



BIROn - Birkbeck Institutional Research Online

Hornsby, Jennifer (2013) Basic activity. Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume 87 (1), pp. 1-18. ISSN 0309-7013.

Downloaded from: <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/7234/>

Usage Guidelines:

Please refer to usage guidelines at <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/policies.html>
contact lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk.

or alternatively

JENNIFER HORNSBY

BASIC ACTIVITY

I present a view of activity, taking it that an agent is engaged in activity so long as an action of hers is occurring. I suggest that this view (a) helps in understanding what goes wrong in an argument in Thompson (2008) known sometimes as ‘the initial segment argument’, and (b) enables us to see that there could be an intelligible conception of what is *basic* when agents’ knowledge is allowed into an account of that.

I

In much philosophy of action of the last half-century actions are said to be *events* caused by states of mind and causes of other events. That was what Donald Davidson said (1963, 1971); and those who take Davidson’s lead tell the so-called standard story of action. G.E.M. Anscombe (1957) told a different story, which has been compellingly retold recently by Michael Thompson (2008).¹ In the standard story, agents are subjects of event-predications, whereas in Thompson, agents are treated as the subjects of ‘event- or process- forms’. This makes an enormous difference. When an idea of process is in the picture, it is allowed that an action (event) has occurred only if a process has been underway: not only did Michael walk to school, Michael *was walking* to school. Unless this is allowed, it seems that we cannot think of agents as ever being in any sense *active*.

I think that we are often active. So I agree with Thompson and with anyone else who thinks that the standard story has a quite wrong conception of human agency. And I agree with him that a correct conception must take account of what someone is (or was, or will be) doing, not only of what they have done (or will have done). But there is something that I cannot agree with Thompson about. I think that some sense can be given to an idea of what is ‘*basic*’ for an agent: it seems to me that there must be something right in saying that no-one would do anything if everything she might do was something she could only do by doing something else. Yet this is something that Thompson apparently denies. What leads him to his opinion, I think, is an untenable conception of agential processes. The first

¹ The standard story comes in different versions, and many who tell it don’t subscribe to the details of the account of action that Davidson gave. Likewise there are various ways to tell the different story, as indeed my disagreement with Thompson shows.

part of this paper will consist in an attempt to uncover the different conception that I think we need.

I will present a view of *activity* and of its relation to actions and other events (§§II, III and IV). I shall be glad if the view appears to have a place within a general vision of the temporal world; for I suspect that the tendency on the part of philosophers to concentrate on actions at the expense of activity is a facet of a much more widespread tendency to think of what there is atomistically. Still, what I present is a view specifically of intentional activity. And my topic being intentional action, when I speak of something that is done, I shall usually mean it to be implicit that it is *intentionally* done. I present the view of activity here because it helps me in providing a diagnosis of an argument in Thompson that I dispute (§V); and it helps in turn, I think, in seeing how an idea of what is *basic* could be understood in philosophy of action (§V1).

II

The actions of the standard story are events—'dated, unrepeatable particulars'. Their occurrences are reported in such sentences as: 'Donald turned on the light', 'Jones buttered the toast', 'A torpedo bomber sank the Bismarck', 'Adam ate the apple'. These sentences exhibit perfective aspect, where 'perfective' conveys an idea of completion. Thus inasmuch as something happened when a human being intentionally did one or another thing, there was a happening having the shape of a completed unit, a whole, a countable thing. But facts about human agency can be, and often are, reported without reporting happenings. The continuous tense may be used, so that the sentences are imperfective in aspect. 'Jones is buttering the toast', for instance, or 'Adam was eating the apple when someone offered him a banana instead'. In order to register the contrast with the perfective, one can make explicit use of the idea of activity to record what such sentences say: 'Jones is (/was) engaged in the activity of buttering the toast'. The activity of buttering the toast is something Jones is (/was) engaged in at any time when he is (/was) buttering it.

('Jones buttered the toast at midnight' is subjected to treatment by Davidson (1967). Notice that if someone told you that Jones had buttered the toast at midnight, then you might want to ask them 'Do you mean that he *was buttering* it at midnight; or that he

started to do so then, or that he finished doing so then?'. Of course it often wouldn't matter what the answer was.)

