

## The “standard story” and some problems

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Wittgenstein’s question: “Let us not forget this: when ‘I raise my arm,’ my arm goes up. And the problem arises: What is left over if I subtract the fact that my arm goes up from the fact that I raise my arm?” (Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §621)

An arithmetic puzzle: Action (“I raise my arm”) = Bodily movement (“my arm goes up”) + x. Solve for x.

“Standard Story” of Action: Actions are bodily movements that are caused (in the right kind of way) and rationalized by an agent’s desire for something and her belief that moving her body in the relevant way will bring about what she desires.

### Some questions:

1. What is meant by the claim that actions *are* bodily movements?
2. What role does the qualification “caused *in the right kind of way*” play?
3. What is the standard story a story *about*?
  - a. Of what actions are?
  - b. Of what agency is, or involves?

### *§1: Bodily movements, basic actions, and agential control*

Davidson on “primitive” actions: “Our primitive actions, the ones we do not do by doing something else, mere movements of the body—these are all the actions there are. We never do more than move our bodies: the rest is up to nature.” (“Agency”, p.59 in Davidson 2001.)

Michael Smith on basic actions: “We begin by identifying some putative action that the agent performed by tracing its effects back to some bodily movement. This bodily movement has to be one that the agent knows how to perform, and it further has to be the case that his knowledge how to perform it isn’t explained by his knowledge how to do something else: in other words, it must be one that could be a basic action (Danto 1963; Davidson 1971 [“Agency”].)”

“Actions are bodily movements”: This claim does important work here.

1. Observation: A typical assumption is that only physical things or events can be observed. If this is true, then we do not really observe someone acting, rather what we see is a bodily movement. The bodily movement is observationally basic.

2. Basic action vs non-basic actions: The bodily movement functions as the most basic thing done, it is by doing this that we do other things.

E.g. When biking I can signal that I am going to turn by raising my arm. “Signalling” and “raising my arm” are both actions, but I do one *by* doing the other.

Non-basic action = Whatever is done by doing something else.

Basic action = Whatever is done by *not* doing anything else.

Arthur Danto: “A basic action is perfectly simple in the same way in the same sense in which the old ‘simple ideas’ were said to be: they were not compounded out of anything more elementary than themselves, but were the instead the ultimately simple elements out of which other ideas were compounded.” (Danto, “Basic Actions”, 1965, 147)

Bodily movements caused (in the right kind of way) by beliefs and desire are, or manifest, the fundamental occurrences of agency. If there is no bodily movement, then there is no action, since there is no event of which we can ask whether or not it was caused by a belief and desire pair.

A possible worry: refraining from smoking, ignoring a phone call, sitting still in an armchair. These seem to be actions, but they do not involve any particular bodily movement.

Michael Smith’s reply: “Sometimes, when you lean motionless against a wall, the orientation of your body is under your control. Your doing what you are doing is caused and sustained by some desire you have and the belief that you can get what you desire by leaning motionless against the wall. It is this feature of the orientation of your body – the fact that it is under your control in the sense of being sensitive, moment by moment, to your desires and means-end beliefs – that the standard story makes it an action, whether or not you happen to be actually moving.” (Smith “Four Objection to the standard story of action”, 2012, 389).

## §2: *Deviant cases*

Two types of deviant cases:

1. Weakness of will: The possibility of weakness of will (*akrasia*) suggests there must be more to the notion of “agential control” than a bodily movement or orientation being caused by a belief and a desire.
2. Deviant causal chains: Even when the right causal antecedent – a belief and a desire – are present, it seems possible that these cause something other than an action.

Davidson's mountain climber: "A climber might want to rid himself of the weight and danger of holding another man on a rope, and he might know that by loosening his hold on the rope he could rid himself of the weight and danger. This belief and want might so unnerve him as to cause him to loosen his hold, and yet it might be the case that he never *chose* to loosen his hold, nor did he do it intentionally. It will not help, I think, to add that the belief and the want must combine to cause him to want to loosen his hold, for there will remain the *two* questions *how* the belief and the want caused the second want, and *how* wanting to loosen his hold caused him to loosen his hold." (Davidson, "Freedom to act", reprinted in Davidson 2001, 79)"

Some options:

1. Accept that what happens is an unintentional action.
2. Claim that actions are bodily movement caused *in the right way*, but accept that we cannot specify what the right way is.
3. Try and supplement the standard story.

Differential sensitivity-condition: "*For a doing to be an action ... what the agent does must be differentially sensitive to the contents of this desire and beliefs* (Peacocke 1979). The movement of an agent's body is an action only if, in addition to having been caused by a suitable belief-desire pair, if the agent had a range of desires and beliefs that differ ever so slightly in their content from those he actually has, he would still have acted appropriately. ... What does the [different sensitivity requirement] guarantee? It guarantees ... that *someone who acts intentionally does indeed have and exercise the capacity to be instrumentally rational.*" (Smith, "The standard story of action: an exchange (1)", 2010, 53-54)

Questions: What is this capacity to be instrumentally rational? What is it to exercise such a capacity?

Is an exercise an action? Or something else?

Problem: Does the story leave the agent out of the picture? (cf. Hornsby 2004 = reading list # [73], Hornsby 2010 [75]) What role *should* an agent have in an account of action?

Some alternatives:

1. Adopt agent or substance causation over event causation.
  - a. Bishop, O'Connor, Lowe, Steward. (See reading list under §13)
2. Take intentional action as basic, and deny it can be further subjected to a causal explanation.
  - a. Levi [45]; Ford's article in [16].
3. Question the possibility of a causal account of action
  - a. Ford [88].