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Agency and Actions

Jennifer Hornsby

Among philosophical questions about human agency, one can distinguish in a rough and ready way between those that arise in philosophy of mind and those that arise in ethics. In philosophy of mind, one central aim has been to account for the place of agents in a world whose operations are supposedly 'physical'. In ethics, one central aim has been to account for the connexion between ethical species of normativity and the distinctive deliberative and practical capacities of human beings. Ethics then is involved with questions of moral psychology whose answers admit a kind of richness in the life of human beings from which the philosophy of mind may ordinarily prescind. Philosophy of mind, insofar as it treats the phenomenon of agency as one facet of the phenomenon of mentality, has been more concerned with how there can be 'mental causation' than with any details of a story of human motivation or of the place of evaluative commitments within such a story.

This little account of the different agenda of two philosophical approaches to human agency is intended only to speak to the state of play as we have it, and it is certainly somewhat artificial. I offer it here as a way to make sense of attitudes to what has come to be known as *the standard story of action*. The standard story is assumed to be the orthodoxy on which philosophers of mind, who deal with the broad metaphysical questions, have converged, but it is held to be deficient when it comes to specifically ethical questions. Michael Smith, for instance, asks: 'How do we turn the standard story of action into the story of 'orthonomous action?', where orthonomous action is action 'under the rule of the right as opposed to the wrong'.¹ Smith is not alone in thinking that the standard story is correct as far as it goes but lacks resources needed to accommodate genuinely ethical beings. Michael Bratman is another philosopher who has this thought; and I shall pick on Bratman's treatment of human agency in due course.

The standard story is sometimes encapsulated in the slogan: 'Beliefs and desires cause actions'. In the version of Smith's that I shall consider here, it says:

Actions are bodily movements that are caused and rationalized by an agent's desire for an end and a belief that moving her body in the relevant way will bring that end about.

Smith's unpacking of the slogan shows how *reason* is supposed to enter the story: the word 'rationalize' is used in conveying that that which causes an action constitutes the agent's reason for it.² For the purposes of the present

¹ This is Smith's question in 'The Structure of Orthonomy', the paper he presented to the conference on which the present volume is based. The quotation from Smith below is taken from the handout he used at the conference.

At the conference Michael Smith responded to my own paper by saying that the standard story could be retold so as to avoid my objections to it. The present, much revised, version is aimed at showing that that which I find objectionable in the standard story cannot simply be evaded. I thank Michael for his contribution to discussion there, Tom Pink and Miranda Fricker for comments they gave me on a draft of the earlier version, and the editors for comments on a draft of the present version.

² This use of 'rationalize' is taken from Donald Davidson's 'Actions Reasons and Causes', *Journal of Philosophy*, 60, (1967) 685–700, reprinted in his *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford University Press, 1980) 3–19, in which the seeds of the standard story were sown.

paper, it need not matter very much exactly how the story is formulated. My objection to the standard story will be that—despite the fact that the word ‘agent’ appears in definitions like Smith’s—*the story leaves agents out*. Human beings are ineliminable from any account of their agency, and, in any of its versions, the standard story is not a story of agency at all.

The claim I intend by saying that the story leaves agents out is not answered by adding states of mind of different sorts from beliefs and desires to the causes of bodily movements. For what concerns me is the fact, as I see it, that ‘belief-desire psychology’ as it is understood in the standard story can cover none of the ground where human agency is found, and cannot do so even when it is supplemented with further mental states.³ The popularity of the standard story then seems very unfortunate. It is not merely that that which supplements it inherits its crucial flaw. It is worse than that. For when the standard story is the base line for questions in moral psychology, a shape is imposed on those questions that they should never have been allowed to take on. Meanwhile the orthodoxy in philosophy of mind is silently reinforced.

Before I criticize Bratman’s attempt to supplement the standard story (§3), I want to draw attention to what I shall call its *events-based* character, and to explain how and why that is a source of trouble (§1). Events-based accounts introduce a conception of the causal order in which agents have no place (§2). The causal role that agents actually occupy disappears in an account, which is events-based (§4).

1

There are some ideas in the background of the standard causal story which I should start by spelling out. The basic idea is that there is a category of particulars called ‘events’, and that some of the things in this category—spatiotemporal things that can happen only once—merit the title actions. Thus any of the following may on occasion apply to an event: ‘a mosquito’s biting me’, ‘the chocolate’s melting’, ‘Don’s falling from the cliff’, ‘Jones’s stealing the jewels’, ‘Helen’s waving her right arm’. And, very likely, the last two phrases here—but (*human* action being implicitly understood) only these two—apply to events that are actions. As we have seen, *bodily movements* (some of them) are said to be actions in the standard story. That is because such things as stealing the jewels are things that people do by moving their bodies; and if Jones stole the jewels by moving his body thus and so, then his stealing the jewels is (the same event as) his moving his body thus and so. ‘His stealing the jewels’ describes a bodily event by allusion to an effect that it had.⁴

Some of this is already controversial. And I need to set some controversies aside now in order to move on. There are philosophers who object to the whole idea that actions are events. I think that their objection will be easier to understand when some of its sources have emerged. (Without defending the idea that actions

³ In ‘The Possibility of Philosophy of Action’, in *Human Action, Deliberation and Causation*, ed. Jan Bransen and Stefaan Cuypers (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1998), 17–41, Michael Smith defends the standard story, which he there calls the basic Humean story, to the hilt. He aims to show just how widely the story has application (however much one might need to embellish it in order to deal with all of the various cases). My present concern, one might say, is not with any of the particular claims in that paper, but with the general picture of agency that lies behind it.