An idea of on-going activity seems to be presupposed to the idea of an action. For if someone did (/will have done) something, so that there has been an action of her doing it, then at some time she was (/will be) doing it, which is to say that she was (/will be) engaged in the activity of doing it. Perhaps this isn't obvious for an action that took (/will take) only a very little time, where interruption is difficult to imagine. But one can always picture things in slow motion; then one sees that a person may have been doing something, even if there would not have been enough time to say that she was doing it.²

So what are activities? Let me take them to include buttering the toast, turning on the light, walking, walking to the shops, operating the pump .. , so that activities are things that may be (intentionally) engaged in by one or another person at one or another time. They are not then actually present in the world of space and time. In this respect they are like what are sometimes called *acts* or *act types*, which are abstract, and instantiated by actions (so called 'token actions'). But *someone's engagement in an activity*—Jones's buttering the toast at midnight, say—apparently does have actual being in the spatiotemporal world: one might say that it partakes of the *concreteness* of actions (of 'tokens'). The abstract/concrete distinction is contestable, so that not much can be rested on it. Still, the word 'activity' apparently has two quite different sorts of application. It applies not only to that which Jones or any other person might be engaged in at midnight or at any other time; but also to Jones's actually buttering the toast at midnight. Let me use '*on-going activity*' for that which has actual presence in time and space. Some on-going activity—Jones's buttering the toast—is present so long as Jones is actually busy buttering it, and *was* present so long as Jones *was* actually busy buttering it.

Often enough one may know what someone is doing simply by seeing their activity. So on-going activity can be perceptible while it is on-going. But it seems that on-going activity might be depicted in a still photograph. 'Here's one taken at midnight: it shows

² I leave instantaneous events out of account. Some may think that so-called achievements are (at least some of them) instantaneous actions. But achievement verbs are a mixed bunch from the point of view of someone concerned with what is done intentionally, and it would complicate matters to try to bring them in.

Jones buttering the toast in the bathroom.’ Looking at the photograph and told that it shows this, you know that it shows something dynamic, present at the time that the photograph was taken.³ Knowing the dynamic character of activity, you know that what you see in the photograph continued. You know then that you would see a slightly different scene if you were shown another photograph, taken a second later. But unless Jones suddenly stopped buttering the toast, this other photograph would serve just as well in showing Jones’s activity. The on-going activity continues. It had a beginning, and has, or will have, an end. It began when Jones started buttering the toast, and ends either when Jones finishes doing so, or when his buttering stops for some other reason. What you can see, then, by way of a photograph, is part of something which has temporal boundaries, in which Jones plays a continuing role.

When the on-going activity is no longer present, so that Jones is buttering the toast no more, there has been an *event*. If Jones finished buttering the toast, then it is an event to which ‘Jones’s buttering of the toast’ applies.⁴ There might have been, or might come to be, many events of just that type. Events are countable, so that one can ask how many events of some type there were. But about Jones’s buttering the toast, understood as on-going activity, one cannot ask ‘How many?’. One can ask only how *much* there was of Jones’s buttering the toast, which is a question about for how long—for how much time—Jones was buttering. Any question about the on-going activity is a question about something present for so long as Jones is buttering the toast, and all of which is present (was shown in the photograph) for just so long. But until such time as there is an event, no *thing* has happened: the whole of an event which takes time does not happen at just a moment.

³ I don’t suggest that the experience one has looking at the photograph replicates the experience that one would have had if one had been present at the scene. (I’m sure it doesn’t!)

⁴ The nominal here (with ‘of the toast’) is perfective. I take it that the imperfective nominal ‘Jones’s buttering the toast’ has uses in which it applies to on-going activity, uses in which it applies to a stretch of activity there has been, and uses in which it applies to the fact of Jones’s buttering the toast. I don’t want to rest anything on the distinction between two sorts of nominals because (a) the difference in English is not always marked, and can be hard to hear even when it is marked, and (b) imperfective nominals have multiple and confusable uses/senses. I acknowledge that imperfective nominals as they are true of on-going activity are seldom used. But then nominals that are true of actions are seldom used outside philosophy.

III

I hope to have persuaded you that on-going activity is not in any category of countables, so that on-going activities are no sort of particulars, as events are particulars. It might appear to be an objection to this that ‘activity’ can be pluralized. ‘If there can be two, or three, or several activities, then surely we can count them’, it may be said. Well, I think that there are two uses for the plural here. First, ‘activities’ may mean *types* of activity. Secondly, ‘activities’ may mean *stretches* of activity. Let me say a little about each.

