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Actions and Activity

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Contemporary literature in philosophy of action seems to be divided over the place of action in the natural causal world. I think that a disagreement about ontology underlies the division. I argue here that human action is properly understood only by reference to a category of process or activity, where this is not a category of particulars.

1

Those who tell the so-called standard story of action say that when a person has brought about an outcome she intended, the outcome was caused by a movement of the person's body which itself was caused by states of the person's mind—by 'beliefs and desires' that enter into a reason-explanation.¹ Human agency is then supposed to be fully accommodated in the natural world when the causality it involves is treated as *event-causality*. A capacious notion of *event* is evidently used when the story is told, given that the states of mind which are found in reason-explanations are here considered to be causes. Indeed those who subscribe to the physicalist picture in which the story belongs sometimes speak of 'events broadly understood', meaning to include processes or activities as well as states among the particulars which stand to one another in causal relations. When processes or activities are included, it is allowed that events may be extended in time—that an event may be or have been on-going. So causation is viewed as a matter of links between particulars, where the particulars may endure (as states presumably do) or take time to occur (as processes or activities presumably do).

One objection to this story is that it leaves out the agent. It need not be in dispute that if there has been an action, then some agent was in states of mind which could come into an explanation of why her body, or a part of it, has moved. Still, the role that an *agent* has played in her intended outcome's coming about has to be introduced if she is to be seen as having brought it about. I enlarged on the objection that the agent is left out of the standard story in Hornsby 2004. What I want to suggest here is that the agent is given her due only when it is acknowledged that she engages in activity, where no activity is any particular.

Suppose that an agent raises her arm and her arm goes up. Those who treat causation as always linking events (broadly understood) say that mental states of the agent cause an event of her raising her arm and an event of her arm's going up. They then face a dilemma. Is there only one event here caused by the mental states? Or does the event of her raising her arm cause the event of her arm's going up?

Evidently one cannot say *Yes* to both questions: if the raising event just is the arm's going up, then it is not a cause of the arm's going up. Yet there is pressure to say *Yes* to each of the questions.

It is very natural to identify someone's raising her arm with her arm's going up. When one sees what goes on when someone raises her arm, one cannot perceptually discriminate between her changing the position of her arm and the position of her arm's changing. Moreover if her raising of her arm did cause her arm's going up, then presumably it would be temporally prior to her arm's going up, and thus should be conceived as something which happens inside her from which her arm's going up ensues. And then, since an event of her raising her arm is an action (it is just one sort of 'bodily movement', which like any other bodily movement may have effects of various sorts), one would be driven to the general conclusion that actions occur inside the body. The conclusion is problematic, however, because it apparently renders actions invisible.² Of course there would be no such problem if the identity of the arm's raising with the arm's rising were allowed. But it seems that causality must be present on the occasion. The verb 'raise' is causative: it can be glossed, at least roughly, with 'cause to go up'; and it appears to be univocal. If causation is everywhere a relation between events, and the only events in question here are the raising of an arm and the arm's going up, then the causativity of 'raise' must be accommodated by saying that the event of her raising her arm causes the event of her arm's going up.

There is a way out of this dilemma. It is a way of respecting the natural thought that there is only one event here. In order to recognize causality as present on an occasion of someone's raising her arm, one needs to think of a person's raising her arm as a type of causal activity in which she engages. A person is engaged in such activity from the moment at which her arm starts to rise; and her arm is going up so long as she is engaged in it. This is because her arm's moving upward is what she is causing throughout the time that she raises her arm. The agent herself plays a causal role, and does so by virtue of causality's being internal to activity in which she engages.

Of course once the arm of someone who has raised her arm is up (up as far as she raised it), one may speak of an event of the arm's going up (up as far as it did). If one looks for the cause of this event, one may learn that the person was responsible for her arm's being up; and if one asks how she made it happen that her arm was up, one will learn that she raised it, i.e. that there was an event of her raising it. So when the fact of the person's agency is removed from a description of what occurred, it will seem as if an event of an arm's going up were the effect of a prior event. Once again, if the activity engaged in by the agent is left out of the picture—as it is likely to be until it is allowed that she *was raising* her arm (progressive tense)—then it will seem as if there were two causally related events. But once the agent's role in her arm's coming to be up is acknowledged, she will be seen as having been engaged in activity; and an event of her raising her arm and an event of her arm's rising can then be seen as alike comprised from a bit of activity—a bit of the type of activity that someone engages in for just so long as she is

