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as impure gold or an imperfect circle. Even schoolchildren know that, from the point of view of chemistry, *all* gold is pure, and that from the point of view of geometry, *every* circle is perfect. And so it seems that from a scientific point of view, there is no logical space, and thus no distinction to be drawn, between the essential species and its genus. But if a species and its genus are the same, then, strictly, there is no species and there is no genus to speak of.

This line of thought presents itself as an objection, but in fact it is only another way of describing what needs to be understood. For there is, indeed, a striking contrast between “loose” and “strict” ways of speaking—between, on the one hand, what is good enough for ordinary talk, and, on the other hand, what rises to the need of a rational discipline. But the most striking thing about this contrast is that it only emerges in a certain sort of case. No one is of the opinion that “strictly speaking” to be a nose is to be a snub nose, or that “strictly speaking” to be an animal is to be a horse. What needs to be understood is precisely the form of generality that underwrites a contrast between “disciplined” and “undisciplined,” or “rigorous” and “lax,” or “scientific” and “vulgar” modes of thought and expression.

The contrast in question applies across an astonishingly wide domain of objects; we do well, therefore, to diversify our menu of examples. Arguably, the same abstract structure that joins together *gold*, *impure gold* and *pure gold* is also exemplified by each of the following trios.

X	$\sim X$	$\sim\sim X$
human body	lifeless human body	living human body
human body	unhealthy human body	healthy human body
human hand	deformed human hand	undeformed human hand
human being	vicious human being	virtuous human being
doctor	incompetent doctor	competent doctor
law	unjust law	just law
contract	invalid contract	valid contract
inference	invalid inference	valid inference
calculation	incorrect calculation	correct calculation
word	meaningless word	meaningful word
appearance	knowledge-withholding appearance	knowledge-conferring appearance
judgment	false judgment	true judgment

Figure 2

With respect to each of the listed trios, there have been philosophers, at one time or another, who have held that the “primitive” or “original” or “fundamental” conception of what is in the leftmost column is in fact a conception of what is in the rightmost column; or that to explain the former is to explain the latter; or that, “strictly and philosophically speaking,” *to be* the former is *to be* the latter. It is possible, of course, that all of these philosophers were wrong, and that none of the listed trios exhibit the relevant asymmetry. But it does not matter. What matters, again, is not the purported examples themselves, but only the form they purport to exemplify.

As a first step towards understanding this form, it will be useful to focus on the *opposite* of an essential species—what we might call an “inessential species.” Examples of this belong in the center column of the chart above, the column marked “ $\sim X$ .” One cannot help but notice that the noun phrases appearing in this column all contain adjectives with a decidedly “negative” character. Let us therefore begin with that.

Medieval philosophers used the term “*alienans* adjective” in reference to an adjective that changes, or alienates, the sense of the noun it qualifies—as, for instance, the adjective “false” in “false teeth” changes what would otherwise be understood by

“teeth.” Now it is the mark of an *alienans* adjective, A, that we cannot infer *salva veritate* that what is true of an N (‘N’ being a noun) is also true of an AN.<sup>17</sup> Human teeth grind and tear; but it does not follow that *false* ones do; and, as Peter Geach has observed, it does not follow that *bad* ones do.<sup>18</sup>

Of course, the relation between *false teeth* and *teeth* is different than that between *bad teeth* and *teeth*, and it will be necessary to consider the difference. But these two relations also have something striking and important in common, namely this: it follows, just from the fact that teeth are *false*, that they lack something of the character of teeth; and the same thing follows, just from the fact that teeth are *bad*. This is not true of an accidental species or of a categorial species. It does not follow just from the fact that a nose is snub that it lacks something of the character of a nose. Nor does it follow just from the fact that an animal is a horse that it lacks something of the character of an animal. But an inessential species always lacks something of the character of its genus: it is always either an “alienated species,” like *bad teeth*, or an altogether “alien species” like *false teeth*.

**2.4.2.2 The Alienated Species** Let us first consider what I have called an “alienated species,” and let us continue to focus on the variety of “alienation” that is exemplified by *bad teeth*. (We will soon see that other varieties exist.) Bad teeth are defective teeth: they are bad in relation to their kind. Geach and others have noted that a defect typically exemplifies some more determinate form; thus a thing’s defectiveness may consist in its being e.g. corrupted, deformed, diseased, wilted, warped,

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<sup>17</sup>In discussions of the *alienans* adjective, one typically finds examples of two very different sorts. On the one hand there is e.g. “counterfeit” in “counterfeit money” and “porcelain” in “porcelain egg” and “rocking” in “rocking horse.” On the other hand there is e.g. “putative” in “putative father” and “accused” in “accused murderer.” All of my examples are of the first sort. Now in both sorts of case it is true that we cannot safely infer that what holds good of an N also holds good of an AN—but it is true for different reasons. In the first sort of case (which I am discussing) it is true because it follows, just from the fact that an N is an AN, that it is not “really” an N. In the second sort of case (which I am ignoring as irrelevant) it is true because it does not follow, just from the fact that an N is an AN, that it “really” is an N.

<sup>18</sup>Peter Geach, “Good and Evil,” (1956), pp. 33–42.

erroneous, rotten or broken. And all such forms of defect are the product of *privation*.

Aristotle distinguishes two senses of privation, one more anemic, one more robust.<sup>19</sup> In the anemic sense, a thing is deprived of whatever it does not possess: so a blind man, an oyster and a lime tree are all deprived of sight. In the robust sense, however, a thing can be deprived only of what is proper to its kind: so while a blind man is deprived of sight, an oyster and a lime tree are not. Thinking of a thing as deprived, in the latter sense, depends on having a conception of the kind of thing it is. Thus, in judging that a man without sight is *missing* sight—i.e. that something is amiss with his not having it, so that his lack of sight constitutes a *defect* or *disability*—we must refer, at least implicitly, to a conception of his nature, according to which a human being has the power to see. And similarly, the judgment that an oyster without sight is *not* thereby bereft of it depends on the judgment that vision is not proper to its kind.

Now in both of the senses distinguished by Aristotle, privation is a kind of clash or contrariety.<sup>20</sup> And, obviously, the opposite of *lacking* something is *having* it. But the different senses of “privation” correspond to different senses of “possession.” In the anemic sense, possession and privation are both of something external to a thing’s own nature. So, for instance, while a circle may in fact “possess” a certain color (e.g. red), whether it “has” the color or “lacks” the color makes no difference at all, as far as its being a circle is concerned. Or, again, whether or not a human nose “possesses” a certain shape (e.g. concavity) does not bear on its status as a human nose. Here the contrariety is between, on the one hand, a thing’s just happening to have some trait, and, on the hand, its just happening not to have it. This form of opposition is defined by the fact that it does not touch on the nature of a thing, one way or the other.

But privation in the robust sense is one pole of an opposition, the opposite pole of which is precisely the nature of that which is deprived. This is not to deny that

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<sup>19</sup> *Metaphysics*, 1022b25.

<sup>20</sup> *Categories*, 11b15-13b35.



privation is opposed to possession. But what is meant by “possession,” in the robust sense, is a thing’s possession of its nature, or of its character as the kind of thing it is. A blind man lacks the character of a human being in just this respect, that he cannot see; and in this respect he is deprived. Privation here consists in a thing’s being out of accord with some aspect of its own nature; and it is contrary to a thing’s *not* being thus out of accord.

If privation, in either sense, is something somehow “negative,” then possession, in either sense, is something somehow “positive.” But it follows from what has already been said that this “positive” character must be very different in the two sorts of case. Anemic possession is of something that is not missing when it is absent, or, equivalently, of something that is superfluous when present. But robust privation is not of a would-be extra something. And consequently, robust possession is not the possession of a surplus. It does not involve a thing’s having anything apart from, or additional to, what is contained in its own nature. Possession, here, only requires that a thing be what it is—in an undiminished, undistorted, unqualified way. It is the neutral position between some potential deficiency and some potential excess, or the maintenance of an order against a possible disturbance. Its “positive” character is entirely exhausted by the *annulment* of a “negative” antithesis. And so we might say it is doubly-negative.

Now a defect is the product of privation in the robust sense. And this has the significant result that a thing’s being a good one of its kind does not involve its being anything over and above the kind of thing it is. For we said that defect is a type of *badness*: it is badness-relative-to-a-kind. And whatever is opposed to defect is the corresponding type of *goodness*: it is goodness-relative-to-a-kind. What, though, is the opposite of defect? Just as the opposite of being flawed is being unflawed, or flawless, the opposite of being defective is being undefective, or defectless. Like being unflawed, being undefective is a matter, not of a thing’s having a certain “positive” character, but only of its *not* having some “negative” one. Thus the goodness that is

antithetical to defect is not something *extra*.

And yet there are kinds of alienation other than defect. Impure gold is not defective: gold is not *bad* in virtue of being mixed with something else, and it is not *good* in virtue of being unmixed. Nor is an imperfect circle defective: a circle is not *bad* in virtue of being lopsided, and it is not *good* in virtue of being un-lopsided. But impurity is to a chemical kind, and imperfection is to a geometrical kind, something like what defect is to a living kind. Notice that just as there is no such thing as being defective or undefective *simpliciter*, but only *qua* horse or hoof or stomach, likewise, there is no such thing as being pure or impure *simpliciter*, but only *qua* gold or lead or silver, and likewise, there is no such thing as being perfect or imperfect *simpliciter*, but only *qua* circle or triangle or square. In general, an alienated form is what falls away from its own ideal. And this “falling away from the ideal” is found even outside of a normative context—that is, even where concepts like “good” and “bad” have no straightforward application.

**2.4.2.3 The Alien Species** In all of its varieties, an alienated species fails to exhibit the nature of that of which it is a species. The same is true of what I have called an “alien species,” like *false teeth* or *fool’s gold*. There is obviously a difference between an alienated species and an alien species—e.g. between *bad teeth* and *false teeth*, or between *impure gold* and *fool’s gold*. But now, what is the difference?

The natural answer—and in the end a fine one—is that bad teeth, like good teeth, are teeth, whereas false teeth are not teeth; and that impure gold, like pure gold, is gold, whereas fool’s gold is not gold. But we cannot, I think, just help ourselves to such a form of words. For someone might object that both of these claims are either wildly paradoxical or else flatly contradictory. On the face of it, one seems to want to say that what are admittedly teeth (albeit false ones) are not teeth; and that what is admittedly gold (albeit a fool’s) is not gold.

Of course we can make it known that the second appearance of the word “teeth”

in the statement, “False teeth are not teeth” is intended to be heard in a special, rigorous sense. And to this end we can introduce one or another of several common “rigor-operators”: we can say that false teeth are not “really” or “truly” or “literally” or “strictly speaking” teeth; or we can say, with emphasis, that they are not *teeth*; or we can say that they are teeth, all right, but teeth “in name only.” But this is not illuminating. For the problem is to understand what operation we hereby perform.

It is worth remembering that this is in fact the second appearance of a rigor-operator. Earlier, it came to mind to say—indeed, to object—that impure gold is not “strictly speaking” gold. But in the present context, where it is a question of distinguishing impure gold from fool’s gold, it comes to mind to say that impure gold *is* “strictly speaking” gold. This looks like a contradiction, but of course it is not. The accumulated wisdom of our common sense could be summarized in the claim: Fool’s gold is not *really* gold; impure gold and pure gold are *really* gold; and pure gold is *really, really* gold. We are now, I think, in a better position to understand the earlier desire to say that an alienated species, like impure gold, is not “really” what it purports to be. And doing so will shed light on the present desire to say that an alien species, like fool’s gold, is, again, not “really” what it purports to be.

The slogan of natural law theory—that an unjust law is not a law—has seemed paradoxical to many jurists. John Austin dismisses it as “stark nonsense”: the claim is, he says, “an abuse of language”; it is “not merely puerile, it is mischievous.”<sup>21</sup> This was not because Austin failed to consider the possibility that the words “*lex iniusta non est lex*” might have some special, “strict” interpretation. No, his view was that justice is not internal to the nature of a law, but something extra, an accident, which requires a separate account. To deny this, he thought, was “to confound what is with what ought to be.”<sup>22</sup>

The existence of law is one thing; its merit or demerit is another. Whether it be or be not is one enquiry; whether it be or be not conformable to an assumed standard,

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<sup>21</sup>John Austin, *The Province of Jurisprudence Determined*, Lecture V, (1832), p. 185.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 184.

is a different enquiry.<sup>23</sup>

Without passing judgment on the truth or falsity of the natural law slogan, we ought to be able to see that at least it is not nonsense, and that Austin's division of inquiries really is beside the point.<sup>24</sup> The slogan "an unjust law is not a law" is in point of form the same as the apparently intelligible slogan "impure gold is not gold."

It would be obvious what to reply, if someone denounced the slogan "impure gold is not gold" on the grounds that the existence of gold is one thing and its purity or impurity another. We would concede that the question whether some particular ring is gold (rather than, say, pyrite or silver or platinum) is indeed distinct from the question whether it is pure gold. But we would nevertheless insist that the question *what it is to be gold* and the question *what it is to be pure gold* constitute a single scientific inquiry. And if it were asked why, in that case, a ring of impure gold is said to be "gold" at all, we could reply, simply, that a ring of impure gold has a lot of pure gold in it.

No one today would suggest, in the manner of Austin, that chemists are guilty of confounding what gold is with what it ought to be. Yet, the science of chemistry treats the question "What is gold?" as though it were in the first instance identical with the question (as we on the street would put it) "What is pure gold?" If it seems outrageous to accuse chemists of confounding an "ought" with an "is", this is not just because a normative concept like "ought" has no application to chemical kinds. Normative concepts certainly do apply to the object of anatomy. And just open any anatomy book: every limb and organ, there, every bone and muscle, every cell, is shown to be exactly where it *ought* to be, doing exactly what it *ought* to do. No defect is portrayed, no deformity, no disability, no disease. In the first instance, anatomy identifies the question "What is the human body?" with the question (as

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 184.

<sup>24</sup>For discussion of the *non est lex* slogan, see Norman Kretzmann, "LEX INIUSTA NON EST LEX: Laws on Trial in Aquinas's Court of Conscience," (1988), and Mark C. Murphy, "Natural Law Jurisprudence," (2003).

we would put it, in our loose way) “What is the healthy human body?” But it is outrageous to suggest that anatomists therefore confound what a human body is with what it ought to be. And our judgment that anatomical practice is right to prioritize the undefective body is intelligibly expressed by the slogan: an unhealthy human body is not a human body.<sup>25</sup>

Of course it is a question whether the injustice of a law is rightly conceived as a *defect*. If so, then the fundamental account of a law’s nature will have to abstract from this privative condition, as that of a human liver abstracts from liver disease. And if not, not. But it would take some showing either way; and the position cannot just be dismissed as nonsense.

Now this was to shed light on a different sort of case. If anatomy is primarily concerned with the *healthy* human body, it is exclusively concerned with the *living* human body. Anatomists do look at corpses, of course, but not for the sake of understanding corpses: they study the living *through* the lifeless. Assuming that anatomy is not radically mistaken about what is involved in explaining the nature of its object—namely: the human body—the fact that anatomy is exclusively concerned with the living human body shows, in the most striking possible way, that the *living* of a living human body is not something external to its nature. For that the nature of which anatomy explains does exist except as alive.

Aristotle famously held that a lifeless human body is a human body in name alone. He sometimes expressed this view by saying that a lifeless body is as little a body as a body carved in stone. This, too, has often been received as flagrant nonsense. But in fact the Aristotelian slogan that “a lifeless human body is not a human body” is an intelligible expression of the judgment that a scientific understanding of the human body properly has nothing whatever to do with corpses.

There is, after all, the following striking parallel. Just as anatomy’s understanding

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<sup>25</sup>The slogan is admittedly dramatic—but then, it is a slogan. The drama is anyway of highly intelligible sort. We are all familiar with the honorific use of words according to which it makes good sense to say, for instance, “His friends are not friends,” and to ask, for instance, “You call that an argument?”

of the human body is primarily of the healthy body, and exclusively of the living body, so, also, chemistry's understanding of gold is primarily of pure gold, and exclusively of real gold. Like the "living" in "living human body," the "real" in "real gold" could seem to signify a surplus—something external to the nature of gold. But from the point of view of chemistry, it very clearly does not. Meanwhile, the slogan "fool's gold is not gold" would seem to be a natural expression of the judgment that a scientific understanding of gold properly has nothing whatever to do with fool's gold.

It may seem that we have not advanced beyond our original claim that fool's gold is not "strictly speaking" gold. For it looks as though we have just replaced "strictly speaking" with "scientifically speaking"—and thus substituted one rigor-operator for another. And in a way that is right. Part of the point was to bring a statement like "fool's gold is not gold," or "a lifeless human body is not a human body," into contact with some obviously legitimate, obviously systematic, investigation into the nature of things.

But the preceding discussion has also put us in position to see something important about the relation between an alien and an alienated species. Only a *living* human body falls under the standard by reference to which bodies are judged healthy or unhealthy. Corpses are *neither* healthy *nor* unhealthy. And only *real* gold falls under the standard by reference to which the purity or impurity of gold is judged. Measured against that standard, fool's gold is *neither* pure *nor* impure.

We can now finally state the difference between an alienated species of something and an alien species of the same thing: an alienated species of X is that which is of merely secondary concern in a scientific account of X, while an alien species of X is something that is of no concern in such an account. Or equivalently: an alienated species of X is that which bears and exhibits the nature of X, but does so imperfectly, whereas an alien species of X is something that does even bear this nature. The "not" in "impure gold is not gold" or in "an unhealthy body is not a body" means: not primarily, or not in the first instance. Whereas the "not" in "fool's gold is not gold"

or “a lifeless body is not a body” means: not at all, or not even in the last instance.

**2.4.2.4 The Essential Species as Unalien and Unalienated** Despite the evident difference between them, both types of inessential species share the striking characteristic that they are opposed, or contrary, to an essential species. There are two ways to lose sight of this common characteristic: the first is to suppose that only an alienated species bears any relation to the relevant genus; the second is to suppose that only an alien species stands to the genus in a relation of opposition or contrariety.

Because an alien species, like *fool’s gold*, does not bear the relevant nature, there is some temptation to think that it really has nothing to do with that of which it is a species. But not so. The relation between fool’s gold and real gold is not like that between a river bank and a savings bank. It is a mere accident of the English language that the latter are both called “banks”: a true account of the one need not mention the other. But it is no accident that fool’s gold and real gold are both called “gold.” In any language, a true account of fool’s gold must refer to the real stuff—supposing, at least, that by “fool’s gold” we mean, not some *other* chemical substance, like pyrite, but rather: whatever is mistaken for, or passed off as, gold. Note, however, that the dependence is not reciprocal: in order to explain what real gold is—as I presume that chemists do—one need not mention fool’s gold. Nor is it a coincidence that lifeless and living human bodies are both called “human bodies.” In order to explain what a lifeless human body is, we must refer, in any language, to a living one. But in order to explain a living human body—as again I presume that anatomists do—we need not mention a lifeless one.

So an alienated species and an alien species are *both* related to that of which they are species. It bears emphasis that they are both related to *one and the same thing*. A lifeless human body and an unhealthy human body are, respectively, alien and alienated species of human body, because they are both related to the primary

object of anatomical science, which is one thing: a human body which is *both* living *and* healthy. Meanwhile, insofar as chemistry concerns itself with gold, its primary object is gold that is *both* real *and* pure. This is again one thing, in relation to which fool's gold and impure gold are, respectively, alien and alienated species of gold. So there is, as it were, a single center of gravity, around which orbit both of the types of inessential species.

The second point to observe is that both types of inessential species are characterized, not just by their *relation to* some unique metaphysical center-point, but, in particular, by their *distance from* it. It is easy to lose sight of the fact that an alienated species is opposed, or contrary, to that of which it is a species, precisely because an alienated species bears the relevant nature: i.e. it is not just *externally* related to that nature, like an alien species of the same thing. One may be struck by the fact that the alienated species “makes” a certain “cut”: it is “in,” whereas the alien species is “out.” And struck by the fact that the alienated species is “in,” one may fail to notice that, nevertheless, it is *on its way* “out.”

An alienated species of something always shades off into what is an alien species of the same thing, or into what is no species of it at all. Good teeth rot into bad ones, and bad ones into little knobs, which are not teeth at all. Perfect vision fades into imperfect vision, and the latter into blindness, which is not vision at all. And what is true of the parts, and of their functions, is also true of the whole: a healthy human body deteriorates into an unhealthy one, and this finally into a corpse, which at least according to Aristotle is not a body at all. The point is even more striking in the case of a chemical substance. As the proportion of lead mixed with gold increases gradually from zero parts in a hundred, pure gold gives way to impure gold, impure gold to impure lead, and impure lead, finally, to pure lead, which is not gold at all. An alienated species of something is, thus, poised somewhere on a spectrum, one pole of which is the paradigmatic case, or first instance, of that of which it is a species, and the other pole of which is not so much as a case, or not so much as an instance,



of that.

It should by now be clear that an essential species is opposed, or contrary, to both types of inessential species. Its opposition to an alien species entails that it is of interest, rather than of no interest, to an investigation of the relevant nature. Its opposition to an alienated form entails that it is of primary, rather than of secondary, interest. So if fundamental theory is what explains the nature of a thing, then an inessential species is that which does not matter for the purposes of fundamental theory. And an essential species is: *not* that. That is: *not* what does not matter. That is: what matters.

## 2.5 COMPARISON OF THE FORMS

In order to see more clearly their three distinctive characters, it will be useful to consider how a species of each variety relates to a contrary species, and how such a pair of contraries relate to their common genus. In the following figure, B and C are contrary species of A—“contrary” in the sense that what is A cannot be both B and C simultaneously—and, within each trio (A, B, C), the underlined terms are prior to those not underlined.

<i>Accidental Generality</i>	<i>Categorical Generality</i>	<i>Essential Generality</i>
$\frac{\underline{A}}{B \quad C}$	$\frac{A}{\underline{B} \quad \underline{C}}$	$\frac{\underline{A}}{\underline{B} \quad C}$

Figure 3

These are of course forms of “specificity” just as much as they are forms of “generality.” Let us consider them in turn.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>Might there be *more* than three forms of generality and specificity? Certainly, nothing I have to say depends on the supposition that there are *only* three. The figure in the text above suggests at least the possibility of a fourth:

If B and C are contrary accidental species of A, then A is prior to B and C alike. For the same reason that *nose* is prior to *snub nose*, it is also prior to *aquiline nose*. Such a pair of contrary accidental species are symmetrically related to their genus: neither enjoys any privileged relation to that which both of them are. A snub nose is not a nose in virtue of its relation to an aquiline nose, or vice versa; each is a nose entirely in its own right; and each of them exemplifies what it is to be a nose just as well as the other.

Contrast and compare categorial generality. If B and C are contrary categorial species of A, then A is posterior to B and C alike. For the same reason that *color* is posterior to *red*, it is also posterior to *blue*. So with the transition from accidental to categorial generality, something important changes: the locus of priority shifts altogether from the level of the genus to the level of the species. But something important also stays the same: like accidental species, categorial species are symmetrically related to their genus. Red is not a color in virtue of its relation to any other color, but entirely in its own right, as every color is.

But now consider the form of essential generality. If B is an essential species of A, and C is contrary to B, then A and B are coeval, and both are prior to C. For notice that what is characteristic of an essential species is not characteristic of its opponent. If the purity of pure gold consists in its being *nothing but gold*, the impurity of impure gold consists in just the opposite—that is, in its being, in part, something other than gold. Whereas the contrary of an accidental species is another accidental species, and the contrary of a categorial species is another categorial species, the contrary of an essential species is not itself an essential species, but an “inessential species.”



Figure 4

—that is, it suggests the possibility of a pair of contrary species that are coeval with one another and at the same time coeval with their genus. Perhaps *male horse* and *female horse* fall in this way under *horse*, as perhaps do *immature horse* and *mature horse*. But the larger purpose of this essay does not require us to consider whether this is really the case, and if so, why, or what it matters.

An essential species and the opponent inessential species are asymmetrically related to that which both of them are. An inessential species falls under the genus only in virtue of its relation to the opponent essential species. Impure gold is gold only in virtue of its relation to pure gold. And an imperfect circle is a circle only in virtue of its relation to a perfect circle. Thus, an essential species has a singular role in the constitution of its genus. An accidental species, like *snub nose*, has no such role in constituting what it is to be a nose. And a categorial species, like *horse*, has no such role in constituting what is to be an animal.

## 2.6 THE UNCRITICAL ASSUMPTION OF THE STANDARD APPROACH

Having gathered the tools for the work to be done, I can now restate my central thesis as follows. The standard approach in the philosophy of action proceeds on the uncritical assumption that both of the two canonical divisions—of events, into mere events and actions; and of actions, into qualified and unqualified actions—are instances of accidental generality. But the assumption is false on both counts. As for the first division, *action* is not an accidental species of *event*, but a categorial species. And as for the second, a form of unqualified action, such as *intentional action*, is not an accidental species of *action*, but an essential species.

This may seem a long way to have gone for the mere formulation of a thesis—and for a predominately negative thesis, at that. But in fact I think that something important has already been accomplished. Whatever else is true, I think we have at least isolated the real point of contention in the philosophy of action, the point on which it turns what sort of method and what sort of account is fitting for the object of our study. And if that is so, then we have also come to see that the central controversy is logical or metaphysical in character, and thus vastly more fundamental than any

disagreement in the philosophy of mind—for instance, between “psychologism” and “behaviorism.”