⁴ For a defence of the idea that actions are described in terms of effects they have and the thesis about the individuation that underlies this claim, see Davidson’s ‘Agency’, reprinted in *Essays on Actions and Events*, cit. n.2, 43–61.

are events in the present paper, I would suggest that its innocence may be manifest when it is freed from everything with which it has so often and so readily been wrongly associated. Much of the opposition to the idea is explained [I believe] by the alacrity with which philosophers whose outlook is ‘naturalistic’ have moved from this idea to events-based accounts of agency: see §§4 and 5 *infra*.) Again, there are philosophers who allow that actions are events, but who draw upon a conception of events different from the standard story’s own. I hope that it will come to be evident that errors I find in the standard story are not a product of its conception of events as such (see n.14 below). Then again, there are those who allow that an action can be an event of someone’s moving their body but who don’t believe that such an event is a movement. They refuse to equate (say) *a*’s moving her leg with *a*’s leg’s movement. Here I agree, but leave expression of my own disbelief for much later because I want to avoid muddying the waters for the present. For the time being, then, let us simply follow the standard story in speaking as if bodily movements were the events which are redescribed in terms of effects or results they have—redescribed so as to reveal interesting things done by someone who moved their body in some way.

An account of action which is *events-based*, as I shall mean this, assumes more than that actions are such redescrivable bodily movements. It also assumes that the phenomenon of human agency, and not just a category of events, is delimited when it is said which events are actions. And it takes it that the causal truths about agency can be formulated as claims about causation of, or by, an action—as claims about particulars. (See Smith’s version quoted above in which both of these assumptions are implicit.) An events-based account thus accords a very central role to events, having recourse to them both in marking out the phenomenon of agency, and in a causal depiction of it.

The events-based character of the standard story is what I shall criticize to begin with. One way to see the error of its first assumption is to think about failures to act (in a certain sense). One way to see the error of its second assumption is to think about how action-explanation works. I take each of these in turn now.

1.1 The key notion in much theory of action has been that of doing something *intentionally*. This is evidently the notion that has informed the standard story, which takes ‘believe’ ‘desire’ and ‘do intentionally’ to form a sort of conceptual trio. Behind the use of ‘intentionally’ is the thought that one keeps track of what is significant in someone’s life as an agent if one attends to what they *intentionally* do. That was one of Davidson’s principal claims in his paper ‘Agency’.⁵

But someone can do something intentionally without there being any *action* that is their doing the thing. Consider A who decides she shouldn’t take a chocolate, and refrains from moving her arm towards the box; or B who doesn’t want to be disturbed by answering calls, and lets the telephone carry on ringing; or C who, being irritated by someone, pays that person no attention. Imagining that each of these things is intentionally done ensures that we have examples of agency in a sense that Davidson’s claim brought out. But since in these cases, A, B and C

⁵ Cited in previous note. That paper begins with the question ‘What events in the life of a person reveal agency?’. The question puts in place the assumption that the phenomenon of human agency will be delimited when it is said which events are actions.

don't move their bodies, we have examples which the standard story doesn't speak to.

It might be thought that the standard story needs to take the emphasis off *bodily movements*. And certainly it seems that the story would encompass more than it does if actions weren't defined by reference to the body and its movements.⁶ If D's temptation to take a chocolate was so powerful that she had to tense her muscles in order to hold herself back, then arguably 'her refraining from taking a chocolate' would apply to an event even though her body did not move: it would apply to D's tensing her muscles, perhaps. Still to adapt the standard story in order to let in an example such as this would not address the real point here, which is that in cases like the three imagined, there simply is no event—no particular—which is the person's intentionally doing the relevant thing. In the cases of A, B and C, that which ensures that something is done intentionally is not a matter of the occurrence of an event at all. Of course there will be plenty of events in the region of these agents at the time at which they do their things. But as the cases are imagined, none of these events is someone's doing something intentionally. One might put the point by saying that 'there is no positive performance' on the part of A or B or C, and that when actions are taken to be events, they are 'positive performances'.

Notice that one cannot put the point by saying that there are 'negative actions' on the parts of A, B and C. Of course not: where 'action' is taken in the standard story's sense, there could not be any such thing as a negative action.⁷ It is true that philosophers who are interested in categories such as *omitting*, *refraining*, *letting happen* sometimes speak of these as categories of 'negative actions'. But then they don't use the word 'action' as having application to events. It may put a strain on those who raise questions about 'negative actions' to use the word as the standard story does—so that it is denied application as soon as there is no event which can be identified as an action. (This is why speaking of 'a positive performance' can help to make the point about the examples.) Still the strain is something that one has to put up with if one adopts the terminology of the standard story in order to evaluate it. The bodily movements of which the story speaks are spatiotemporal particulars. And in any of its versions, the standard story finds actions among such particulars—among events. To that extent, it fails to deal with examples where there is (in its own sense) no action. If such examples appeared to have been included in the story, perhaps that is because it is so easy to forget that 'action' is used there in a semi-technical, philosophers' sense.

1.2 If it were a matter of its preferring one conception of agency to another, then the standard story could not be faulted for leaving out cases where there is no 'positive performance'. And one can imagine someone thinking that there are reasons to hold on to a relatively narrow conception of agency, which treats

⁶ The doubt about assimilating actions to bodily movements mentioned a few paragraphs back is different. The question there was this: Assuming that an agent moved her body on some occasion when there was an action, then is it her bodily *movement* with which the action is to be identified? Here the question is this: Should the class of actions be so circumscribed that it is required that an agent move her body for there to be an event which is an action?

⁷ There are no such things as negative particulars: cp. D.H. Mellor, *The Facts of Causation* (Routledge, London, 1995), 131–4. Notice that the presence of the word 'not' in a verb-phrase that applies to some agent need not correspond to there being no action: it could correspond to the occurrence of an action that is negatively described. Equally a positive description can sometimes be given of cases where there is no action (in the standard story's sense): she spoiled the show by not turning up.

the territory of agency as defined by the domain of the events which are actions. (It might, for instance, be thought that certain questions in metaphysics receive a particularly sharp formulation by reference to this domain.) Still the problem with the standard story's narrow conception is not that it serves only certain purposes: it doesn't even serve its own.