raising her arm and her arm is going up. The duration of such any such bit of activity is the duration of an event which might be described equally as ‘her raising her arm’ or as ‘her arm’s going up’. There are not two events here, inasmuch as her arm’s going up is what she is causing at any moment at which she is raising it. (It cannot make a difference to this that there might be an event of someone’s arm’s going up which is not comprised of activity on her part—as there would be if, say, her arm was taken upwards by a gust of wind. This shows only that events of fundamentally different sorts may satisfy the description ‘her arm’s going up’.)

2

Donald Davidson’s work played a major role in launching the standard story of action.³ He once wrote: ‘Our language encourages us in the thought that there are such things [as events], by supplying .. the full apparatus of definite and indefinite articles, sortal predicates, counting, quantification, and identity-statements’ (1970, p.25). But if there is activity in the sense I have mooted, then there are sentences true in virtue of something’s occurring which cannot be understood using this apparatus. Occurrences—particulars that occur—are not all that occur. Actions are not all that agents participate in: also they engage in activity.

In one of the arguments that Davidson gives for an ontology of events, he unwittingly brings it to attention that ‘Such-and-such was going on at t ’ must sometimes not report the occurrence of any event. Here is that argument:

The conditions under which (1) is said to be true must make clear why it entails (2).

(1) Sebastian strolled through the streets of Bologna at 2 A.M.

(2) Sebastian strolled through the streets of Bologna.

If we analyze (1) as

(A) There exists an x such that Sebastian strolled x , x took place in the streets of Bologna,
and x was going on at 2 A.M.’,

then the entailment is explained as logically parallel with (many cases of) adjectival modification; but this requires events as particulars. (Davidson 1970, p.30.)

There could be a question about the interpretation of (1), the candidate analysandum. One may want to ask ‘Exactly what is supposed to have happened at 2a.m.?: Is it that Sebastian started out on a stroll then, or what?’. But however that may be, Davidson’s analysis shows how the sentence can be understood. In order for (1) to be true, there need not have been anything punctate to which ‘at 2a.m.’ applies: (1) is true so long as a stroll of Sebastian was *going on* at 2.a.m. A stroll is an event, by Davidson’s lights. So Davidson apparently relies upon thinking that an event which occupies an interval of time was going on at any moment during that interval.⁴

That seems right. But one may wonder what ensures that Davidson can rely upon it. ‘Going on at 2a.m.’ not only will have been true of the particular stroll that Sebastian actually took,⁵ but also would have been true of countless different strolls of various durations that Sebastian might have taken. What do the various strolls that could be said to have been going on at 2a.m. have in common? Well, Sebastian was strolling at 2a.m. if any of them occurred. But now we seem obliged to recognize that there is a good answer to the question ‘What was going on at 2a.m.?’ which does not require the existence of any particular event. At any moment at which Sebastian is (or was) strolling, it can (or could have been) said ‘Sebastian is strolling now’. To the truth of this, it is utterly irrelevant at what time Sebastian started to stroll, or at what time he stopped, or how long he strolled for.

Davidson takes ‘Sebastian strolled’ to make a claim recorded using the existential quantifier of the first order predicate calculus. When ‘Sebastian was strolling’ is taken likewise to make some sort of existential claim, it appears not to make any *quantificational* one: it says that there was (‘existed’) strolling by Sebastian. This tells us that something—namely strolling on the part of Sebastian—was going on. But it does not say of any event, nor of any particular of any other sort, that it was going on. The ‘*x*’ of ‘*x* was going on’ in Davidson’s analysis, has a value: it is a variable in the scope of a quantifier whose range is a domain of countable things. But when ‘strolling’ applies to that which goes on for the duration of any of the things that are strolls, it does not apply to any thing—not to anything of a countable sort, that is. Whereas ‘A stroll was going on at *t*’ is true only if *t* is within the interval within which some event occurred, ‘Strolling was going on at *t*’ speaks simply of something that was going on at *t*. And given that it is irrelevant to the truth of ‘Strolling was going on at *t*’ which particular events might have been going on at *t*, the sentence seems not to require the existence of any event. It helps to see this to notice that Sebastian’s strolling, insofar as it is present at any moment at which Sebastian is strolling, could be said to be wholly present then.⁶ By contrast, the whole of some particular that is a stroll could not be present at just a moment. (The fact that the whole of a stroll could *not* be present at a moment helps to explain why there can be a question about the interpretation of Davidson’s (1).)