Moreover, we now have an interpretation of Anscombe’s claim that intentional action cannot be explained by appeal to an “extra feature.” At least, we have, I hope, some idea of what it would mean to affirm or deny it, and to accept or reject the standard approach on this basis. It is true, of course, that this “interpretation” is not based on the argument that Anscombe actually gives for the claim. My only defense is that I think it is harmonious with her principal doctrines and methods.

In the final three chapters of the dissertation, I will argue that *action* is a categorial species of *event*. It is characteristic of categorial generality that the species is in a certain sense prior to its genus: the genus depends on the likes of it, and not the other way round. I claimed earlier that something is colored because it is, for example, red; it is not red because it is colored. My position will be, likewise, that something is an event because it is, for example, an action; it is not an action because it is an event. The standard approach depends on the assumption that the genus *event* is given in advance. Against this, I will argue, that it is only because there are actions, and only because there are mere events, and only because of the difference between them, that there is any such thing as an event “in general.”

Before coming to that, however, I must first argue, in Chapter 3, that the various forms of unqualified action are in fact essential species. If the argument succeeds, then it will be possible, afterwards, to set aside the contrast between qualified and unqualified action, because it will have been established that action is, in the first instance, action *par excellence*.

## 3.0 ACTION UNQUALIFIED

### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

An action can fail, in any number of disparate ways, to be a sound expression of the human will. It can be unintentional, inadvertent, accidental or involuntary. It can be idle or mindless; drowsy or drunk; spasmodic or reflex. Psychology teaches that action can be compulsive, addictive, delusional, subconscious, phobic, anarchic, maniacal or depressed. And of course it can also be estranged, half-hearted, and vicious. But forms of action such as these seem not to be the main concern of practical philosophy. On the contrary, the main concern seems rather to be whatever they are opposed to. For the explicit object of inquiry is, with very few exceptions, always a corresponding “positive” term: one inquires about action that is, for instance, intentional, voluntary, purposeful, deliberate, free, whole-hearted or virtuous.

But why should this be so? The practical philosopher is given a distinction between qualified and unqualified action, and is drawn ineluctably to the latter.

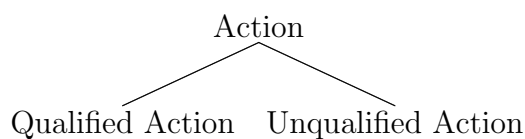


Figure 5

The reason, I will argue, is that the various qualified forms of action are its inessential species. In one way or another, to some degree or another, each of them lacks the

character of an action. In that case, unqualified action is for the practical philosopher what a pure sample is for the chemist, and what a healthy body is for the student of anatomy. But this makes it impossible to explain unqualified action by means of the standard approach.

### 3.2 THE STANDARD APPROACH TO UNQUALIFIED ACTION

David Velleman begins his book, *The Possibility of Practical Reason*, exactly as I began this dissertation, by quoting Wittgenstein’s question, and by marking the two canonical divisions.<sup>1</sup> The second division is his main concern, and he is quick to explain that not every manifestation of the will is equally worthy of the name “action.” The reason, he says, is that some of them fail to be “autonomous.” In particular, Velleman points to Freudian slips, and to things that are done “idly and inattentively—perhaps even unwittingly,”<sup>2</sup> like scratching one’s head while reading.

Such cases require us to define a category of ungoverned activities, distinct from mere happenings, on the one hand, and from autonomous actions, on the other. This category contains the things that one does rather than merely undergoes, but that one somehow fails to regulate in the manner that separates autonomous human action from merely motivated activity. The philosophy of action must therefore account for three categories of phenomena: mere happenings, mere activities, and actions.<sup>3</sup>

Velleman here expresses an interest in a certain specific liability of action: its liability to be, as he says, “ungoverned” or “unregulated.” If a manifestation of the will is deficient in this way, Velleman calls it “mere activity”; otherwise, he calls it “autonomous action.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>David Velleman, *The Possibility of Practical Reason*, (2000), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 1.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 4.

<sup>4</sup>There are two things to notice about Velleman’s terminology. First, it is Velleman’s policy, if not his consistent practice, to use the term “action” only in its ideal, or honorific employment. For him, there is strictly speaking no such thing as “defective action”: if a product of the will is defective, he does not call it “action,” but “activity.” The policy is awkward, but not, I think,

Velleman presents his distinction between “mere activity” and “autonomous action” as holding between an *imperfect* exercise of the will and a *perfect* exercise of the will. He calls a Freudian slip—which for him is a paradigm case of “mere activity”—“a defective instance of the agent’s making something happen.”<sup>5</sup> And speaking more generally, he says:

Mere activity is [...] a partial and imperfect exercise of the subject’s capacity to make things happen: in one sense, the subject makes the activity happen; in another, it is made to happen despite him, or at least without his concurrence. Full-blooded human action occurs only when the subject’s capacity to make things happen is exercised to its fullest extent. To study the nature of activity and action is thus to study two degrees in the exercise of a single capacity.<sup>6</sup>

Velleman maintains—quite uncontroversially, I would think—that a philosopher of action must account for a human being’s capacity to act, a capacity that can be exercised either defectively or undefectively, imperfectly or perfectly. He also maintains that in order to explain the capacity to act, a philosopher must account for both its perfect and its imperfect exercise.

The latter notion is, on the face of it, very strange. Normally, an account of a capacity is exhausted by the account of its perfect exercise.<sup>7</sup> In order to explain

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entirely unreasonable. Certainly, it is no more unreasonable than reserving the term “circle” for what is ordinarily called a perfect circle. If we were to adopt such a policy, we would find it awkward to speak of what is ordinarily called an “imperfect circle”—since, for us, this would involve a contradiction—but we could simply introduce a new term, and speak instead of an “imperfect quasi-circle.” And this is in effect what Velleman does: instead of “activity” he could just speak of “quasi-action,” and also, if the need arose, “defective quasi-action.” What forces him to coin a term is the decision to reserve the word “action” for action that is undefective.

The second point is closely related to the first. When Velleman refers to his most important category—both in the passage quoted above, and throughout his book—he speaks interchangeably of “autonomous actions” and simply of “actions.” This practice, which appears to identify a certain specific kind of action with action in general, is more or less universal among philosophers of action, including Anscombe. But one really ought to wonder why. On the face of it, this sort of talk would seem to involve a grotesque assimilation of species to genus. What on earth can explain the fact that Velleman is inclined to speak this way, and moreover, that everyone else understands him when he does so? What, if not the inarticulate sense, shared by all, that the sort of action under discussion is one whose nature is especially bound up with the nature of action itself?

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 8.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 4.

<sup>7</sup>Naturally, this claim only pertains to those capacities whose exercise can be either perfect or imperfect. There is no such thing as a defective exercise of iron’s capacity to rust, or of a stone’s

human vision, for instance, one must explain what it is to see something; but one is under no additional obligation to explain what it is to *fail* to see something—in the sense that one certainly does “fail to see something” if one sees it only blurrily, as the farsighted see what is near, and the nearsighted see what is far. The reason is that blurry vision is defective vision: it arises not so much from the capacity as from the incapacity to see, and is the product not so much of vision as of blindness.<sup>8</sup> Certainly, no one would think to begin an account of human vision by asking after the difference between blurry vision and clear vision, or between blindness and sight. But that is exactly how Velleman proposes to account for human agency, by investigating the difference between that which is defective and that which is undefective.

The very same tendency is also on display in the first quoted passage. From the fact that there are three distinct categories of phenomena—“mere happenings,” “mere activities” and “actions”—Velleman immediately infers that the philosophy of action “must therefore account for three categories of phenomena.” He appears, thus, to take it for granted that the purpose of marking the canonical divisions could not be, for instance, to indicate what the philosophy of action must account for, and to set this apart from something else—something that is of little or no importance.

This is not an eccentric feature of Velleman’s theory, but a necessary consequence of the standard approach. Velleman describes himself as inheriting a program from Donald Davidson and Harry Frankfurt.<sup>9</sup> According to Velleman, the first important capacity to warm in sunshine: the contrast between perfection and imperfection simply does not apply here.

<sup>8</sup>Here one may wish to object that blurry vision, however feeble, is, in fact, a product of the capacity to see, inasmuch as it is *vision*. And of course that is right. To the extent that a nearsighted or farsighted person sees, this can only arise from the capacity to see. But notice that the same is not true of the blurriness which clouds her vision: *this* is not a product of her capacity, but the form of its limitation. What the objection shows is that the relevant sort of incapacity presupposes the corresponding capacity. The sort of “blindness” that afflicts a nearsighted or farsighted person—as distinct from that of a mole or, if you like, a stone—presupposes vision, since, if one is either nearsighted or farsighted, one must to some extent be sighted. But the reverse is not the case: if one is sighted, one need not be, to any extent, either nearsighted or farsighted; one might, after all, have perfect 20/20 vision. This is only another indication of the metaphysical priority of vision over blindness, of capacity over incapacity and, in general, of the undefective over the defective.

<sup>9</sup>The paragraph that follows is intended to summarize the brief intellectual history recounted by Velleman in first fourteen pages of his *Introduction*. I do not mean to endorse his interpretation



step was taken by Davidson, who argued that an action is a sound expression of the will, if it is caused (in the right way) by a desire and a belief. Davidson's account is inadequate, Velleman says, because there are various products of the Freudian subconscious—like slips of the tongue—which are far from sound expressions of the will, but which nevertheless satisfy Davidson's requirement. Davidson's requirement may describe what an event must be in order to be an action, but it does not say what an action must be in order to be an action *par excellence*. According to Velleman, Frankfurt is significant for helping one to see exactly what more is required. For Frankfurt argued that an action is a sound expression of the will if it is “regulated” by a second-order desire to be motivated by one's first-order desire and belief. In Velleman's estimation, this model is an improvement over Davidson's, but it is still ultimately inadequate. For if a person's second-order desire is the product of e.g. boredom, depression, sloth or perversity, then the resulting action will fit the description proposed by Frankfurt, but it will not yet be a perfect expression of agency. Velleman presents his own work as addressing the question: “What more is still required? What more does an action have to be in order to be action in the full and proper sense?”

Velleman's answer to this question is in many ways idiosyncratic,<sup>10</sup> but the question itself could not be more familiar; it is, as Velleman himself points out, a sophisticated version of Wittgenstein's question. His method thus depends on the assumption that it is possible to understand what action is prior to understanding the undiminished form of action that is the special object of his interest. He assumes, in other words, that *autonomous action* is an accidental species of *action*.

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Davidson or Frankfurt; but I think his interpretation is at very least representative of their reception.

<sup>10</sup>Velleman's account of autonomous action is first developed in his book, *Practical Reflection*, (1989); the essays collected in *The Possibility of Practical Reason*, (2002), modify and elaborate that earlier view.

### 3.3 UNQUALIFIED ACTION AS AN ESSENTIAL SPECIES

#### 3.3.1 The Qualifications of Action

Given the existence of essential specification, which I defended in Chapter 2, it is at least *possible* that the word “intentional” in “intentional action” and the word “autonomous” in “autonomous action” are, in fact, each opposed to an *alienans* adjective. In that case, neither of them refers to a feature of action that remains to be accounted for once a philosopher has explained—or, for that matter, just taken for granted—what action is. And, of course, the same might be true of all of the other positive-seeming modifiers of “action.”

In a well-known passage, J. L. Austin claims that this is at least true of the word “free,” and that the failure to recognize this is the source of our trouble about the freedom of the will:

While it has been the tradition to present this [sc. Freedom] as the ‘positive’ term requiring elucidation, there is little doubt that to say we acted ‘freely’ (in the philosopher’s use, which is only faintly related to the everyday use) is to say only that we acted *not* un-freely, in one or another of the many heterogeneous ways of so acting (under duress, or what not). Like ‘real’, ‘free’ is only used to rule out the suggestions of some or all of its recognized antitheses. As ‘truth’ is not a name for a characteristic of assertions, so ‘freedom’ is not a name for a characteristic of actions, but the name of a dimension in which actions are assessed.<sup>11</sup>

Austin’s claim that “‘freedom’ is not a name for a characteristic of actions” rings a bell in the present context, reminding one of Anscombe’s claim that “an action is not called ‘intentional’ in virtue of any extra feature.”<sup>12</sup> But Austin’s view of “intentional” is subtly different from Anscombe’s, and it is different from his own view of “free.”

The word “free,” like the word “real,” is, in Austin’s patronizing phrase, a “trouser word.” What this means is that the word “free” may be used to cancel one of a wide

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<sup>11</sup>Austin, “A Plea for Excuses,” (1956), p. 180.

<sup>12</sup>Anscombe, *Intention*, (1963), p. 28.

variety of possible ways of being “unfree,” and that on any specific occasion it receives what sense it has from its contrary: the negative word “wears the trousers” in the sense that *it* has the authority, and dictates the meaning of the positive word (which, in the logic of the metaphor, wears the skirt). “‘Is he free?’—well, what have you in mind that he might be instead? In prison? Tied up in prison? Committed to a prior engagement?”<sup>13</sup> Austin is more expansive in his discussion of the “real”:

A definite sense attaches to the assertion that something is real, a real such-and-such, only in the light of a specific way in which it might be, or might have been, *not* real. ‘A real duck’ differs from the the simple ‘a duck’ only in that it is used to exclude various ways of being not a real duck—but a dummy, a toy, a picture, a decoy, &c.; and moreover I don’t know *just* how to take the assertion that it’s a real duck unless I know *just* what, on that particular occasion, the speaker has it in mind to exclude. This, of course, is why the attempt to find a characteristic common to all things that are or could be called ‘real’ is doomed to failure; the function of ‘real’ is not to contribute positively to the characterization of anything, but to exclude possible ways of being *not* real.<sup>14</sup>

By attending to possible ways of being *not* free, Austin hopes likewise to “dispose of the problem of Freedom.”<sup>15</sup> In both cases, his point is that the “positive” term has no meaning except what it borrows from its wildly disparate contraries. A dummy duck, a toy duck, a picture duck and a decoy duck are radically dissimilar and lacking in unity. But the “realness” of a “real” duck—which, depending on the circumstances, is either *not* a dummy, or *not* a toy, or *not* a picture, or *not* a decoy, &c.—inherits that disunity. So that the attempt to give an account of what it is for a duck—or anything—to be “real” begins to look absurd.

But disposing of “the problem of Freedom” presumably does not mean disposing of the problem of action. If a qualification like “free” is doubly-negative, in the sense that it cancels ways of being unfree, this must doom one specific kind of explanatory project, but not *all* kinds. It is hopeless to explain what teeth are by reference to the distinction between real teeth and false teeth—say, by describing a quality that the

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<sup>13</sup>Austin, *Sense and Sensibilia*, (1962), p. 15 n. 2.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 70.

<sup>15</sup>Austin, “A Plea for Excuses,” (1956), p. 180.

former possess and the latter do not—but it is not therefore hopeless to explain what teeth are. And to explain what teeth are is, I suppose, to explain what *real* teeth are. It is, at any rate, to give an account of teeth that are *not* in any way *unreal*. Similarly, if we cannot explain what action is by focusing on the contrast between that which is free and that which is unfree, still, we can explain what action is. And to explain what action is is, presumably, to explain that which is *not unfree*.

Austin's position is different on the topic of intentional action. Whereas, on his view, "real" borrows all of its meaning from its negative contraries, "intentional" has, he thinks, a definitive positive sense of its own. Like Wittgenstein, who demurs at the suggestion that a person can be said to "try" to raise her arm unless something unusual is preventing her,<sup>16</sup> Austin is skeptical that a person can be said to do "intentionally" some ordinary thing in ordinary circumstances. "Only when there is some suggestion that it might have been unintentional does it make non-misleading sense to say, for example, 'I ate my dinner intentionally.' To this extent, it is true that 'intentionally' serves to rule out 'unintentionally.'" <sup>17</sup> But this does not amount to saying that the qualification "intentional" is like "real" and "free." It would be "wholly untrue," Austin says, "to suggest that 'unintentionally' is the word that 'wears the trousers'—that is, that until we have grasped certain specific ways of doing things unintentionally, and except as a way of ruling these out, 'intentionally' has no positive meaning."<sup>18</sup> And while it seems right of Austin to prevent the assimilation of "intentional" to "free," he has says unfortunately little about the contrast—or, indeed, the relation—between them.<sup>19</sup>

Anscombe, for her part, is unconcerned with what we say when, and does not shy away from the idea that an ordinary action, like eating one's dinner, is intentional in

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<sup>16</sup>Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, (1953), §622.

<sup>17</sup>Austin, "Three Ways of Spilling Ink," (1966), p. 284.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 284.

<sup>19</sup>What he says is: "But in the present case, to mention nothing more, there is the verb 'intend' to take into account, and it must obviously have a highly 'positive' sense; it cannot just be used to rule out 'don't (or didn't) intend'," Ibid., p. 284.

ordinary circumstances.

The question does not normally arise whether a man's proceedings are intentional; hence it is often 'odd' to call them so. E.g. if I saw a man, who was walking along the pavement, turn towards the roadway, look up and down, and then walk across the road when it was safe for him to do so, it would not be usual for me to say that he crossed the road intentionally. But it would be wrong to infer from this that we ought not to give such an action as a typical example of intentional action.<sup>20</sup>

But she adds: "It would however be equally a mistake to say: since this man's crossing the road is an example of an intentional action, let us consider this action by itself, and let us try to find in the action, or in the man himself at the moment of acting, the characteristic which makes the action intentional."

On the face of it, Austin and Anscombe appear to have very different views of the qualification "intentional," Austin saying that it has a positive sense and Anscombe seemingly denying this. But the difference should not be overstated. Austin says that the qualification "free" lacks a positive sense in part because it is opposed to many diverse things: depending on the circumstances, it may be opposed to being engaged for the evening, to being bound in shackles or to being imprisoned. By contrast, "intentional" is always opposed to only one thing—to being unintentional. Austin presumably would *not* say that "unimprisoned" lacks a positive sense. Nor is it a "trouser word." And nor do philosophers give theories of it.

Then so long as we take Austin's point about the versatility of "trouser words," and consider a qualification like "free" only in opposition to a definite negative contrary, so that it has itself a definite sense, something like Anscombe's approach can be taken to all of the privileged forms of action that philosophers discuss. That is, though it would ordinarily be "odd" to say of someone's action that it is e.g. "whole-hearted"—since the question of its "whole-heartedness" does not normally arise—still, we can take as a perfectly good example of "whole-hearted" action any action that is not "half-hearted." And this will not prevent us from saying that one

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<sup>20</sup>Anscombe, *Intention*, (1963), p. 29.

cannot infer, from the fact that the action *is* whole-hearted, that it is possible to consider the action by itself, and to find in the action, or in the man himself at the moment of action, the characteristic which makes the action whole-hearted.

The best way to see this is to reflect on the kind of opposition that obtains between the various privileged forms of action and their negative antitheses, and then to reflect on the question *why* the former have a privileged role in the philosophy of action. It will help again to have a wide variety of examples in view.

X	$\sim X$	$\sim\sim X$
action	unintentional action	intentional action
action	un-autonomous action	autonomous action
action	drunk action	sober action
action	forced action	free action
action	half-hearted action	whole-hearted action
action	involuntary action	voluntary action

Figure 6

If forms of action such as those listed in the center column of the chart above are inessential species of action, then it will follow that the fundamental object of practical philosophy is some one thing: action that is neither unintentional, nor involuntary, nor vicious—nor diminished or deprived in any other way.

Right from the start, it can seem a puzzling suggestion that the inessential species of action are all opposed to some one thing. After all, unintentional action is opposed to intentional action, and drunk action to sober action, and coerced action to free action. But these are not the same: an action's being intentional is not the same as its being sober; and its being sober is not equivalent to its being free. Here it is helpful to recall the kind of unity that belongs to the object of a discipline like anatomy. A lifeless human body is opposed to a living human body; a feverish human body to one without a fever; and a legless human body to one that has legs. It is true that being alive is not the same as being without a fever; and that being without a fever is not

equivalent to having legs. Still, a human body that is both living and in every way healthy—this is one thing. And this one thing is the fundamental object of anatomy.

Now it is in principle impossible to give a systematic account, or even an exhaustive list, of the inessential species of a thing. The ways that a body can be deformed, or a family unhappy, or bicycle broken, are numberless and essentially disparate. One could at best offer something like Austin's *Doctrine of Infelicities*, the schematic and fragmentary character of which he constantly advertised.<sup>21</sup> But any corresponding *Doctrine of Felicities* must inherit the same disorder. For the essential species of something are only the reflection of its inessential species. If what can be broken on a bicycle is any random thing, then what can remain unbroken, is, likewise, any random thing.

The inessential species of action are likewise disorderly. All that can be said of them in general is that every such form lacks something of the character of action, or fails somehow to be sound expression of the will. However, it is possible to draw two broad distinctions among these forms, and thereby to impose some order upon the phenomena. Some species of action are inessential because they fail to express the will *directly*, others because they fail to express it *perfectly*. The latter, imperfect forms of action admit of a further division: some actions are imperfect because of an imperfection of the will, others because of an imperfection of the circumstances in which the will is exercised. Let us consider these in turn.

### 3.3.2 Unintentional Action as an Alien Species

According to Anscombe and Davidson, the contrast between intentional and unintentional action is strictly speaking a contrast between different *descriptions* under which a particular action falls. It may be, for instance, that a man who is sawing a plank in order to build a house is also, but unknowingly, preventing his neighbor from sleeping and making a pile of sawdust. What this man is doing may be described

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<sup>21</sup>Austin, *How To Do Things With Words*, (1962), p. 14–45.

either as “dividing wood,” or as “preventing his neighbor from sleeping,” or as “making sawdust.” Under the first description his action is intentional, under the second and third it is unintentional.

The distinction is familiar, but why is it significant? Of course, no one doubts that it *is* significant. No one thinks that the distinction between what is done intentionally and what is done unintentionally is comparable to the distinction between what is done before midday and what is done after. On the contrary, everyone presumes that intentional action is of the first importance in practical philosophy, and thus, that it has a very definite priority relative to its opposite, unintentional action. But what sort of priority is this?

The shape of an answer will begin to emerge, I think, if we set aside the sawyer and think about his saw—a soulless thing with nary a belief or desire. It is (or was) a philosophical commonplace that in order to explain what a saw is, one must explain what it does. And of course a saw *saws*. But what a saw does on any particular occasion of its characteristic activity may be variously described: it may be described either as “dividing wood” or, for instance, as “making sawdust.” For on any such an occasion, the saw is in fact doing two different things at once, the first of which tends towards there being divided wood, the second of which tends towards there being a pile of sawdust. And these two things are differently related to what a saw is. Insofar as we see divided wood as the *product* of sawing, and the pile of sawdust as a *by-product*, we are forced to acknowledge a corresponding asymmetry in the descriptions of the process itself. We must recognize that under the description “making sawdust,” the process is only indirectly related to the nature of a saw.

One might suspect that our ability to draw such a distinction depends on the fact that a saw is an *instrument*, and thus essentially bound up with human goals and projects. But not at all. The roots of a tree must be understood by reference to what they do under the description “growing” and not under the description “breaking up the sidewalk.” And the human heart must be understood by reference to what it



does under the description “pumping blood,” and not under the description “making a thumping noise.”

In each of these cases it is clear which description is metaphysically fundamental. A saw makes sawdust because it divides wood; it doesn’t divide wood because it makes sawdust. A tree breaks up the sidewalk because it grows roots; it doesn’t grow roots because it breaks up the sidewalk. And a heart thumps because it pumps; it doesn’t pump because it thumps.

My suggestion, then, is that acting intentionally is to the human will as dividing wood is to the saw, as growing is to the roots of a tree, and as pumping blood is to the heart. The description under which an action is intentional is a description under which it is shown to be the product, rather than a by-product, of the will—its direct rather than its indirect expression.

This would explain why the philosophy of action is especially interested in intentional action. As everyone agrees, the philosophy of action is concerned with a certain capacity: the human will. This capacity, like any other, must be understood in relation to its object. The object of this capacity, like that of any other, is subject to many descriptions, only some of which reveal it to be the object of this capacity.

If this is right, then the standard approach to intentional action is misguided for reasons that have nothing to do with the capacity to act in particular. It is true of *any* capacity that its nature is determined by reference to its product, rather than by reference to its by-product. And it is in general hopeless to investigate a capacity by identifying some quality that distinguishes its product from its by-product. Just as a complete account of the saw could proceed without reference to making sawdust, and a complete account of the heart could proceed without reference to thumping, so, also, a complete account of the will could proceed without reference to unintentional action.

### 3.3.3 Defective Action as an Alienated Species

**3.3.3.1 Internal Defect** An action can be defective or undefective, imperfect or perfect, only under an intentional description. Think again of sawing. Under the description “dividing wood” what the saw is doing may be perfect or imperfect; but under the description “making sawdust” the perfect/imperfect contrast does not apply to what it is doing. There are flawed and unflawed products, but not flawed or unflawed by-products.

Action that is not “autonomous” in Velleman’s sense is an imperfect expression of the will. In order to be “autonomous”, an action must be *both* intentional—i.e. considered under the right sort of description—*and* not subject to some particular imperfection (it must be not “unregulated”). If a man is relocking all the doors in his house because he feels himself compelled to do so by an uncontrollable psychic urge, his action fails to be “autonomous.” But his relocking of the doors is intentional, in Anscombe’s and Davidson’s sense; it is, as I would say, the direct expression of his will. After all, the man we have imagined is not acting under the description “wearing down the keys”, something which, as a matter of fact, he is *also* doing at the moment. No, the description under which he acts is “relocking all the doors”: this is what, for better or for worse, he aims and understands himself to be doing. Still, something is obviously missing, or amiss.

