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. According to causal theories of the nature of action, which currently represent the most widely followed approach to the understanding of this contrast, the essential difference between events of the two types is to be found in their prior causal histories; a bodily movement is an action if and only if it results from antecedents of a certain kind. Different versions of the causal approach may provide differing accounts of the sorts of events or states which must figure causally in the production of actions. The tenet they characteristically share is that it is both necessary and sufficient, in order to determine whether an event is an action, to consider how it was brought about.

Despite its popularity, I believe that the causal approach is inherently implausible and that it cannot provide a satisfactory analysis of the nature of action. I do not mean to suggest that actions have no causes; they are as likely to have causes, I suppose, as other events are. My claim is rather that it is no part of the nature of an action to have a prior causal history of any particular kind. From the fact that an event is an action, in my view, it does not follow even that it has a cause or causes at all, much less that it has causal antecedents of any specific type.

In asserting that the essential difference between actions and mere happenings lies in their prior causal histories, causal theories imply that actions and mere happenings do not differ essentially in themselves at all. These theories hold that the causal sequences producing actions are necessarily of a different type than those producing mere happenings, but that the effects produced by sequences of the two types are inherently indistinguishable. They are therefore committed to supposing that a person who knows he is in the midst of performing an action cannot have derived this knowledge from any awareness of what is currently happening, but that he must have derived it instead from his understanding of how what is happening was caused to happen by certain earlier conditions. It is integral to the causal approach to regard actions and mere happenings as being differentiated by nothing that exists or that is going on at the time those events occur, but by something quite extrinsic to them—a difference at an earlier time among another set of events entirely.

This is what makes causal theories implausible. They direct attention exclusively away from the events whose natures are at issue, and away from the times at which they occur. The result is that it is beyond their scope to stipulate that a person must be in some particular relation to the movements of his body during the period of time in which he is presumed to be performing an action. The only conditions they insist upon as distinctively constitutive of action may cease to obtain, for all the causal accounts demand, at precisely the moment when the agent commences to act. They require nothing of an agent, once the specified causal antecedents of his performing an action have occurred, except that his body move as their effect.

It is no wonder that such theories characteristically run up against counterexamples of a well-known type. For example: a man at a party intends to spill what is in his glass because he wants to signal his confederates to begin a robbery and he believes, in virtue of their prearrangements, that spilling what is in his glass will accomplish that; but all this leads the man to be very anxious, his anxiety makes his hand tremble, and so his glass spills. No matter what kinds of causal antecedents are designated as necessary and sufficient for the occurrence of an action, it is easy to show that causal antecedents of that kind may have as their effect an event that is manifestly not an action but a mere bodily movement. The spilling in the example given has among its causes a desire and a belief, which rationalise the man’s spilling what is in his glass, but the spilling as it occurs is not an action. That example makes trouble particularly for a causal theory in which actions are construed as essentially movements whose causes are desires and beliefs by which they are rationalised. Similar counterexamples can readily be generated to make similar trouble for other variants of the causal approach.
I shall not examine the various maneuvers by means of which causal theorists have attempted to cope with these counterexamples.¹ In my judgment causal theories are unavoidably vulnerable to such counterexamples, because they locate the distinctively essential features of action exclusively in states of affairs which may be past by the time the action is supposed to occur. This makes it impossible for them to give any account whatever of the most salient differentiating characteristic of action: during the time a person is performing an action he is necessarily in touch with the movements of his body in a certain way, whereas he is necessarily not in touch with them in that way when movements of his body are occurring without his making them. A theory that is limited to describing causes prior to the occurrences of actions and of mere bodily movements cannot possibly include an analysis of these two ways in which a person may be related to the movements of his body. It must inevitably leave open the possibility that a person, whatever his involvement in the events from which his action arises, loses all connection with the movements of his body at the moment when his action begins.