So: even if a stroll is an event which may have been going on at a time, strolling is not an event. Strolling is an activity in the sense in which we saw raising one’s arm to be an activity. So also are walking, reading, etc., etc., activities. Now each of raising one’s arm, strolling, walking, reading .. is considered *an* activity by virtue of its being a *type* of activity. And when ‘raising an arm’, ‘strolling’, ‘walking’, ‘reading’ name types of activity, they are not count nouns. In understanding how they work, it can be helpful to think about another brand of non-count nouns—those which name types of stuff. Names of stuffs don’t pick out particulars. If a name of a stuff can be pluralized, that is not because particulars satisfy it, but because there can be different types of a single stuff. So for instance ‘gold’

names a type of stuff; and someone who speaks of three golds has to mean three types of gold. (Apparently jewellers say that there is yellow gold, white gold, and rose gold.)

Consider ‘beer’, of which there are many types. Moreover beer itself is a type of stuff, so that if there is beer in the fridge, there’s stuff of that type in the fridge. Now if it is actually true that there’s beer in the fridge, there will no doubt be there some thing or things that can be reckoned an instance or instances of beer—as it might be a puddle or two of the stuff, or as it might be six beers (as we say when there are that many bottles or cansful of the stuff). Still to say that there is beer somewhere is not to say that there is any sort of instance of it there. Rather it is to say that there is there stuff of a certain type—sc. beer. Where ‘beer’ names a sort of stuff, and ‘thing’ applies to the particulars that are occupants of the spatial world, the word ‘beer’ in ‘There is beer in the fridge’ does not stand for any thing. So now there is an analogy between stuffs and activities. Just as ‘Stuff [of some type] is at a place’ does not say that there is a particular at that place, so, likewise, ‘Activity [of some type] was going on at a time’ does not say that there was any particular in progress then. Even if it can only actually be true that someone was strolling at a time if there was at that time some event that can be reckoned an instance of strolling on the part of that person, still to say that the person was strolling is not to say that there was such an event.

It is impossible to think of a stroll of Sebastian’s as having been going on at a time without thinking that Sebastian was strolling then. Even more obviously, perhaps, it is impossible to think that a stroll of Sebastian’s is going on right now without thinking that Sebastian is now strolling. The “going on” of any action, past or present, has to be understood in terms of an agent’s engaging in activity. Just as there are neither bottlesful of beer or puddles of beer unless there is stuff of a certain type (sc. beer), so there are no strolls on someone’s part, unless there is activity of a certain type (sc. strolling) on their part. And just as beer pervades any volume of space occupied by beer, so strolling pervades any interval of time occupied by strolling. Things in space are comprised of stuff. And the events that Davidson was concerned with under the head of actions are comprised of activity.

3

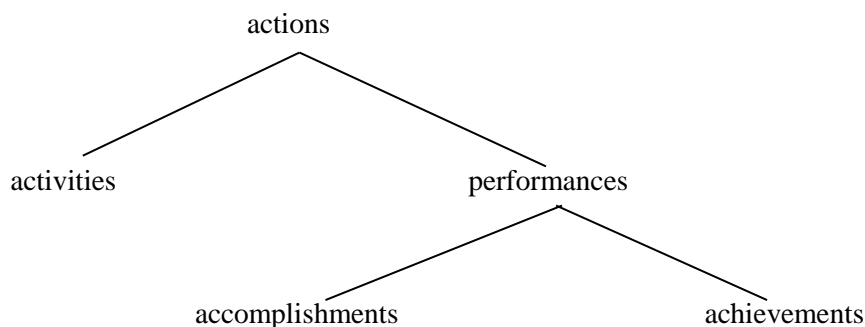
My suggestion has been that the relation between the stuff of the spatial world and the particulars therein is analogous to the relation between the activity of the temporal world and particulars there. The idea of such an analogy is far from new, and to many it will be familiar from Mourelatos 1978.⁷ Mourelatos spoke there of ‘the play of categories so fundamental as to span the distinction between verbs and nouns’ (p.424). But one may wonder whether he drew out the full significance of the parallels there are between (types of) stuff and (types of) activity.