In the case we have imagined, there is something wrong with the person’s capacity to act. It is disturbed: that is why the action fails to be autonomous. But then, the standard approach to autonomous action is inappropriate for reasons that have nothing to do with the capacity to act in particular. It is true of *any* capacity whose product is vulnerable to defect that the nature of the capacity is determined by reference to its undefective product. We do not explain or understand the archer’s skill by reference to missed shots, or the baker’s craft by reference to burnt loaves, or vision by reference to blurry vision, or digestion by reference to indigestion.

**3.3.3.2 External Defect** Aristotle’s distinction between voluntary and involuntary action draws attention to the fact that the capacity to act, like any capacity, is what it is in relation to certain external circumstances.<sup>22</sup> It is not primarily by reference to what happens when a human being is under water, or in a dark or smoke-filled room, that we explain or understand human vision. This because human vision presupposes e.g. light and smokeless air. Of course, the capacity to see is very often exercised in unfavorable circumstances. The point is only that such exercises inevitably fail to exhibit the capacity for what it is.

And just the same is true of the will: there are circumstances unfavorable to its exercise, and by reference to which it is impossible to explain or understand it. Aristotle mentions several of these. If a person is forced by a tyrant to choose between the lesser of two significant evils (e.g. between losing his child and performing some shameful act); or if he is tortured in a way that overstrains human nature; or if he is ignorant of some particular feature of the circumstances in which he acts (e.g. that his goblet contains a tasteless, odorless poison)—if any such thing obtains, the capacity to act may indeed be exercised, but not in such a way as will show it for what it is.

Just as we must exclude from our basic account of the capacity to see the kind of seeing that a person does in conditions unfavorable to vision, so, also, we must exclude from our basic account of the capacity to act the kind of acting that a person does in conditions unfavorable to the will.

## 3.4 IDEAL ACTION THEORY

The suggestion that action theory is fundamentally a theory of ideal action runs against a recent tendency to emphasize precisely the non-ideal.<sup>23</sup> Consider the open-

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<sup>22</sup>*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1109b30-1111b3.

<sup>23</sup>Perhaps the clearest expression of this is tendency is Nomy Arpaly’s recent book, *Unprincipled Virtue*, (2003).

ing paragraphs of Velleman’s paper, “The Guise of the Good”:

The agent portrayed in much philosophy of action is, lets face it, a square. He does nothing intentionally unless he regards it or its consequences as desirable. [...] All of his intentional actions are therefore directed at outcomes regarded *sub specie boni*: under the guise of the good.

This agent is conceived as being capable of intentional action—and hence being an agent—only by virtue of being a pursuer of value. I want to question whether this conception of agency can be correct. Surely, so general a capacity as agency cannot entail so narrow a cast of mind. Our moral psychology has characterized, not the generic agent, but a particular species of agent, and a particularly bland species of agent, at that. It has characterized the earnest agent, while ignoring those agents who are disaffected, refractory, silly, satanic or punk. I hope for a moral psychology that has room for the whole motley crew.<sup>24</sup>

I have been urging that philosophy of action does not, and should not, portray pathological agents for the same reason that anatomy does not, and should not, portray pathological bodies: a pathological specimen, just in virtue of being such, fails to exhibit the nature of that of which it is a specimen.<sup>25</sup> In that case Velleman’s complaint is unjustified. In their portrayal of the healthy human body, anatomists do not neglect the “generic” body in favor of a “bland species” of body. On the contrary, their depiction is precisely of the nature of the human body in general. And though they *are* concerned with this general nature, anatomists have not forgotten about, or failed to leave “room” for, the existence of pathologies—or, for that matter, the existence of tattoos and pierced ears. But it is not their business to mention such things.

Still, Velleman’s remarks do point to something interesting. The standard assumption that (e.g.) *intentional action* is an accidental species of *action* has a very strange consequence: namely, that the discipline calling itself “the philosophy of ac-

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<sup>24</sup>Velleman, “The Guise of the Good,” (1992), p. 3.

<sup>25</sup>I don’t mean this as a denial of Austin’s (1961) eloquent claim that consideration of the “abnormal will throw light on the normal, will help us to penetrate the blinding veil of ease and obviousness that hides the mechanisms of the natural successful act,” pp. 179–180. The target of my criticism is not someone like Austin who thinks that the portrayal of non-ideal action is useful for the heuristic purpose of throwing light on ideal action, which he admits is more fundamental. My target is only the person who denies that ideal action is more fundamental.

tion” is not now, and never has been, very much occupied with the nature of action in general. For on the standard assumption, “What is action?” and (e.g.) “What is intentional action?” are distinct questions. They are related as “What is a nose?” and “What is a snub nose?” So to a devotee of the standard approach, it must appear as though philosophers of action have always focused on the specific question—to the more or less complete neglect of the general one. And Velleman is right to find this appearance very strange. One would have thought that the question “What is action?” was the fundamental question of our discipline.

Of course, this is not a problem if the standard assumption is false, and if *intentional action* is an essential species of *action*. For in that case, the questions “What is action?” and “What is intentional action?” are not distinct. They are for the philosopher as the questions “What is gold?” and “What is real gold?” are for the chemist, and as the questions “What is a human body?” and “What is a living human body?” are for the anatomist. So a book like Anscombe’s *Intention* may be read as directly addressing the nature of action in general.

Now if on the standard assumption it is hard to see why philosophers have neglected the general question “What is action?” it is even harder to see why they have bothered to discuss any of the specific questions. What could possibly justify our interest in (say) intentional action, if this is really only an accidental species of action?

There is no mystery if the science of gold takes a special interest in pure gold, for that interest arises directly and immediately from the nature of gold itself. But it is highly mysterious if the science of gold focuses instead on Peruvian gold. And on the standard assumption, *intentional action* is related to *action* the way that *Peruvian gold* is related to *gold*. There is indeed an extra feature that distinguishes Peruvian gold from gold in general, or from gold just as such: namely, its having been dug out of a mine in Peru. But precisely because this is an extra feature, the science of gold should have nothing to do with it. Or, again, there is no mystery if the science of the

human nose takes a special interest in the undeformed human nose, for this interest arises directly and immediately from the question, “What is a human nose?” But if the science of the human nose instead takes a special interest in the question “What is the snub nose?”—this is entirely mysterious.

The devotee of the standard approach must therefore explain why the philosophy of action is especially interested in e.g. *intentional* action, rather than its antithesis, *unintentional* action—or rather than in something that is common to them both.

From a certain point of view, this may not seem so difficult. One might simply argue that the philosophical significance of intentional action derives from some *other* philosophical topic, one whose significance is not open to doubt. Everyone knows, for instance, that philosophers care about rationality, both practical and theoretical. And intentional action would seem to be one expression of that. After all, it is widely agreed that action done for a reason is intentional, and that intentional action is the kind that can be done for a reason.—But this sort of maneuver only pushes the problem back: Why does philosophy take a special interest in action and belief that is supported by reasons, rather than in action and belief that is *not* supported by reasons? In other words, why focus on rationality, rather than irrationality? Or why not focus on something common to them both?

Perhaps the suggestion will be that the philosophical interest in intentional action derives from study of Ethics. After all, intentional action is subject to praise and blame: it is good or bad, right or wrong, virtuous or vicious.—But this answer seems to forget that Ethics, too, is a rational discipline, one with its own clear set of priorities. Its central concepts are the right and the good, not the wrong and the bad.<sup>26</sup> It contains doctrines of virtue, not doctrines of vice. It seeks theories of justice, not theories of injustice.

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<sup>26</sup>This priority is disputed by John Herman Randall, Jr. in his paper, “The Wrong and the Bad,” (1954). For a compelling reply, see John Wild, “Ethics as a Rational Discipline and the Priority of the Good,” (1954).

A science in general puts the “positive” before the “negative”—that is, order before disorder, law before lawlessness, form before deformity. Why is this? Are we just optimistic? Is it useful? Is it closer to our hearts? The conclusion looks inescapable that the asymmetrical concern of a rational inquiry reflects an asymmetry in the nature of what is inquired about. But if we are going to have to say this in the end, then why not say from the very beginning that our abiding concern with intentional action arises directly and immediately from the fundamental question of our discipline: What is action?

## 4.0 ACTION SIMPLICITER

### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

If action theory is, in the first instance, ideal action theory, and so if, for the time being, we may set aside the menagerie of deranged and diminished types of action, along with their undeformed contraries, then it still remains for us to consider the other of the two canonical divisions, that between an “action” and a “mere event.”

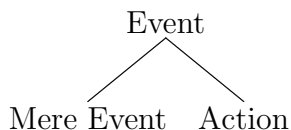


Figure 7

Even more than the division between qualified and unqualified action, this one attracts the standard approach: typically, a philosopher of action will take for granted the genus *event*, and then try to say what distinguishes *action* from everything else within that genus.

I will now begin developing grounds for rejecting the standard approach to action, a task that will occupy me for the rest of the dissertation. It bears emphasis that in leaving behind the distinction between qualified and unqualified action, we are leaving behind a concern with essential generality, as I called it in Chapter 2, and taking up the topic of categorial generality. In Chapter 3, I argued that the standard approach to unqualified action invariably treats as accidental what is really an essential species.



But there is, I think, a different problem with the standard approach to action. The problem now is that the standard approach must treat as accidental what is really a categorial species. From this point forward, my aim will be to argue that *action* is a categorial species of *event*, and one of a distinctively practical kind.

## 4.2 ACTION AS A PRACTICAL CATEGORY

In the end, what compels the rejection of the standard approach is, I think, that the basic concepts of practical philosophy—concepts like “action” and “good action”—have, themselves, a practical character, and define what we might call practical categories. The *practicality* of such categories consists in the fact that an agent must deploy them in the course of bringing about whatever could fall under them: they are not simply the brainchildren of theory, but are operative in the very phenomena that a theory must explain.

Certainly, nothing of the sort could be said of the abstract category of events. The unfolding of an event does not in general depend on anyone’s apprehension that it is unfolding: when rain drops, or mud slides, no one need have a thought of it. By contrast, I will argue, the unfolding of an action must be understood as such—that is, it must be understood *as* the unfolding of an action—by the agent whose action it is. The fact that an agent *thinks* she is acting is part of what makes it the case that she is, in fact, acting. Nor is the agent’s thought, here, a mere efficient cause, “triggering” or “guiding” what would anyway be the self-same kind of event. It is rather that the agent’s thought is constitutive of the kind of event it serves to bring about.

Although the argument that follows will be limited to the category of action, I want to point out, if only in passing, that a similar position might also be held with regard to the category of good action. According to Aristotle and Kant, a

morally good action is one that is done because it is morally good. This is implicit in Aristotle's claim that a virtuous action is done "for the sake of the noble,"<sup>1</sup> and in Kant's claim that a morally worthy action is one that is done "from duty."<sup>2</sup> A person cannot be acting for the sake of the noble, in Aristotle's sense, unless she herself understands that what she is doing *is* noble; and she cannot be acting from duty, in Kant's sense, unless she herself understands that what she is doing *is* dutiful. In that case, however, the fact that the agent *thinks* that she is acting well is part of what makes it the case that she is, in fact, acting well.

Now if the latter claim is true, it is, I think, a substantive ethical truth, and not the sort of thing that philosophy could establish. It is worth noticing, here, that Kant does not give an argument, at the beginning of the *Groundwork*, that a morally good action is one that is done because it is morally good. This, he believes, is a prephilosophical factum. For he believes it is part of our conception of a good will, a conception which "already dwells in natural sound understanding and needs not so much to be taught as only to be clarified."<sup>3</sup> Of course, Hume and many others would deny the claim that a morally good action is one that is done because it is morally good. And I do not want to enter that dispute. All I hope to suggest is that *if* Kant and Aristotle are right—if what is good, practically speaking, knows itself *to be* good—then the category of good action, like the category of action, must enter into the constitution of anything that falls under it.

The idea of such a category is, to be sure, something deeply puzzling. But suppose it is not in the end unintelligible; and suppose, further, that *action* and *good action* are two legitimate examples. What follows, I think, is that any attempt to explain these categories by means of the standard approach will be ruined by circularity. It is, after all, the *aim* of the standard approach to give a complete set of noncircular conditions

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<sup>1</sup>*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1115b12, 1116b3, 1117b9, 1117b17, 1119b15, 1120a23, 1122b6.

<sup>2</sup>*Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, pp. 397–401. Kant and Aristotle are helpfully compared by Christine Korsgaard, "From Duty and for the Sake of the Noble: Kant and Aristotle on Morally Good Action," (1996b).

<sup>3</sup>Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, p. 397.

under which a member of the relevant genus is a member of the relevant species. Thus, one attempts to describe a distinguishing mark of action that is intelligible without reference to action, or a distinguishing mark of good action that is intelligible without reference to good action. But this cannot be done, if one of the conditions necessary for an event to be an action is that the agent herself should apprehend that what she is doing is performing an action, or, again, if one of the conditions necessary for an action to be a good action is that the agent herself should apprehend that what she is doing is performing a good action. The reason is, of course, that in specifying the crucial condition, the accidentalist account would have to mention the very thing it was needed to explain.

My position will be that the relevant circularity is not itself a problem: it causes trouble *only* for a partisan of the standard approach. And because I think the standard approach ought to be given up, my principal aim in discussing this circularity will not be to solve a problem, so much as to catch hold of it, and to embrace it, and to keep it from getting away.

### 4.3 THE HUMEAN CIRCLE

#### 4.3.1 The Circle Described

As I mentioned, one might object on ethical grounds to a claim that I attributed to Aristotle and Kant: the claim, namely, that a morally good action is one that is done because it is morally good. For this implies that an agent, in doing a good action, must understand that what she is doing *is* a good action. And that might seem to involve an overly intellectual conception of moral goodness.

But apart from any ethical concern, there is also a strictly metaphysical objection, which derives from David Hume. Hume objected that such an account is circular.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Hume's objection is discussed by Christine Korsgaard in "Kant's Analysis of Obligation: The

This is a point that reappears a number of times in his *Treatise of Human Nature*.<sup>5</sup> In one passage, Hume observes that we praise an action as morally good, only if we think that it was done from a morally good motive. And this presents a problem, he thinks, for anyone who would claim that part of what makes an action good is its having been done with regard to its goodness:

To suppose, that the mere regard to the virtue of the action, may be the first motive, which produc'd the action, and render'd it virtuous, is to reason in a circle. Before we can have such a regard, the action must be really virtuous; and this virtue must be deriv'd from some virtuous motive: And consequently the virtuous motive must be different from the regard to the virtue of the action.<sup>6</sup>

In this particular passage, Hume is concerned with an agent's motive. But his deeper point can be made without reference to motivation. In order to be motivated by the goodness of her action, an agent must *think* that her action is good. What generates the Humean Circle is really just the relation between an agent's *thought* that her action is good and the *fact* that it is good. According to Hume, the fact that an action is good cannot depend essentially on that thought that it is good, on pain of its being unintelligible what a good action is. And his argument is very simple: in order to understand what a good action is, we would need to understand the agent's thought that her action is good; however, in order to grasp the content of this thought, we would need already to know what a good action is. And thus we are caught in a circle.

Hume of course thought he could avoid this circle. And despite the obvious interest of the question whether he was right, I will need to set this question aside, because the answer to it depends, I think, on a prior question, having to do with a different circle. What is important for my immediate purposes is the fact that Hume himself believed that the circle he discussed in connection with moral goodness is not

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Argument of *Foundations I*," (1989).

<sup>5</sup>David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, (1978), Book III, Pt.I.I, p. 467, 468; Book III, Pt.II.I, p. 478, 480; Book III, Pt.II.VI, p. 526.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, Book III, Pt.II.I, p. 478.

the only one of its kind. According to him, there are other circles of precisely the same structure that cannot be avoided, and that cannot be explained away: certain special things we do are, in his view, “naturally unintelligible.” Examples include making a promise, signing a contract, giving a gift and getting married. What is curious about a thing like getting married, and what gives rise to the Humean Circle, is that it cannot be done unknowingly.

Anscombe discusses these thought-dependent forms of action in a series of articles.<sup>7</sup> She points out that every condition requisite for a marriage might be satisfied—the priest and witnesses solemnly gathered, the nuptial oaths intoned and repeated, the rings exchanged, and all the rest—but for this one thing: that one of the parties to the would-be marriage does not think that what he is doing is getting married. (Following Anscombe, we may imagine that he misunderstood someone’s remark, “This is only a rehearsal.”) Well, if he does not think that what he is doing is getting married, then getting married is not, in fact, what he is doing. For thinking that one is getting married is essential to getting married: it is an ineliminable constituent of the fact, when the fact obtains.

It is important to observe two things about an action like getting married. First, it is not a so-called “mental act.” Most philosophers are happy to affirm that one typically knows one’s own mind; indeed, many believe it is a necessary truth. So it may be unsurprising to learn that certain “mental acts” cannot be done unknowingly—that you cannot, for instance, take the square root of 9, or make a decision, or wish upon a star, unless you know that that is what you are doing. But it is not *this* kind of thought-dependent “act” that interested Hume. Getting married is not, after all, something that is done in a secret inner chamber of the soul: it is a public affair, datable and observable. What is remarkable is the fact that there are certain events in time and space—certain apparently *real* events—whose existence depends on the

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<sup>7</sup>See especially “On Promising and its Justice, and Whether it Need be Respected *in Foro Interno*,” (1969); and “Rules, Rights and Promises,” (1978). And compare “The Question of Linguistic Idealism,” (1976).

thought that they exist.

The second point to observe is that getting married depends on thought, not merely as an efficient cause, but also for its own internal constitution. It is not as though the agent's thought were instrumental in bringing about something whose existence we could perfectly well understand on its own. Rather, we seem to need to refer to the agent's thought in order to understand the substantive fact that is brought about. A person's thought that he is getting married is related to the object of that thought quite differently than his vision is related to the object of that vision. It is possible to explain *what* a person sees without making reference to the fact that it is seen. By contrast, we cannot strip away the thought that one is getting married and leave its object intact. If we try to strip it away—as in the case where the groom believes it is only a rehearsal—we find that many of the actions and circumstances that would otherwise be named among the requisites of a marriage will simply be annulled: the groom will say “I do,” but he will not make a vow; he will hand a ring to his would-be bride, but he will not give it to her; and the proceedings will be seen, but nevertheless they will not be witnessed.

Hume observes that an event like someone's getting married seems to give rise to a problem of intelligibility. The problem is this: if it is essential to getting married that one should think that one is doing so, then we cannot understand what it is to get married unless we grasp the content of the agent's thought; however, we cannot grasp the content of that thought, unless we understand what it is to get married. It therefore seems to be totally unintelligible what it is to get married, and also what it is to think that one is doing so.

Anscombe remarks that the difficulty, here, is *not* that we must attribute an infinite series of thoughts to the person who is getting married. Now an infinite series of thoughts might well seem to arise: first, there is the agent's thought that he is getting married; then (since his getting married is an event partly constituted by his thought) there is the thought of his thought that he is getting married; and then (for

the same reason) there is the thought of his thought of his thought that he is getting married; and so on without end. But on the assumption that one knows one's own mind, this sort of worry is easily brushed aside: for to think something is, in that case, to think that one thinks it. In any event, Hume's problem is not to understand how it could be that I think that I think that I think that I think ...that  $p$ . His problem is to understand:  $p$ .

The Humean Circle should also be distinguished from a well-known Gricean puzzle concerning epistemic justification.<sup>8</sup> A person is getting married, we said, only if he thinks he is doing so. But one might worry that a person's thought that he is getting married can only be *justified* if he has evidence that he is getting married. Meanwhile, there cannot be evidence that he is getting married, unless it is true that he is getting married, and therefore, unless he thinks he is getting married. And so, it seems, his thought can never be justified. But the Gricean circle can only get turning if we have already taken for granted the intelligibility of the thought that one is getting married. The epistemic question is how a thought with a certain content could be justified. Whereas we are asking: What is the content of this thought?

### 4.3.2 The Circle Expanded

In Hume's estimation, the problem of "natural intelligibility" had a fairly limited scope: it was limited, he thought, to actions that are associated with a human convention or "practice." And Anscombe, for her part, appears to have agreed, though she did insist on expanding the class of practice-dependent actions so as to include the following of a rule, and therefore also the speaking of a language.<sup>9</sup>

But we are now in position to consider a much more radical expansion of the Humean Circle. Could it be that action *as such* is "naturally unintelligible"? According to Hume and Anscombe, thinking that one is getting married is essential to

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<sup>8</sup>H. P. Grice, "Intention and Uncertainty," (1971).

<sup>9</sup>Anscombe, "The Question of Linguistic Idealism," (1976).

getting married, not just as an efficient cause, but as a constituent of the fact itself. The question, then, is whether thinking that one is acting is likewise constitutive of acting.

The idea that action is essentially self-conscious is something of a commonplace, and will hardly seem a radical thesis. It is implicit, for instance, in Davidson's treatment of so-called "deviant causal chains." On Davidson's view, an intentional action is caused by a belief and desire. But it is famously difficult to explain the relation between an action and these "attitudes." In Davidson's famous example, a mountain-climber wants to rid himself of the danger of holding another man on a rope; and he believes that he will do so by loosening his grip, and letting the other man fall to his death. Yet, the climber is so shaken and appalled by the murderousness of his own calculation, that in his weakened state he begins to loosen his grip on the rope. As Davidson imagines the case, loosening his grip is *not* something that the man does intentionally: it is not an "action" of his; it does not express his capacity as agent. It is true that the man's belief and desire *cause* him to loosen his grip on the rope, but not in the right way. Davidson says:

Beliefs and desires that would rationalize an action if they caused it in the *right* way—through a course of practical reasoning, as we might try saying—may cause it in other ways. If so, the action was not performed with the intention that we could have read off from the attitudes that caused it. What I despair of spelling out is the way in which attitudes must cause actions if they are to rationalize the action.<sup>10</sup>

Like his reader, Davidson knows a deviant causal chain when he sees one. And though he despairs of spelling out the "*right*" sort of etiology, he does venture to suggest that it involves practical reasoning. The suggestion is apparently that when there is the "right" sort of etiology, the agent herself must draw some connection between what she is doing and a reason for doing it. And yet, obviously, the agent cannot draw this connection, unless she is conscious of what she is doing.

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<sup>10</sup>Davidson, "Freedom to Act," (1973), p. 79.



But Davidson is not the only philosopher who is drawn to the idea that action is essentially self-conscious. This idea is the guiding thread of Anscombe's *Intention*. On her view, an action is the kind of event to which a certain sense of the question "Why?" has application—the sense, namely, that asks for a reason. In her effort to explain that sense, the very first thing that Anscombe says is this:

The question ['Why?'] is refused application by the answer, 'I was not aware I was doing that'. Such an answer is, not indeed a proof (since it may be a lie), but a claim, that the question 'Why did you do it (are you doing it)?', in the required sense, has no application.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, the question "Why?" applies only to that which a person *thinks* that she is doing. If you ask someone why she is standing on the garden hose, and she says, truthfully, "Oh, I didn't know I was," then the question simply falls to the ground.

Like Anscombe and Davidson, most contemporary philosophers believe that an action is the kind of event that is, or might be, done for a reason. And it is widely held that an agent has a special cognitive relation to her reasons: namely, that she must *know*, or at least *think* that she knows, what her reasons are. But it would seem to follow from this that an agent, in acting, must think that she is acting. For a person cannot think that she is doing something for some particular reason, or for no particular reason, or for a reason that eludes her, unless she thinks that what she is doing is the sort of event for which it is possible to have reasons—that is, unless she thinks it is an action.

But if thinking one is acting is essential to acting, then it seems that something like the Humean Circle must arise in connection with action itself: that is, it must be impossible to understand what action is, until we understand what it is to *think* that one is performing an action; and yet, clearly, we cannot grasp the content of this thought, until we know what action is. That action is essentially self-conscious is an intuitive, popular and traditional idea. But it may yet be *incompatible* with the standard approach in the philosophy of action.

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<sup>11</sup>Anscombe, *Intention*, (1963), p. 11.

## 4.4 IN DEFENSE OF THE EXPANDED CIRCLE

### 4.4.1 Are Promising and Marrying Exceptional?

It is one thing to say, with Anscombe and Hume, that getting married is an odd thing to do, and difficult to understand; it is a far different thing to say that the self-same problem of intelligibility arises in connection with action itself. In making this transition, our gaze has turned from a certain specific form of action to the overarching category. It is just as though the topic had shifted from one particular form of life, such as that of a horse, to the very idea of an organism; or, again, from a certain natural stuff, like gold, to the category of chemical substance. And this transition is very likely to seem illegitimate.

There are, I think, three main difficulties. The first and most obvious is that getting married is, in many ways, a curious thing to do. It may well seem to be the platypus of action: an improbable freak; something whose existence must be grudgingly conceded; but certainly not an exemplar. The problem is especially acute, because what is apt to seem most peculiar about an action like getting married—or, for that matter, making a promise—is neither its relation to a practice, nor the way that it involves another person, but precisely its dependence on the agent’s thought. And this is of course what gives rise to the Humean Circle.