On-going activity may be of different types. Consider someone you see getting up from her chair. You ask her what she is doing, and she says that she is turning on the light. You see her engaged in one type of activity, and learn that it is activity of another type. Her activity is redescribable. She is engaged in two activities: getting up from her chair and turning on the light. But the fact that there are these two types/descriptions does not show that the activity is some redescribable *thing*. Indeed the action that there comes to be—her turning on of the light—is not redescribable as her getting up from the chair.⁵ When this person walks across the room and raises her arm towards the light switch, her activity continues, and it acquires new descriptions: now it is her walking, now it is her raising her arm. But it is always (so long as it lasts), her turning on the light. (An analogy might be of help here.⁶ There is nothing but liquid in the bottle. In fact there are several immiscible liquids. Through the glass of the bottle, one can see the several liquids, settled in rows. To say that there are these different liquids in the bottle is not to say that there are several *particulars* there. No doubt there is a volume of each of the liquids. But if one

⁵ Thompson faults Anscombe for applying ‘many descriptions of the same’ in cases where the different descriptions in fact have application only to parts of some whole action (2008, p.110, n.7). Anscombe would be exonerated if taken to mean that there can be many descriptions of the same *activity*. I think that Anscombe uses ‘action’ and ‘event’ extremely loosely.

⁶ See e.g. Mourelatos (1978) for the analogy in which the relation between stuff in the spatial world and particulars therein is analogous to the relation between activity in the temporal world and particulars there. Although Mourelatos endorses the analogy, it isn’t preserved in the taxonomy he gives of temporal ‘situations’. And so I think it is with nearly all the taxonomies offered by philosophers and linguists. For a careful treatment of the analogy, leading in exactly the direction I need it to go in here, see Crowther (2011).

specified what liquids there are in the bottle, one would make reference not to the volumes of liquid but to the types of liquid there are.)

What then about stretches of activity? Are these particulars? Consider now that you might be shown some film footage of Jones buttering the toast. The activity that you saw in the still photograph is something of which you can now see a stretch. You might be shown different stretches, some of them longer than others. The footage can be stopped at any moment, so that when you are shown any definite stretch, there are arbitrarily many shorter stretches of on-going activity that you have also been shown. If each of these stretches was itself said to be a particular, then you would seem to have been shown Jones doing arbitrarily many different things—buttering the toast between t_0 and t_1 between t_0 and t_2 , between t_0 and t_3 , etc., etc. But so long as it is allowed that buttering the toast was intentional activity, Jones was not intentionally doing different things at t_0 , at t_1 , at t_2 : you have been shown just arbitrary stretches of the activity that was portrayed in the still photograph. Matters are different if you are shown the stretch whose beginning was Jones's starting to butter the toast and whose ending was his finishing or stopping. This stretch is something whose duration is not determined by how long the film projector happens to be switched on for, but by how long Jones was actively buttering toast. You are now shown something with a certain integrity, a stretch whose boundaries define it, and which might be called an *individual activity*.⁷ It is plausible, then, as it was not in the case of any merely arbitrary stretch, that in this case you have been shown a particular—an event. (The analogy might help again. Arbitrary divisions can be made within the region of space within which there is liquid, so that there are arbitrarily many volumes of liquid within the region. Some arbitrary volumes may contain liquid of a single type, others liquids of different types. There is no call to say that each of these arbitrary volumes is some particular. Yet if one hits on a region that a certain liquid fills and beyond whose boundaries there are different liquids, the volume of liquid in that region does have a certain integrity, and plausibly is a particular.)

⁷ Steward (2012) will call it an individual process. The arguments in Steward's paper are grist to the mill, so far as I am concerned, even if our eventual views don't match exactly.

IV

So much for the nature of activity, although of course a great deal more might be said.⁸ I turn to the relation of activity to actions and other events.

Presumably a philosopher who tells a story of action which deals exclusively with the events that are actions thinks that activity can drop out of the picture. They suppose that everything is dealt with when actions are accounted for. They may respond to me: 'It may be alright to think of Jones as having engaged in activity, and perhaps even to think that his engagement in that activity was on-going activity. Still, a person is engaged in activity for so long and only for so long as an action of his is occurring. And that means that one can hardly miss out on what was going on with an agent at any time if one confines oneself to the actions there then were.' But this response is wrong in several ways.