Mourelatos saw that a distinction within the class of predications made using verbs mirrors the distinction within nominal predications between terms for things and terms for stuffs. He noticed that

two sorts of verbal predications must be written differently when given in nominalized form. In a sentence that makes an event (more specifically, action) predication, the existential construction has the import of the regular existential quantifier. So, for instance, ‘Mary capsized the boat’ has a nominalization transcription which, being manifestly count quantified, Davidson could happily endorse: ‘There was at least one capsizing of the boat by Mary’. In a sentence that makes a process (more specifically activity) predication, the import of the existential construction is different. So, for instance, ‘Mary was painting the nativity’ has as its nominalization transcription ‘There was painting of the nativity by Mary’.⁸ In this case, what marks the sentence as an activity predication is its imperfective aspect, introduced with the progressive tense. But predication in the category of activity can be marked also by lexical means. An example that Mourelatos gives is ‘Jones pushed the cart for hours’. Although ‘pushed’ here is simple past (not progressive) tense, ‘for hours’ lets one know for how long (at least) a certain activity was ongoing (pp.426–7).

It can seem as if Mourelatos wanted to treat activity predications in terms of the very ontology that I have introduced. He says (p.427) that the parallel for the transcriptions of activity predications is ‘in sentences of the same form as “There is snow on the roof” or “There is gold in the mountain”’. My “There’s beer in the fridge” is evidently of this form. He also says (p.430) that ‘just as we can collect and thus individuate stuffs into such extrinsic containers as bottles or lumps or measures, we can correspondingly collect and individuate activities into stretches, phases, stages and the like’. Presumably Mourelatos’s idea about the individuation of stuffs is that beer (say) may be contained in bottles or be formed in puddles, so that there are particulars which are such as to be singled out as comprised from that stuff. The corresponding idea about activities will then be that strolling (say) may come in stretches or in phases, so that there are particulars which are such as to be singled out as comprised from that activity.

Mourelatos, however, often uses the word ‘activity’ in a different sense from the sense it takes when there is an analogy with stuff. One sees ‘activity’ used in this different sense in a tree diagram that Mourelatos gives in order to illustrate how different species of actions are related (p.423). A pared down version of the tree looks like this.⁹



[actions.xps](#)

Activities here are subsumed, along with performances, under the head of actions. So activities are particulars, belonging in a domain over which there is count quantification. They are not the analogues of stuffs in that case. What then are the activities that come under the head of ‘activities’ here? The answer is obvious perhaps. Activities here must be events ‘in the broad sense’. They are *stretches* of activity—the particulars there are when activity can be individuated. If Sebastian started strolling at 10a.m. and continued to stroll until he stopped at 11 a.m., then there was a one-hour stretch of Sebastian’s strolling, and this was *an* activity in the sense ‘activities’ has in the label on Mourelatos’s tree. Activities now are just those actions that there will have been if someone has engaged in such an activity as running around or swimming or pushing a cart or whatever, and has stopped doing so. Their starting and stopping delimits a stretch. (I use ‘stretches’ as a catch-all term: depending on the nature of an activity, we speak more readily of bits, or of pieces, or of bouts, or of spells, or of stints of it.)

If ‘activities’ could mean only *stretches* of activity, then ‘activity’ as I have used it in discussing someone’s raising an arm and their arm’s going up would be ruled out of court. There would be no place for the idea that ‘raising an arm’ and ‘strolling’ name types of activity, and it would be impossible to understand sentences such as ‘She is raising her arm’ or ‘Sebastian was strolling’ or ‘Smith is pushing the cart’ by reference to a category that is the analogue of the category of stuff. Although such a category of activity is introduced by Mourelatos, it can seem to go missing when he presents his account of what there is.¹⁰

Granting that there may be activity at some time, and that there may be a stretch of activity which occupies an interval of time, we can ask now how activity relates to those actions which are not merely stretches of activity. What connects activity with performances of the two kinds which Mourelatos distinguishes—accomplishments and achievements? More often than not, philosophers who take actions to be events use ‘actions’ to mean accomplishments. So consider these first. Some of Mourelatos’s examples of accomplishments will serve: Mary’s painting of the nativity, John’s running a mile, Smith’s pushing the cart to the top of the hill. In the case of actions of these sorts, we know what it amounts to for a particular action of that sort to be over. As Mourelatos says, accomplishments ‘involve a product, upshot, or outcome’ (p.417); and they come to be over, or complete, with the coming to be of the relevant product, upshot or outcome—a painting of the nativity, John’s having covered a distance of a mile, Smith’s cart’s being at the top of the hill. Accomplishments can be contrasted with stretches of activity, in that case. What it takes for there to be an accomplishment of any sort is determined by the sort of endpoint required for an accomplishment of that sort, whereas for there to have been a stretch of activity of any kind, it is only required that there no longer be activity of that kind: a stretch of activity is over simply when it has stopped.

