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Teleology: Old Wine
in New Skins

Edited by László Bernáth — Dániel Kodaj

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Intentional Actions and Final Causes*

Davidson once asked what events in an agent's life are her deeds and doings in contrast to those which merely happen to her (Davidson 1971/1980. 43). Since agency, *prima facie* at least, is a causal concept, it seems natural to approach this question by trying to understand the nature of causation that is involved in exercising it when agents act intentionally. But many years later, Davidson reported that he remained convinced "that the concepts of event, cause, and intention are inadequate to account for intentional action" (Davidson 1987/2004. 106).

My purpose in this paper is to argue that Davidson is right if causes are understood as efficient rather than final causes. I shall argue that the intentionality of behavior is an irreducibly teleological phenomenon, and hence we cannot dismiss the idea of final causation in our account of intentional action. Intentional actions have, of course, efficient causes, and in certain contexts those causes can even explain what an agent did. But efficient causes cannot explain, as the still dominant causal theories of actions aim to do, why what the agent did was intentional.

According to the standard version of causal theories, actions are intentional if they are caused, 'in the right way', by an agent's psychological attitudes or by some agent-involving mental event.¹ According to another version of such theories, an agent's behavior is intentional to the extent that the results of her behavior are caused by the *agent* understood as a persisting substance rather than being caused by some of her psychological states or by some mental event.² Although the two sorts of theories differ both in their ontological presuppositions

* Many thanks to two anonymous referees for their supportive and helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper and to Dániel Kodaj for urging me to do something with it.

¹ Such accounts include, among others, Goldman 1970, Searle 1983, Bishop 1989, Mele 1992, Enc 2003. For further reference see Davies 2010.

² Taylor 1966; Alvarez and Hyman 1998; Lowe 2009, Steward 2012. According to what strikes me as a somewhat peculiar mixture of these two approaches, although actions in general might only have events as their efficient causes, an agent's *free* actions must be caused by the agent. See O'Connor 2000 and Clarke 2003.

and in their accounts of the intentionality of actions, they share the common assumption that intentional agency must be understood in terms of prior *efficient causes*.³ And this is exactly what teleological accounts of actions deny.

Traditionally, most philosophers who reject the causal theories argue that explanations of intentional actions with reference to agents' reasons cannot be causal.⁴ But this, in itself, even if right, does not prove that the nature of intentional action and agency can only be understood in terms of final causes. Elizabeth Anscombe has famously claimed that intentional actions "are actions to which a certain sense of the question 'Why' is given application; the sense is of course that in which the answer, if positive, gives a reason for acting" (Anscombe 2000. 9). However, agents can act intentionally even when they have no reason for which they act because an action done without or against one's reason need not be aimless. And further, behavior can be intentional even in such cases when the question does not seem to be applicable at all, unless "giving a reason" is simply understood as a synonym of "ascribing a goal".

Hence, I shall argue that intentional behavior, irrespective of whether or not it is done for a reason, is irreducibly teleological. Agents act intentionally if their behavior has some 'final cause' in the sense that they have some end or goal for the sake of which their actions are performed. The distinction between those forms of behavior which reveal intentional agency and those which do not cannot be understood in terms of prior efficient causes. Neither event-causation nor agent-causation can explain the intentionality of behavior. Agency, to the extent it is manifested by intentional actions, is a fundamentally teleological concept.

I shall argue for this thesis as follows. First, I shall distinguish two questions about the intentionality of actions: one that is related to the teleological structure of behavior and one that is related to the possibility of conscious control. I shall argue that the former is the more fundamental. Second, I shall highlight those aspects of Aristotelian final causation that make it especially fit for explaining the nature of intentionality of behavior. Third, I shall argue that granting that agents as persisting substances can cause events is neither necessary nor sufficient for the explanation of the intentionality of behavior; and further, that the psychological or psychophysical *origin* of behavior cannot explain its intentionality either. Consequently, we cannot understand the intentionality of actions with reference to inner efficient causes. Finally, I shall argue that "trying to" expresses the intentional mode or aspect of agents' behavior precisely because behavior is intentional only if it is done for the sake of some ends.