The reason why the standard story doesn't serve its own purposes is that it purports to work with a rather general conception of agency, deriving from a model of action-explanation. We saw that proponents of the standard story take the notion of being *intentionally* done to provide a hallmark of agency. This is thought to provide a hallmark because of its connexion with 'reason-explanation'— explanation which speaks about agents' beliefs and desires. A's, B's and C's cases count as agency on this reckoning, because one can construct tales of what each of them believed and desired which will appropriately explain their doing their things—not moving, letting the 'phone ring, not paying attention to X. So the standard story locates examples in a certain explanatory setting in order to characterize them as examples of agency, yet, by treating actions as events in accordance with the standard story, it ensures that there are cases that belong in that setting but don't have a place in the story.

Well, a proponent of the standard story might acknowledge that there are more explanations in the 'belief-desire' style than there are events (sc. 'positive performances') about which his story could be told, but respond by suggesting that action-explanation comes in two sorts. The suggestion would be that there are explanations in which the occurrence of an event—of a bodily movement—is explained and the standard story can straightforwardly be told; and there are, in addition, explanations in which the standard story cannot be told, although some other, related story, which also mentions 'beliefs and desires', no doubt can. But the suggestion is actually not at all plausible. For when we ask why someone did something, expecting to learn about what they thought or wanted, we don't always need to consider whether or not there was a positive performance on their part; explanation can carry on in the same vein, whether there was or not. One might discover that it was because she wanted to wreak revenge on the producer that she spoiled the show, and it not matter very much whether, for example, she put a sleeping tablet into the principal performer's drink (so that her spoiling the show was an event that was her putting ..) or she simply failed to turn up (so that there was no *event*, or at least no bodily movement of hers, that was her spoiling the show). Either way, we say that she spoiled the show because she wanted to wreak revenge; and it makes no odds here whether the case is of such a sort that we can construct a statement 'Her wanting to wreak revenge — caused [an event which was whatever bodily movement was] her Φ -ing'.

In the version of Smith's that we looked at, the standard story contains such causal statements as: 'Her wanting — and her believing — caused and rationalized a bodily movement'. Simplifying a bit, we can say that the standard story's causal statements are on the following style and pattern:⁸

(SS) Her desire — caused [an event which was] her bodily movement.

What we have just seen is that it is sometimes impossible to find a statement in this style, and implausible that we should be looking for statements in two

⁸ The simplification assumes that *w* is a cause of that of which *d* and *b* are a cause. It is actually unclear how the 'and' of '*d* and *b* caused *m*' (a desire and a belief caused a movement) is supposed to work: cp. nn.13 and 15 *infra*. But I take it that those who tell the standard story will assent to 'Desires cause actions', just as they assent to 'Desires and beliefs cause actions'.

different styles. That surely suggests that our focus should be on the sort of causal claim which comes naturally and which applies in every case:

(*) She did such and such because she desired —.

Causal statements like this hardly need defence: they are statements of a kind that we commonly recognize to be true.⁹

One may wonder now why causal claims like (SS), which are part of the standard story, should ever have been made. For even where there *is* an event of the agent's doing something, its occurrence is surely not what gets explained. An action-explanation tells one about the agent: one learns something about her that makes it understandable that she should have done what she did. We don't want to know (for example) why there was an event of X's offering aspirins to Y, nor why there was the actual event of X's offering aspirins to Y that there was. What we want to know is why X did the thing she did—offer aspirins to Y, or whatever.¹⁰ When we are told that she did it because she wanted to help in relieving Y's headache, we learn what we wanted to know.

Now the standard story's proponents say that 'Actions are caused by a desire and a belief of the agent'. So they not only take the occurrence of a particular to be causally explained when an action-explanation is given, they also assume that items in a realm of particulars are what do the explaining. Hence their recurrent talk of 'belief-desire pairs' as causes, and of beliefs and desires as 'token' states. This is not the place to issue a challenge to the very idea of token states as they figure in the philosophical orthodoxy.¹¹ But we can notice that those who treat a state of mind a person was in—wanting to help, as it might be—as if it were a particular inside that person, appear to confuse two quite different uses of 'state'. And it is surely the events-based character of the standard story which gives rise to the idea that action-explanations record truths about causally-related particulars. Only when events are on the scene would there be any incentive to move from (*) to (SS). (*) gives the form of some action-explanations as normally understood; (SS) purports to see particulars standing in a relation of 'cause'.¹²

⁹ I cannot defend the idea that action-explanation is causal in the present paper. About it, I would say what I say, in n.5 *supra* about the idea that actions are events

¹⁰ I don't think that I need to take issue with Davidson's claims in 'The Logical Form of Action Sentences' (reprinted in his *Essays on Actions and Events*, cit. n.2): one can accept that some of the sentences that give the explanantia of some action-explanations implicitly contain an existential quantifier whose domain is events, without thinking that any of the explanations is focused on the occurrence of an event. The objection that may be raised here will be that by allowing any sort of equivalence between 'a Φ -d' and 'there was an event of a's Φ -ing', one ensures that action-explanation is the explanation of events' occurrences. But I think the objection relies on a failure to appreciate the hypersensitivity of 'explains why —' contexts. Consider that there may be circumstances in which we are interested to know why *Mary* stole the bicycle, and other circumstances in which we are interested to know why *Mary* stole the bicycle; and different answers to the questions will satisfy our interests in the different circumstances. (See Jonathan Bennett, §14 of *Events and Their Names* (Oxford University Press, 1988) pp.32–3 for a spelling out of this example.) My claim is that when someone seeks an action-explanation, typically what she is interested to know is why someone did something.

¹¹ Helen Steward's challenge, in Part II of *The Ontology of Mind: Events, Processes and States* (Oxford University Press, 1997), is devastating. There is no ontological category into which can be lumped both the things which those who tell the standard story call 'states' and the things which they call 'events'.