The distinction between stretches of activity and accomplishments has a parallel in the spatial realm. There are occupants of space that can be picked out simply as bits of stuff. (It depends on the nature of a stuff whether we are apt to speak of bits, or of pieces, or of lumps, or of chunks, or of volumes of it.) The unity of such an occupant of space, like that of a stretch of process, is a matter simply of the boundaries that it actually has. The spatial boundaries of bits and lumps and puddles mark the difference between the presence and absence of a type of stuff, and the temporal boundaries of stretches of activity mark the difference between the presence and absence of a type of activity.¹¹ Occupants of space, however, may be picked out using sortal concepts, and the individuation conditions of things so picked out are determined, not by way of spatial boundaries but by the sorts that they are of. Such sortally governed particulars are the analogues of accomplishments.¹²

There is one difference, however. And it is worth noticing. Sortal terms that apply to occupants of space may place relatively little constraint on the type of stuff from which the things they apply to are made.¹³ But terms for accomplishments always introduce activity of a particular type. If Mary painted a picture, then so long as she was painting it, she was engaged in the activity of painting it. If Smith pushed a cart to the top of the hill, then so long as he was pushing the cart, he was engaged in the activity of pushing the cart up the hill. And so on. Thanks to the fact that where Φ is a verb for an accomplishment 'x has Φ -d' suffices for 'x was Φ -ing', one can derive, from any accomplishment verb, a correlative term for an activity. One might give the name of *directed activity* to those activities, which, while they are under way, have as their anticipated development the product, upshot or outcome of some accomplishment. Inasmuch as the product, upshot or outcome which goes with a performance is an agent's end or telos, directed activity will be intentionally engaged in. When a directed activity reaches its completion, there has been an accomplishment: the agent has done something intentionally. (When directed activities are brought onto the scene, a list of activities multiplies profusely. For now not only are raising an arm, strolling, painting, running and pushing a cart activities, so also are raising an arm to reach a bowl, strolling to Da Cesare, painting a picture, running a mile, pushing a cart to the top of the hill.¹⁴)

In examining the argument that Davidson gave for introducing quantification over events, we saw that there are no strolls without strolling. It can now be said, very much more generally, that where Φ is an accomplishment verb, there are no Φ -ings without Φ -ing—no events of someone's Φ -ing without activity of the Φ -ing type on their part. A person is engaged in the activity of Φ -ing as soon as they have started to Φ ; and in order for there to be such activity, nothing more is needed than that they should have started. It can be another matter whether there comes to be an event of their Φ -ing. If a person stops Φ -ing because they were impeded or interrupted while engaged in Φ -ing or because they changed their mind about Φ -ing, then there will have been a stretch of Φ -ing whose beginning is their

starting to Φ and whose end is their stopping Φ -ing. The stretch is now a stretch of directed activity. And the reason why someone may have been Φ -ing but never have Φ -d is that directed activity may occur without the outcome towards which it was directed.¹⁵ If the outcome never comes to be, then there has been a stretch of activity merely. Still, whether they are merely stretches of activity or accomplishments, actions are comprised of activity, just as whether they are merely bits of stuff or sortally governed particulars, things are comprised of stuff.