In the first place, as is often remarked, there can have been activity of some type but no action of that type: someone may have been doing something which, because of interruption or a change of mind on her part, she never did. An example often used is of someone whom a terrible accident befell when she was crossing the street so that she never got more than halfway across. A different example will be useful here. So let it be that Ann was doing a mile run but stopped when she twisted her ankle. She was engaged for a while in the activity of doing a mile run, but there was no action of her doing of a mile run.

Now consider cases of three different kinds, in all of which someone's running continued long enough for her to have run a mile. (B): Beth intended to do a mile run, and did what she intended. (C): Clare did a mile run, but when she set out, she did not intend to cover any particular distance. After a quarter of a mile, she noticed that she was on a track with distances marked out, and only then did she decide upon doing a mile run. (D): Dawn decided to run until she was out of breath, thinking that to do so would be good for her health, and, as it happened, it was a mile that she had covered when she became breathless. The case of Clare is a sort of converse of the case of Ann who twisted her ankle. The activity by virtue of which Clare comes to have done a mile run intentionally, only kicks in after she has begun, whereas Ann's activity stopped before her intended

⁸ See Galton (2012) for some more. Galton brings activities (including intentional activities, but not as such) into categories of processes (abstract and other).

action could come to be. The case of Dawn is different again. Like Beth and Clare she ran a mile, but that was not something she intended to do.

We can ask: In which of the four cases is there an *action* of running a mile? The answer evidently depends upon how 'an action' is to be understood. On what is probably the usual understanding, there has been an action only when an agent brought about some end or goal of hers. Thus 'Donald's turning on of the light' denotes an action, on the assumption that Donald wanted the light to be on and accordingly did some thing or things which ensured that the light was on. When actions are understood in this way, so-called accomplishment verbs are cut out for describing them. Implicit in the meaning of such verbs is the idea of a type of activity that has a 'set terminal point' beyond which it cannot continue. Activity of such a type's continuing for as long as it does, which is for as long as it will continue save for interruption or a change of mind on the agent's part, is a matter of its progressing towards the set terminal point. And its reaching that point is a matter of the agent's reaching her goal: she has covered a mile in distance (for 'run a mile'); the light is on (for 'turn on the light').⁹

On this understanding of 'action', there was an action of Beth. (Beth's was the straightforward case.) And there will have been an action of Clare—at least if it is allowed that a person need not have been engaged in activity which is for the sake of accomplishing something for the whole of the time that her action was occurring. On this understanding, there was not an action of Ann or of Dawn, however. Their activity could be brought into an account of the actions that there are only if it were allowed that a bounded stretch of intentional activity is itself an action. In the case of Ann, there was an

⁹ Vendler (1957) introduced the idea of accomplishment verbs, in the course of providing a taxonomy of verb phrases which has understandably been extremely influential. Vendler said that 'the concept of activities calls for periods of time that are not unique or definite' (p.149), and this concept of activities is used in much of the subsequent literature. Evidently my concept is different. I allow that there is activity in whose nature it is to have a definite ending (an ending not necessarily specified in temporal terms, however). Given that a distinction between accomplishment verbs and activity verbs is crucial in Vendler's classification, and that I take over his idea of accomplishment, someone might question whether I am entitled to use 'activity' in the broad sense that I do. I respond that a classification of verbs is one thing, and a classification of what there is (to which a verb in one or another inflection may have application) is something else.

event throughout the course of which she was intending to be doing a mile run, but she did not run a mile—did not reach her goal. In the case of Dawn, ‘run until out of breath’ provides a description which fixes a terminal point where Dawn herself had fixed one; but being out of breath was not Dawn’s goal, any more than completing a mile was. Dawn did not *finish* running a mile, as Beth and Clare both did.

Dawn, who was running for the sake of her health, illustrates a general point. Activity need have no end internal to it, towards which it is set to go. Even Clare, who did accomplish a mile run, was not engaged in activity with a set end until she determined that it would be a mile for which she ran. The example of Clare has special features. But there is nothing particularly special about a person’s engaging in activity which has no set terminal point. Jones might butter toast night after night, without any reason ever to be doing so except that this is how he earns his living. Someone may play squash, and carry on just as long as the court booking allows. Someone may play the piano for a bit, and stop only when it seems to her that she ought really to be doing something else. In all of these examples, there would be on-going activity which no accomplishment verb circumscribes. There are more events in the domain of agency than there are events which culminate in an agent’s reaching a goal internal to her activity.