The proposal to expand the circle therefore invites the following objection: “Considered just as a form of action, or a possible object of intention, getting married is quite exceptional, in that it cannot be done *unintentionally*. What cannot be done unintentionally cannot be done *unthinkingly*. That is why every instance of someone’s getting married is accompanied by his thought that he is doing so. The apparent inseparability, in such a case, of what is done, on the one hand, and the agent’s thought of it, on the other, is the source of the Humean Circle. But these two things are not *normally* inseparable: the normal object of intention is something that can be done *either* unintentionally *or* intentionally—and thus, *either* unthinkingly *or* thinkingly.

Consider examples from Davidson like flipping a switch, or sinking a ship or going to Katmandu; or consider examples from Anscombe like crossing the street, or sliding on ice or poisoning a well. All of these things can be done unthinkingly, many of them by animals, and some of them even by inanimate objects. And it is because such things can be done unthinkingly that we can explain or understand what it is to do them without appealing to thought, simply by reference to their unthinking, unintentional instances. It is only in the odd case that *what is done* has any essential relation to thought. And thus it is only in the odd case that the Humean Circle arises.”

We may begin by conceding that getting married is a very unusual member of the class of “things that can be done,” or of the class of “things that things can do.” But to say this is to say no more than that getting married is a very unusual form of event. And of course every form of action is an unusual form of event: that is why philosophers distinguish an action from a *mere* event. The only question that we have to consider is whether its dependence on thought makes getting married an unusual form of action.

One thing that *is* unusual about getting married is this: it is a form of action whose very description announces its categorial status, declaring unambiguously that it is, in fact, an action. Anything that falls under the super-abstract category of event, and that is *also* describable as someone’s getting married, necessarily falls under the determinate category of action, and not under that of a mere event. Thus, every true sentence of the form “X is getting married” refers to an example of the special kind of event that philosophers of action aim to understand. The same is obviously *not* true of “X is sliding on ice,” or “X is rolling down the hill,” or “X is destroying a spider’s web.” After all, that which is destroying a spider’s web *might* be a child with a stick; but it might also be an earthquake, or a rain storm, or a falling branch, or a bear. Unlike “getting married,” an event-description such as “destroying a spider’s web” can perfectly well refer to an event on either side of the division between mere events and actions. An event-description like “destroying a spider’s web” is indeterminate,

in the sense that it gives no indication of the categorical status of the event that it describes.

But the fact that an event's *description* is categorically indeterminate does not entail that the event itself is likewise indeterminate. It is not even clear what that would mean. There is no such thing as an event in the abstract: every event must be *either* an action *or* a mere event. And so, *a fortiori*, every event of destroying a spider's web must fall under one determinate category or the other, even if we cannot tell which on the basis of its description alone.

And there is a parallel point to be made about the object of an agent's thought. Someone who is intentionally destroying a spider's web must in some sense realize that what she is doing falls under this description. And we have just acknowledged that this is a description on the basis of which alone it is not possible to infer that what she is doing is an action, rather than a mere event. But the fact that the description under which she acts is categorically indeterminate does not entail that what the agent *thinks* that she is doing is likewise indeterminate. After all, the agent *might* think something about her action that cannot be inferred from its description: she might think, in particular, that it is an action.

The imagined objection depends on the idea that what is done under a syncategorematic description like "destroying a spider's web" is one and the same thing, whether it is an action or a mere event.<sup>12</sup> It is only on this assumption that there can seem to be cases in which what is done unthinkingly (e.g. by the wind) is identical to what is done thinkingly (e.g. by a child). For if the assumption is false—if it is one thing to destroy a spider's web thinkingly, and another to do it unthinkingly—then what is done by a child who is intentionally destroying a spider's web is never done by the wind, or an earthquake, or a falling branch, or a bear. In that case, it is just like getting married: it is something which is known to be done, whenever in fact it *is* done. And this is what gives rise to a Humean Circle.

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<sup>12</sup>Anscombe sometimes seems to share this assumption. See especially *Intention*, (1963), pp. 84–87.

Then what speaks for the idea that what is done under the description “destroying a spider’s web” is the same, regardless of whether it is an action or a mere event? Nothing, it seems, apart from the fact that the same description can be used in both cases. But there is no reason that the same description *must* be used. If ever the need should arise, we certainly *can* disambiguate the descriptions of what is done: that is arguably the function of the English word “intentional.”<sup>13</sup> But in most cases the need does not arise: it is typically just obvious which category of event is being described; thus, we do not typically encumber the description with a statement to the effect that the event in question was, or was not, an intentional action. If what destroyed the spider’s web was the wind, the event was definitely in one category; if a child with a stick, probably the other. But, again, the mere fact that an event can be described in an ambiguous, or categorially indeterminate, way does not entail that the event described is itself indeterminate. And the event itself is *not* indeterminate: it is always belongs—squarely—to one category or the other.

If I intend to destroy a spider’s web, I intend to destroy it *intentionally*. The object of my intention—what I intend to do—is not something that, for all I know or care, may as well be a mere event. The object of my intention is definitively an action. And likewise the object of my thought. If I am intentionally destroying a spider’s web, and therefore think I am doing so, I think I am doing it *thinkingly*—and *not* as the wind does; and *not* as it were indeterminately.

This, at any rate, is what I hope to entitle myself to say. It will take some work to show that what is done, when a person acts, is always specifically an action. That is the task of Chapters 5 and 6. But we may note in advance that if the position is defensible, then what is true of getting married, or making a promise, or signing a

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<sup>13</sup>If what matters in the context is just the fact that there are two homeless spiders, one might say, “The girl destroyed this spider’s web, and the boy destroyed that one’s,” or simply, “She did what he did,” even though what she did was unintentional and what he did was intentional. In fact, we might even say, of these two children, “They did what it did,” referring now to the wind’s destruction of another spider’s web. But if what matters is, say, how well- or badly-behaved the children have been, we will not describe what happened by saying that she did what he did.

contract, or taking an oath, is true of any other form of action: it cannot be done unthinkingly—that is, it cannot be done without the agent’s thinking that what she is doing is: what she is doing. And if what she is doing is a form specifically of action, then the agent must think that what she is doing is acting.

#### 4.4.2 What is it to Think that one is Acting?

But now, what is it for the agent to *think* that she is acting? The category of action cannot figure in her thought in the same way as a specific form of action, like getting married. This is particularly clear in the present case. In order for someone to think she is getting married, she must have certain special words in her vocabulary: in particular, she must possess the predicate “to get married.” Someone who had never heard of marriage, and who had no idea what a wedding was, could not think that she was getting married; and as a result, she could *be* getting married. But “action” is not the sort of thing that one needs to have heard of in order to do. Thinking that one is acting is not a matter of deploying the predicate “to act.” And it certainly does not depend on the possession of philosophical jargon like “intention,” “reason” and “category.” This is the second difficulty that seems to prevent the envisioned expansion of the Humean Circle. If not as part of the explicit content of an agent’s thought, then in what other way does the category of action inform the agent’s thinking?

The answer is, I think, that the category of action figures in the agent’s thought by way of her recognition that what she is doing is vulnerable to a certain line of criticism, liable to a certain kind of failure, subject to a certain sort of explanation, and, in sum, responsible to a certain question “Why?” The sense of this question is the topic of the next chapter. But even before coming to that, two things ought to be clear: first, that the relevant sense of the question “Why?”—whatever it may be—is something that the agent herself understands; and second, that *if* the relevant sense of the question applies to what a person is doing, then she herself must recognize this

fact.

Neither of these points should be at all controversial. As I said earlier, it is a familiar commonplace that a person must know, or think that she knows, her reasons for acting. A person does occasionally act for no particular reason: she might, for instance, try to balance a penny on its edge, or build a house of cards, not because this served any purpose, but just for fun, or just because she thought she would. However, someone who is acting for no particular reason *knows* that she is acting *for no particular reason*. And so, in this case as in the normal one, she knows that what she is doing is the sort of thing for which it is possible to have reasons.

But “action” is just the name we give to that sort of event. If I am pressing the button in order to open the elevator door, what I am doing is susceptible to a very particular kind of criticism, with which we are all familiar. Someone might tell me, “Ah, but the door won’t open if you press that button,” or again she might say, “Ah, but the door will open all the same whether you press that button or not.”<sup>14</sup> And “action” is what we call an event that is subject to this sort of criticism, in light of that sort of reason.

But if an agent must know that what she is doing is the sort of thing for which it is possible have reasons, or is the sort of thing that criticizable in light of her reasons, she must understand the reason-requesting sense of the question “Why?” For she must understand, at least implicitly, what a reason is, and hence, also, the request for one. Then to explain the relevant sense of the question “Why?,” as I will begin to do in the sequel, is to articulate a structure that is intelligible from the agent’s own perspective.

The immediate point is not merely that an agent must possess an understanding of the question “Why?” as part of her background conceptual scheme. The point is that she must actually bring this understanding to bear on anything that it applies to, and that she is doing. The applicability of the question “Why?” is not something

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<sup>14</sup>See Anscombe, *Intention*, (1963), p. 36.

about which the agent herself could be *mistaken*. She could not, for instance, know full well that she was destroying a spider's web, and think that she was doing it intentionally, though in fact she was doing it unintentionally. Nor is this something about which the agent might, as it were, have no opinion. If the question "Why?" has application to something the agent is doing, then the agent herself must think that it does.

This admittedly tells us nothing—or very little—about the relevant sense of the question "Why?" or what it is for the question to "apply" to an event. But it does already point to a problem with the standard approach to action. A philosopher of action cannot first take for granted a theory of events, and then describe an extra feature of action, because a complete description of that extra feature would have to mention the agent's thought. In particular, it would have to mention the agent's thought that what she is she doing is such as to attract the reason-requesting sense of the question "Why?"—and thus, that what she is doing is an action. This means that a philosopher could say *whatever else she liked* about *whatever else she liked*—about belief-desire pairs, or bodily movements, or brain states, or what have you—but to anything else that a philosopher might say, she would have to add this one thing in particular: that the agent, in acting, must think of herself as doing precisely that: acting. And then everything else would be swept into the circle.

#### 4.4.3 Is the "Naturally Unintelligible" Unintelligible?

Another seeming obstacle to the envisioned expansion of the Humean Circle is the appearance that it must render action totally unintelligible. To say that something is "naturally unintelligible" is, I suppose, to say that it is unintelligible on certain assumptions about what the natural world is like. If one of those assumptions is that any part of physical reality must be susceptible to explanation by genus and differentia, then action is indeed "naturally unintelligible."

But the fact that there is no addendum in virtue of which an event is an action is



no more troubling or problematic than other similar claims. There is no addendum in virtue of which a quality is a color, or in virtue of which a color is red. And there is no addendum in virtue of which a substance is an organism, or in virtue of which an organism is a horse. Certainly, these things—qualities, colors, substances and organisms—these things are not unintelligible. And if some philosophical conception of nature makes them seem to be so, the conclusion to draw is that this conception is false.

In its expanded form, the Humean Circle is, I think, just a special instance of a circle that arises in connection with any categorial species. As we saw in Chapter 2.2, a categorial species cannot be explained by reference to genus and differentia. The attempt to do so inevitably sends one reaching for something that, upon reflection, cannot be understood prior to what one is trying to explain. And here again, too. In this case, what one reaches for—sooner or later—is the agent's thought about what is done.

## 5.0 WHAT IS DONE

### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

What is done, when a person acts, is something somehow general. To build a house, for example, or to open a door, or to walk down the street, or even simply to stand up, is to do some one thing that many people might do, many times and places, many different ways. Once having noticed this “one” in these “many,” a philosopher might begin to wonder about the salient principle of unity. What is it that is the same when the same thing is done, and yet different when different things are done? What is the “form” of an action?

Curiously enough, we stumble upon the same question, approaching the matter from the opposite direction. For although what is done is in one way general, it is also in another way specific. To be “doing something” is always to be doing something in particular—tying one’s shoe, as it might be, or turning on the lights. A person is “acting,” as philosophers say, only because she is, for example, hammering a nail. Action is something that does not exist in the abstract, but only in its concrete forms. What, then, is an “action-form”?

Admittedly, this is not a question that philosophers of action have worried much about.<sup>1</sup> But once it has been raised, the question is difficult to ignore. On any view,

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<sup>1</sup>But see Michael Thompson, “Naive Action Theory,” in *Life and Action*, (2008). The term “action-form” is an adaptation of Thompson’s “event-form.” Anyone familiar with his essay will see how thoroughly it has influenced this chapter. See also Donald Davidson, “The Logical Form of Action Sentences,” (1967); and Jennifer Hornsby, *Actions*, (1980).

practical philosophy concerns itself with ends and means, and with their connection in practical reasoning. Then among its most fundamental questions are, presumably, these: “What is it to do one thing *for the sake of* doing another?” and “What it is to do one thing *by means of* doing another?” However, the answer to these questions depends on the answer to this one: “What it is to do one thing *as distinct from* doing another?” In what follows I will pursue the conjecture that the converse is also true: that in order to account for the unity of an action, we must come to see how doing something can be an end to which, or a means by which, one is doing something else.

The pursuit of this conjecture will involve a noticeable change of course. My aim in the preceding chapters has been predominately negative. I have tried to vindicate Anscombe’s assertion that the standard approach in the philosophy of action “leads us into inextricable confusions, and we must give it up” (29). But it is, I think, a legitimate complaint that we cannot abandon the standard approach in the absence of a genuine alternative. In this chapter, I will begin to explore a different approach, the one that Anscombe herself recommends.

Despite this obvious change of course, the argument of the present chapter may also be seen as continuing that of the last. There, I argued that what an agent is doing falls under the category of action only if the agent herself *thinks* that it does. In order to think of what she is doing as an action, I claimed, the agent must grasp a certain sense of the question “Why?” and, moreover, she must see what she is doing as susceptible to that question. But the relevant sense of the question “Why?” is something I did not explain. I will now begin to do so. I hope, at least, to begin to make clear what it is to represent something as an action. For the time being, I will bracket the question whether the action represented is one’s own. In the sequel, I will return to the topic of the agent’s own thought.

## 5.2 ANOTHER APPROACH

What, then, is the alternative to the standard approach in the philosophy of action? According to Anscombe, the philosopher's task is not to describe an extra feature of action, but to display what she calls a "form of description"<sup>2</sup>—"an order which is there whenever actions are done with intentions."<sup>3</sup> And this is what she attempts to do. Near the end of *Intention*, Anscombe writes:

If one simply attends to the fact that many actions can be either intentional or unintentional, it can be quite natural to think that events which are characterisable as intentional or unintentional are a certain natural class, 'intentional' being an extra property which a philosopher must try to describe. In fact the term 'intentional' has reference to a *form* of description of events. What is essential to this form is displayed in the results of our enquiries into the question "Why?"<sup>4</sup>

The relevant sense of the question "Why?" is the one that is "given application" only by an intentional action. Anscombe's inquiries into this question include the famous discussion of a man who is moving a handle up and down ("Why?") in order to work the pump ("Why?") in order to replenish the house water-supply. But half way through the book, Anscombe's attention turns from the question "Why?" to a corresponding question "How?" and she takes up the subject of practical reasoning—the kind of connection between ends and means that Aristotle called the "practical syllogism."<sup>5</sup> She closes the latter discussion with this:

If Aristotle's account were supposed to describe actual mental processes, it would in general be quite absurd. The interest of the account is that it describes an order which is there whenever actions are done with intentions; the same order as I arrived at in discussing what 'the intentional action' was, when the man was pumping water.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Anscombe, *Intention*, (1963), p. 84.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>5</sup>The question "How?" is introduced on page 46 of *Intention*; the discussion of the practical reasoning begins on page 57.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 80.

Anscombe's discussion of the question "Why?" and of the corresponding question "How?" contain between them the bulk of her positive doctrine. And this might strike one as strange. After all, accounts of the intentional action do not typically focus on the structure of practical reasoning. It plays no role either in the "belief-desire model" associated with Davidson, or in the "hierarchical model" conceived by Frankfurt. Noticing this, someone might wonder how, exactly, reflection on ends and means is supposed to teach us what an action is.<sup>7</sup>—Does action spring from a syllogism like a missile from a cannon? Is it led by reason like a dog on a leash?—According to Anscombe, the interest of the practical syllogism is exhausted by the fact that it reveals an "order" that is internal to the action itself. The point is not that intentional action is launched by practical reasoning, but rather that a logical nexus of ends and means permeates an action throughout, holding it together, and making it one. The philosopher's task, on her view, is to peer inside the action and describe its inner structure—or to break it open, like a pomegranate, and show what it contains.

This is in contrast to the usual psychological account, which is born of the standard approach, and which aims to describe a mental state that "causes" or "guides" or "controls" an action. It is characteristic of such an account that it takes no interest in the action itself. Its primary object of concern is either the relevant mental state or else the relation between that mental state and the action it produces. But the action itself is totally untheorized, and may as well be a structureless monad. We learn absolutely nothing about it, except its relation to something else. It is almost as though an intentional action had no character of its own.

The alternative will turn our attention back to the action itself. It will inquire about the structure of what is done, and not what precedes it, or what hovers alongside. Marx attempted to unfold the the entire capitalist system from the inner structure of its elemental form: the individual commodity.<sup>8</sup> The individual action may

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<sup>7</sup>Anscombe's discussion of the practical syllogism is for the most part ignored by authors like Velleman 1989 and 2000, and Setiya 2007, who have tried to enlist Anscombe to the standard approach.

<sup>8</sup>Marx, *Capital*, Ch.1.1, p. 127.

likewise contain an unanticipated wealth.

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Admittedly, the alternative is obscure. What, for example, is the “order” that is supposed to characterize an intentional action? How is the exhibition of such different from the account of an extra property? And what does it mean for the question “Why?” to be “given”—or “refused”—“application”?

The obscurity surrounding these issues makes it difficult to see the kind of account that Anscombe has in view. So much so, that a casual reader of *Intention* might even suppose that Anscombe herself is pursuing the standard approach. One might think, for example, that she defines an intentional action as one that is done for (or “motivated,” or “caused,” or “explained,” or “justified” by) a reason. She writes:

What distinguishes actions which are intentional from those which are not? The answer I shall suggest is that they are the actions to which a certain sense of the question ‘Why?’ is given application; the sense is of of course that in which the answer, if positive, gives a reason for acting.<sup>9</sup>

Remarks like this one may give the impression that Anscombe, too, is in search of an extra feature, and that the feature she ultimately settles upon is an action’s being done for a reason. But this cannot be so. First, because Anscombe holds that an account of intentional action *just is* an account of the relevant sense of the question “Why?,” and that this *just is* an account of the corresponding kind of “reason.” So, on her view, the idea of a “reason” cannot be appealed to as something intelligible independently of intentional action. Second, because Anscombe does not believe that an answer to the question “Why?” always gives a reason for acting, but only that it does so “if positive.” Whatever is meant by the qualification, it is clear that, on her view, an event may be an intentional action even though it does not possess the supposed extra feature. Her approach, in that case, cannot be the standard one.

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 9.

But it may shed light on the envisioned alternative to consider these two points in a little more detail. Anscombe acknowledges that there is something slightly problematic about her appeal to the question “Why?” What is problematic, she thinks, is precisely that it risks giving a false impression of the progress we make by invoking the idea of a reason. Thus, to the remark quoted in the previous paragraph, she immediately appends the following warning: “But this statement”—namely, that the relevant sense of the question “Why?” is the one that requests a reason for acting—“is not sufficient, because the question ‘What is the relevant sense of the question “Why?”’ and ‘What is meant by a “reason for acting”?’ are one and the same,” (9). Shortly after equating an account of the relevant sense of the question “Why?” with that of a “reason for acting,” Anscombe equates the latter (and thus both) with an account of intentional action. She writes:

Why is giving a start or gasp not an ‘action’, while sending for a taxi, or crossing the road, is one? The answer cannot be “Because the answer to the question ‘why?’ may give a *reason* in the latter cases”, for the answer may ‘give a reason’ in the former cases too; and we cannot say “Ah, but not a reason for *action*”; we should be going round in circles.<sup>10</sup>

Why does Anscombe think it is circular to appeal to the idea of a reason in explaining what an action is? Like most philosophers of action, Anscombe distinguishes two different kinds of event: the kind that is an “action” (e.g. sending for a taxi or crossing the road) and the kind that is a “mere event” (e.g. giving a start or gasping). Of either kind of event, one can request an explanation. That is, one can ask for the reason why it happened; one can ask: “Why did you give a start?” or “Why did you cross the road?” And in answer to such a query one may be told the reason why. One may be told, “The reason I gave a start is that I saw a face in the window.” And likewise, one may be told, “The reason I crossed the road is that I was walking to school.” But, according to Anscombe, the two different kinds of event correspond to two different senses of the question “Why?” and two different determinate species of

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p.10.

“reason.” In that case, it is impossible to define an action as an event that is done for a “reason.” For the “reason” we invoke must be of one or another determinate kind: it must be either a “reason for action” or a “reason for a mere event.” The latter kind of reason is irrelevant, but we cannot appeal to the former without presupposing what we are attempting to explain. It is clear that there is no non-circular account of “action” that appeals to a “reason for action,” and thus, none that appeals to “the sense of the question ‘Why?’ that requests a reason for action.”

But then, one might wonder, how does Anscombe herself manage to avoid “going round in circles”? She claims to give an account of “action;” and yet, she appeals without embarrassment to “the sense of the question ‘Why?’ that requests a reason for action.” Doesn’t understanding the relevant sense of this question depend on understanding what an action is? And if so, then how can she explain what an action is by appeal to this question? The answer is that there is a kind of circularity that Anscombe embraces. Such circularity is a characteristic feature of categorial specification; and, on Anscombe’s view, *action* is a categorial species of *event*. According to her, “action,” and the relevant kind of “reason” and the relevant sense of the question “Why?” constitute a single system of concepts that must be explained together.

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Before saying more about this, let us consider the other reason I gave for thinking that Anscombe’s appeal to the question “Why?” is not in the service of describing an extra feature. Anscombe is quite explicit about the fact that the question “Why?” may be “given application” even where it has no “positive” answer—a “positive” answer being one that states a reason for acting. Thus, she is happy to allow that not every intentional action is done for (or “motivated,” or “caused,” or “explained,” or “justified” by) a reason:

Now of course a possible answer to the question ‘Why?’ is one like ‘I just thought I would’ or ‘It was an impulse’ or ‘For no particular reason’ or ‘It was an idle action—I was just doodling’. The question is not refused application because the answer to



it says that there is *no* reason, any more than the question how much money I have in my pocket is refused application by the answer ‘None’.<sup>11</sup>

The comparison drawn by Anscombe between the question “Why?” and the question “How much?” is one we will return to shortly. For now let us focus on Anscombe’s claim that a person may be doing something, and doing it intentionally, just for fun, or just because he just thought he would, or for no particular reason. Davidson seems to balk at this claim, if he does not simply deny it.<sup>12</sup> It is certainly denied by those of his followers who propound a reductive psychological account, according to which an action is intentional if and only if it is caused (in the right way) by a reason. Like Davidson and his followers, Anscombe offers an account of intentional action that makes ineliminable reference to the idea of a reason for action. But unlike them, she takes in stride the intuitive claim that certain intentional actions, like doodling on a scrap of paper, are done for no reason. All that matters, from her point of view, is whether the action is one with regard to which the reason-requesting sense of the question “Why?” is appropriately asked. If so—if the question “has application,” as she puts it—then the action is intentional; and if not, not.

Now, although Anscombe thinks that intentional action can be done for no reason, she also believes that reasonless intentional action is of comparably little philosophical importance.

[T]he concept of voluntary or intentional action would not exist, if the question ‘Why?’, with answers that give reasons for acting, did not. Given that it does exist, the cases where the answer is ‘For no particular reason’, etc. can occur; but their interest is slight, and it must not be supposed that because they can occur that answer would everywhere be intelligible, or that it could be the only answer ever given.<sup>13</sup>

Anscombe refers, somewhat strangely, to the existence of concepts and questions and answers, but her point can be put in simpler terms. Her point is that if there were no

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>12</sup>Davidson, “Actions, Reasons and Causes,” (1963), p. 6.

<sup>13</sup>Anscombe, *Intention*, (1963), p. 34.

such thing as acting for a reason, there would be no such thing as acting for no reason, and, thus, no such thing as action. Mention of reasons—or, of positive answers to the question “Why?”—is therefore essential to an account of what intentional action is.

From a certain point of view, this may seem an untenable position. Can it be true both that the idea of a reason for action is essential to an account of intentional action, and that certain intentional actions are done for no reason? It can, if the point of mentioning a reason for action is to indicate the kind of event that intentional action is, rather than a property attaching to every member of the kind. On Anscombe’s view, intentional action is the kind of event to which it belongs to have a reason. We could put this this saying that every particular intentional action either *has* a reason or *is missing* one. Of course, if we put it like this, we will have to acknowledge that there are two different ways for something *not* to be done for the relevant sort of reason: as when, just for fun, one tries to balance a penny on its edge; and as when, having seen a face in the window, one gives a sudden start. We will have to say that giving a start merely has no reason of the relevant, whereas balancing a penny is missing one. And this means that in regard to the question, “What distinguishes actions which are intentional from those which are not?” Anscombe’s position will have to be something like this: that intentional action is that which either *has* a reason, of a kind that only intentional action can have, or else *fails to have* one, in a way that only intentional action can fail to have one.<sup>14</sup> But that is not an unwelcome result. For it reinforces the idea that Anscombe’s appeal to reasons—or to “positive answers to the question ‘Why?’”—is circular, and gives us no independent purchase on the category of intentional action.