II

In order to develop a more promising way of thinking about action, let us consider the notion that actions and mere happenings are indistinguishable in themselves. This notion is an important element in the motivation for causal theories. If it were thought that actions and mere happenings differ inherently, then it would be obvious that the way to explicate how they differ would be by identifying this inherent difference between them. It is because causal theorists think that there is no other way to differentiate between actions and mere happenings that they seek a differentiating difference among the events that precede them.

David Pears, who believes that desires play an essential causal role in the production of actions, makes this explicit:

We simply do not possess the general ability to distinguish between those bodily movements which are actions and those which are mere bodily movements without using as a criterion the presence or absence of the relevant desire. . . . It is true that there are various intrinsic characteristics of bodily movements which do give some indication of their classification. For example, a very complicated movement was probably produced by a desire. But . . . the simplicity of a movement does not even make it probable that it was not produced by a desire.

Because we cannot find any inherent characteristic of action which permits us to distinguish it reliably from mere bodily movement, we must therefore, in Pears’ view, “classify some bodily movements as actions solely by virtue of their origins.”²

Pears observes correctly that the movements of a person’s body do not definitively reveal whether he is performing an action: the very same movements may occur when an action is being performed or when a mere happening is occurring. It does not follow from this, however, that the only way to discover whether or not a person is acting is by considering what was going on before his movements began—that is, by considering the causes from which they originated. In fact, the state of affairs while the movements are occurring is far more pertinent. What is not merely pertinent but decisive, indeed, is to consider whether or not the movements as they occur are under the person’s guidance. It is this that determines whether he is performing an action. Moreover, the question of whether or not movements occur under a person’s guidance is not a matter of their antecedents. Events are caused to occur by preceding states of affairs, but an event cannot be guided through the course of its occurrence at a temporal distance.

It is worth noticing that Pears is mistaken when he concedes that very complicated movements, though they may possibly be mere happenings, are probably to be classified as actions. The complicated movements of a pianist’s hands and fingers do, to be sure, compellingly suggest that they are not mere happenings. Sometimes, however, complexity may quite as compellingly suggest the likelihood of mere bodily movement. The thrashings about of a per-

¹ For discussion of the problem by adherents to the causal approach, cf. Alvin Goldman, *A Theory of Human Action* (Princeton, 1970), pp. 61–63; Donald Davidson, “Freedom to Act,” in T. Honderich (ed.), *Essays on Freedom of Action* (London, 1973), pp. 155–154; Richard Foley, “Deliberate Action,” *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 86 (1977), pp. 58–69. Goldman and Davidson evidently believe that the problem of avoiding the counterexamples is an empirical one, which is appropriately to be passed on to scientists. Foley’s “solution” renounces the obligation to provide suitable analysis in another way: he specifies conditions for acting and, when he recognises that they may be met by spasms and twitches, he simply declares that such movements are nonetheless actions if they satisfy his conditions.

son’s body during an epileptic seizure, for example, are very complicated movements. But their complexity is of a kind which makes it appear unlikely to us that the person is performing an action.

When does complexity of movement suggest action, and when does it suggest its absence? This depends, roughly speaking, upon whether the movements in question cohere in creating a pattern which strikes us as meaningful. When they do, as in the case of the pianist, we find it difficult to imagine that the movements would have occurred, in just those complicated ways required by the meaningful pattern they have created, unless the pianist had been guiding his hands and fingers as they moved. In the epileptic’s case, on the other hand, we find it unlikely that a person would have created such an incoherently complicated pattern if he had been guiding his body through its movements. A person’s simple movements, as Pears notes, generally suggest neither an action nor a mere happening. This is because their patterns do not ordinarily strike us as being in themselves either meaningful or incoherent. They do not present us on their faces with any indication of whether or not they are being guided by the person as they occur.