When a stretch of on-going activity is over, an event is on the scene (even if not an action on the usual understanding). This is so whether the activity comes to an end because the agent’s intended end is reached, *or* because the agent was stopped or came herself to have a reason to stop. In the former case, one can ask the agent ‘How long did it take you to do it?’, and in the latter case ‘How long did you do it for?’ An answer to the former question gives the duration of an *action*, and an answer to the latter the duration of a stretch of *activity* that started and stopped. The two questions are similar. But the ‘it’s of the ‘do it’s in the question do different work, the first ‘it’ alluding to a type of action, the second to a type of activity. It would not be surprising, then, if actions and activity were sometimes confused. And I think that sometimes they are indeed confused.¹⁰

¹⁰ To the twenty ‘conflating views’ that Sandis identifies in his (2012), another may be added. See n.5 above to see how the confusion can impinge upon questions about ‘the individuation of actions’.

V

I am now equipped with some materials that may help in understanding why it should seem right to say that we don't do everything we do by doing something else. In the first instance, my strategy is to see what goes wrong when this is denied.

Here, then, is Michael Thompson denying it.

X's doing A is an intentional action (proper) under that description just in case the agent can be said, truly, to have done *something else* because he or she was doing A. The intended sense of 'because' is . . . the one deployed in rationalization (2008, p.112, my italics).

So: for anything, A, that X has done, there is *something else*—say B—such that X B-d *because* X was A-ing. Given that the 'because' introduces 'rationalization', 'X B-d *because* X was A-ing' might be thought tantamount to saying (i) that a reason for which X B-d was that she was A-ing, (ii) that X B-d in order to do or to be doing A, (iii) X A-d by means, perhaps among other things, of B-ing. (i), (ii) and (iii) may not be exactly equivalent, but each of them would seem to convey the gist of Thompson's claim.

Thompson supports his claim with a conjecture: 'Acts of moving something somewhere intentionally always have an initial segment that is also an act of moving something somewhere intentionally' (p. 111). And for this, he gives an argument:

I have pushed a stone along a certain path from α to ω , and .. this is a completed intentional action of mine. It must ... be that I have pushed the stone from α to β , if β is a place about halfway along the path from α to ω . And as I began to push off from α it would have been as much *true* for me to say 'I am pushing it to β ' as 'I am pushing it to ω '. How, though, can we deny the further claim that I was pushing the stone to β , the midpoint *intentionally*—just as, by hypothesis, I was pushing it to ω intentionally, and along that path? ... It is hard to see [then] why we shouldn't say that ... I was pushing and pushed the stone to β *because* I was pushing it to ω ' (pp. 107–8).

If what Thompson says here about his pushing to β is right, then it can be said again about his pushing to γ halfway between α and β , and so on, and on. Thus Thompson summarizes his argument with a rhetorical question: 'Why should we not isolate some initial segment in every case?'

One might well wonder whether Thompson, in using an example in which something is pushed to a set destination, has not selected a type of action/activity which is especially well-suited to make the case he wants to. Let that be for now. I want to draw attention to a different assumption that lies behind Thompson's argument. Thompson uses the fact that he was pushing intentionally throughout the action to make us think that at any point not only has he *been intentionally pushing it* to that point, but also he has *pushed the stone intentionally* to that point. Thompson then has us view his pushing the stone from α to ω as having consisted of an ever increasing stock of actions that have occurred (he *has* pushed it to here, now to a point further on, now to some next point) and an ever decreasing stock of actions that will occur (he has still to push it from here to there, then to beyond there, then to further beyond). His assumption, then, if I may put in my terms, is that his having been engaged in a stretch of activity was a matter of his having participated in a series of actions. But is that right? Did Thompson really do one thing, then another, and another, and another, .. , and all of these *intentionally*?¹¹

Of course I've already suggested an answer. He did not: unbounded stretches of activity of arbitrary length are not particulars, and thus not actions. But there is an independent reason to fault Thompson's treatment of his example. Suppose that δ is a place on the path from α to ω that the stone took, and that *we* choose at random. Thompson was pushing the stone when it was at δ , but might have had no opinion what it would be to push the stone to δ , and thus not have known how to push it from α to δ . Had he been told at the outset that δ is a place to which he should push the stone, he would have needed to find out where exactly δ was. To have done what he actually did, however, he had no need to know this. All that he needed, in order to do what he actually did, was the capacity that he exercised so long as he was pushing the stone, an ability to keep track of where he and the stone are headed, and whatever it took for him to come

¹¹ I have no need to deny that there is a perspective from which the activity in question can in theory be segmented. If it is allowed that on-going activity is continuous, then one will be likely to think of the beginning of Thompson's action as the bounding instant before which he was not pushing the stone. Even so, there may be no objection to thinking of the beginning as an initial segment. It could be said that any segment which contains within itself all earlier segments is a first in the series to which it belongs.

to know when the stone has reached the destination he intended. He surely didn't intentionally push the stone to δ .