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<sup>14</sup>Her official position is that “the answers to the question ‘Why?’ which give it an application are more extensive in range than the answers which give reasons for acting. This question ‘Why?’ can now be defined as the question expecting an answer in this range,” (28). But she makes no attempt to define the “range” of answers that give the question “Why?” application: she simply says that it includes *ones like* “For no particular reason,” and “I just thought I would.” Elsewhere Anscombe does attempt to narrow the range of acceptable answers to the question “Why?” by appeal something that is supposed to be intelligible independently of the question. She says that the question “Why are you doing A?” is “refused application” by the answer “I didn’t know I *was* doing A.” But it is not clear this move is legitimate.

According to Anscombe, an intentional action is that about which a certain sort of question can be raised: it is, as we might say, the object of a certain kind of thought. What this means will become clear, I hope, if we consider the comparison that Anscombe draws between the question “Why?” and the question “How much?” Just as the object of the question “Why?” is, on Anscombe’s view, a distinctive kind of event, the object of the question “How much?” is, on any view, a special kind of substance. And just as Anscombe claims that the question “Why?” calls for a certain sort of reason, everyone must agree, I think, that question “How much?” calls for a certain sort of quantity.

Any substance is quantifiable, but its quantifiability can take one of two determinate forms, either that of countability or that of measurability. A countable substance is, as we might say, “a thing,” whereas measurable substance is “stuff.” Linguists call a word for a thing a “count-noun” and a word for stuff a “mass-noun”: examples of the former include “river,” “statue,” “horse” and “planet;” examples of the latter include “earth,” “air,” “fire” and “water.”

The very same distinction could be marked by saying that a thing gives application to the question “How many?” whereas stuff gives application to the question “How much?” To represent something as a thing is to represent it as having a certain logical shape, thanks to which the question “How many?” may be sensibly asked and answered. Meanwhile, to represent something as stuff is to represent it as having a different logical shape—a shape that is fitted to a different question, the question “How much?” Both of these questions are inquiries into the quantity of a substance, but they call for different sorts of answer. The canonical answer to the question “How many?” is a number: for instance, 12. By contrast, the canonical answer to the question “How much?” is an amount: for instance, 12 gallons.

The difference between these questions, and the answers they elicit, is evidently a formal one. Contrast, on the one hand, the fact that the question “What is the

quantity?” may be answered with either a number or an amount, and, on the other hand, the fact that the question “How many?” may be answered with either an even or an odd number. The difference between a number and an amount is quite unlike the difference between an even and an odd number. To see why, we might imagine someone who claimed that an amount is just a number with a certain special property—for instance, that of being very, very large. An account of this sort is obviously hopeless. The difference between “12” and “12 gallons” is not the difference between two kinds of number, but between a number and something else.

If there can be a logical match between a question and what it is about, there can also be a mismatch. And that is what we find in the present case: the question “How many?” has no application to stuff; and the question “How much?” has no application to things. Of tobacco in a pouch, you cannot ask how many there are. Of cigarettes in a packet, you cannot ask how much there is. The thought “S is 12 in number” (or: “There are 12 S’s”) can only be of a thing: “a thing” refers to the formal object of any predication of number. Similarly, the thought “S is 12 gallons” (or: “There are 12 gallons of S”) can only be of stuff: “stuff” refers to the formal object of any predication of amount.

It is important to emphasize that the questions “How many?” and “How much?” may both have application even where they have no positive answer. If the number of cigarettes in a packet is zero, there is no positive answer to the question how many cigarettes there are. But since cigarettes are countable things, the question still has application: it still makes sense. What is quantifiable—here, a cigarette—is, if you like, in the present circumstances “unquantified.” Likewise, there is no positive answer to the question how much tobacco there is in the pouch, if the amount in the pouch is none. But the question “How much?” is not in that case refused application, because tobacco remains a measurable stuff.

Notice that the formal contrast between stuff and things is marked even in their absence—that is, even in the difference between “zero” and “none.” The first means

“not any number”; the second means “no amount.” The distinction between “12” and “12 gallons” is preserved in distinction between “0” and “0 gallons.” Surprising though at first it may seem, there are two ways of having no quantity whatsoever—two ways of being absolutely nothing.

Of course, in many languages, the distinction between “How many?” and “How much?” is totally unmarked. In French, there is only “*Combien?*” which is used to ask either question. (It has the flexibility of “What is the quantity?” in English.) But the French might say, in the manner of Anscombe, that stuff gives application to “a certain sense” of the question “*Combien?*” while a thing gives application to a different “sense” of the question. Corresponding to these two different senses are two different forms of *quantité*, with two different scales of *beaucoup* and *peu*.

Anscombe warns of an explanatory circle that arises in connection with “action” and the idea of a “reason;” and we can easily imagine an identical circle arising in connection with “thing” and “quantity.” Someone might ask: “Why is fire or water not ‘a thing,’ while a horse or a planet is one?” The answer cannot be, “Because the answer to the question ‘*Combien?*’ may give a quantity in the latter cases,” for the answer may “give a quantity” in the former cases too; and we cannot say “Ah, but not a quantity of *things*;” we should be going round in circles. In order to break out of the circle, it would be necessary to explain the form of quantity belonging to a thing, as distinct from that belonging to stuff. We would have to reveal the character of a thought whose formal object is a countable substance.

And notice what would *not* seem a reasonable way to proceed, here. It would *not* seem reasonable—even remotely—to take for granted a generic conception of that which is quantifiable, and then to look for an extra feature attaching to the quantifiable, in virtue of which it is countable. The positive question, how, in that case, we ought to proceed—whether, say, along the lines of Frege’s *Grundlagen*, or in some other way—is admittedly very difficult, but the negative point is perfectly clear: the method of division is out.

It is equally clear that our interest in the questions “How many?” and “How much?” is a logical or metaphysical one, and has nothing to do with the contingent possession of the predicates “...is a thing” or “...is stuff.” One need not possess the concept “stuff” in order to represent something as a measurable substance: it is sufficient to grasp the sense of the question “How much?,” and to recognize its applicability to the substance at hand. That is, it is enough to recognize that the substance at hand is susceptible to a certain “form of description.”<sup>15</sup>

Similarly, I claimed in Chapter 4 that in order to represent an event as falling under the category of action, it is not necessary to possess or deploy the predicate “...is an action”: it is enough to recognize that the event in question as subject to the question “Why?” According to Anscombe, the term “intentional action” has exactly the same logico-metaphysical character as “stuff” or “a thing”: it designates the formal object of a certain kind of thought. This is the meaning of her claim that “the term ‘intentional’ has reference to a *form* of description.”

In answer to the positive question, how we ought to proceed, if not by the standard approach, Anscombe thinks that we must try to exhibit the kind of thought whose formal object is an intentional action. To do so is to explain the form of the action itself, and not anything external to it, such as its efficient cause. What is essential to this form, she says, is displayed in the answers to the question “Why?” and to the corresponding question “How?” Then in order to exhibit the internal structure of an action, we must try to explain the sense of these questions.

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<sup>15</sup>Anscombe also compares the question “Why?,” as asked of an intentional action, to the question “What does it say?,” as asked of a word or a sentence: “It is not that certain things, namely the movements of humans, are for some undiscovered reason subject to the question ‘Why?’ So too, it is not just that certain appearances of chalk on blackboard are subject to the question ‘What does it say?’ It is of a word or sentence that we ask ‘What does it say?’; and the description of something as a word or a sentence at all could not occur prior to the fact that words or sentences have meaning. So the description of something as human action could not occur prior to the existence of the question ‘Why?’, simply as a kind of utterance by which we were *then* obscurely prompted to address the question,” (83). I have chosen to focus on the questions “How much?” and “How many?” because it is relatively uncontroversial that the contrast between stuff and things is a logical, or quasi-logical distinction. The scandalous suggestion that the word “word” also refers to a formal object would be, in the present context, a needless distraction.

### 5.3 WHAT, WHY AND HOW?

Anscombe's basic thought is this, that what is done intentionally is *many things at once*—all of them intentional, all of them related in a systematic way. To exhibit these relations is, she thinks, to reveal the inner structure of an action, and thus, to say what action essentially is.

Suppose, then, that what I am doing is filling a cistern with water. Someone passing by might ask, "What are you doing?" and I might tell him matter-of-factly: "I am filling the cistern." However, once it is known *what* I am doing, the questioner might wonder *why*. He might ask, "Why are you filling the cistern?" and I might say, truly, "I am replenishing the house water-supply." The answer to the question *why* I am doing what I am doing is, in that case, another description of *what* I am doing. What I am doing is two things at once: it is filling the cistern and replenishing the water-supply, and the one for the sake of the other. Notice that in answer to the question "Why?," I could have said, "I am filling the cistern *because* I am replenishing the water-supply," or "I am filling the cistern *in order to* replenish the water-supply." Replenishing the water-supply is that in the pursuit of which I am doing something else: it is, in a word, my end.

It is an end, moreover, to which filling the cistern with water is a means. If what I am doing is two things at once, then, in response to the question "What are you doing?" I might just answer straightaway: "I am replenishing the water-supply." But having been told *what* I am doing, the passerby might ask me *how*. And if asked, "How are you replenishing the water-supply?" I might explain, "I am filling the cistern." At this point, the passerby might pursue his inquiry further: "How are you filling the cistern?" And I: "I am operating the water-pump" And he: "But how are you doing that?" And I: "I am moving the handle up and down." The answer to the question *how* I am doing what I am doing, like that to the question *why*, is another description of *what* I am doing. What I am doing is, not two, but many things at

once. It is replenishing the water-supply, and filling the cistern, and operating the pump, and moving the handle up and down. Moreover, it is the first *by means of* the second, and the second *by means of* the third, and so on.

The many things that one must do in doing something intentionally are bound together as the elements of a system. The question “How?” displays them as an ordered series of means. Given that I am *doing D* intentionally, the question “How?” brings out the fact that I am also *doing C* intentionally, and that I am *doing D* by means of *doing C*. Further applications of the question reveal that I am *doing C* by *doing B*, and *doing B* by *doing A*:

- D. I am replenishing the house water supply.
- C. I am filling the cistern.
- B. I am operating the pump.
- A. I am moving the handle up and down.

Meanwhile, the question “Why?” presents the very same material in the reverse order, as a series of ends. Given that I am *doing A* intentionally, the question “Why?” brings out the fact that I am also *doing B* intentionally, and that I am *doing A* for the sake of *doing B*, and so on:

- A. I am moving the handle up and down.
- B. I am operating the pump.
- C. I am filling the cistern.
- D. I am replenishing the house water supply.

A series of ends is the puddle-reflection of a series of means, A—D of D—A. It bears emphasis that these are just two ways of arranging, or looking at, the self-same system of elements. If we abstract from any specific content, what remains is an ordered list of things done, which can be read either from top to bottom, or, instead, from bottom to top:

X is *doing A*  
X is *doing B*  
X is *doing C*  
X is *doing D*



Read from top to bottom, the list appears as a series of ends; read from bottom to top, it appears as a series of means.

That there is a single order, or system, is clear, if only because A—D and D—A both refer to the same unfolding action. We have not imagined that on Monday in St. Louis I was moving a handle, and on Tuesday in Pheonix I was operating a water-pump, and on Wednesday in Pittsburgh I was filling a cistern, while on Thursday in Seattle I was replenishing a water-supply. Instead we have considered four things that I am doing *here and now*. As Anscombe puts it, “There is one action with four descriptions, each dependent on wider circumstances, and each related to the next as description of means to end; which means that we can speak equally well of *four* corresponding intentions, or of *one* intention.”<sup>16</sup> But what is true of the intention is true, also, of what is actually done: we can say that I am doing *four* things, or that I am doing *one*—and equally well. “For moving [my] arm up and down with [my] fingers round the pump handle *is*, in these circumstances, operating the pump; and, in these circumstances, it *is* replenishing the house water-supply.”<sup>17</sup> In doing any one of the things I am doing, I am doing all the rest. I am moving the handle “in” replenishing the water-supply. And, conversely, I am replenishing the water-supply “in” moving the handle. Each of them is “in” the other: the one as end the other as means.

Though they do represent a single order, the two different series, A—D and D—A, nevertheless correspond to two different aspects of practical life. On the one hand, the A—D series, unleashed by the question “Why?,” presents itself as an order of what Davidson called “rationalization.”<sup>18</sup> Each item in the series looks to the next one for its reason, purpose or rationale. What makes it reasonable for me to move the handle up and down is the fact that my aim is to operate the pump. Operating the pump is in turn a sensible thing to do in view of the fact that I have undertaken

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>18</sup>Davidson, “Actions, Reasons, and Causes,” (1963).

to fill the cistern. And so on.

On the other hand, the D—A series, heralded by the question “How?,” presents itself as an order of deliberation. If a boss has given me the order, “Replenish the house water-supply!” I might need to reflect on how to do that, and I might conclude that what I should do is to fill the cistern. But at this point the deliberative question might reassert itself, and lead me to inquire how to fill the cistern, and so on. Of course, I can be *doing B* by means of *doing A* without having deliberated, just as I can be *doing A* for the sake of *doing B* without having attempted to rationalize my action. The point is simply that deliberation, like rationalization, reflects an order that is internal to the action itself.

There is a corresponding contrast between two complementary modes of explanation, and two senses of “because.” One way to explain what I am doing is to show what makes it necessary, another is to show what makes it possible. The first is to explain *why* I *must* do what I am doing, the second *how* I *can*. What makes it necessary for me to operate the pump is filling the cistern. True, there may be other ways to do it; operating the pump is not “necessary” in the sense that this is the only available means to my objective. Rather, it is what Anscombe calls an “Aristotlelian necessity”: it is that upon which some good depends. If I were filling the cistern by means other than those I am actually employing, my filling of the cistern would depend on something else; but as things are, it depends on operating the pump. And to know this is on the face of it to know something about my operation of the pump. For we have supposed that, in the circumstances, operating the pump *is* filling the cistern. On the other hand, what makes it possible for me to operate the pump is moving the handle up and down. And, again, in coming to appreciate this, one comes to have a richer understanding of what I am doing: that is, operating the pump. This means that there are two associated senses of “because”: the “because” of necessity, and the “because” of possibility. If asked, “Why must you operate the pump?” I might answer, “Because I am filling the cistern.” And if asked, “How can you operate

the pump?” I could explain, “Because I am moving the handle.”

#### 5.4 THE PURPOSIVE UNITY OF AN ACTION

We have been considering the contrast between the question “Why?” and the question “How?,” between the kind of explanation that appeals to necessity and the kind that appeals to possibility, between rationalization and deliberation, between ends and means. Though what is done is many things, it will have become clear that the basic phenomenon is a two-place relation—a relation between doing one thing and doing another. The system whose order we want to understand is therefore reducible to this:

$$\begin{array}{l} X \text{ is } \textit{doing} A \\ X \text{ is } \textit{doing} B \end{array}$$

If, for the time being, we forget about the agent, and focus entirely on what is done, we are left with the idea of two things that an agent might do, about which we know only that they differ from one another, and that first is a means to which the second is the end:

$$\begin{array}{l} \textit{To do} A \\ \textit{To do} B \end{array}$$

Now let us ask: What can be the value of these variables? If it is possible to do A in order to do B, and, conversely, to do B by means of doing A, then doing A must be different from doing B, and different in such a way that, in the circumstances, to do be doing A *is* to be doing B. But what can stand to what in this relation?

There presumably must be some constraint. Not just anything is an end, or a means, to just anything. Suppose that I am rubbing an apple on my sleeve, and someone asks me why. Certain answers are intelligible, others unintelligible. An intelligible answer is: “I am polishing it,” or “I am scratching an itch.” An unintelligible answer is: “I am building a fence.” The latter answer is unintelligible, even if I *am* building

a fence, because there is, or appears to be, no connection between the doing the one thing and doing the other. Or suppose I am removing the books from a shelf and putting them in a box. If someone asks me why, and I say, “I’m making dinner,” this will not explain my action, because making dinner and boxing books do not stand in the right sort of relation. The question is: How must doing one thing relate to doing another, so as for them to be an end and means?

This is a question of what might be called the purposive unity of an action. It arises because, as Anscombe observes, acting intentionally consists in doing different things at once, and because an account of intentional action must explain how they all hang together. In pursuing such an account, the first step is to notice that the different things done are purposively related. The second step is to inquire what it is for two things done to stand in a purposive relation.

Of course, one might worry that, once we have taken the first step, and marked the purposive nexus, we have come to the end of any general theory. And that would seem to be Anscombe’s position. At any rate, she is not overly concerned with the question what it is for one thing to be done by means of another. She writes, “The mark of practical reasoning is that the thing wanted is *at a distance* from the immediate action, and the immediate action is calculated as a way of getting or doing or securing the thing wanted,” (79, original emphasis). Anscombe adds that the thing wanted “may be at a distance in various ways,” but she does not tell us what they are, these “various ways.” She seems to be content with the idea that an end and its means are separated by a “distance.” That, however, is only to say that doing the one thing is not the same as doing the other, a fact that is already implicit in our use of the different variables, *To do A* and *To do B*.

But at one point Anscombe gestures at something slightly more systematic. She offers what she calls a “vague and general formula,” the purpose of which is apparently to characterize the conditions under which it is possible to think of one thing as done for the sake of another:

In order to make sense of ‘I do A with a view to B’, we must see how the future state of affairs B is supposed to be a possible later stage in proceedings of which the action A is an earlier stage.<sup>19</sup>

The main problem with Anscombe’s formula is neither its vagueness nor its generality, but simply that it seems to be false. If a man is moving a handle up and down with a view to operating the water-pump, operating the water-pump is not a “later stage” in the proceedings of which moving the handle is an “earlier stage”: for moving the handle and operating the pump are (or might be) *simultaneous*—as two different “stages” presumably cannot be. Anscombe herself says that, “moving his arm up and down with his fingers round the pump handle *is*, in these circumstances, operating the pump,” but an earlier stage of some development is not, in any sense, a later stage of the same.

Still, Anscombe’s formula points to something important. If an action has a *purposive* unity, thanks to which the many things done in the course of its performance are bound together in a system of means and ends, it also has a *temporal* unity, consisting in the fact that it unfolds itself gradually in “phases,” “steps” or “stages.” And this at least holds out the promise that we may come to see the purposive unity of an action if we take into account its temporal unity.

## 5.5 THE TEMPORAL UNITY OF AN ACTION

An action is either complete or incomplete, already finished or still under way. Michael Thompson has recently argued that attention to an action’s temporal structure is the key to understanding how it is possible for one action to explain another: if one thing

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<sup>19</sup>Anscombe, *Intention*, (1963), p. 36, substituting “A” and “B” for “P” and “Q.” Anscombe’s formula is evidently intended to capture whatever truth is contained in the idea that: “The future state of affairs mentioned [in answer to the question “Why?”] must be such that we can understand the agent’s thinking it will or may be brought about by the action about which he is being questioned,” p. 35.

is done for the sake of another, it is, he thinks, “the progress of the deed itself” that explains what is done for its sake.<sup>20</sup>

As Thompson notes and emphasizes, an action can be thought of in two different ways. The predicable “To do A” may be joined with a subject *imperfectly*, as in the past-tense judgment, “X was doing A,” and in the present-tense judgment, “X is doing A,” or else *perfectly*, as in the past-tense judgment, “X did A,” a judgment to which nothing in the present corresponds. The salient contrast is easiest to see in connection with the past-tense judgments: in the judgment “X was doing A,” we represent an action as having been incomplete, or under way, or in progress; in the judgment “X did A” we represent the same action as completed, or finished, or over and done with.

	<i>Past</i>	<i>Present</i>
<i>Imperfective</i>	X was doing A	X is doing A
<i>Perfective</i>	X did A	

Figure 8

The judgment that something was, or is, in progress is expressed in language by means of a verb with “imperfective aspect,” as linguists call it, while the judgment that something happened, or is done with, is expressed by a verb with “perfective

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<sup>20</sup>See Michael Thompson, “Naive Action Theory,” *Life and Action*, (2008), p. 90. My discussion of this essay will skirt Thompson’s official topic, which is a certain kind of psychologism in the philosophy of action. In ordinary life, we encounter two apparently different forms of action explanation: the explanation of action by action, and the explanation of action by want. A person can explain what she is doing by reference to something else that she is doing, saying, “I am doing A because I am doing B.” But she also explain what she is doing by reference to something that she wants to do, saying, “I am doing A because I want to do B.” Thompson defends the unorthodox view that the explanation of action by action is the fundamental form.

But the question concerning the purposive unity of action is one that arises whichever side one takes in that dispute. If I cannot explain why I am rubbing an apple by reference to the fact that I am building a fence, then I cannot explain it by reference to the fact that I *want* to build a fence. And if it is unintelligible to say that I am putting books in a box because I am making dinner, it is also, and equally, and for the same reason, unintelligible to say that I am doing it because I *intend* to make dinner. Thus I simply ignore the dispute between Thompson and his opponents.

aspect.” It will be convenient to refer to these, respectively, as imperfective and perfective judgments.

The peculiar logical character of these judgments is revealed in the fact that what is in progress can be interrupted, or broken off and left incomplete. Thus, an imperfective judgment may be true, even though the corresponding perfective judgment is false. A person may have been doing something that, in the end, he never did; and he may now be doing something that, on the day of judgment, he will not have done. It might be that he was writing a dissertation, although he did not write one; or, again, that he is writing one now, although he will never finish.

Thompson observes that whenever two actions are purposively related, as means and end, the end is always incomplete. Thus, if some form of *To do A* is to figure in thought as a means, with some form of *To do B* as its end, the latter can appear either in the imperfective judgment that “X *was* doing B,” or in the imperfective judgment that “X *is* doing B;” but it *cannot* appear in the perfective judgment that “X *did* B.” This holds whether the means are represented as complete or as incomplete. Thus, the content of the present tense imperfective judgment, “X *is* doing B” can explain that of the present tense imperfective judgment, “X *is* doing A,” or that of the past tense imperfective judgment, “X *was* doing A,” or that of the past tense perfective judgment “X *did* A.” For example, the fact that I *am* making dinner may explain the fact that I *am* pulverizing herbs; but it may also explain the fact that, a minute ago, I *was* chopping garlic, as well as the fact that, earlier, I *peeled* a tomato. In general, A can be done for the sake of B, and B by means of A, only so long as B is still in progress. This temporal constraint yields the following table of possible forms of rationalization:

	<i>X is doing B</i>	<i>X was doing B</i>	<i>X did B</i>
<i>X is doing A</i>	X is doing A because X is doing B		
<i>X was doing A</i>	X was doing A because X is doing B	X was doing A because X was doing B	
<i>X did A</i>	X did A because X is doing B	X did A because X was doing B	

Figure 9

Thompson’s observation that the end is always still in progress prompts the suggestion of a new formula in the spirit of Anscombe’s original, a formula describing the conditions under which it is possible to think of one thing done as a means to another: *if X is doing B by means of doing A, and A for the sake of B, then doing A must advance the progress of B*. Of course, the new formula is every bit as “vague and general” as Anscombe’s own, but it has, I think, the virtue of being true. And it seems to explain the emptiness of the empty cells in the table above. The emptiness of the center cell in the top row is explained by the fact that nothing that X *is* doing can advance the progress of what X *was* doing—unless, of course, the latter continues in the present, in which case X *is* doing two things, one of which rationalizes the other, and the example belongs in the top left cell.<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, the emptiness of the entire right-hand column is explained by the fact that nothing whatever can advance the progress of an action that is already finished: what’s done, after all, is done.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup>Thus, it is not enough to say that the progress of one deed can rationalize another. If I *was* doing B, this cannot rationalize the fact that I *am* doing A, even though “I was doing B” is an imperfective judgment. We need to add that the rationalizing action must be in progress *contemporaneously* with what it rationalizes. For B can rationalize A only so long as B is still in under way.

<sup>22</sup>One might object that, “I did A because I did B,” is a legitimate form of rationalization, which ought to appear in the bottom-most right-most cell. And of course it might be the case that I *did* something, A, for the sake of something else I *did*, B. But this can only mean that I *was* doing A because I *was* doing B, and I finished them both. In other words, it must be the case that B was in progress back when I was doing A for its sake. And that is the essential point.



## 5.6 WHETHER AN ACTION'S PURPOSIVE UNITY *IS* ITS TEMPORAL UNITY

That the explanation of action by action conforms to the pattern of the table above, and is, in general, a matter of relating the relevant means to a still unfolding process, is certainly an important observation. But does it explain the purposive unity of an action? So far, nothing has been said about the value of the variables *To do A* and *To do B* that combine in the way that is shown in the table. Even if, as Thompson says, it is “the progress of the deed itself” that explains what is done for its sake, still, it is not just the progress of any old deed that explains the doing of anything. Thompson’s pithy slogan, “Explanation by the imperfective,” invites the response, “Yes, but the explanation of *what*? By the imperfective of *what*?”

Now Thompson may seem to explain this, too. It is, after all, a theme of his essay that one action can rationalize another if the first is a “whole” of which the second is a “part.” The part-whole relation is displayed in the following exchanges:

QUESTION: “Why are you breaking an egg?”

ANSWER: “I’m making an omelet.”

QUESTION: “Why are you crossing the street?”

ANSWER: “I’m walking to school.”

QUESTION: “Why are you writing the letter ‘a’?”

ANSWER: “I’m writing the word ‘action.’”