Complexity of body movement suggests action only when it leads us to think that the body, during the course of its movement, is under the agent’s guidance. The performance of an action is accordingly a complex event, which is comprised by a bodily movement and by whatever state of affairs or activity constitutes the agent’s guidance of it. Given a bodily movement which occurs under a person’s guidance, the person is performing an action regardless of what features of his prior causal history account for the fact that this is occurring. He is performing an action even if its occurrence is due to chance. And he is not performing an action if the movements are not under his guidance as they proceed, even if he himself provided the antecedent causes—in the form of beliefs, desires, intentions, decisions, volitions, or whatever—from which the movement has resulted.

III

When we act, our movements are purposive. This is merely another way of saying that their course is guided. Many instances of purposive movement are not, of course, instances of action. The dilation of the pupils of a person’s eyes when the light fades, for example, is a purposive movement; there are mechanisms which guide its course. But the occurrence of this movement does not mark the performance of an action by the person; his pupils dilate, but he does not dilate them. This is because the course of the movement is not under his guidance. The guidance in this case is attributable only to the operation of some mechanism with which he cannot be identified.

Let us employ the term “intentional” for referring to instances of purposive movement in which the guidance is provided by the agent. We may say, then, that action is intentional movement. The notion of intentional movement must not be confused with that of intentional action. The term “intentional action” may be used, or rather mis-used, simply to convey that an action is necessarily a movement whose course is under an agent’s guidance. When it is used in this way, the term is pleonastic. In a more appropriate usage, it refers to actions which are undertaken more or less deliberately or self-consciously—that is, to actions which the agent intends to perform. In this sense, actions are not necessarily intentional.

When a person intends to perform an action, what he intends is that certain intentional movements of his body should occur. When these movements do occur, the person is performing an intentional action. It might be said that he is then guiding the movements of his body in a certain way (thus, he is acting), and that in doing so he is guided by and fulfilling his intention to do just that (thus, he is acting intentionally). There appears to be nothing in the notion of an intentional movement which implies that its occurrence must be intended by the agent, either by way of forethought or by way of self-conscious assent. If this is correct, then actions (i.e., intentional movements) may be performed either intentionally or not.

Since action is intentional movement, or behavior whose course is under the guidance of an agent, an explication of the nature of action must deal with two distinct problems. One is to explain the notion of guided behavior. The other is to specify when the guidance of behavior is attributable to an agent and not simply, as when a person’s pupils dilate because the light fades, to some local process going on within the agent’s body. The first problem concerns the conditions under which behavior is purposive, while the second concerns the conditions under which purposive behavior is intentional.

The driver of an automobile guides the movement of his vehicle by acting: he turns the steering wheel, he depresses the accelerator, he applies the brakes,
and so on. Our guidance of our movements, while we are acting, does not similarly require that we perform various actions. We are not at the controls of our bodies in the way a driver is at the controls of his automobile. Otherwise action could not be conceived, upon pain of generating an infinite regress, as a matter of the occurrence of movements which are under an agent's guidance. The fact that our movements when we are acting are purposive is not the effect of something we do. It is a characteristic of the operation at that time of the systems we are.

Behavior is purposive when its course is subject to adjustments which compensate for the effects of forces which would otherwise interfere with the course of the behavior, and when the occurrence of these adjustments is not explainable by what explains the state of affairs that elicits them. The behavior is in that case under the guidance of an independent causal mechanism, whose readiness to bring about compensatory adjustments tends to ensure that the behavior is accomplished. The activity of such a mechanism is normally not, of course, guided by us. Rather it is, when we are performing an action, our guidance of our behavior. Our sense of our own agency when we act is nothing more than the way it feels to us when we are somehow in touch with the operation of mechanisms of this kind, by which our movements are guided and their course guaranteed.