The set-up in Thompson's example is unrealistic. Can anyone say at all exactly what places a stone they have pushed has moved through? Thompson-the-philosopher uses Greek letters to name such places, as well as the stone's destination. But it is unlikely that Thompson-the-agent will have thought of his destination labelled thus. In any real case, the destination will have been an apt place, from Thompson's point of view, for the stone to come to be—next to the front door, as it might be. Unless Thompson thought of his destination in a way consonant with his coming to know that the stone had come to be there, it will be hard to understand why he should have stopped pushing the stone when it reached that place.

Thompson's argument, then, can hardly show that an action can always be resolved into indefinitely many different sub-actions, each of them an agent's doing some different thing intentionally. But there is a question now about the scope of the argument. His treating what might seem to be a rather special case stems presumably from this thinking that intentional action always involves movement of some sort. One might allow him that, but still wonder why such movement as there is when activity fails to culminate in an agent's reaching her goal should be left out of account. Weren't Ann (who twisted her ankle) and Dawn (who ran for the sake of her health) running intentionally for as long as they ran? And what will Thompson say about Clare (who hit on the idea of doing a mile after she had run a bit)? She did a mile run intentionally, but she did not run the first stretch *because* she was doing a mile run. Of course these examples are somewhat artificial. But they can draw attention to the fact that a stretch of intentional activity need not be structured as the 'intentional actions (proper)' whose structure Thompson's argument was supposed to uncover.¹²

¹² Thompson appears to share an assumption about the domain of agency with philosophers who say that action explanation is 'belief-desire explanation', and who expound this by speaking of 'an agent's having a desire for some end'. The exposition derives from Davidson's way of thinking about human agency. But Davidson himself said that an agent might do something for 'no reason .. besides wanting to do it' (1963, p. 6). Anscombe might seem to agree: (1957) p. 25, although where Davidson has 'no *further* reason [besides] ..' she has 'no particular reason'. In this matter Thompson appears to be on the side of latter day 'belief-desire' theorists.

There is something perplexing about Thompson's project. He is surely right that far too many philosophers, thinking of actions as events over and done with, have treated actions as if they might as well be atomic wholes. But his argument, which may be supposed to reveal the structure of intentional action, gets started by contemplating a past action, which then, in the course of the argument, is broken down into segments.¹³

However this may be, the conclusion of Thompson's argument will be disputed by anyone who thinks that there are things we do (intentionally) but not *by* doing other things (intentionally). They may introduce an idea of what is basic, saying that something basic is not done by doing something *else*.

VI

Thompson has no use for the word 'basic'. But Douglas Lavin uses it in his (2012) where he gives (among many others) an argument on the same pattern as the one from Thompson I have criticized. Like other writers on the subject, Lavin talks of 'basic *actions*', if only in his own case for the purpose of denying that there are any.¹⁴

In Lavin's, as in many others', account of the matter, the things that may be more or less basic are actions, where 'an action' is something that may be 'performed' or 'executed' or 'done'.¹⁵ I think that this use of 'action' distracts one from what is meant by some of those who have seen fit to speak of basic things. At any rate in order to understand what they have been driving at, it doesn't seem necessary to paint the

¹³ The tension I find in Thompson's thinking perhaps shows itself when he writes: 'Why should we suppose that acquisition of skill in moving a[n] object along [a] path must deprive movement along sub-paths of their status as intentional?' (p.108). Did he mean to write 'movement [singular] along sub-paths of *its* status' or to write '*movements* [plural] along sub-paths of their status'?

¹⁴ It might be that Lavin does not mean to rule out basic actions altogether. He says 'I would consider the essay [sc. his (2012)] a success were it to establish that if basic action is to be anything at all it cannot be durative and telic' (n.35 at p. 31). He appears here to want to restrict actions, as Thompson wants to, to those whose ends are internal to them.