¹² 'Cause' is sometimes used in such a way that any 'because'-statement (or, perhaps, any 'because'-statement which is genuinely causal) licenses a statement of the form 'C causes E'. I needn't quarrel with this usage, insofar as 'Q because P' might be equivalent to 'C causes E' where 'C' and 'E' abbreviate 'the fact that P' and 'the fact that Q'. My quarrel here is with the move from

It will have to suffice here to have questioned the conception of action-explanation that an events-based account characteristically leads to. First, a causal explanation of why someone did something could not always be the explanation of an event's occurrence (for want sometimes of a 'positive performance'). Secondly, an action-explanation doesn't ever seem to be focussed on saying why an event occurred. Once these points are appreciated, perhaps the habit of thinking that action-explanations mention items which combine with one another in the production of an event will start to be undermined.¹³

2

The foregoing is meant to indicate that agency is misconceived in an events-based account of it. Examples where there is no 'positive performance' suggest that the account leaves things out, and they point towards the impossibility of accommodating agency to its view about the operation of causality. Perhaps that view—of causality operating through items linked in causal chains—is the correct view of causal truths in some areas. But the truths that make up the phenomenon of agency seem not to belong in a world in which causality operates only in such a manner.¹⁴

I come now to a more direct way of showing that agency cannot be captured if one takes this view of causality's operation. I suggest that if one attempts to locate agency within the confines of such a view, one fails.

Consider Hume on the subject of bodily movements' production:

We learn from anatomy, that the immediate object of power in voluntary motion, is not the member itself which is moved, but certain muscles, and nerves, and animal spirits, and, perhaps, something still more minute and more unknown, through which the motion is successively propagated, ere it reach the member itself whose motion is the immediate object of volition. [T]he power, by which this whole operation is performed is, to the last degree, mysterious and unintelligible. ... [W]e have no power [to move our limbs]; but only that to move certain animal spirits, which, though they produce at last the motion of our limbs, yet operate in such a manner as is wholly beyond our comprehension.¹⁵

Hume's account of how limb movements come about provides one way of filling out one part of the standard story. But it is impossible to believe that Hume has succeeded in offering any part of any story of human agency. The lesson

 'Q because P' to 'c caused e', where 'c' and 'e' are taken to name something in the category of particulars.

¹³ A different way to undermine this habit is to show that there are no intelligible causal statements which mix together things in a category of events with things in a category of conditions (where so-called 'token' states would need to be reckoned in the category of conditions). This is the conclusion of an argument of Davidson's 'Causal Relations' (reprinted in his *Essays on Actions and Events*, cit. n.2, 149–162). For a spelling out and endorsement of the relevant argument, see Helen Steward, 'On the notion of cause "philosophically speaking"', in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, XCVII, 1997, 125–140. From the perspective of Steward's article, it must seem an irony that Davidson's writings about action should so much have influenced those who tell the standard story.

¹⁴ I hope that it will be evident now that the view about the operation of causality that I put into question need not be founded in the standard story's conception of events. At the outset of §1, I noted that some philosophers draw on a different conception: an example would be Jaegwon Kim. The criticisms of the standard story in §1 have relied upon a specific conception of events (upon the only conception, I should say, which allows that they are genuinely particulars). But I believe that my claims against "events"-based accounts have application also when "events" is understood in different (but all of them philosophically familiar) ways.

¹⁵ *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), §7.I

from anatomy, supposedly, is that the only effects we can produce are events in our brains, and thus, as Hume himself puts it, ‘totally different from’ the effects that we intend. But it is undeniable that among the effects we produce when we do something intentionally, there are some that we intend—whether bodily movements, or events in the region beyond our bodies. And if we do produce intended effects, then we can produce them. It is true, of course, that advances in neurophysiology have made the production of limb movements less incomprehensible than Hume took it to be. But the present point is not that Hume could not comprehend how our limbs come to move, but that, with an events-based account as his only resource, he finds himself saying that we *cannot* (‘have no power to’) move them.¹⁶

In Hume’s story of agency, there is no place for beings who can move their bodies. Thomas Nagel has said that ‘There seems no room for agency in a world of neural impulses, chemical reactions, and bone and muscle movements’. When he presented ‘his problem of autonomy’, Nagel adopted an external perspective from which ‘the agent and everything about him seems to be swallowed up by the circumstances of action; nothing of him is left to intervene in those circumstances’. If you try to imagine your actions as part of the flux of events, then you won’t succeed, Nagel said. ‘The essential source of the problem is a view of .. the order of nature. That conception, if pressed, leads to the feeling that we are not agents at all.’¹⁷

Some commentators share Nagel’s anxiety. Not everyone has gone along with it, however. Those who have got used to thinking that someone’s doing something intentionally is constituted by states and events see no difficulty about discovering examples of human agency in the picture on show from Nagel’s external perspective. But perhaps one can appreciate the source of some of Nagel’s anxiety by thinking about where Hume was led by his assumption that instances of agency consist of items—volitions, and then movements of muscles, nerves, animal spirits and, eventually, limbs—linked on causal pathways. It is surely because there seems to be no place for a sort of being that can move itself in his account that Hume is led to the conclusion that we cannot move our limbs. Where Hume plumps for a manifestly false conclusion, Nagel tells us that we find problems.¹⁸

The problem now would seem to be that agency cannot be portrayed in a picture containing only psychological states and occurrences and no agent making any difference to anything. It is no wonder that some of those who share Nagel’s worry take it to be a problem for the standard story of action.¹⁹

¹⁶ Hume’s denial of causal powers is well-known. But I think that its consequences for an account of human agency are insufficiently appreciated. (I take these consequences to be revealed in the particular passage, though no doubt there could be more argument about this. I don’t suggest that Hume really thought that no one can move their limbs. His compatibilist arguments always take it quite for granted that human beings can take their place in the causal nexus.)