Explaining purposive behavior in terms of causal mechanisms is not tantamount to propounding a causal theory of action. For one thing, the pertinent activity of these mechanisms is not prior to but concurrent with the movements they guide. But in any case it is not essential to the purposiveness of a movement that it actually be causally affected by the mechanism under whose guidance the movement proceeds. A driver whose automobile is coasting downhill in virtue of gravitational forces alone may be entirely satisfied with its speed and direction, and so he may never intervene to adjust its movement in any way. This would not show that the movement of the automobile did not occur under his guidance. What counts is that he was prepared to intervene if necessary, and that he was in a position to do so more or less effectively. Similarly, the causal mechanisms which stand ready to affect

the course of a bodily movement may never have occasion to do so; for no negative feedback of the sort that would trigger their compensatory activity may occur. The behavior is purposive not because it results from causes of a certain kind, but because it would be affected by certain causes if the accomplishment of its course were to be jeopardized.

IV

Since the fact that certain causes originate an action is distinct from the considerations in virtue of which it is an action, there is no reason in principle why a person may not be caused in a variety of different ways to perform the same action. This is important in the analysis of freedom. It is widely accepted that a person acts freely only if he could have acted otherwise. Apparent counterexamples to this principle — “the principle of alternate possibilities” — are provided, however, by cases that involve a certain kind of overdetermination. In these cases a person performs an action entirely for his own reasons, which inclines us to regard him as having performed it freely; but he would otherwise have been caused to perform it by forces alien to his will, so that he cannot actually avoid acting as he does.

Thus, suppose a man takes heroin because he enjoy its effects and considers them to be beneficial. But suppose further that he is unknowingly addicted to the drug, and hence that he will be driven to take it in any event, even if he is not led to do so by his own beliefs and attitudes. Then it seems that he takes the drug freely, that he could not have done otherwise than to take it, and that the principle of alternate possibilities is therefore false.

Donald Davidson argues to the contrary that whereas a person does intentionally what he does for his own reasons, he does not do intentionally what alien forces cause him to do. While the movements of his body may be the same in both cases, Davidson maintains that the person is not performing an action when the movements occur apart from pertinent attitudes and beliefs. Someone who has acted freely might have done the same thing even if he had not been moved on his own to do it, but only in the sense that his body might have made the same movements: “he would not have acted

\[1\] A useful discussion of this way of understanding purposive behavior is provided by Ernest Nagel, “Goal-directed Processes in Biology,” *The Journal of Philosophy,* vol. 74 (1977), pp. 271ff. The details of the mechanisms in virtue of which some item of behavior is purposive can be discovered, of course, only by empirical investigation. But specifying the conditions which any such mechanism must meet is a philosophical problem, belonging to the analysis of the notion of purposive behavior.

intentionally had the attitudinal conditions been absent.” Even in the “overdetermined” cases, then, something rests with the agent: “not . . . what he does (when described in a way that leaves open whether it was intentional), but whether he does it intentionally.”

The issue here is not, as Davidson suggests at one point, whether a person’s action can be intentional when alien forces rather than his own attitudes account for what he does. It is whether his behavior can be intentional in those circumstances. Now the behavior of the unknowing addict is plainly as intentional when he is caused to take the drug by the compulsive force of his addiction, as it is when he takes it as a matter of free choice. His movements are not mere happenings, when he takes the drug because he cannot help himself. He is then performing the very same action that he would have performed had he taken the drug freely and with the illusion that he might have done otherwise.

This example is not designed to show that Davidson is mistaken in insisting that there can be no action without intentionality, or in the absence of pertinent attitudinal conditions. Even when the addict is driven to do what he does, after all, his behavior is presumably affected both by his craving for the drug and by his belief that the procedure he follows in taking it will bring him relief. His movements, as he sticks the syringe into his arm and pushes the plunger, are certainly intentional. However, the relevant problem is not whether an action can occur apart from attitudinal conditions. It is whether it is possible that an action should be caused by alien forces alone.