¹⁵ 'Basic actions' has a long history, helpfully reviewed in Sandis (2010). I agree with Sandis that there are conceptions of what is basic which rely upon conflating *what* I do with the *event* of my doing it. I should say that some such conflation is rife, and have to doubt Sandis's claim that 'there are multitudes of equally legitimate conceptions of what counts as basic' (although I suppose there might be).

mistaken picture of human action which Lavin takes basic actions to fit into. In that picture '*X's intentionally doing something* is the arithmetic sum of *what merely happens* and something else' (2012, p. 7). I am as much opposed to the picture as Lavin is. For I think that an agent's intentionally doing something can be on-going activity which does not 'merely happen', and to which nothing needs to be added to be intentional activity. When on-going activity can be in view, we have a different picture from Lavin's opponents and can have a different understanding of 'basic action'.

The argument of Thompson I've rejected, which Lavin uses a version of, and which would seem to imply that no-one has ever done anything that could deserve the name of 'basic', starts from considering some *fait accompli*. But the thought that there must be basic things can be a thought about action *in prospect*. One could never get started if one had always to do something *else* in order to do something. There must always be something that one can get to perform or to execute *just like that*. When it is put in this way, the idea can seem puzzling. 'Just like that' has a sort of 'Hey Presto' ring about it. Are we meant to think that someone's doing something basic is a performance over in a flash? If one wishes to understand how anything it takes any time to do is ever done, obviously it cannot help to bring in things completed in a flash. There must be some different understanding of 'just like that'.

Suppose that you want to go to the park, that you have decided to go there on foot, and are settled now on walking there now. You now intend to be walking. More exactly: you now intend to be walking in the direction of the park. But you know how to walk, and you know where the park is in relation to yourself. Everything is in place for you to be walking to the park, and that is what you are doing: your walking to the park is on-going activity.¹⁶ At the time you started to walk, you had no need for any knowledge, beyond what you already had, of how to walk to the park. You had an end which you could achieve directly, 'just like that': you could achieve it by virtue of the fact that you knew the means. If you had not known how to walk, or not known what direction one must go in order to get to the park, you could not have walked to the park just like that.

¹⁶ I rely implicitly on John McDowell's idea that 'intentions for the future become intentions in action when the time for acting comes'. See his (2011).

Practical reasoning, which is reasoning that moves from ends to means, is prospective reasoning. Starting from an end, it delivers the knowledge¹⁷ someone has when she is in a position to move towards it. Such reasoning may be considered abstractly, prescinding from the particular circumstances of any particular agent. One then imagines someone who has some end but does not know how to achieve it. She deliberates. She may reason that she has to do this, that and the other, but unless this, that and the other are things she can simply do, she must ask herself by what means she can do them. She must reason on, so that she gains knowledge of all the means—the things now that she can simply do—by doing which she may reach her end.

Thinking abstractly about practical reasoning could lead to an unrealistic conception of what putting means-end knowledge into practice actually involves. It might mislead in two different ways. First, when it is made explicit how practical reasoning proceeds, it can be made to look as if someone who takes means to her end needed always to consciously deliberate. Thompson—who, remember, thinks that there is a great multiplicity of intentional actions whenever there is intentional activity—considers that ‘the line of thought most likely to be opposed [to his own] rests on the notion that if an action is intentional under a given description, then this very description, or the concept that is expressed by it, must have been deployed by the agent in some occurrent thought’ (p.108). Well, if one supposed that a person’s reasoning from ends to means was always present to her consciousness, then, on phenomenological grounds, one would think that practical reasoning is not much involved in what one does. But is it wrong to suppose that thought (not ‘occurrent thought’) pervades action? If one is doing something at the service of some end one has, so that one can say why one is doing it, then does one not need to know that it is something one is doing? It is difficult to see how someone who wasn’t able to come by knowledge of means could ever come to have any reason for doing anything much besides flailing about, or perhaps walking around and around.

There is a second reason why it can be misleading to consider practical reasoning in the abstract. One might get the impression that someone who takes means to her end

¹⁷ Like reasoning of any sort, practical reasoning may be undertaken without delivering knowledge: it may be faulty, and it may proceed from what isn’t actually known. But I observe the maxim ‘knowledge first!’, and think it applies beyond the study of theoretical knowledge. The maxim directs us to allow that knowledge is a concept in whose terms others may be understood.

always starts in a void, having knowledge only of her end, and needing through reasoning to arrive at a determinate plan which will see her through to the end. But this isn't how it actually is. What makes it easy to forget how it actually is is that so much of our knowledge can be taken quite for granted. When one suggests a particular plan to someone, one doesn't, and for the most part couldn't, supply the details of what she will need to know at the time of carrying it out. The abstract view of practical reasoning obscures the situation-specific character of the knowledge one has when one is actually doing something. And it makes no allowance for the fact that knowledge is acquired in the course of action. A person who is determined upon an end can set out being sure that she will find a way to the next step even as she carries on. She is not in the first place a reasoner who devises a plan, then afterwards an agent who carries it out. She is at every stage a thinking agent (never mind that she may lack what Thompson calls 'occurrent thoughts').