¹⁷ See *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford University Press, 1986) pp. 110-11).

¹⁸ In Ch. VII of op. cit. n.19, Nagel discusses a question which ‘applies even to the activity of spiders’ before he introduces two different problems relating specifically to human agency. I have not been careful to distinguish here between Nagel’s various problems, thinking as I do that they should all be solved together. I have said more about the problem that Nagel calls the problem of autonomy in ‘Agency and Causal Explanation’, in *Mental Causation*, eds. J.Heil and A.Mele (Oxford University Press, 1993) 129-153 (reprinted in *Philosophy of Action*, ed. A. Mele, Oxford Readings in Philosophy 1997).

¹⁹ David Velleman introduces his problem about agency by reference to Nagel’s puzzle in ‘What Happens When Someone Acts?’, *Mind* 101, 461–481 (reprinted at 123–143 in his *The Possibility of Practical Reason*, Oxford University Press, 2000); but he settles for the view that the standard

Michael Bratman, so far from sharing Nagel's worry, thinks that it is obvious that an account of our agency had best be 'embedded in the event causal order'. He recognizes that 'in some cases we suppose ... that the agent .. is not merely the locus of a series of happenings, of causal pushes and pulls'. And he is led to seek a fuller account of actions' aetiology than the standard story provides. In a series of recent articles, Bratman builds upon that story, adding further states to its beliefs and desires.²⁰ I look at his account now in order to illustrate the direction in which philosophers are led if they think that treating distinctively human forms of agency is a matter of bolstering the standard story.

Bratman is right, of course, to think that the standard story is conceptually inadequate insofar as it mentions only beliefs and desires. Everyone agrees that a life-like account of human agency will include states of mind of many more sorts than these. And Bratman himself has done more than anyone else to show that agents' intentions cannot be reduced to their beliefs and desires.²¹ But to agree to this is not to accept the strictures of what Bratman calls a 'broadly naturalistic psychology', wherein phenomena are all to be seen as 'consisting in some, perhaps, complex, causal structure involving, events, states and processes'.²² These strictures, rather than its simple shortage of mental states, are what lead Bratman to think that the way to treat agency is to add further pieces of psychological machinery to the standard story's states.

In Bratman's account a distinction falls between action determined or governed by an agent—confined to adult human beings—, and '(merely) motivated behaviour'—found for instance among children who have beliefs and desires but do not yet have the conceptual resources for normative deliberation. The question what makes someone a *full-blown agent* of X is a question about the type of psychological functioning—beyond what is found where behaviour is motivated merely—from which X issues.²³ Bratman postulates that where agency is full-blown, actions are caused by higher-order reflexive policies. Any such policy has a content of this sort: Treat desired end E as providing reasons in one's motivationally effective deliberation, and treat it so as a result of having this

story is adequate if someone's agency falls short of what is needed for a case of 'agency *par excellence*'. I think then that Velleman fails to address what Nagel had supposed to be a *quite general* puzzle. I discuss Velleman's treatment in this and subsequent of his papers in my 'Agency and Alienation', in *Naturalism in Question*, ed. Mario De Caro and David Macarthur (Harvard University Press, 2004) 173–187.

²⁰ The paper by Bratman on which I mainly focus in the present section is 'Two Problems About Human Agency,' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* (2000-2001) 309-326. (I have just quoted from p.311.) I also draw on his 'Reflection, Planning, and Temporally Extended Agency', *The Philosophical Review*, 109 (2000) 35-61: the phrase 'embedded in the event causal order' occurs there. In this, Bratman not only endorses 'naturalistic psychology', but also maintains that an agent's identity over time should be treated as consisting 'primarily in overlapping strands of various kinds of psychological ties' between 'states and attitudes'. It is a good question whether such a reductionist conception of personal identity is enforced by 'naturalistic psychology', but certainly no accident that someone should subscribe to both.

²¹ See his *Intention, Plans and Practical Reason* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge Mass., 1987).

²² 'Two Problems ..', op. cit. n.20, p.312.

²³ Ibid. p.310.

policy.²⁴ The proposal is that when action is the upshot of such a policy, there is a strong form of agency, so that ‘the *agent* is the source of, determines, directs, governs the action, and is not merely the locus of .. causal pushes and pulls’.

Well, there doesn’t seem to be any ordinary evidence that people regularly operate with second-order, reflexive policies of Bratman’s kind. The fact that people show consistency in exhibiting one or another virtue certainly doesn’t seem to provide evidence. When you call someone ‘considerate’, for example, it doesn’t seem that you say that their actions are caused by the presence of a policy to treat respect for others’ feelings as providing reasons in their motivationally effective deliberation and so to treat it as a result of having the policy. (If it really were as a result of a policy that someone showed consideration, then its content most probably would be ‘Be considerate’.) It is not clear what could persuade us that anyone pursues policies of Bratman’s kind. Certainly it seems very unlikely that many people would readily assent to possessing them. And it will be doubtful that many of us would be prepared to settle for a definite list of ends to encompass all of what we do as self-determined agents. At the very least, then, it is implausible that many adult human beings will be revealed as full-blown agents on Bratman’s account of the matter. Yet presumably few adult human beings only ever go in for what Bratman calls ‘(merely) motivated behaviour’.

Suppose, however, for the sake of argument, that we go along with Bratman’s policies. Suppose that we can define the ends we desire, and that we have the relevant policies in respect of each of them, and that such policies sometimes account for what we do. Even so, we surely should not want to say that someone is self-determined only insofar as the presence of such a policy actually explains what they do at some time. Consider a segment of someone’s life history—a day’s worth, say. Even allowing that, within this segment, policies with a second-order reflexive content sometimes cause actions, we shall not think that this shows that the person’s self-determination is sometimes switched on. Much of what is done by a self-determined agent is not at all remarkable, so that most likely very many of the examples of agency found in such a segment will be quite mundane, and lack any distinctly rational or ethical deliberative history. The property of being a self-determined agent surely does not derive from particular occasions when some distinctive sort of state of mind—a special kind of policy or whatever it might be—kicks in to produce an action.