All of the examples in Thompson’s essay are carefully selected to be of this kind: each of them is meant to exhibit the distinctive relation that obtains between *egg-breaking* and *omelet-making*. Of course, one wants something more than a list of examples and the woolly intuition that they all go together: one wants an account of what it is for one thing done to be a “part” of another. Thompson’s view is seemingly that to understand what a “part” is, it suffices to grasp the idea of an action’s being under way, rather than complete.<sup>23</sup> In other words, he identifies the contrast between “part”

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<sup>23</sup>At any rate, he provides no *other* account of what it is for one action to be a “part” of another.

and “whole” with that between “imperfection” and “perfection.” If he is right, then an action’s purposive unity *is* its temporal unity.

But on the face of it this looks doubtful, if only because, as Anscombe says, the end can be “at a distance” from the means “in various ways.” Even in advance of any account, it is obvious that the kind of “distance” separating a “part” from a “whole” is one among many. It is certainly possible to break an egg for the sake of making an omelet, as Thompson has observed. But it is *also* possible to raise one’s hand for the sake of casting a vote. The relation between *hand-raising* and *vote-casting* is not mereological: raising one’s hand is not part of casting a vote, but the whole of it, thanks to a pre-given custom. And so, alongside Thompson’s list of intuitively similar examples, we can produce a list of different sort:

QUESTION: “Why are you tugging your ear?”

ANSWER: “I’m giving the batter the signal to bunt.”

QUESTION: “Why are you handing her those slips of paper?”

ANSWER: “I’m paying my rent.”

QUESTION: “Why are you making those squiggly marks?”

ANSWER: “I’m writing calligraphy.”

Such examples are of course common in the literature. Where Anscombe discusses this kind of case, she characterizes the means as something “brute” relative to which the end is something “conventional.”<sup>24</sup>

The relation between a brute means and a conventional end is altogether different from the one that is featured in Thompson’s examples. Intuitively, there is more to making an omelet than breaking an egg; and there is more to walking to school than crossing a street; but there is nothing more to writing calligraphy than making certain squiggly marks—nothing, that is, apart from the custom in virtue of which making such marks *is* writing calligraphy. Of course, what is meant by “more,” here, needs

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The reader must conclude either that Thompson intends his treatment of imperfection to elucidate the idea of a part, or that he has nothing to say about what a part is.

<sup>24</sup>See Anscombe, “On Brute Facts,” (1958a); and “Modern Moral Philosophy,” (1958b).

to be explained, but no one, I think, will deny the difference.

The difference is particularly clear in view of the fact that a conventional action, like making the sign of the cross, is an end that gathers into itself means of both kind. In order to make the sign of the cross, one must do something brute: one must make a certain gesture with the hand. But in order to make this gesture, one must perform the actions that are its parts: one must first touch the forehead, then the belly, then the right shoulder, then the left. Touching one's forehead is to making the gesture as breaking an egg is to making an omelet. One touches one's forehead *for the sake of* making the gesture; and one makes the gesture *for the sake of* signing the cross. But the relation between the gesture and its parts is different from that between the gesture and its significance.

If it is possible to break an egg for the sake of making an omelet, and to raise one's hand for the sake of casting a vote, it is also possible to eat a peach for sake of eating a piece of fruit. (Suppose, for example, that my doctor has told me that I need more fruit in my diet.) The relation between *peach-eating* and *fruit-eating* is certainly not mereological, but neither is it conventional: it is, instead, the relation between doing some specific thing and doing something general. One can easily devise a third list of intuitively similar examples:

QUESTION: "Why are you taking a course in ancient philosophy?"

ANSWER: "I am fulfilling the college's humanities requirement."

QUESTION: "Why are you painting the house?"

ANSWER: "I am sprucing it up."

QUESTION: "Why are you running?"

ANSWER: "I am exercising."

If I am eating a peach for the sake of having some fruit, then this is not the only way that I could have achieved my end. I could have had a pear; I could have had a plum; I could have had a medley of peaches, pears and plums. But what I am in fact doing is eating a peach—nothing more and nothing less. Given my purposes, this will do.

For I am hereby having some fruit.

A general end, like eating fruit, gathers into itself a specific means, like eating a peach, but also various parts. To eat a peach, one must take a bite, and then another, and then another—and so on to the stone. Of course, the same process could be described by saying that first I eat a bite of *fruit*. Obviously, eating a bite of peach *is* eating a bite of fruit, and eating a peach *is* eating a piece of fruit: this is the “is” of genus and species, not the “is” of part and whole. But given the relation of genus and species, it is possible to move back and forth between the parts of the thing specifically described and the whole of the thing generically described, and between the parts of the thing generically described and the whole of the thing specifically described. Because a *fish* is a species of *animal*, and because a *fin* is a part of a *fish*, a *fin* is a part of an *animal*. And similarly, because *eating a peach* is a species of *eating a piece of fruit*, and because *eating a bite of peach* is part of *eating a peach*, *eating a bite of peach* is part of *eating a piece of fruit*. But, again, the relation between eating a peach and taking a bite is on the face of it very different from that between eating a peach and having some fruit.

There seem to be at least three different purposive relations between doing one thing and doing another—three formally distinctive ways that a means can be subordinate to an end. In that case, we will need at least three different tables modeled on the one in the previous section. In the first, *doing A* and *doing B* will be replaced by examples like the ones that are featured in Thompson’s essay; the pairs will relate as “part” to “whole,” like *egg-breaking* and *omelet-making*. In the second table, by contrast, all of the variables will be replaced by pairs that are related as something “brute” to something “conventional,” like *hand-raising* and *vote-casting*. Meanwhile, the third table will feature pairs like *peach-eating* and *fruit-eating*, which relate to one another as something “specific” to something “general.” All three charts will exhibit exactly the same pattern of temporal combination. Each of them will have the same empty cells, and for the same reason. Each will display what Thompson

calls “explanation by the imperfective.”

It begins to look as though Thompson’s principal thesis—that an action is rationalized by reference to what is in progress—has nothing in particular to do with the part-whole relation. For it appears that, as far as his main thesis is concerned, he could just as well have used examples that were exclusively of the brute-conventional variety, or that were exclusively of the species-genus variety. Or he could have done like most philosophers of action, and availed himself of a wide assortment of examples, drawn at random from all three lists.

But in fact it is not yet clear whether Thompson is wrong to identify an action’s purposive unity with its temporal unity. One might reply, on his behalf, that the part-whole relation is important in a way that no other purposive relation is; that what Thompson has isolated, by the careful selection of his examples, is not just *a* fundamental form of means-end relation, but *the* fundamental form; and that what makes it so is that it is *identical* to the relation between what is in progress and what is complete. Just as every intentional action admits of a contrast between perfection and imperfection, Thompson argues that every action admits of a contrast between whole and part. And nothing has been said to contradict this claim. On the contrary, it has come out that a conventional action, like making the sign of the cross, is a whole comprised of parts, and also that a general action, like eating a piece of fruit, is a whole comprised of parts. If anything, the foregoing discussion has supported the idea that the part-whole relation is an exceptionally important feature of an action’s inner structure.

Certainly, no similar importance could be claimed for the relation between a brute means and a conventional end. If Thompson is right, then *every* intentional action contains within it the contrast between part and whole. But who would think to say that every intentional action involves the doing of something conventional? Walking, dragging, tearing, holding, pushing, biting, lifting, crushing: these do not depend on custom—or not in the way that *voting* does. They are, as it were, merely

physical, merely animal things to do, and are aptly called “brute.” To understand a conventional form of action, like making the sign of the cross, one will have to understand everything that is involved in the underlying brute action, *and a whole lot more besides*. In particular, one will have to understand the nature of a “convention” or “custom” or “social practice”—whatever kind of thing it is that accounts for the fact that making a certain gesture with one’s hand *is* making the sign of the of the cross. And while this clearly is an important topic in practical philosophy, it just as clearly does not belong to the basic account of an action.

But what about the relation between a specific means and a general end? In what follows, I will argue that, unlike the relation between a brute means and a conventional end, the species-genus relation is a fundamental form of purposive nexus, and essential to the structure of any intentional action. In this, I think, it is like the relation between the part of an action and the whole of it. An important aim will be to show these are two coeval and mutually-dependent forms of doing one thing for the sake of doing another.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>It may be of interest to say how this relates to the main argument of Thompson’s essay, the argument against psychologism in the philosophy of action. Thompson constructs a sixteen-celled table of forms of rationalization: rationalization *of* and *by* what one is doing, what one is trying to do, what one intends to do, and what one wants to do, (*Life and Action*, (2008), p. 99). He points out certain logical features of the table’s inner structure—certain vertical and horizontal entailment relations that are consequent upon the fact that doing something intentionally entails trying to do it, which entails intending to do it, which entails wanting to do it—and he sets himself the task of explaining the table’s unity. Thompson encourages the reader to imagine that the schematic letters in each cell of his table stand for actions that are related to one another as *egg-breaking* and *omelet-making*. That is, he encourages the thought that the unity of his table has something to do with the part-whole relation. But for every appearance of “doing A” in Thompson’s table, we *could* substitute “eating a peach”; and for every appearance of “doing B,” we *could* substitute “eating a piece of fruit.” This substitution would have no effect whatsoever on the vertical and horizontal entailment relations that hold among the tabulated judgments. The table would maintain the same “appealing squareness,” but none of the tabulated judgments would exhibit the explanation of part by whole. If the arguments for Thompson’s main thesis are sound, then all of the tables will display explanation by the imperfective. With a look toward any one of them we could say: “To frame a naive rationalization is to associate the thing “grounded” with an intrinsically imperfective state of affairs as “ground”—that is, with a state of affairs that can only be grasped through an imperfective judgment, or expressed in forms of speech that admit an imperfective interpretation,” *ibid.*, p. 129.

This explains why I have been so careful to avoid the term “naive,” which appears in the title of Thompson’s essay. The term is introduced in the essay’s second paragraph, after a list of examples: “The special character of what is given, in each response, as formulating a reason—[1] a description, namely, of the agent as actually doing something, and, moreover, [2] as doing something of which

But first it will be necessary to establish a distinction that has so far only been insinuated, the distinction between an action's purposive unity and its temporal unity. Disambiguating these two aspects of an action's inner structure will require us to look more carefully at the relation between a part of an action and the whole of it. If I am right, Thompson leaves this relation unexplained, because he mistakenly supposes that to understand what a "part" is, one only needs to grasp the idea of an action's being in progress, the latter being a topic about which he has much to say. The first task, then, is to distinguish the *parts* of an action, which are purposive elements, from its *phases*, which are temporal.

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the act queried might be said to be a part, phase or "moment"—marks each of our exchanges as an instance of what I will call naive action explanation or, more generally, naive rationalization," (ibid., p. 86, numbers added). According to Thompson, naive rationalization has *two* marks: it is an explanation of action by action, "and, moreover," it is an explanation of part by whole. Then if there are other types of rationalization that relate the action explained to something an agent is "actually doing"—types, that is, which are not underwritten by a part-whole relation—they will not count, for Thompson, as "naive." By his very terminology, Thompson invites one to suppose that the explanation of action by action is, as such, the explanation of part by whole.

But it is not just his terminology that encourages the assimilation. In the climactic section of his paper, where he identifies the "red thread" that runs through and unites all his tabulated forms of action explanation, Thompson writes: "The unity that pervades our table of forms of straightforward rationalization resides on the present view in this, that the sort of rationalization registered in it is in general a form of explanation by the imperfective, or by the 'incomplete.' *In particular, the type of explanation of action at stake in action theory, whether naive or sophisticated, is uniformly a matter of locating the action explained in what might be called a developing process,*" Ibid., p. 132, italics added. The first sentence of this passage expresses the idea that rationalization relates the action explained to a developing process, but the second sentence refers to a specific type of relation: Thompson implies that *relating* an action *to* a developing process is "uniformly" a matter of *locating* it *in* one. He clearly has in mind the part-whole relation, the relation between e.g. *egg-breaking* and *omelet-making*. Elsewhere he will describe the explaining action as "overarching" the action explained (133). But I am in no sense "locating" the explanandum "in" the explanans if I say that I am raising my hand with a view to casting a vote, or that I am eating a peach with a view to eating some fruit. Absent some argument to the effect that there is only one explanatorily significant relation between an action and a developing process—to wit, the relation between part and whole—the italicized claim must involve a severe and unjustified constriction of what is "at stake in action theory."

Despite passages like these, I think it is consistent with the predominant tendency in Thompson's thought to pry the term "naive" loose from the part-whole relation, so that any explanation of action by action will count as "naive rationalization," and any theory that prioritizes these explanations will count as "naive action theory." After all, it is the contrast between action-action explanation, which is so common in ordinary life, and action-want explanation, which is so common in the pages of philosophy, that makes it apt to speak of "naivete" and "sophistication" in the first place.

## 5.7 THE PARTS AND PHASES OF AN ACTION

### 5.7.1 That a Phase is not a Part

The temporal unity of an action is such that, if it is complete, an action has a beginning, a middle and an end. That a tragedy should have this form is a famous doctrine of Aristotle's, but the reason for the doctrine is less well-known: the reason is that a tragedy should imitate an action.<sup>26</sup> The same tripartite structure belongs to the life of an animal or plant, which also has a kind of “plot,” and which divides itself, if complete, into youth, maturity and old-age.

Such a division of an action is a division into phases. It is natural to want to compare it to the spatial division of a line—although, as we will soon see, the comparison leads to certain problems.



Figure 10

That Aristotle divides an action into exactly *three* phases is not entirely arbitrary. Like a person's life or a tragedy, an action is something that begins and ends: it has limits; and it must have something *between* its limits. Thus, the threefold division provides a kind of minimum temporal structure. On the other hand, though, there is clearly *something* arbitrary about dividing an action into three, since, as Aristotle would surely admit, each phase can be divided into further phases, and these into further ones, and so on *ad infinitum*. But what is important is this, that however finely the phases of an action are divided, they cannot possibly overlap: like the segments of a line, phases always arrange themselves end-to-end. And so, as the total

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<sup>26</sup> *Poetics*, 1450b21–31.



length of a line is the sum of that of its segments, the total duration of an action is the sum of that of its phases.

The division of an action into phases marks the grades or degrees of its imperfection. Until now, we have followed Thompson in approaching the temporal structure of an action by way of the contrast between “X was doing A” and “X did A.” The danger in this approach is that it tends to produce the false idea that imperfection and perfection are two poles of an opposition. Indeed, attention to the logical and linguistic data can only reveal a brute duality: it may teach us that the predicable “To do A” has two different forms, which we call “perfective” and “imperfective;” but it cannot show us how they are related. For it lacks the resources to distinguish among different degrees of imperfection, and treats every imperfection as equal. But if it is true to judge that “X was doing A,” a somewhat more precise judgment is necessarily also true: for instance, that “X was just getting started doing A,” or that “X was in the middle of doing A,” or that “X was almost finished doing A.” What makes it the case that “X did A” is the culmination of a development. Thus, the contrast between imperfection and perfection is not to be compared with the ON and OFF positions of a light switch. A progressing development is “imperfect,” if you like, but it is also “perfect” *to a degree*. Not only that, but it is “perfect” *to an ever increasing degree*—indeed, *to a degree whose increase is inversely related to the degree of its imperfection*. An action may be far from done, half done, close to done, or—finally and simply—done. As the imperfect gives way gradually to the perfect, action dawns.<sup>27</sup>

The dawning of an action is represented in our ordinary descriptions of how some-

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<sup>27</sup>Thompson describes imperfection and perfection as two “poles” of an “opposition” throughout “Naive Action Theory,” but see especially *Life and Action*, p. 130–134. Thompson is, I think, right to lay emphasis on the contrast between the perfective and the imperfective. But in the section of the essay titled, “Event-forms, Event-types and Individual Events,” he takes what is to my mind an excessively stark view of the matter, as though completion was an all or nothing affair. Thompson criticizes the failure to appreciate *how* different the imperfective is from the perfective. But how different is an action that is complete from one that is all but complete? Less different, I would think, than it is from an action that has just begun. And in that case completion is a matter of degree.

thing is done. If I want to make an omelet, the way to do it might be this: by *first* breaking some eggs, *then* mixing and seasoning them, *then* doing some other thing, and *finally* something else. And if, now, I need to go to the grocery store, the way to get there might be this: by *first* going one block north, *then* cutting eastward through the park, and *finally* going north again until I see it on my left. A typical action, like making an omelet, or going to the grocery store, has what we might call a “temporal frame,” into which it gathers other actions. The temporal frame is expressed with the words, “First . . . , then . . . , finally . . . ,” and divides an action like the chapters of a book, or the acts of a play, distinguishing what is done at the beginning, what is done in the middle, and what is done at the end.

The actions that are gathered into such a temporal frame are the “parts” of the action that gathers them up: they are things that are done for its sake. But the parts of an action are different from its phases. The phases of an action are the sequentially ordered and infinitely divisible stages of its development; its parts, by contrast, are the actions performed *during* its phases. If lines and measures are the phases of a sonata, the parts of it are, for instance, notes, chords and rests. In general, the phases of an action are marked by a “First . . . , then . . . , finally . . . .” framework, and its parts are represented by whatever fills in the ellipses.

A phase is a fragment or a portion of an action; but, importantly, it is not itself an action. A phase is not something that an agent *does*; it is not an object of the will, or of intention: it is as it were a piece of such. By contrast, a part of an action *is* an action, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. That is why it is misleading to compare the phases of an action to the segments of a line. If you divide a line in half, what you get is *two* lines. But if you divide a tragedy in half, you do not get *two* tragedies. And if you divide a sonata in half, you do not get *two* sonatas. The problem, here, is not that one division is temporal and the other spatial. After all, if you divide a chair in half—e.g. with a saw—you do not get *two* chairs. The problem is that a line represents only one dimension: it can only depict an action’s length—that is,

its duration. But in addition to its temporal length, a process also has a kind of width: for at any one point in its development, a process may comprise many distinct subprocesses. Any set of ellipses in a “First ..., then ..., finally ...” framework may be filled in by two simultaneous actions. The second step in making an omelet might involve *both* beating the eggs *and* adding milk; for I might have to add the milk *while* beating the eggs. Indeed, at any given moment in the performance of an action, an agent may be performing numerous other actions that are subordinate to the first, and parts of it. It might be, for instance, that I am nearly done beating the eggs for my omelet, though I have just begun to season them, and for several minutes now I have been slowly warming some butter in a pan. Except perhaps at the very beginning or the very end of her action, an agent is always beginning some parts of it, midway through others, and concluding others still. Let the following two-dimensional staff represent a completed action, with the horizontal lines as its several parts.

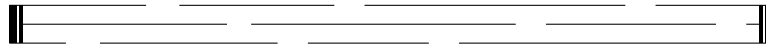


Figure 11

Like fibers in a piece of thread, or notes in a piece of music, the parts of an action overlap. And so, although the total duration of an action is the sum of that of its phases, it is *not* the sum of that of its parts.

Parts and phases relate differently to interruption. The fibrous overlapping of parts entails that to interrupt an action is always to interrupt many distinct but simultaneously developing subordinate actions, and to terminate each of them at a different stage in its own development. As I said, phases are not actions—they are not any sort of process—so they cannot be interrupted. Nevertheless, interruption is definitive of a phase. Just as every point where you might divide a line is the boundary-point of a segment of that line, every moment when you might interrupt

an action is the limiting moment of a phase of that action: the infinite divisibility of phases corresponds to the infinity of such moments.

There are many things that tend to obscure the distinction between parts and phases. First, and most superficially, the English word “part” is commonly used in reference to what we are calling a phase. One speaks of the first part of a recipe, or the last part of a person’s life, or the next part of whatever it is one is doing. And an incomplete process is one that is only “partially” complete. The word thus glides easily across categories. (Notice, though, that the word “phase” is not likewise promiscuous: it makes no sense to speak of two simultaneous or overlapping phases of the same process.) Another thing that tends to obscure the distinction between parts and phases is the fact that parts and phases share the uncommon property of being constituted by more of the same: parts by more parts, and phases by more phases. Finally, consider that parts and phases are each thoroughly bound up with the other. Any durative action *has* phases; and since the parts of an action are actions, parts have phases, too. Moreover, any action that is part of another action unfolds *during* a phase of the action of which it is a part. So the one idea has application anyplace the other does.

The distinction between parts and phases is particularly difficult to see if attention is focused on examples of locomotion. When called upon to identify the parts of an action like *walking from A to C*, one is likely to mention *walking from A to B* and *walking from B to C*, but not e.g. *hacking away the underbrush* or *looking out for snakes*. All four of these actions are, or might be, parts of *walking from A to C*, subordinate to it, and explicable by it, in precisely the same way. But the first two are an extremely unusual pair, as far as parts go, and exclusive attention to them is apt to distort one’s understanding of the part-whole relation. Notice that *hacking away the underbrush* and *looking out for snakes* are things that might be done simultaneously; moreover, either of them, or both of them, might be done while one was walking from A to B, or while one was walking from B to C, or, indeed, all

the while that one was walking from A to C. By contrast, it is impossible that an agent should be *walking from A to B* while she is *walking from B to C*: one cannot be two places at once, so the first action must end before the second can begin. Actions whose descriptions are produced by dividing a single trajectory stand to one another in a serial relation: like the divisions of a line, they cannot possibly overlap. If we isolate a class of serial parts, and exclude from consideration all the other parts of the same action, it will be natural to conceive the part-whole relation on the model of a line and its divisions. And then it will be irresistible to assimilate parts to phases, which, we have seen, are also arranged in serial order.<sup>28</sup>

These difficulties notwithstanding, the distinction between parts and phases can be summarized as follows. A phase of an action is not an action, but a fragment of one. By contrast, a part of an action is itself an action. Interruption divides between phases, but it cuts through parts. Like the chapters of a book, or the stages of a life, the phases of an action cannot overlap; whereas the parts of an action are simultaneous and intertwining. The duration of a completed action is, consequently, equal to the sum of that of its phases, but not to that of its parts.

### 5.7.2 That a Phase is not a “Stretch of Time”

If, as I claim, a phase is not a part, then it seems that it must be “a stretch of time.” A stretch of time is an *amount* of time—it is, let us say, ten minutes. But a phase is not a magnitude: as I have said, it is a portion or fragment *of* something: of an action. Just as a painted fragment of the Berlin Wall, which is now on display in some museum, *has* (not *is*) a spatial magnitude that can be measured in inches and feet, so, also, a fragment of a development *has* (not *is*) a temporal magnitude that

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<sup>28</sup>One might still think there was some philosophical justification for isolating a class of serial parts: namely, that the central cases of intentional action always involve movement, which is always across some trajectory, whose geometrical division will always yield such a set of parts. But this is not a reason to isolate a set of serially related parts unless there could be some act of intentional locomotion whose *only* parts were serially related. For an argument that such locomotion is impossible, see Section 7.3, below.

can be measured in seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months or years. And just as the magnitude of a fragment of a wall is a fraction of the magnitude of the wall as a whole, the magnitude of a fragment of a development is a fraction of the magnitude of the development as a whole. A phase is not a stretch of time any more than a hunk of wall is a stretch of space.

Admittedly, it sounds strange to speak, as I have, of a “portion” or a “fragment” of an action. But here it may help to consider an analogy. There are two ways to divide a fish that is dead but otherwise undisturbed. A cook who is preparing stew might chop it in half with a butcher’s knife, midway between the nose and the tail. Then he might chop the halves in half; and then the quarters; and so on. The cook’s division of the fish is *spatial*: he cleaves by reference to the fish’s length. But there is another way to carve a fish—another principle by reference to which the same whole can be divided. A physiologist might dissect the fish with a scalpel, carefully removing its organs and members, cutting, so to speak, along the fish’s natural line or grain. Such a division of the fish is *functional*: it is the fish’s anatomy, and not its geometry, that determines each incision.

Corresponding to these two ways of dividing a fish, there are two kinds of element into which a fish can be divided. The product of a spatial division is a portion of the fish; the product of a functional division is an organ or member. Portions of the fish can be divided spatially into smaller portions, and organs functionally into smaller organs. But portions and organs have two very different kinds of unity, and are related in two very different ways to the fish as a whole. To speak of a “portion” of a fish is like speaking of its “front” or “back” or “top” or “bottom;” and this is obviously quite different from speaking about its “nose” or “tooth” or “heart.” And though a portion of a fish is *not* one of its organs, it is not just a stretch of space, either—it is not, say, three inches. Rather, it is three inches *of* something: of a fish. Since a fish is an organized thing, a portion of fish will have organs in it. Still, an organ and a portion are different kinds of element.

That they are different is also clear from the following. The organs of a fish have a functional integrity much like that of the fish as a whole—we will speak, for instance, of the anatomy of a heart, as well as that of the creature to which it belongs. But we have no regard for the integrity of a fish's organs if we divide it spatially, like the cook. A chop of the butcher's knife does not separate organs: it cuts right through them. Not only will a single chop cut through several organs, but it will cut through each of them at a different place in its own anatomy. The chop that divides a fish in half will perhaps cut through the middle of its spleen, the front of its bladder and the back of its stomach.

My thought is of course that the parts and phases of action are likewise two different kinds of element—that parts are like the organs of a fish, and that phases are its temporal portions. The interruption of an action is, in that case, like the chop of a butcher's knife. In terminating the action, the interruption also terminates its parts. And these parts, which have a functional integrity similar to that of which they are part, are terminated by the interruption at different stages in their own development: some when they are just beginning; others when they are half-done; others when they are wrapping up. An interruption does not cut along a natural line or grain. It is a violent intrusion from without.