This will seem to be impossible only if it is thought that an action must have attitudinal conditions among its causes. But it is not essential to an action that it have an antecedent causal history of any particular kind. Even if there can be no action in the absence of certain attitudinal conditions, therefore, it is not as prior causes that these conditions are essential. The example bears upon the point that is actually at issue, by illustrating how an action (including, of course, any requisite attitudinal constituents) may have no causes other than non-attitudinal or alien ones. Thus it confirms the falsity of the principle of alternate possibilities, by showing that a person may be caused by alien forces alone to perform an action which he might also perform on his own.

The example also suggests, by the way, that the attitudinal conditions of a person’s action may themselves be alien to him. There is no reason to assume that an addict who succumbs unwillingly to his craving finally adopts as his own the desire he has tried to resist. He may in the end merely submit to it with resignation, like a man who knows he is beaten and who therefore despairingly accepts the consequences defeat must bring him, rather than like someone who decides to join with or to incorporate forces which he had formerly opposed. There are also obsessional and delusional beliefs—e.g., “If I step on a crack it will break my mother’s back”—which a person may know to be false but whose influence he cannot escape. So even if it were true (which it is not) that every action necessarily has attitudinal conditions among its antecedent causes, it might nonetheless be alien forces alone which bring it about that a person performs an action.

The assertion that someone has performed an action entails that his movements occurred under his guidance, but not that he was able to keep himself from guiding his movements as he did. There are occasions when we act against or independently of our wills. On other occasions, the guiding principle of our movements is one to which we are not merely resigned; rather, we have embraced it as our own. In such cases, we will ordinarily have a reason for embracing it. Perhaps, as certain philosophers would claim, our having a reason for acting may sometimes cause it to be the case that movements of our bodies are guided by us in a manner which reflects that reason. It is indisputable that a person’s beliefs and attitudes often have an important bearing upon how what he is doing is to be interpreted and understood; and it may be that they also figure at times in the causal explanations of his actions. The facts that we are rational and self-conscious substantially affect the character of our behavior and the ways in which our actions are integrated into our lives.

V

The significance to our actions of states and events which depend upon the exercise of our higher capacities should not lead us, however, to exaggerate the peculiarity of what human beings do. We are far from being unique either in the purposiveness of our behavior or in its intentionality. There is a tendency among philosophers to discuss the nature of action as though agency presupposes characteristics which cannot plausibly be attributed to

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members of species other than our own. But in fact the contrast between actions and mere happenings can readily be discerned elsewhere than in the lives of people. There are numerous agents besides ourselves, who may be active as well as passive with respect to the movements of their bodies.

Consider the difference between what goes on when a spider moves its legs in making its way along the ground, and what goes on when its legs move in similar patterns and with similar effect because they are manipulated by a boy who has managed to tie strings to them. In the first case the movements are not simply purposive, as the spider's digestive processes doubtless are. They are also attributable to the spider, who makes them. In the second case the same movements occur but they are not made by the spider, to whom they merely happen.

This contrast between two sorts of events in the lives of spiders, which can be observed in the histories of creatures even more benighted, parallels the more familiar contrast between the sort of event that occurs when a person raises his arm and the sort that occurs when his arm goes up without his raising it. Indeed, the two contrasts are the same. The differences they respectively distinguish are alike; and they have, as it were, the same point.

Each contrasts instances in which purposive behavior is attributable to a creature as agent and instances in which this is not the case.

This generic contrast cannot be explicated in terms of any of the distinctive higher faculties which characteristically come into play when a person acts. The conditions for attributing the guidance of bodily movements to a whole creature, rather than only to some local mechanism within a creature, evidently obtain outside of human life. Hence they cannot be satisfactorily understood by relying upon concepts which are inapplicable to spiders and their ilk. This does not mean that it must be illegitimate for an analysis of human agency to invoke concepts of more limited scope. While the general conditions of agency are unclear, it may well be that the satisfaction of these conditions by human beings depends upon the occurrence of events or states which do not occur in the histories of other creatures. But we must be careful that the ways in which we construe agency and define its nature do not conceal a parochial bias, which causes us to neglect the extent to which the concept of human action is no more than a special case of another concept whose range is much wider.

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