There are two sorts of objection to Bratman in the foregoing. Firstly, he postulates states of mind which are not plausibly states of ordinary people. Secondly, he assumes that we have to consider what is for an *action* to be of an especially high-grade sort in order to come to understand particular forms of *agency*. (This assumption is also present in Smith, when he raises the question what it is for an action to be *orthonomous*.) The assumption flows from allegiance to the standard story. The story tells us how the events that are actions are caused. And Bratman (like Smith) thinks that we have to find a particularly high-grade sort of cause for the actions of a self-determined (or *orthonomous*) agent.

Life would be tough if pursuing second-order reflexive policies were the only option for a genuinely ethical agent. Pursuing them would be cognitively taxing and interfere with exercising more ordinary capacities—capacities to react appropriately to the particularities of the various situations in which one may find oneself. These other capacities can be taken for granted if one rejects the assumption that characterizing self-determined agency is a matter of marking out a

²⁴ Ibid. pp.321–4.

special class of events. For then our claim to self-determination can be founded in a conception of human agents as the kind of beings who consciously act under the influence of a wide variety of considerations, including so-called normative reasons. And an account of agents and their motivation can then make allusion to quite disparate factors, including, for instance, traits of character and emotional reactions.²⁵ Provided that human beings themselves are acknowledged to be part of the subject matter in action-explanation, a story about what someone does on occasion need not be focused upon actions and their history among other events, states and processes; it can be focused upon the agent and the difference that she made.

4

The idea that human beings make a difference—that they cause things, or bring them about—is surely a very ordinary and familiar one. Bratman tells us that ‘it is difficult to know what it means to say that the agent, as distinct from relevant psychological events, processes and states, plays .. a basic role in the aetiology and explanation of action.’²⁶ But I think that Bratman’s difficulty must be a consequence of his espousal of an events-based account of agency. When one reflects upon what is present in that account, it can seem as if the only alternative to thinking of actions as ‘embedded in an event causal order’ were to treat agents as ‘fundamentally separate and distinct elements in the metaphysics’²⁷—as if any agent would have to encroach upon the causal chains that lead up to actions.

There is another view, however; and I think that it is a part of common sense. If we want to know what it means to say that an agent (as distinct from events and so on) brings things about, then we need only to think about what is ordinarily meant when this is said. That is what I explore next (4.1). We shall discover that events-based accounts are ruled out when it is accepted that agents bring about the things that they actually do (4.2). When the actual causal role of agents is grasped, it becomes evident why the standard story is not a story of human agency (4.3).

4.1 An event of someone’s doing something is usually an event of their bringing something about. A driver slams on the brakes and she brings it about that the car comes to a sudden stop; the event that is her slamming on the brakes brings it about that the car comes to a sudden stop. A tea drinker puts her cup on the table; the result of the event of her putting it there is that the cup is on the table. The thought here—that a person’s doing something is typically that person’s bringing something about—relies on the fact that typical action verbs are causatives of one or another sort. The causative character of action language reflects agents’ abilities to affect things. When agents do things by moving their bodies, they draw on causal knowledge, some of which is knowledge of relations of event causation, including knowledge of what their bodies’ movements cause. (A foot pressed against the appropriate pedal applies the brakes; braking causes stopping; and so on.) In taking up the language of

²⁵ I say this in order to point towards a different direction from Bratman’s in which to go in order to answer questions like Bratman’s. I don’t mean to deny that there are plenty of good questions in the region of Bratman’s own.

²⁶ See ‘Reflection, Planning’, *op. cit.* n.20, p.39

²⁷ *Ibid.*

events, then, one is able to recapitulate in an explicit way a kind of knowledge that agents exploit in affecting things beyond themselves.

The idea that actions are events that can be redescribed in terms of their effects or results was part of the background of events-based accounts. We see now that this idea fits in with a general way of spelling out the causative character of action language: something the driver did was to bring the car to a sudden stop, and the car's arriving at a sudden stop was an effect of the driver's action; something the tea drinker did was to put the cup on the table, and the cup's being on the table was a result of her putting it there. Although an event ontology is made explicit here, there is no call to import the two assumptions of an events-based account of agency. In the first place, to claim that there are events which merit the title 'actions' is not to adopt a conception of agency which confines examples of agency to the occurrence of events. For the upshot of agents' drawing on their causal knowledge can perfectly well be that they *don't* move their bodies. (So it was in the case of A, B and C, who, knowing that their moving would not have conduced to what they wanted, did things intentionally without there being any *action*.) Secondly, the claim that actions are events that are usually described in terms of their effects and results says nothing about the aetiology of actions. Taking a view about the language of action and its causative character can hardly settle the question of what kind of story to tell about the causation and explanation of action. Accepting that actions are events is one thing, endorsing an events-based account of agency quite another.

4.2 Advocates of events-based accounts are not alone in thinking that once events are on the scene, any causal question relating to human agency concerns the causation of the events that are actions. There are also the Agent Causationists who say that *agents* are causes of actions.²⁸ It is when this is said that it looks as though agents were intruders among events states and processes, encroaching there as 'fundamentally separate and distinct elements in the metaphysics'.

But in order to defend the causal role of agents, there is no need to say that they cause actions. Indeed there is every reason to say that agents do *not* cause actions. Consider again the examples of the driver and the tea drinker. What did they cause, or bring about? The driver caused (among other things) the car's coming to a halt; the tea drinker brought it about that (among other things) her cup was on the table. These things, which they caused or brought about, are the effects or results of their actions. What agents cause, then, are not the events that are their actions, but the effects or results in terms of which their actions may be described.²⁹ And when we think of agents causing things, we don't think of them imposing themselves in causal chains that lead up to their actions.³⁰

²⁸ I introduce the initial capitals in 'Agent Causation' in order to suggest a distinctive doctrine—that of e.g. Richard Taylor (see further, next n.). Robert Kane, in *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will* (2002) p.23, talks about the common practice of introducing a hyphen in 'agent causation' in order to indicate that a special kind of relation is intended. Well, many philosophers have had particular theoretical intentions when they have defined notions of agent causation; save for that, I don't think that we'd be inclined to think that there's anything special about it.