These two points about practical reasoning relate to the reality of our situation as practically rational beings. But they can be taken on board, and it still be allowed that what is intentionally done has the sort of means/end structure that can in principle be made explicit. Practical reasoning terminates in things that one needs no knowledge of the means to do. And that takes us back to basics. The knowledge a person has at a particular time equips her to be doing whatever she is doing then. So at any time she must be doing something she can then be doing without recourse to further knowledge—something she can then be doing directly, 'just like that'. Thus on-going (intentional) activity will always be of some basic type.

VII

The point of thinking of activity here can be seen by recalling Jones. Jones was a proficient butterer of toast. At least that must be what I assumed when I said that the same on-going activity was portrayed in one still photograph of him and then in another taken slightly later. In saying that, I treated the activity as homogeneous, so that parts of any stretch of it are stretches of the same activity.

Someone who lacked any interest in what Jones was intentionally doing, but was concerned only with the question how toast may be buttered, would take a different view of the episode. They might see it as one in which the knife in Jones's hand repeats

movements in a certain series—first along the toast, then towards the block of butter, . . . They would discern a means/end structure which is which is not articulated in any intention of Jones, and is absent from the on-going activity of Jones. Jones was buttering toast for a bit, to do which he didn't have to do first one thing (intentionally), then another thing (intentionally), then another.¹⁸ One might say that he exercised his *skills* in buttering toast. That would be a way to register the idea that someone who has the skill of A-ing, though she may A thoughtfully, has no need to have deliberated how to A or to make use of propositional knowledge how to A.

*Philosophy Department
Birkbeck, University of London,
London WC1E 7HX
UK*

*Centre for the Study of Mind in Nature
University of Oslo
0315 Oslo
Norway*

REFERENCES

- Anscombe, G. E. M. 1957: *Intention*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Baier, Annette 1971: 'The Search for Basic Actions'. *American Philosophical Quarterly* 8, pp. 161–70.
- Crowther, Thomas 2011: 'The Matter of Events'. *The Review of Metaphysics*, 65, pp. 3–39.
- Davidson, Donald 1963: 'Actions, Reasons, and Causes'. Reprinted in Davidson 1980, pp. 3–19.
- 1967: 'The Logical Form of Action Sentences'. Reprinted in Davidson 1980, pp. 105–22.
- 1971: 'Agency'. Reprinted in Davidson 1980, pp. 43–61.
- 1980: *Essays on Actions and Events*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

¹⁸ In the course of writing this paper I had many conversations with Christos Douskos. They were all very helpful, and I thank him.

- Galton, Antony 2012: 'The Ontology of States, Processes, and Events'. In Mitsuhiro Okada and Barry Smith (eds.), *Proceedings of the Fifth Interdisciplinary Ontology Meeting*, pp. 35–45. Tokyo: Keio University, Open Research Centre for Logic and Formal Ontology.
- Lavin, Douglas 2012: 'Must There Be Basic Action?' *Nous* (pre-publication online version has pp. 1–32).
- McDowell, John 2011: 'Some Remarks on Intention in Action'. *The Amherst Lecture in Philosophy* 6. Online at <http://www.amherstlecture.org/>.
- Mourelatos, Alexander 1978: 'Events, Processes, and States'. *Linguistics and Philosophy*, 2, pp. 415–34.
- Sandis, Constantine 2010: 'Basic Actions and Individuation'. In Timothy O'Connor and Constantine Sandis (eds.), *A Companion to the Philosophy of Action*, pp. 10–17. Wiley-Blackwell.
- 2012: *The Things We Do and Why We Do Them*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Steward, Helen 2012: 'Actions as Processes'. *Philosophical Perspectives* 26, pp. 373–88.
- Thompson, Michael 2008: *Naïve Action Theory*, Part 2 (pp.83–146) of his *Life and Action*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Vendler, Zeno 1957: 'Verbs and Times'. *The Philosophical Review*, 66, pp. 143–160.