

ACTIONS: TOKENS AND KINDS

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In recent philosophy of action, it has become customary for philosophers to talk of actions “under a certain description”.⁽¹⁾ If on the road to Thebes Oedipus quarrels with a man and kills him, without knowing that the man is his father, then under the description “killing a man” Oedipus’s action is intentional, but under the description “killing his father” his action is unintentional.

We express this idea better as soon as we realize that an action is the doing of many things. One thing Oedipus does is kill a man; another thing he does is kill his father. The doing — his action — is a doing of (at least) these two kinds. We do not say that Oedipus’s killing of a man and Oedipus’s killing of his father are two actions; we say that his action — his doing — is a doing of (at least) these two kinds: manslaughter and patricide.

The beginning of progress in a proper understanding of actions is marked by an awareness of this very basic distinction between the particular events which are our doings on the one hand, and the things we do, or *what* we do, on the other. In this article I would like to show, by means of a few examples, why we must make this basic distinction.

In Alan Robbe-Grillet’s novel *La Jalousie*, one of the characters, Franck, crushes a centipede with his napkin on the terrace at dinner-time. Later on in the novel the same centipede reappears, this time in the narrator’s bedroom. Franck crushes it with a towel. Now if we ask about the two episodes “What did Franck do?”, the answer in both cases will be the same: “He crushed the centipede”. We know, however, that *two* crushings have occurred, the first on the terrace and with a napkin during dinner, the second in the bedroom and with a towel at night; and a compelling reason emerges for distinguishing people’s doings of things (their actions) from the things they do (action kinds).

If the idea of two crushings of the same centipede strikes us as preposterous, since we do not, outside fiction, encounter such bizarre

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1. Anscombe describes the phrase “under a description” as Aristotle’s “ ” in modern dress (Latin *qua*). G.E.M. Anscombe, “Under a Description”, *Noûs*, 13 (1979), p. 219.

occurrences, then we may think of two beatings of the same donkey, two recitations of the same sonnet, two climbings of the same ladder, and countless other such examples. In all these cases it would be true to say that the agent did the same thing but false to say that only one action occurred. *The thing he did* is the same on both occasions, but his *action* is not the same. He may be held responsible for the first climbing but not for the second, praised for today's recitation and criticized for yesterday's, punished for one beating and rewarded for the other, etc.

The same distinction between particular actions and action-kinds is forced upon us if we consider such expressions as "He did the same thing as you". Here what we are saying is that the same action-kind subsumes both his action and yours; or (which is the same) that your action and his are of the same kind.⁽²⁾

Just as there can be two particular actions (e.g. mine and yours) of the same kind (as when I do the same thing as you), so, and conversely, one and the same action may be of different kinds. If I alert the prowler by turning on the light, clearly I have done (at least) two things. One thing I've done is turn on the light; another thing I've done is alert the prowler. My action is of these two kinds. But an answer to the question "How many things did I do?" tells me nothing about the number of actions (i.e. particular doings) that were mine.

We should gather further evidence for our distinction between particular actions and action-kinds if we consider a problem which many philosophers have set themselves, namely the problem of agency. Some philosophers have sought to establish criteria of agency by focusing on the specific behaviour of action verbs. Kenny defines a verb of action as

"a verb which may occur as the main verb in the answer to a question of the form 'what did A do?'"⁽³⁾

This procedure is confusing, for two reasons:

1) it is misleading to try to characterize *action-verbs* like this. Q. What did he do? A. He fell asleep. He trembled with fear. He sneezed. He blinked. He sweated. Although they occur as the main verb in the answers to Kenny's question, "fell asleep", "trembled with fear", "sneezed", "blinked", "sweated" do not (normally anyway)⁽⁴⁾ report an action. Not all doings are actions; and so not all verbs which report a doing are action-verbs.

2. "For if there are particular actions, then it is surely a sufficient condition of difference that one action is yours, another mine". J. Hornsby, "Actions and Identities", *Analysis*, 39/4, October 1979, p. 200.

3. A. Kenny, *Action, Emotion and Will*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963, p. 154.

4. Can I sneeze intentionally? Well, I can intentionally cause myself to sneeze (e.g. by sniffing pepper). But might not someone also have the ability to sneeze at will, just as some actors have

2) It is misleading to characterize *actions* via action-verbs. To know whether an action occurred we must know more than that the main verb (which occurs in an answer to the question "What did he do?") is an action-verb. Let us call "hit" an action-verb (seeing that, unlike "sneezed", "sweated", "fell asleep", it does sometimes report an action). How can we tell whether "hit" in "Paul hit the lamp-post" reports an action? If Paul was pushed, fell, and hit the lamp-post, then "Paul hit the lamp-post", though true, would not report an action. We cannot tell, just by looking at the verb (even when it is a verb of action, as in this case), whether an action had occurred.⁽⁵⁾

There are exceptions. If we accuse a person of lying, or forging a document, or cheating, or murdering someone, then we are obviously imputing agency to the accused. If we are right, i.e. if our descriptions are correct, then (1) these verbs must report an action, and (2) the action must be known to the subject *under that description*.⁽⁶⁾ Otherwise we must be wrong, we have passed the wrong judgement: *either* because no action has occurred (the man's hand was forced: this is how his signature came to appear on the dotted line); or because the action was of another kind — not of the kind we said it was (the subject did not know the rules of the game, therefore he wasn't cheating; he did not intend to deceive, therefore he wasn't lying, etc.).⁽⁷⁾

But these are exceptions; and in the vast majority of cases we must discard grammatical criteria, or verb-lists, as indicators of agency. Davidson writes:

"In a host of cases a sentence can record an episode in the life of the agent and leave us in the dark as to whether it was an action".⁽⁸⁾

He gives these examples:

"He blinked, rolled out of bed, turned on the light, coughed, squinted, sweated, spilled the coffee, and tripped over the rug".⁽⁹⁾

the capacity to weep at will? Cp. Austin, "Doubtful, though not inexplicable", cases arise here, because of doubt as to how much is connoted by a putative description of a "physical" action. Can I pretend to cough? Shall I, if I produce a coughing noise, have actually coughed? Or is "to cough" different from "to deliberately cough"? "Pretending", *Philosophical Papers*, Oxford University Press, 3rd ed. 1979, p. 258, footnote 3. My claim is simply that, "normally anyway", "sneezed" does not report an action.

5. Compare Locke, J., *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), Book 'II, ch. xxi, and MacMurray, J., "What is Action?", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supp. Vol. 17 (1938), 69–85.

6. Neither of these two consequences follows from the truth of "he hit the lamp-post". Even if he was pushed, and even if he thought that what he had hit was a traffic-sign, the sentence "he hit the lamp-post" still correctly reports what happened when he fell.

7. See Anscombe, *Intention*, 2nd ed., Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1963, para. 47.

8. D. Davidson, "Agency", in *Essays on Actions and Events*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1980, p. 44.

9. *Ibid.*

In all these examples, *something* is always *done* by whoever is the subject of the particular verb. What he or she does is blink, roll out of bed, cough, squint, spill the coffee, etc. But, Davidson is suggesting, we do not always and necessarily have a corresponding action whenever we have a case of something done. Not all sentences which report that something was done, report that an action occurred. And in this way a new reason emerges for the recognition of doings beyond things done.