Others who are called agent causationists include Timothy O'Connor and John Bishop. There is much agreement between the view I put forward here and theirs. But O'Connor and Bishop both define actions as *relations* (and perhaps, then, they do introduce a notion which is 'special' in the sense meant by Kane). Thus they abandon the idea in the background of events-based accounts, which, as it seems to me, can be perfectly acceptable.

²⁹ And that is why it is not an ordinary notion of agent causation which is used when Agents are said to Cause actions (see preceding n.). Bringing in an agent to do some of the causal work of the states and events of an events-based theory can be a consequence of confusing actions with their effects or results. One sees this confusion in the following passage from Richard Taylor's *Action*

Those who speak as if an action were an event one candidate for whose cause is an agent make it seem as if an action might be identified independently of any agent. But an event that merits the title ‘action’ is *a person’s* intentionally doing something. And such events do not belong in a causal order from which people themselves might be missing. Their effects and results are caused by people situated in the causal world in which they intervene, and knowledge of which they rely on for their doings to lead to outcomes they want. Evidently this world, which we know and inhabit, although it is not a world from which events are absent, is not ‘the event causal order’ of which Bratman spoke. But nor is it a world into which people intrude.

Bratman and Smith, when they raised questions about what it is for an agent of a certain sort to be at work, turned these into questions about what sort of psychological cause is in operation. Like others who tell the standard story, they suppose that citing states and events that cause a bodily movement carries the explanatory force that might have been carried by mentioning the agent. But unless there is an agent, who causes whatever it is that her action does, questions about action-explanation do not even arise. An agent’s place in the story is apparent even before anyone enquires into the history of the occasion.

To see this, consider that when one has an action-explanation, one knows why someone did something, and that that is to know why they played a particular causal role—why *a* brought it about that *p*, say. The explanation does not tell one *what* causal role *a* played: one already knows this when one knows what *a* did. If one finds out *why* *a* did whatever it was, then one comes to know things about *a* which make it understandable that she should have brought it about that *p*. But it then becomes more fully intelligible why it came about that *p* only insofar as this had already be understood by reference to *a*’s part in bringing it about. It might be that the agent actively intervened—so that there was a “positive performance” on her part—, or it might be that the agent intentionally let matters take their course. Either way, one must have taken a view of what the agent did—what role she played—, before one can speak to the question of why she did it. In cases where

and Purpose (Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, 1966. The quotation is at p.111 of the 1973 edition reprinted by Humanities Press, New York; I have added the numbering):

(1) In acting, I make something happen, I cause it . . . (2) It seem[s] odd that philosophers should construe this as really meaning, not that I, but rather some event process or state not identical with myself should be the cause of that which is represented as my act. (3) It is plain that .. I am not identical with any such event process or state as is usually proposed as the ‘real cause’ of my act. (4) Hence, if .. I sometimes cause something to happen, .. it is false that an event process or state not identical with my self should be the real cause of it.

The philosophers, the oddness of whose construal Taylor points out at (2), claim that an event, state or process causes his action. But in order to arrive at their claim, one has to confuse ‘acting’ with the ‘something’ that he makes happen, or causes, in acting. In putting the cup on the table (say) that which he makes happen, or causes, is that the cup is on the table. His action, however, is his putting the cup on the table. Thus to represent that some event process or state caused the cup to be on the table is not to represent that some event state or process caused his putting it there. Nothing is said about the cause of his putting it there. Thus Taylor’s assertion at (4) can be rejected. An event not identical with the agent (sc. an action) is a cause of that which an agent causes to happen. This does not conflict with Taylor’s claims at (1) and (3), which are obviously true.

³⁰ In Ch.VII of *Actions* (Routledge, 1980), I suggested that the question of the irreducibility of agent causation comes down to the question whether ‘is an action of’ can be analysed in terms of event-causal notions. It now seems to me that the principal thesis of that book—namely that actions are events that we always describe in terms of their effects—leads rather directly to the answer *No*. We don’t know which events are *a*’s actions unless we know what *a*—the agent—caused. And we couldn’t know what it is for something to be *a*’s action without knowing that things like *a* can cause things.

the agent can be said to have intervened, there will be an event that was her action. But that could not mean that one needs to switch one's attention to an event causal order in order to uncover the agent's motives and reasons in such cases.

The fact that our attention is never directed towards an event causal order when it comes to action-explanation makes it clear why the same sort of explanation should subsume cases where there is no event which is an action as well as cases where there is (§1.1). And it helps to show why (SS) of §1.2 ought never to command our assent, although (*) perfectly well can.

4.3 Before concluding, I should say something about *bodily movements*. (I indicated that I would postpone expression of my own disbelief in the standard story's accounting of these back at the start of §1). What it will be important now to realize is that the agent's role—as cause of what her actions cause—still has application in connection with moving the body. Recognizing this will help to pinpoint where the standard story goes wrong. And it will also enable us to understand better why Hume should have been led to say that we can only produce effects totally different from any that we intend.

We move our bodies in order to effect changes beyond them. The driver, for instance, produced a movement of her foot for a purpose. Thanks to her causal knowledge, her moving her foot on the brake pedal belonged in a causal sequence that culminated in the car's coming to a halt. Her action then is describable as her moving her foot, as her slamming on the brakes, and as her bringing the car to a halt. But there is no possible reason to say that it is a foot's movement. Would anyone be inclined to think of someone's moving her foot as a foot's movement unless they imagined that a person's activity could be dissolved into the goings-on of states and events? The movement of a foot is not an action: it is not an agent's doing anything.