### **5.7.3 That Imperfection is a Missing Phase**

The contrast between what is in progress and what is complete depends on the idea that an action is divisible into elements. It is definitive of the fact that I am in the middle of performing a certain action that some of it is already behind me and some of it still lies ahead. But since an action is divisible in different ways, into different kinds of element, the question arises which kind of division, and which kind of element, is operative in the contrast between imperfection and perfection. When we say of an unfolding action that “some of it” still lies ahead, do we refer to the space of overlapping parts, or, instead, to that of sequential phases?

The answer should by now be clear. It is the idea of a phase, and not the idea of a part, that is operative in the contrast between imperfection and perfection. To represent an action as being in progress is to represent it as missing a fragment or chunk or portion of itself, and not a purposive or functional element. It is of course true that any process that is missing a phase will *also* be missing whatever parts are scheduled to unfold *during* that phase—just as, if a cook chops a fish in half, each of the resultant portions will have numerous organs inside it. Still, “the front half of the fish” does not refer to any organ; and “what remains to be done” does not describe an object of the will. An unfolding action is like a fish that, as it were by magic, increasingly has less of itself chopped off.

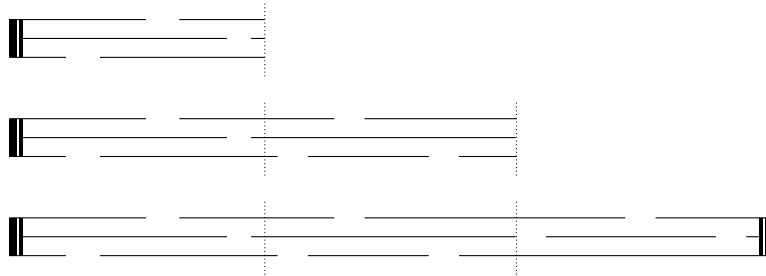


Figure 12

One might object that the relevant analogy between a temporally-extended development, like an action, and a spatially-extended substance, like a fish, really only applies to a development that has already come to completion. The whole fish exists *before* it is chopped in half. And similarly with a line: the segments into which it is divisible are already there—potentially—*before* the line is divided. In general, one might say, a “division” presupposes the existence of the divided whole. So only a development that has already occurred is temporally divisible into phases. The suggestion that an incomplete action is a “portion” or “fragment” of a complete one is therefore inadmissible, because the relevant whole does not exist so long as the action is still in progress.



But on these grounds, the objector will have to dismiss as nonsense many familiar judgments about on-going processes. As I have mentioned, it is common to judge, not just that someone is doing something, but also that she has a certain amount of it—maybe less, maybe more—still left to do. It is a perfectly ordinary thought that “X is far from finished,” or that “X is half-finished,” or that “X is nearly finished doing A.” And, as the second one makes clear, all three of these judgments concern the *proportion* of the action that is behind the agent relative to that which still lies ahead. Thus, we seem to grasp the idea of a “half”—and of more, and of less than “half”—even in the absence of any “whole.”

But this is common also in the case of material things. On a construction site, we may see, and know that we see, the bottom half of a house, even though the top half remains unbuilt. There is, in that case, half of something, despite the fact that no whole exists. And if one will admit the existence of half a house, there seems no reason to deny that a person can be half-finished building a house. And in that case, he might be half-finished building a house even at the moment when he is killed in a fatal accident, the result of which is that a whole house will never in fact be built.

Admittedly, this is all extremely puzzling. How is it possible to judge that a process is far from finished, half-finished or nearly finished—before that process *is* finished? The judgment is clearly quantitative. But what, exactly, is being quantified? And how can we know—or even think that we know—the relevant proportions of whatever that is?

The matter may come to seem less puzzling, if we leave it for now, and proceed with the account. But first let us pause to remind ourselves of what we doing and why. We are pursuing an account of the internal structure of an intentional action. In the course of performing an intentional action, an agent does many things, all of which are intentional. Not only are they all intentional, but they are all related to one another as ends and means—as answers to the question “Why?” and answers to the question “How?” Then to understand what an action is, we must understand

how the many things done in the course of acting intentionally all hang together in one purposive system. But that is only the beginning, because in addition to its purposive structure, an action also has a temporal structure, thanks to which there is a contrast between an action's being in progress and its have been completed. And an action's temporal and purposive structures are intimately related. For the temporal structure of an action constrains what can be a means to what: in order for one action to be a means to another, the first must advance the progress of the second. On the face of it, there appear to be several different ways to advance an action's progress, among which two stand out as especially important: one action can advance another's progress, either by being a *part* of it, or by being a *species* of it. I say that this is how it appears, but we have been considering the possibility that, in fact, the appearance is deceptive. One might think that the contrast between a part of an action and the whole of it is just identical to the contrast between what is in progress and what is complete; and if that is true, then the purposive structure of an action is, at bottom, the same as its temporal structure. But, as we have just seen, they are *not* the same. The contrast between what is in progress and what is complete is different from the contrast between a part of an action and the whole of it. Having liberated the purposive unity of an action from its temporal unity, we can now go forward and investigate what it is for one action to be a purposive part, or a purposive species of another.

## 5.8 PURPOSIVE PARTS

### 5.8.1 Part and Whole

What it is for one action to be a “part” of another has already been explained in a preliminary way. As we saw, an action has a temporal frame—a beginning, a middle, and an end—into which numerous other actions are gathered: these are the parts

of what gathers them up; they are done for its sake, and must somehow further its progress. But in view of the fact that there are different ways to advance an action's progress—e.g. as the brute advances the conventional, and the species the genus—one still wants to know what is distinctive about the way that a part of an action advances the progress of a whole.

At first glance, it might look as though the distinctive nexus between part and whole had something to do with their relative duration. A brute form of action takes just as long to do as the conventional form for the sake of which it is done: gesturing with the hand takes just as long as making the sign of the cross. But touching one's forehead—which is *part* of the gesture—takes less time than the gesture as a whole. And similarly, a specific means has the same duration as its general end. If one is going to school by riding the bus, doing the one thing takes just as long as doing the other. Yet waiting for the bus, while making a transfer—which is *part* of riding the bus to school—takes less time than the trip as a whole. On these grounds, one might suspect that a part's contribution to the progress of the whole was best understood temporally.

But this is a mistake. A part of an action is sometimes shorter than the whole to which it belongs, but frequently it is not. Suppose, for example, that I have carried a bundle of kindling from A to Z, balancing it on my right shoulder. In that case, balancing the kindling was part of carrying it; but it was a part that lasted as long as the action as a whole. And although carrying the bundle and balancing it had exactly the same duration, it is clear that I balanced it for the sake of carrying it, and not the other way round. With a little more strength, I might have balanced *two* bundles, one on each shoulder, each for the whole time, and each for the sake of carrying them both.<sup>29</sup> The distinctive contribution of a part is, thus, not to be

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<sup>29</sup>The reader may suspect that there is some temporal discrepancy between the two things done in this example: some time during which the carrying was going on, but not the balancing. And there might be, depending on how we imagine the case. But *need* there be? If it helps, one may imagine that A and Z are both within a desert strewn with land-mines; and that carrying the kindling has therefore required me to look out for land-mines *the whole time*. Indeed, we may imagine that I was

understood temporally.

Still, there is obviously something right in the idea that doing part of an action is “less” than doing the whole of it, and requires something “more.” One conclusion to be drawn from the previous section is that the relevant surplus is purposive, rather than temporal. We need to look for additional means, and not for extra time.

Thankfully, additional means are easily discovered. For reasons that will soon come out,<sup>30</sup> a part of an action is never the only one: there is always at least a second part—a “partner,” as we might say, to the first. The same is not true of a specific or a brute means. If I want to eat a serving of fruit, then I can *either* eat a peach, *or* eat a pear, *or* eat a plum, *or* eat some combination of the three; but doing more than one of these will not, and cannot, serve my purpose. Similarly, if I want to pay my rent, and hand my landlord a few slips of paper, which thanks to convention are money, that is all there is to it. Like the specific means, the brute is sufficient to its end. But it is definitive of a purposive part that it does not suffice by itself: it is never enough to achieve its purpose; it requires that something else be done. If doing A is part of doing C, there must be some B, that is also to be done for the sake of doing C.

In that case, the relation between part and whole entails a relation between part and partner. Thus, one thing that makes the contribution of a part different from that of a brute or specific means is that a part’s contribution is always as it were *cooperative*. What governs this cooperation is the whole to which the parts are subordinate, or the partnership in which they are joined. It will therefore be essential to see how the whole coordinates its parts.

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looking out for land-mines even as I walked to A, where I began carrying the kindling, and even as I walked away from Z, where I put the bundle (carefully) down.

<sup>30</sup>See Section 7.3 below.

### 5.8.2 Part and Partner

What I am doing has the power to explain, both other things that I am doing, and things that I am forbearing to do. For example, the fact that I am making a pie may explain, both, why I am rolling a crust, and also why I am *not* eating a peach that I picked this afternoon (tempting though it may be): the peach is for the pie. The fact that I am driving to work may explain, at once, why I am pressing the accelerator, and also why I am *not* reading the newspaper (much though I might like to): my eyes are needed on the road. The governing action asserts itself positively, through its commands, and negatively, through its prohibitions. With whatever authority it can muster, it enjoins what will advance its progress, and forbids what will impede it.

This double-authority, both positive and negative, of the whole over its parts, determines how two partners relate to one another. In the first place, negatively, no part of an action must prevent another's being done. If A and B are both for the sake of C, then, by undermining B, A would undermine C. There is, then, a requirement of mutual non-interference—a requirement issuing from the action itself, that, in doing any part of it, I forbear impeding another part.

And we may safely assert, of every action ever completed, that no part of it was ever incompatible with another. This is not to deny that mistakes have been made. If, on my way to Kathmandu, I turned left at a fork in the road, though Kathmandu lay to the right, this was a mistake, tending to prevent me from doing various other things that needed to be done—for instance, passing through Bhimphedi. But if I made it to Kathmandu in the end, then the other cooperating parts of my action must have compensated for my mistake, and restored the original harmonious order. Perhaps I turned around, and went back the other way—back to the fork, through Bhimphedi, and on to Kathmandu. Or perhaps I decided to change my course, and drove there by a different route. Either way, all of the parts were compatible in the end. The proof is that I got there.

One might question how my wrong left turn, at the fork near Bhimpheedi, can be a part of my drive to Kathmandu. We call it a mistake because it tended to undermine the action as whole, by undermining the other things that needed to be done. And yet, a part of an action is a means, and a means is something that furthers, not undermines, its end. Then how can we see my left turn *both* as a means *and* as a mistake?

The answer is that we cannot see it any other way. That is, we can see my left turn as a mistake *only if* we see it as a part of my drive to Kathmandu, and thus a means. For if it were just something else that I happened to do, then nothing would be wrong with it: it would have, in that case, no responsibility to the other parts and to the whole. A part is an action that has this kind of responsibility, and that either forbears impeding its partners, or else is subject to criticism on the ground that it does not.

An analogy. Over the past several hours and days, the various organs of my body have done a variety of things, the result of which is that I am still alive. And this was their purpose. This was the reason that what was done, by each of my organs, *was* done. What they did, in this fateful period, displayed a certain harmony, such that nothing done by any of my organs interfered with what the others did. Or not too much. To be sure, certain of them did certain things that were somewhat untoward. But nothing done by any of them was so irreparably bad that my other organs could not, and did not, compensate for it, doing what otherwise they would not have done, for the sake of keeping the whole on its feet. And the proof is that I am still alive. The parts of any completed action are similarly harmonious.

Then in addition to the negative requirement of mutual non-interference, there is also a general positive requirement of mutual aid. What one part of an action needs another must prepare. Doing virtually anything presupposes that certain objects and instruments be ready and available. And, at very least, these must be readied and made available. To this extent, we can say of any completed action—again with

certainty—that whatever was needed for the performance of any single part of it was provided ahead of time by another part. And the proof is again that the action was done.

In fact, the relation between a preparatory part and the partner it prepares for is very much like the relation between any single part and the whole to which it belongs. As I pointed out, an action has a double-authority with respect to all of its parts: it enjoins those actions that further its progress, and prohibits those that impede it. Well, the same is true of an action that is prepared-for: it requires, both, that certain things be done, and that certain others *not* be done.

Thompson observes that what a person is doing can be rationalized, not just by something else she *is* doing, but also by something she *is going* to do.<sup>31</sup> To our original list of examples of parts and wholes (see Section 5, above), compare the following:

- QUESTION: “Why are you buying eggs?”  
ANSWER: “I’m making an omelet.”
- QUESTION: “Why are you putting on your shoes?”  
ANSWER: “I’m walking to school.”
- QUESTION: “Why are you opening a box of chalk?”  
ANSWER: “I’m writing the word ‘action.’”

This is how we talk; but one might argue that the way we talk is misleading. For if I am at the store, buying eggs, then I am not—not yet—making an omelet. So this case is somewhat different from the one in which I say that I am making an omelet in answer to the question why I am breaking an egg: if I am breaking an egg, the omelet-making has already begun. And similarly with the other examples. Perhaps I will give the same answer whether I am asked, at 8:00, why I am putting on my shoes, or, at 8:05, why I am crossing the street: namely, that I am walking to school. And perhaps I will say that I am writing the word “action” whether I am asked why I am opening a box of chalk, or, a moment later, why I am writing the letter ‘a.’ But,

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<sup>31</sup>Thompson, *Life and Action*, (2008), p. 132.

still, there is a difference.

And though there is, indeed, a difference, the sense that it is very deep may relax a bit once one has noticed that the relation between a preparatory action and the action prepared-for is one we find *within* an action, *between* its parts. Take two things that are uncontroversially part of making an omelet—two things about which there can be absolutely no doubt that, if I am doing either of them, omelet-making has begun: for example, breaking an egg and mixing an egg-batter. Now the first is preparatory to the second. And, if we want to be strict and narrow in our descriptions of my action, we will say that these two actions are such as not to overlap, that my egg-breaking must end before my batter-mixing can begin. Notice, though, that if I am asked why I am breaking an egg, I can answer that I am making an omelet, but I can also say: “I am mixing an egg-batter.” Thus, my action can be rationalized, either by appeal to the whole, or by appeal to a part—one it is preparing for.

### 5.8.3 The Ineliminability of Parts

What we are looking for is, in Anscombe’s words, “an order which is there whenever actions are done with intentions.” But is *every* intentional action a whole comprising parts?

Thompson argues that it is.<sup>32</sup> He points out that in moving from one place to another, a person necessarily moves along a trajectory that is infinitely divisible into smaller sub-trajectories, along which one also moves. If I have intentionally walked from A to Z, then I must have walked to the midpoint, Y. Furthermore, it was true, back when I set out from A, that I was walking to Y as well as to Z. Not only that, but it seems that I was walking from A to Y *intentionally*, and that I was doing so

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<sup>32</sup>Assuming, at least, that “the object of the philosophy of action is legitimately restricted, in the first instance, to a category of intentional action that excludes acts of mind, startings-to-act and other such non-durative actions-by-courtesy—to intentional action proper, as we call it,” *Life and Action*, pp. 111–112. I will follow Thompson in assuming that the fundamental cases of intentional action involve physical movement. For Thompson’s argument, see *Ibid.*, Chapter 7, Sections 1 and 2.



*for the sake of* walking from A to Z. It seems, in other words, that walking from A to Z was my end, and that walking from A to Y was the means. But then, if I walked from A to Y, I must also have walked to the midpoint, X, and I must have been doing the latter for the sake of doing the former. By the reapplication of such considerations, one arrives at the conclusion that my action of walking from A to Z is a whole comprising infinitely many purposive parts.

The same is true if I moved, not myself, but something else: for instance, if I pushed my car from the side of the road to the gas station. In that case, I moved the car along an infinitely divisible path, and I moved it along each division of the path for the sake of moving it along the whole. Naturally, the situation is no different if what I am moving is, not my car, but my hand, and I am raising it from its resting place at the side of my leg to somewhere over my head—as when, for example, I am voting.

On the assumption that the central cases of intentional action involve some kind of movement, Thompson's argument is meant to show that for every intentional action, it is possible to find a second one, which is part of the first, and done for its sake. But the argument faces a number of objections. One worry concerns very short trajectories. The road I have travelled in walking from A and Z is infinitely divisible. And so, in walking it, I have travelled distances that are vanishingly small. But did I really have any intention with regard to these infinitesimal trajectories? Is there not some distance shorter than which I cannot *intend* to move?

Another worry concerns trajectories that are, though not infinitesimally small, nevertheless quite complex. Many ordinary actions, like tying one's shoe, require moving both oneself and other things in very intricate ways. Sure, there are trajectories traversed, but in what sense are they given to the agent? The agent can neither describe, nor even think about the way he moves his fingers in the course of tying his shoes, except perhaps under the description, "the way I move my fingers in the course of tying my shoes." But under this description, it is not clear that the movement in

question is geometrically divisible. Is “the way I move my fingers in the course of tying my shoes” something of which there is “half”? If not, then the Zeno-paradoxical division will grind to a halt with this description.

Rather than consider the merit of these objections, let us instead observe something about the argument at which they are aimed: namely, that it concerns the movement of what may as well be an extensionless point floating across a line. The austerity of Thompson’s conception of movement, and of the “folk-geometrical truisms” that he permits himself to assume, will assure that his argument is relevant to any movement whatsoever. But it may also be the source of the skeptic’s doubt when the discussion turns to intentional action.

In any event, the austerity is out of place. The philosophy of action is not concerned with the imaginary “movement” of geometrical points, nor with the flight of angels. We do not aim to understand the to-ing and fro-ing of wind-blown leaves, nor, again, the ascent of helium balloons. All that matters is the real self-movement of an organized substance. Quite unlike the balloon, the leaf, the angel and the geometrical point, a self-moving organism has moveable parts. And it has, not one, but many of them. In moving itself, or something else, from one place to another, an organism must do one thing with one part of itself and another thing with another part, if only hold it still.<sup>33</sup> Even the inchworm, as it inches, must firmly plant its rear during each heroic forward thrust; and just as firmly, it must plant its front while dragging up the rear. I, as I walk, must move my own two legs.

The skeptical thesis may therefore be granted, that there is some trajectory, A to B, smaller than which I cannot possibly intend to walk. Still, in walking just from

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<sup>33</sup>This idea is the starting-point of Aristotle’s *De Motu Animalium*: “If one of the parts [of an animal] moves, there must be some part at rest; and it is for this reason that animals have joints. [...] In any case, the origin relative to which the motion takes place, qua origin, is always at rest when the part below it is moved, as, for example, when the forearm is moved the elbow remains at rest, but when the whole limb is moved, the shoulder. And when the lower leg is moved, the knee, but when the whole leg is moved, the hip. It is obvious, then, that each animal must have something at rest within itself as well [sc. as without], to provide that which is moved with its origin, and supporting itself against which it will move both all at once as a whole and part by part,” 698a14-698b8.

A to B, I will be doing one thing with one leg, and another with the other. And so, for the sake of walking what is, by hypothesis, the minimum distance intentionally traversed, I will in fact be doing two things at once, and both of them intentionally.

It may likewise be conceded that the movements I make in tying my shoe are given to me under that very description. Still, to tie my shoe, I use both of my hands and all ten of my fingers. Among other things, I bend at the waist, and crook my knee, and hold my foot more or less still. I do all of these things, with all of these parts, intentionally. Each of them is responsible to the others, and responsible to the enterprise as a whole: they are all parts of what I am doing—parts of tying my shoe.

Someone might object that, nevertheless, it is possible to do just one thing, with just one part of one's body: to simply raise one's hand, for example. But in raising my hand (from fingertips to wrist), I also raise my lower arm (from wrist to elbow) and my upper arm (from elbow to shoulder). And that is to say nothing of the rest of my body. If my knees and ankles buckle, I will not raise my hand, but crumple to the floor in a heap. If, at the crucial moment, I bend forward ninety degrees at the waist, I will send my hand straight out in front of me: I will not raise it—my vote will not be cast. If I am actually to raise my hand, I must see to it that the rest of my body cooperates. And the cooperating movement, or stillness, of my other moveable bodily parts is intentional, and is part of what I am doing.

This, I think, is enough for the claim that the part-whole relation is essential to the structure of any intentional action. What matters, for these purposes, is not the thesis that Thompson defends—namely, that every action is a whole with parts—but rather the more modest and disjunctive thesis that every action is *either* a whole with parts, *or* a part of a whole, *or* a partner to another part.<sup>34</sup> The truth of the disjunction is secured by a fact that Thompson's austerity prevents him from considering: namely, that the agent herself has parts. A person cannot move herself, or anything else,

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<sup>34</sup>It may well be that each of these disjuncts entails all of the others, but we need not concern ourselves with that. For even if only the disjunction is true, the part-whole relation may be safely said to belong to "an order which is there whenever actions are done with intentions."

from one place to another, except by moving a part of herself. And yet, she cannot move a part of herself, except by moving or keeping still another part of herself. This guarantees that she will always be doing at least two things at once, both of which belong to the kind of mereological structure whose purposiveness we have just done a little to explore.

## 5.9 PURPOSIVE SPECIES

### 5.9.1 Species and Genus

Aristotle observes that the movement of an animal from one place to another admits of a division into species as well as into parts:

If locomotion is a movement from here to there, it, too, has differences of form—flying, walking, leaping, and so on. And not only so, but in walking itself there are such differences; for the whence and the whither are not the same in the whole racecourse and in a part of it, nor in one part and in another.<sup>35</sup>

According to Aristotle, the difference between *walking from A to C* and *flying from A to C* is a difference of form; and the difference between *walking from A to B* and *walking from B to C* is a difference of form; and these are different differences.

Of course, when Aristotle mentions flying, walking and leaping as three different forms of locomotion, he is presumably *not* thinking that these are three different ways for a human being to get from one place to another, but rather that they are the forms of locomotion proper to e.g. a bird, a man and a frog. Nevertheless, his observation points to a distinction among the things that can be done, which is orthogonal to that between part and whole, and which we confront in our practical life.

Nothing is more common than to want to go from one place to another. One finds oneself at A; one wants to be at C; and so one goes to C. Typically, what one wants

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<sup>35</sup>*Nicomachean Ethics*, X.4, 1174a.

is nothing more than to get to one's destination, because, for whatever reason, that is where one wants to be. But in order to get there, one cannot simply "go" there. One must do something else, something more determinate: one must walk, or run, or ride on horseback, or drive a car, or take a train. The only way to go somewhere is to go in some specific way, by some specific means.

The same is obviously true if what one wants to move from one place to another is, not oneself, but something else. If I have a bundle of kindling and want to get it home, I must push, or pull, or drag, or yank it; or put it on a donkey; or carry it on my shoulder. Or I must do some combination of these. But I cannot do what I want to do—which is really just to get it home—except by some specific means.

The subordination of a specific means to a general end is even more striking in a complicated action. If one's aim is to kill a group of political party chiefs who are prosecuting a murderous war, there are many ways to do it: one way is to poison them; another is to shoot them; another is to blow them up with bombs. Should one choose to poison them, the question will arise how. One ingenious method is to introduce a slow-acting but deadly toxin into the water-supply of the house where they live. But here again are choices to be made. One way to introduce the toxin—though certainly not the only way, and not the most obvious, or even the most likely to succeed—is to pump water into the cistern from a source that has been laced with it. This is the deed that Anscombe imagines. For the sake of killing the party chiefs, the man she describes is poisoning them, by just such means as these. For the sake of doing something general, he is doing something more specific.

Once one sees the pattern, one sees it everywhere. Davidson writes of an officer whose aim is to sink the battleship *Tirpitz*, and who adopts the available, but not inevitable means of shooting it with a torpedo; of a queen who wants to kill her husband, and who kills him by—of all things—pouring a vial of poison in his ear; of a man who wants to illuminate a room, and who does so in the usual, but certainly not the only way, by turning on the lights. In all of these examples, what the agent wants

to do is doable in many ways; and among these many, exactly one is chosen; and this one way is the means to the end. The object of the will, the heart's desire, what one wants, is general. It is to go over there; or to sink that ship; or to kill that man; or to light this room. Precisely because of its generality, the end is, as Anscombe says, "at a distance;" and by adopting some specific means, one brings the end back to oneself, back to something that one can do.

To bring one's end back to something that one can do is the characteristic work of deliberation. The question "How?" that corresponds to Anscombe's question "Why?" is, as I mentioned, a deliberative question; and it is paradigmatically answered by a *specification* of the agent's end. If getting something to eat is my end, then my end will be achieved when I have gotten something to eat. But the question immediately arises how I am to procure this food: Am I to buy it, or steal it, or make it, or what? Suppose I decide to make it. There is no such thing as making food in general, but only food of one or another kind. So the deliberative question reasserts itself: Am I to make soup, or bread, or an omelet, or what? Suppose I decide to make an omelet.

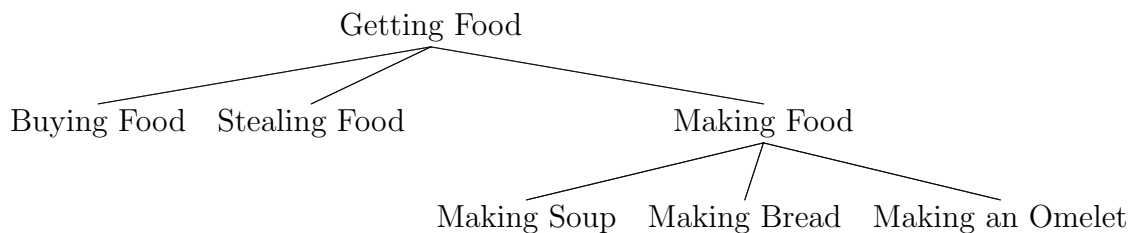


Figure 13

When the omelet is made, food is made; and when food is made, food is procured. So my end will be achieved as soon as I have made the omelet. In moving from my end, *getting food*, to a certain means, *making food*, and then to a certain subordinate means, *making an omelet*, I have made a familiar sort of advance in my deliberative thought.