³ When I say "only", I do not mean, of course, that the disagreement is minor or irrelevant.

⁴ See, among others, von Wright 1971, Wilson 1989, Ginet 1990, Schon 2005, Lowe 2009, and McLaughlin 2012. Thompson's 'naïve action theory' might be interpreted as a version of the teleological view, see Thompson 2008. On Anscombian teleological accounts see also Wiland 2012. 145–155.

I. TWO CONTRASTIVE QUESTIONS ABOUT THE INTENTIONALITY OF BEHAVIOR

Sometimes we wonder whether an agent's behavior was intentional rather than being *nonintentional*. *Prima facie*, what we inquire in such cases is whether the agent performed the action with some purpose. When we understand agents as acting intentionally, we typically see their actions performed as a means for some end. At least, this is how we ordinarily make sense of intentional behavior. When we try to understand an action *qua* intentional, we search for some end for the sake of which it was performed.⁵

Some other times, however, when we ask whether an agent's behavior was intentional, we are interested in something else. We are interested in whether the action was intentional rather than being *unintentional*. What we wonder in this case is whether an agent has succeeded in exercising conscious control over what she has done or failed to do. Raising this question presupposes that the agent must have had something in mind by doing what she did; or that she acted in the way she did because she had the intention, or at least *an* intention, to perform an act.⁶

Most intentional human actions are intentional in both senses: they are instances of purposeful behavior which the agents whose actions they are also had in mind. We expect normal adult agents to exercise some degree of conscious control over their own behavior, which they can do only if they are aware of what they intend to do. However, as far as the philosophical problem of agency and intentional behavior is concerned, the interesting issue is the relation between these two features of intentional behavior: whether the possibility of purposiveness depends on the possibility of conscious control; or rather, whether conscious control presupposes the purposefulness of behavior.

1. *The primacy of purposiveness*

The easiest way to settle the issue of primacy would be to find examples of such actions that are intentional but lack one of the two characteristics. Unfortunately, as far as our ordinary practice of ascribing intentionality to human actions goes, it seems that we can find examples for both. It is possible to find examples of intentional, but seemingly purposeless actions as well as actions that are done purposefully, but that are not under the agent's direct conscious control.

⁵ In fact, as current research in cognitive science shows, the 'teleological stance' seems to be our 'natural ontological attitude' in the sense that, developmentally, it precedes the attribution of mental states. See the important results of Gergely, Gy. – Csibra, G. 1998, 2003, 2007.

⁶ About the importance of the difference between having *the* intention and having *an* intention see Michael Bratman's classic paper, Bratman 1984/1987.

Most human actions in which we are interested are performed for some purpose. But there are some which seem to be intentional but aimless: crossing one's arm in a certain moment or fidgeting with one's pen during a talk does not seem to serve any further purpose. Nonetheless, such actions are still under the agent's direct conscious control, and in that sense, they seem to be intentional.⁷

On the other hand, there are also forms of behavior which are intentional even if the agent has no direct conscious control over them. In fact, the performance of almost all intentional actions has some parts or aspects over which the agent has no direct control. Someone on an airplane may or may not fly intentionally to a certain destination, even if she has no direct control over where the plane will land.

To the latter problem, one can respond that the intentionality of actions requires only that agents can consciously control the initiation of their specific actions – like boarding a specific airplane – even if they lack direct control over every aspect of its performance.⁸ However, it is not obvious that an agent must be able to exercise such control even when her behavior is intentional. For, as we shall see, not every form of intentional behavior needs to have a beginning at all. Moreover, not every being which can act intentionally is reasonably assumed to possess the capacity of such control. And further, even when they do, this does not prove the priority of conscious control over the purposefulness of overt behavior in the explanation of the intentionality of actions. For if an agent consciously initiates an action the successful performance of which won't be fully under her direct control, then she must be aware that she is initiating a process that will – if everything goes well – constitute her intentional action. And the relevant process is identified teleologically from the perspective of the end for the sake of which it has been initiated.