So much for accomplishments. What about the other kind of performances, which Mourelatos distinguished from accomplishments—achievements? The distinction here is between actions that have duration—such as Mary’s painting a picture or John’s running a mile (accomplishments), and actions that may be conceived as punctate—such as Mary’s finding the book or John’s winning the 100yds sprint (achievements).¹⁶ Characterized as they are, by their punctual character, achievements are evidently counterexamples to the claim that actions are comprised of activity. Nevertheless they need to be accommodated in a world of activity. For what achievement verbs report (at least when used in saying what has been done intentionally) is the product, upshot or outcome of some piece of activity. Suppose that Mary found the book. Perhaps she took ten minutes to find it: ten minutes would then be the length of a stretch of activity of her looking for it. Suppose that John won the sprint race. Although it cannot be said that it took him any time to win, still we know that in order for John to have won, he must have been running for the whole of the race faster on average than any other competitor. Achievements are not comprised of activity, as stretches of activity and accomplishments surely are. But activity is a *sine qua non* of achievements nonetheless.

Thus activity, in the category that has to be recognized in order for agents to be seen as playing their causal roles, is as ubiquitous as actions are.

The standard story of action has an inadequate conception of causality, which is owed to a failure to understand how the temporal world may be occupied. In §1, I tried to bring out a problem that philosophers of action will face if they treat causality as if it were always a relation between particulars. I maintained that we need a certain understanding of activity in order to grasp an idea of that to which causality is internal which is needed to appreciate what it is for an agent to cause something. And I have said that just as stuff comprises things, activity, so understood, comprises those actions that are stretches of activity or accomplishments. There is a much more general claim that I should want to make—that non-punctate events are comprised of process.¹⁷ In a fuller understanding of these matters, I think that the activity required for human agency might be treated as just one case, albeit a special case, of a sort of generic temporal stuff.¹⁸

¹ The standard story was first so-called by Velleman 1992, 461. Anscombe 1995 spoke of ‘the standard approach’: on this approach, the task of a philosophical account of bodily agency is to uncover the conditions that an event satisfies if it is an action. The standard story is a product of the standard approach, which Anscombe thought was hopeless—as it must be if what follows is right.

Many of those who tell the story believe that sufficient conditions for an event’s being an action can be given in event-causal terms; but not all of them do (Davidson being a notable exception). Evidently the story comes in various versions. It will not be necessary to distinguish between them here.

² Steward 2000 shows very clearly how deep the problem goes, although Steward is far from alone in recognizing the problem. I think that what she says by way of solution can be the beginning of an alternative to the standard story. Steward 2000 responds to various arguments that were supposed to show that actions occur inside the body. The arguments (given in Hornsby 1980) share in the same wrong assumption about the nature of events as I reject in the present paper.

³ Several influential papers are in Davidson 1980.

⁴ The arguments of Davidson 1967a) are perhaps better known than that of Davidson 1970. Lemmon 1967 drew Davidson’s attention to the need for a conception of truth *over a period of time*, rather than simply *at a moment*. In his 1967b), Davidson agreed that ‘his own account was incomplete through neglect of the element of tense’.

⁵ I simplify the argument by saying ‘*the stroll*’. So I assume that there was only one stroll, even though this is not what (1) says. The assumption nonetheless seems justified: in the nature of things one can’t stroll twice simultaneously; and Davidson, who speaks of ‘a stroll of Sebastian’s’ as something ‘Sebastian took’, evidently means by ‘a stroll’ an event whose proper parts are not themselves strolls.

⁶ Cp. Stout 1997, p.26: ‘[A]t every moment during which a process is happening, the process as a whole is present’. I take Stout’s ‘during which’ (contrast my ‘at which’) to be a sign that his conception of a process is not a conception of something inherently durative. Stout’s distinction between events and processes is a distinction between that which happens or happened and that which is or was going on. This ensures that ‘*x* was going on’ could not be true of an event. But we surely can say (retrospectively) about events that they were going on. My own question—In virtue of what can we say this?—is a question as much for Stout, who thinks that processes are continuants, as it is for Davidson.

⁷ I want to acknowledge that I do Mourelatos a disservice by giving only the very restricted account of his insightful paper that I give here. Mourelatos 1978 concerns states as well as events and processes (and of course states must be taken into account when thinking about the occupancy of the temporal world). And Mourelatos’s account is much more general than I allow here: part of his point was to show that the distinctions that need to be made within verbal predications are not confined to the realm of human agency.

⁸ Mourelatos calls this mass-quantified. Myself, I doubt that it is *quantified* at all: one might call it barely existential. I avoid the use of ‘mass terms’ thinking (a) that not all such terms are stuff terms, and (b) that the analogy I present requires a non-standard view of the workings of what are regularly called mass terms. I have been influenced here by Laycock 2006, in which there are objections to, and diagnosis of, aspects of standard treatments of mass terms.