### 5.9.2 Object and Instrument Specification

As the reader will perhaps have noticed, the specification of an end can assume a number of different linguistic guises. Sometimes it appears in the place of the verb, as when deliberation goes from an end like “*killing* the king” to a means like “*poisoning* the king,” or when it goes from “*getting* food” to “*making* food.” But specification can also show up in the verbal object, as when one makes the deliberative advance from “making *food*” to “making *an omelet*.” Or, again, it can show up in the sort of verbal modifier that would be expressed in Greek by the so-called “instrumental dative,” as in the movement from “sinking the battleship” to “sinking the battleship *with a torpedo*,” and from “going from A to C” to “going from A to C *by bicycle*.”

Of course, these formulations are often interchangeable. Sometimes, a language will have a special verb to describe doing something *with*—or *by means of*—a certain instrument: to go somewhere by bicycle is to bicycle there; and to harm someone with poison is to poison him. Other times, there is a special verb to describe doing something *to*—or *on*, or *against*, or *at*, or *through*—a certain object: if what one is hunting is fish, then what one is doing is fishing. How many such transformations are possible in a language is obviously a contingent matter, and of no philosophical interest.

But this raises the worry that perhaps I have failed properly to distinguish the action itself from its circumstances, or external conditions. We are supposed to be considering *what* is done; not *where* it is done, or *when*, or *by whom*—or any number of other things that *could* be said about an action. If it is asked of Socrates *what* he is, the answer is not that he is fat, or in the agora; the answer is that he is a human being. His being fat, or in the agora, are mere accidental qualities, and do not speak to the man himself. But then, have I not made a similar mistake with regard to action? For have I not confused *what* is done with what it happens to be done *with*, or what it happens to be done *to*?

This is related to another concern. I have said that what an agent aims to do

is doable in many “ways”; and I have spoken of the chosen “way” as the product of deliberation, and thus, as the means to an end. But what is the relevant kind of “way”? Do the descriptions “walking down the street with a parrot on one’s shoulder” and “walking down the street with a ferret on one’s shoulder” refer to two different “ways” of walking down the street? What about building a bird house in the morning and building one in the afternoon—are these two different “means” to the “end” of building a bird house? Is *roasting a turkey on Kilimanjaro* one “species” of the “genus” *roasting a turkey*, to be contrasted, perhaps, with *roasting a turkey on Everest*?

This points to the need for a general distinction, such as we find in the category of substance, between what is done on some occasion and that which is merely true of it. Clearly, the difference between roasting a turkey on Mt. Everest and roasting a turkey on Mt. Kilimanjaro is of no practical significance: the recipe does not change; a cook might perform exactly the same actions, in exactly the same order, for exactly the same reasons. On the other hand, it *does* affect what must be done whether one is roasting at a high altitude or at a low one; whether one is using a gas oven or a wood-burning stove; whether one is roasting a turkey or a cornish hen. Nothing depends on whether one is hunting on Tuesday or on Wednesday; but everything depends on whether one is hunting fish or fowl; and if one happens to be fishing, whether one is using a rod, a spear or a net.

In his analysis of Jones, who buttered a piece of toast in the bathroom with a knife at midnight, Davidson finds that what Jones did was to butter a piece of toast, and that this was in the bathroom, with a knife, at midnight.<sup>36</sup> Thus, Davidson treats the time and place of the action as being on par with the instrument employed: the fact that the action was done *with a knife* is just one among an infinite number of things that could be said about it. Given this approach, it should surprise one that Davidson does not consider Jones’ action to be simply: *buttering*. After all, this can

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<sup>36</sup>See Davidson, “The Logical Form of Action Sentences,” (1967).



be done with tools other than knives, in places other than bathrooms, at times other than midnight, and to things other than toast—to muffins, to cobs of corn, even to steak. What principled reason could Davidson have for including mention of the toast in his description of what was done by Jones?

There seem to be a pair of simple tests that will distinguish what is done, on some occasion, from what is merely true of it. They suggest that Davidson was right to include the toast, wrong to exclude the knife, and right to exclude the bathroom and the hour, in his description of Jones' action. The tests correspond to an action's purposive structure, on the one hand, and to its temporal structure, on the other. With regard to anything one might care to mention about an action—that it was done in this place, at this time, with this instrument, to this object, etc.—we can ask, on the one hand, whether this affects what it would be good or bad to do for the sake of the action, and, on the other hand, whether it affects how long the action takes.

Spreading butter on a piece of toast requires a technique that is markedly different from spreading it on a corn cob. Thus, what it would be good or bad to do for the sake of spreading butter varies according to what one is buttering. Yet, if we hold the buttered object constant, and vary the buttering instrument, we find that it requires one technique to butter toast with a knife, while it requires a very different technique to butter it with, say, a toothpick. Moreover, these differences of technique correspond to differences of time. To butter toast with toothpick undoubtedly takes longer than to butter it with a knife. Meanwhile, if we hold constant the buttering instrument, it requires the same technique, and takes the same amount of time, to butter e.g. a piece of toast in the bathroom as in the kitchen, and at midnight as at noon. The object and the instrument are *practically* significant, the time and the place are not.

By why should we concern ourselves with the results of these purported “tests”? Geach emphasizes that judgments employing what he calls “attributive adjectives,” like “big” and “small” and “good” and “bad,” presuppose a conception of *what* the

judgment is about.<sup>37</sup> At least some judgments of the form, “This is a good O,” and, “This is a big O,” appeal to a standard that is set by the nature of an O. Thus, it is by reference to some generic conception of what it is to be an O that one judges of some particular O that it is a good one or a bad one, a big one or a small one. To be eight inches in length is perhaps big for an earthworm, but small for an electric eel. Bigness and smallness are relative to a kind. To have two tires is good for a bicycle but bad for a car. The goodness and badness at issue here are also relative to a kind.

In the same sense that “good” and “bad” and “big” and “small” are attributive adjectives, “well” and “badly” and “slowly” and “quickly” are—in at least some employments—attribute adverbs. In the same way that attribute adjectives appeal to an understanding of *what* the modified object is, attributive adverbs appeal to an understanding of *what* the modified action is.

Just as certain judgments to the effect that this is a big or small O presuppose a generic conception of how big an O is, so, also, certain judgments to the effect that X is doing A slowly or quickly—or, that it is taking a long or short time for X to do A—presuppose a generic conception of how long it takes to do A.<sup>38</sup> And just as certain judgments to the effect that it is good or a bad for an O to be such-and-such presuppose a generic conception of what it is to be an O, so, also, certain judgments to the effect that doing such-and-such is a good or a bad thing to do in the course of doing A presuppose a generic conception of what it is to do A.

The fact that changes of location and hour do not affect what counts as spreading butter slowly or quickly, or badly or well, shows that location and hour are mere

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<sup>37</sup>Peter Geach, “Good and Evil,” (1956). J. L. Austin (1962a) says of such an adjective that it is “substantive hungry”: in addition to “good” he mentions “real” and “the same” and “one,” p. 69.

<sup>38</sup>We are constantly judging that such-and-such was slowly or quickly done; but it might strike one as a strange suggestion that we are just as often thinking, at least implicitly, about the time it takes to do things. After all, how long something takes is an empirical question. On the other hand, as Marx writes in *Capital*: “In all situations, the labor-time it costs to produce the means of subsistence must necessarily concern mankind, although not to the same degree at different stages of development.” Marx points out that, “among the ancient Germans the size of a piece of land was measured according to the labor of a day; hence the acre was called *Tagwerk*, *Tagwanne* (*jurnale*, or *terra jurnal*is, or *diornalis*), *Mannwerk*, *Mannskraft*, *Mannsmaad*, *Mannshauet*, etc.,” p. 164.

externalities, which do not enter into the constitution of the action. And the fact that changes of object and instrument *do* affect evaluative and temporal judgments shows that these “conditions” are internal to what is done.

The point is that not all of the “conditions” of an action are equal. Water must be mentioned in an account of what it is to swim: swimming is a certain sort of locomotion *through water*. As water is to swimming, and air is to flying, and solid ground is to walking, some set of conditions is to every physical action. Such conditions are internal to an action and are definitive of what is done.<sup>39</sup>

Thus, my constant comparison of an action to a material substance is not a mere analogy. The objects we deal with when we act have both parts and species. It is because they do, and because action is constituted by the objects dealt with, that actions, too, have parts and species. This does not mean that the structure of action is somehow derivative of the structure of things, but only that it is no coincidence, and it should not surprise us, if the will and the world have a similar constitution.

### 5.9.3 The Mutual Dependence of Parts and Species

If my aim is, as it often is, to get something to eat, and if I have decided to make myself an omelet, this is not the end of my deliberation. In order to bring my end within reach, it is not enough to bring it downward from the genus; I must also bring it backward from the finale. For I have to determine what to do *now*. And this is the question how to begin. In order to complete my deliberation, I must resolve my action into parts, which are bound together in a temporal frame. Making an omelet

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<sup>39</sup>This is why the opening sentence of Faulkner’s novel *The Sound and the Fury* is unintelligible: “Through the fence, between the curling flower spaces, I could see them hitting.” Hitting what? With what? The paragraph continues: “They were coming toward where the flag was and I went along the fence. Luster was hunting in the grass by the flower tree. They took the flag out, and they were hitting. Then they put the flag back and they went to the table, and he hit and the other hit. Then they went on, and I went along the fence. Luster came away from the flower tree and we went along the fence and they stopped and we stopped and I looked through the fence while Luster was hunting in the grass.” It is not until second paragraph that the reader is told what the “hitting” is all about. What the man hit was: a golf ball. What he hit it with was: a club.

has a plot—it has a beginning, a middle and end—and I must see to it that the first things are done first. If the first step in making the omelet is to get some eggs and break them, then this is also the first step in getting something to eat.

These two deliberative movements—downward from the genus, and backward from the finale—are mutually dependent. On the one hand, the decomposition of an action into parts always presupposes a certain degree of specification. Obviously, what I should do first depends on whether I am making an omelet or stealing a loaf of bread. On the other hand, the parts into which an action is resolved are themselves in need of further specification. All of the deliberative questions raised by *getting food* are raised anew by *getting eggs*.

Since the act of deliberation mirrors the act of rationalization, the interrelation of parts and species can also be seen in answers to the question “Why?” Someone might ask me why I am taking the eggs from the refrigerator, and I might tell him, “I’m making an omelet,” effecting a movement from part to whole. But then he might ask, “Why are you making an omelet?” and I might at this point change direction, explaining my action, not by reference to a still more encompassing whole, but instead by reference to something more general: “Oh, I just wanted to fix myself something to eat.” Or, again, it may be that I am running from A to B because I am running from A to C (part-whole), and also that I am running from A to C because I am exercising (species-genus).

#### **5.9.4 The Ineliminability of Species**

But is the purposive relation between a species and its genus one that belongs to intentional action as such? I argued above, in Section 5.8.3, that every intentional action is either itself a whole comprising parts, or part of such a whole, or partner to another part. What is done is such as to stand in one of these relations to something else that is also done. The part-whole relation is, therefore, an ineliminable feature of the purposive structure of action.

But I also pointed out that not *every* distinctive purposive relation has the same fundamental importance.<sup>40</sup> No one is likely to say, I think, that the relation between a brute means and a conventional end belongs to the essence of action. For huge swaths of our practical life are unrelated to custom, and transpire entirely at the level of the “brute.” Things like walking, lifting, pushing and eating are not themselves conventional; nor are they typically done for the sake of something that is. This is not to say that e.g. eating something is all the same whether it is done by a mere animal or a human being. On the other hand, it is certainly no coincidence that much of what we do is describable in terms of animal movement. And the actions of ours that are so describable seemingly form a foundation, or base, upon which is built the superstructure of convention. Or so one might think. In any case, the question before us now is whether the species-genus relation is, like the part-whole relation, basic, or foundational.

We may begin by observing that the virtues, and the moral law, are traditionally thought to provide an agent with general ends—with ends that are satisfied, if at all, by doing something quite specific. And many philosophers still believe that it is constitutive of action that it may be done for the sake of, e.g., doing what is just, or treating someone as an end in herself. If that is in fact the case, then, certainly, the purposive relation between a species and its genus must be counted as fundamental. But, clearly, this is not decisive. Many philosophers deny that there is any internal relation between the nature of an action and ethical ends. For all we know, there might be practically rational creatures whose only ends are appetitive. (Some believe

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<sup>40</sup>Arguably, it is possible to do something general for the sake of something more specific. If it were prophesied that a newborn child would eventually dethrone the king, but the king did not know *which* child, he might order the death of every single one. Just to be safe. Similarly, one might perform a “whole” action for the sake of doing a “part” of it. One might go all the way from A to C for the sake of going some shorter distance, from A to B. For example, if I want to leap over a puddle, I might leap a distance that is twice as long as the puddle itself. Just to be safe. I submit without argument that the relation between part and whole is obviously more fundamental than that between whole and part, and that the relation between species and genus is likewise more fundamental than that between genus and species. But, so far as I can see, nothing much depends on the question, either way.

that *we* are such creatures.)

But this only reminds us that a wolf may hunt a rabbit for the sake of getting something to eat, and that so of course may I. Appetite sets one general ends to be satisfied by specific means. The end might be *to get some food* and the means might be *to pick a peach*, or, again, *to snare a hare*. And what could be more fundamental, for a practically rational creature, than the sort of connection contained in the thought that extracting the sap of a certain desert cactus is a way of procuring something to drink, or that one might get rid of an unwelcome snake by prodding it with a stick, or that inclement weather could be kept away by finding, or building, some kind of shelter?

But let us prescind from ethical life, from animal movement, and from appetite. Let us, in fact, deny ourselves the whole material world, and consider the matter from a purely geometrical perspective. Between any two points are an infinite number of lines, the shortest of which is straight. From this it follows that even one of the angels, if it travels through space, or an organless, motorless, extensionless dot, must proceed along some path or other as it “moves” to its destination. A continuous line is not, after all, its whence and whither alone, but also the way between them; and it is one way among many. Thus, despite the austerity of our starting-point, we arrive at the same conclusion: that decisions must be made—to go this way or that; by one route or another. The very idea of a line contains *both* the contrast between a whole and its parts *and* the contrast between a genus and its species—a fact which shows how thoroughly the one depends upon the other.

At this point, returning to the world of movement proper, and to animal life, we may avail ourselves of the obvious fact that, in the central cases of intentional action, a human being must move herself, or something else, from one place to another. In doing so, she must necessarily move in some specific way for the sake of moving at all.

## 5.10 THE FORM OF AN ACTION

I began this chapter by asking about the form of an action. There is, as I said, no such thing as “acting” in general, but only, for example, opening a jar or reading a magazine. Doing something is always doing one thing or another, as an organism is always, say, an owl or a whale. Life and action have in common that we find them only in their concrete forms. But what stands to an action as a life-form stands to a living thing? What is an action-form?

A general answer can now be given. The form of an action is *what* is done when someone acts intentionally. As we have seen, what is done on any occasion is, in fact, many things, but many things that hang together in one purposive system. This is a system of ends and means, and is governed by two main principles: that the part should be done for the sake of the whole, and the species for the genus. So an action-form is what rationalizes the parts and species of it, and what, in turn, is rationalized by that of which it is a part or species.

But such a system of ends and means also has a temporal structure. It divides into successive phases—into a beginning, a middle and an end. That it so divides itself depends on its having a definite form. It is impossible to judge that someone is just getting started, or half-way through, almost finishing with what he is doing, except insofar as one has an idea of *what* he is doing. An action-form is what makes it possible to think of an action as being under way.

On the one hand, an action’s form is that with a view to which its parts and species are rationalized, or represented as good; on the other hand, it is that with a view to which the action itself is seen to be progressing. But these two points are intimately related. For, recall, doing one thing can be a means to doing another only if it advances the other’s progress. Thus, what rationalizes a part of an action, or a species of it, is its contribution to the progress of the action to which it belongs.

To describe an action’s purposive and temporal unity is to give an account, how-

ever incomplete, of the reason-requesting sense of the question “Why?” and of the corresponding question “How?” For it is to give a general description of any possible answer to these questions. And that, according to Anscombe, is the task of the philosopher of action.



## 6.0 CONCLUDING REMARKS ON PRACTICAL THOUGHT

What has been said up to now lies open to the objection that a mere unthinking brute—a dog, for example, trotting along a fence—does many things at once, and one for the sake of another. A dog may go a little way for the sake of going a longer way, doing something partial for the sake of something whole. And a dog may trot to its destination simply in order to get there, doing something specific for the sake of something general. Here, too, one thing is done to advance the progress of another. Here, too, is a system of ends and means. It may therefore seem that all we have managed to isolate is the field of animal movement; whereas, presumably, the philosophy of action has a narrower concern.<sup>1,2</sup> What we mean by “action,” and aim

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<sup>1</sup>Anscombe sees animal movement as coming within the scope of her topic in *Intention*, (1963); see pp. 68–69, 84–87. See also “Under a Description,” (1979).

<sup>2</sup>Thompson acknowledges that his own account, in “Naive Action Theory,” applies to the “action” of sub-rational animals: “Of course, this particular etiological relation of happenings to an imperfectly present over-arching process—the relation that constitutes the unity of such happenings with one another in an intentional action, though it can also extend beyond it—cannot be supposed possible except where the agent’s thoughts have come potentially to subserve it. It may be, then, that our formula “explanation by the imperfective” can stand only as the isolation of a genus, and that the specific difference of straightforward rationalization will emerge properly only with its intellectual aspect. This last, though, is a matter I have put outside the scope of the present essay,” *Ibid.*, pp. 132–133. Thompson continues in a footnote: “In defense of this we may note that it is presumably only because its exercises can be supposed somehow to subserve this sort of development and its articulation into narrower subordinate processes that a capacity can be characterized as a capacity for thought at all. If this is right, then the questions, (i), how thought figures in rationalization, and (ii), what thought is, can in any case not be handled independently. Alternate forms of ‘explanation by the imperfective’ might be found in connection with the operations of sub-rational animals, of course, and even, but in another way, in the operations of plants and of the parts of plants and animals alike. The philosophers’ emphasis on ‘teleological explanation,’ which is really a limiting case of this sort of account, inclines us to overlook it,” *Ibid.*, p. 133, n. 16.

to understand, is something unavailable to a mere unthinking brute—and precisely because it *is* unthinking. In that case, one wants to know: What is the role of the agent's thought?

The question is especially pressing in view of the overall argument of this essay. In Chapter 4, I claimed that the agent herself must recognize that what she is doing is an action, if, indeed, it is one. She need not possess the predicate "... is an action"; but she must grasp a certain sense of the question "Why?," and she must see what she is doing as subject to that question. The relevant sense of the question was discussed in Chapter 5. That discussion was meant to explain what is it to think of an event as an action. On the account given, to think of an event as an action is to think of it as a temporally-ordered system of ends and means. But this cannot be the whole story. For I have so far said nothing about the agent to whom the action belongs. As it stands, the account does not distinguish between, on the one hand, a person's thought that she herself is acting, and, on the other hand, her thought that someone else is. But the agent's thought of her own action clearly has a special importance. After all, to think that someone else is acting is, among other things, to think of her that she thinks of herself as acting.

So the account is not yet totally complete. On the other hand, though, there is not very much to add; in fact, there is only this: that the temporally-ordered system of ends and means, which is a person's action, is one whose inner structure the agent herself apprehends. We have already seen that what the agent is doing, in the course of acting intentionally, is many things at once, all of which are intentional, and each for the sake of the others. But the agent's various ends and means are not connected behind her back: she herself can see the connection—in fact, it is she who connects them. Of each thing she is doing, she thinks that she is doing it: of each means, that it is a means; and of each end, that it is an end. If something done is partial, and done for the sake of something whole, this is what she thinks it is, and why she thinks she is doing it. And if it is specific, and done for something general, this, too,

is what she thinks. The entire system is thought to have the very structure it does have. And the agent's thought is the ligament that holds it all together.

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This, then, is the answer to the question what it is to think that one is acting. To think that one is acting is to apprehend the purposive unity of all that one is doing in the course of performing an intentional action.

One might complain that, far from answering the original question, I have simply multiplied it. For I have said, in effect, that in order to think that something I am doing is an intentional action, I must think that something else I am doing is *also* an intentional action; and, moreover, I must think of them as standing in some purposive relation. And, one might say, if the question is how I can think of *one* thing as intentionally done, the answer had better not be that I must think of *two* things as intentionally done.

But why not? After all, this just reflects the inner complexity of the action itself. It came out in Chapter 5 that to do *one* thing intentionally is in fact to do *many* things intentionally, all of which are purposively related. The suggestion now is merely that what is done, on the one hand, and the agent's thought of it, on the other, have exactly the same complexity.

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We are in any case very far from the idea, mooted in Chapter 4, that what is done under a description like "sliding on ice" or "destroying a spider's web" is the same, whether it is a mere event or an action. It was this idea, recall, that seemed to open up a gap between what is done—at least, in a *typical* case of intentional action—and the agent's thought of what is done. Hume observed that there is no such gap if the action in question is making a promise, or getting married: one cannot do such a thing unless one thinks that one is doing it. And this was the source of the circle he found: that we cannot explain what is done, before we explain what is thought to be

done; and we cannot explain what is thought to be done, before we explain what is done. But this can look—and did look to Hume—to be an exception, and not the rule. One might suppose—and Hume apparently did—that *most* things that can be done intentionally, and thus thinkingly, can also be done unthinkingly, whether by a human being, a dog, or a stone: for example, sliding on ice, or destroying a spider’s web. Moreover, one might suppose—as again Hume apparently did—that whatever can be done unthinkingly can also be explained by reference to its unthinking instances. In that case, what is done will not always, or even typically, give rise to a Humean Circle.

I raised the question whether promising and getting married really are exceptional forms of action in virtue of their dependence on thought. In particular, I questioned the presupposition that what is done under a syncategorematic description is the same, regardless of its category. At a minimum, I pointed out, their being the same does not *follow* from their having the same description. So one cannot just take it for granted. What is done by a child, intentionally, with a stick, and what is done by a sudden gust of wind, may both be described as “destroying a spider’s web.” To determine whether the same thing is done by the child and by the wind, it was necessary to consider what is done when a person acts.

On the account I have since given, the thought-dependence of promising and marrying is not at all exceptional. What is done intentionally, and thus thinkingly, is *never* done unthinkingly. For what is done intentionally has a particular kind of temporally-ordered purposive structure. And that which does not have this structure is not the same as it, no matter how it is described.

A stone, skirting across a frozen pond, is certainly doing many things at once; but none of them are ends, and none of them are means. It will certainly go a little way before it goes a longer way; but it will not do the former for the sake of doing the latter. And while it will go from here to there, it will not slide there in order to get there. What is done by a stone under the description “sliding on ice,” or by a

wind under the description “destroying a spider’s web,” is not a system of ends and means.

Unlike a stone, or the wind, a dog has ends and means, of a sort. But they cannot be of the same sort as those of a person who is acting intentionally. For what is done by a dog is not such as to be understood *by the dog* as done for the sake of, or by means of, what else the dog is doing. Its ends and means are joined, so to speak, behind its back. It does not think the system together. What is done by the dog is, thus, not action proper.

Then every form of action is a form, specifically, of action. In virtue of its inner constitution, what is done intentionally—whatever it is: whether it is making a promise, or crossing the street, or sliding on ice—is different from anything else that happens. Whatever it is, there are no unintentional instances of *it*; and *it* is never done unthinkingly. In that case, a person cannot be doing it, unless she thinks she is doing it. And this is the circumstance that Hume identified. On the one hand, we cannot understand what it is to do the thing, until we understand what it is to think that this is what one is doing. On the other hand, we cannot grasp the content of such a thought, until we know what it is to do the thing. Thus, the Humean Circle must arise with respect to any form of action, any object of intention, anything one might have a mind to do.

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In saying, as I have, that a brute does not apprehend the connection between the various things it is doing, I do not take myself to be explaining anything, but only to be availing myself of something that everyone knows already. It is, I take it, common ground that action proper *is* such in virtue of the fact that a person does it thoughtfully. Thoughtful action is what action theory is a theory of. What I have wanted to say is that this thoughtfulness—which everyone admits is special, and is not to be found in the life of a dog—is constitutive of action, and not just an accoutrement. The agent’s thought does not stand outside what is done, as a mere psychological cause: it is as

it were the connective tissue that holds an action together from within, and without which it would disintegrate.

One point of this maneuver is to relocate certain topics in the philosophy of action. The interest of things like “practical knowledge,” “practical reasons” and “practical reasoning” is often thought to be that they stand in some important but external relation to action. And that is a very different conception from the one presented here. Following Anscombe and Thompson, I tried to redirect attention back to the action itself, and to its inner structure. If this structure is represented in the agent’s own thought, then action and its representation cannot be separated in the usual way. For “practical knowledge,” “practical reasons” and “practical reasoning” in fact constitute what such knowledge is of, what such reasons are for, and what such reasoning is about. On this conception, action is permeated with practical thought, so that interest in such thought is identical with an interest in its object.

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