It is not a mere quibble to insist that someone's moving a bit of their body is their doing something, and that the movement they produce is not. For when the label 'action' is attached to bodily movements—to events which aren't actions—the events which *are* actions (to which 'action' had always been supposed to apply) are left out of account. Proponents of the standard story identify actions with bodily movements. And the identification gives their game away. Given that agents cause what their actions cause, an agent's place in any causal story must be the place of her actions. But then agents and the events that really are actions are obliterated with a single stroke when bodily movements are identified with actions. In the standard story no-one ever does anything.

When actions are removed from the scene, not only are agents removed, but also their capacities cannot be recorded. We saw that when one considers the teachings of anatomy as Hume relates these, human agents, with their usual powers of movement and abilities intentionally to do things, are not in sight. Hume denied us our normal capacities of movement. But if it is allowed, against Hume, that we can move our bodies, and can produce such effects as we know would be produced by moving them, then our actions will be thought of as exercises of our capacities. (When the driver, who is capable of moving her right foot [and knows how to put the brakes on etc.] exercises a capacity of movement, there is an event/action of her slamming on the brakes.) Agents then are seen as bodily beings who have a place in causal sequences which lead from influences upon them to the comprehensible effects that they have beyond them. It is only to be expected now that the facts about what we do are not recorded by speaking of items which operate 'in such a manner as is wholly beyond our comprehension'.

5

I hope to have elicited the force of my claim that human agents are ineliminable from any proper story of their agency. Nagel was right to think that the very idea of agency is threatened when we try to picture action from an objective or external standpoint. For in any picture of action, agents will be seen causing things. And since agents are not visible from the external standpoint, we must refuse the suggestion that we might account for agency from it. Some philosophers are inured to the external standpoint; others impose it as their own—for instance when they are led from the idea that actions are events to events-based accounts of agency. But we have established now that this was never the standpoint of anyone who had anything to say about people and what they do; and that treating actions as events incurs no commitment to any events-based account.

It may yet be thought that I exaggerate when I say that the standard story is not a story of human agency at all. Many people suppose that it is only a kind of shorthand that leads philosophers to favour a slogan like the summary version of the standard causal story—‘beliefs and desires cause actions’. What this means, so these people say, is that ‘a person’s believing something and a person’s desiring something causes that person’s doing something’. According to this line, agents’ mental states and their actions are really mentioned, even if agents themselves are not highlighted, in the language of the shorthand and of the standard story. Well, I think that what is represented now as shorthand is actually a way of talking that changes the subject. And I want to say something about why the change of subject should so frequently go unobserved.

Notice that even when what is alleged to be shorthand is given in its unabbreviated version, still the agent’s role in action could not be conveyed. For when an account of the causal transaction in a case of agency is given in the claim that a person’s believing something and a person’s desiring something causes that person’s doing something, it is assumed that the whole of the causal story is told in an action-explanation. The fact that the person exercises a capacity to bring something about is then suppressed. It is forgotten that the agent’s causal part is taken for granted as soon as she is said to have done something. The species of causality that belongs with the relevant idea of a person’s exercising her capacities is concealed.

There are many reasons why this should remain concealed, and why so many philosophers should have settled for a picture of agency like the one presented in the standard story’s events-based account. There is the ease with which it is forgotten that ‘action’ is used in a semi-technical, philosophers’ sense when the causal underpinnings of agency are in question (see §1.1). There is the readiness with which the very different uses of the word ‘state’ are confused (see §1.2). And perhaps there is a tendency simply (unreflectively) to equate a person’s moving her body with the movement that she makes. But none of these slides and confusions is as powerful as the outlook which encourages them and which they encourage. From this outlook, the only possible reality is one in which any causal fact fits into an account in which everything that does any causal work is an event or state. Thus the correct and ordinary idea that to explain what human beings do is to give a kind of causal explanation is thought to be amenable to reconstruction as the idea that some events have causes belonging in a category of psychological occurrences.

Many philosophers with this outlook nod in the direction of the standard story, and offer it a sort of shallow endorsement. They assume that what they have

to say about human agency is compatible with the story, without troubling to investigate it. I examined Bratman's account of full-blown agency in order to see where the standard story leads when it is explicitly told and taken seriously. I hoped to show that, whatever our metaphysical outlook might be, we can appreciate that we need to be released from the straitjacket of the standard story to give a realistic account of human agency. (Bratman's second-order reflexive policies should strike us, I think, as states at best of superhumans—states introduced in order to compensate for a deficiency in what can be uncovered among what is 'embedded in the event causal order'.)

Bratman's work is instructive because he follows where the story leads. Those whose endorsement of the story is more shallow than Bratman's might be less willing than he is to accept what I take to be its consequences. But given the prevailing 'naturalistic' outlook, it is not surprising that so many philosophers should sometimes pay the standard story lip service. And the widespread acceptance of the story among philosophers of mind may make it seem as if the outlook itself had some support. Thus even those whose accounts of agency actually exclude the standard story may blithely suppose that they might always be recast to conform to it. After all, the standard story isn't *obviously* wrong. It is obvious only that its vocabulary is inadequate. This obvious thought leads to the idea that the story needs to be supplemented; the question whether the causal notions that belong in an account of human agency are contained in the story is then overlooked.

I suggest that a 'naturalistic' outlook engenders the story, and that the story sustains that outlook; we have an orthodoxy whose presuppositions aren't examined by most of those who perpetuate it. Peter Strawson once said that it takes a really great philosopher to make a really great mistake.³¹ I can't help thinking that, these days, it takes a really great number of philosophers to contrive in the persistence of a really great mistake.

³¹ 'Self, Mind and Body' in *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays* (Methuen & Co. Ltd., London, 1974).