⁹ Pared down because (a) it omits states, and (b) it is confined to the domain of action (see n.7 above). Mourelatos takes the categories of activities, accomplishments and achievements from Vendler 1957.

¹⁰ It goes missing again when he responds to Gill 1993. Gill charges Mourelatos with failing to make a distinction between processes (/activities) and events (/actions) which corresponds to a real distinction in metaphysics between ontological categories. She assumes that ‘processes (/activities)’ can always be understood to mean (as I should have it) ‘stretches of process (/activity)’. Mourelatos 1993 does not demur.

Steward 1997 provides another example of a philosopher who gives a sensitive account of the occupants of time and who appreciates a real distinction between events (/actions) and processes (/activities), but who, as it seems to me, loses sight of what comes into the fundamental category of process/activity.

¹¹ It will be evident that I do not mean *arbitrary* stretch by ‘stretch’, but rather, as it were detached stretch. Some may want to use ‘stretch of activity’ differently, so that any proper part of any stretch of activity is itself a stretch of activity. (And so for ‘bit of stuff’.) When ‘stretch’ is used in their way, one can answer identity questions about stretches; but there is no principled way of finding the number of them. (One might start to count them, but one couldn’t possibly know when to stop.)

The introduction of arbitrary parts may be encouraged by talk of ‘homogeneity’. Casati and Varsi 2010, n.2 say: ‘An activity, such as John’s walking uphill, is a homogeneous event: its sub-events satisfy the same description as the activity itself . . .’ Here John’s walking uphill is treated as an event. But an event which (I should say) is a stretch of John’s walking uphill can be contrasted with the activity of his walking uphill. For whereas John must have taken a step with each foot at least if an event of his walking has occurred (so that it is not thoroughly homogeneous, as one might put it), John’s activity of walking was going on at any moment at which John was taking steps.

¹² I scratch the surface here. For a wonderfully careful account of the distinction between processes and accomplishments, see Crowther 2011.

¹³ That said, some sortal count nouns can be used and understood as stuff terms which apply to stuff of the type, whatever it is, of which the things to which the count noun applies are comprised. So, for example, if bananas are mashed, there is banana. Examples will proliferate if one thinks about how to describe the result of pulverizing things of one or another sort.

¹⁴ It will multiply again by virtue of the facts (a) that a stretch of activity of some type may consist or shorter stretches of activities of other types—as when something is done by first doing one thing then a second ..; and (b) that a stretch of activity may be thought of as something that itself changes as time progresses—e.g. when someone runs faster and faster. To accommodate cases of the latter sort, one would need an idea of processes of types to whose characterization a notion of change is presupposed. Evidently what I say here falls far short of a worked out account of these matters.

¹⁵ ‘Imperfective paradox’ is the label often used for the fact that one may not infer ‘ $x \Phi$ -d’ from ‘ x was Φ -ing’ where an accomplishment verb is the substituend for ‘ Φ ’. It is a good question what assumptions are made when the failure of inference is found to be paradoxical. I have tried to say enough to explain why the failure of inference is only to be expected.

¹⁶ The punctate character of achievements is sometimes recorded by saying that verbs for achievements lack the progressive tense. But there are exceptions to this. The progressive may be used in allusion to what I have called directed activity, so that someone may be said to be finding the book while she is searching for it (albeit that she must come to find it to have been finding it), and someone may be said to be winning the race, if, save for unexpected developments, she will win (and now she need not come to win to have been winning). A different

sort of exception is found with so-called slow-motion readings of the progressive, where an event ordinarily spoken of as if instantaneous is conceived as taking an appreciable amount of time.

¹⁷ I agree with Mourelatos in taking the ontology of action to be a case of a general ontology (see n.7). The idea then would be that activity is a case of process. However, what Mourelatos 1993 says about the word ‘process’ suggests that he thinks that ‘process’ used in the singular is always a count noun. If that were right (which I doubt), then a new sense of ‘process’ would be needed—a sense according to which processes (plural) are types of process.

¹⁸ I tried out some of the ideas that led to this paper in two workshops—in Leeds in March 2011, and at the Centre for the Study of Mind in Nature, Oslo, November 2011. Thanks to Tom Crowther, Antony Galton, Helen Steward and Rowland Stout for helpful discussion.

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