Importantly, that an agent *desires* some future event or state that might be the consequence of a process initiated by her cannot explain why what she did was intentional. One can buy a lottery ticket intentionally even if there are many conditions beyond one's direct control which need to be satisfied for one's behavior to count as buying a ticket. But one cannot win a lottery ticket intentionally, even if one desires to win. Buying a lottery ticket is a specific sort of process in which an agent participates with the aim of getting one; while winning a ticket is only one of the consequences of her action, which happens to satisfy her desire.

⁷ We might assume that even such actions *can* have some purpose of which the agent is not conscious when performing them. This is certainly possible, but my point is that the actions mentioned *need not* have such purposes in order to understand them as intentional.

⁸ Perhaps it is for this reason why Davidson concludes (“perhaps with a shock of surprise”) that “We never do more than move our bodies; the rest is up to nature”. See Davidson 1980/1971. 59.

For this reason, the teleological understanding of the processes in which agents participate as their initiators is a necessary condition of conscious control over their own behavior. Ultimately, what makes conscious control over one's own behavior possible is that an agent considers what she initiates to do as her action, and hence she must have a prior conception about what counts as an action in a given situation. And what counts as an action in a given situation is determined by the teleological structure of the process envisioned, irrespective of whether or not the agent eventually undertakes the action. Hence, understanding the intentionality of behavior in terms of its purposefulness must be logically and metaphysically prior to the possibility of conscious control.

What then can we say about those actions that seem to be performed without any further purpose? What we need to say is that the mere possibility of such actions does not contradict the idea that the teleological understanding of behavior is a necessary condition of having the *capacity* of conscious control over one's action. For we cannot imagine an agent who performs *all* her actions intentionally only for their own sake. Someone must be able to understand what it means to act in order to do something else or in order to get something before they understand what it means to do something just for its own sake, that is to say, for *no further* end. Hence an agent, who cannot conceive an action, including her own, as a means to satisfy some further end, cannot perform intentionally the types of actions which seem to have no further purpose either.⁹

2. *Teleology and the demands of naturalism*

In fact, the reason why most contemporary philosophers take the teleological structure of processes that are actions derivative of the exercise of conscious control has little to do with the possibility that actions can be performed for their own sake. For everyone agrees that such cases could not be central for an account of the possibility of intentional behavior. The main reason why so many philosophers consider the purposefulness of behavior derivative of the possibility of conscious control over one's own actions is the conviction that the intentionality of actions must be explicable with reference to their causal origin. And they must be so explicable because there could not be any *sui generis* underived teleology in nature.

If this were right, then the teleological structure of actions must be derivable from agents' prior representations of what is desired or intended to happen and

⁹ See Norman Malcolm's important discussion about the very possibilities of intentional 'activities' (Malcolm 1968, 66). Although Anscombe talks about reasons for actions rather than purposes, her famous claim clearly applies in this context as well: "the concept of voluntary or intentional action would not exist, if the question 'Why', with answers that give reasons for acting, did not. Given that it does exist, the cases where the answer is 'For no particular reason', etc. can occur. But their interest is slight" (Anscombe 2000, 34).

the fact that these representations cause what happens when they act. This would imply that even if we typically understand certain forms of behavior as intentional because they have a purpose, they can *have* a purpose only in virtue of the agent's having some prior intention or desire they mean to satisfy. Purposefulness would not be an intrinsic feature of the processes that constitute intentional actions; rather, it would be derivative of agents' having certain types of inner states and the causal role that such states are supposed to play in the production of their behavior.

However, the observation that human actions are often consciously initiated because agents have prior desires and intentions does not establish that the intentionality of actions could be understood with reference to such states. That agents sometimes act *in order to* satisfy their desires does not make the explanation of their behavior nonteleological. Moreover, doing something intentionally in order to satisfy a desire presupposes a prior awareness of the teleological structure of the type of behavior which is performed with that aim. The very thought that an action is executed in order to satisfy some antecedently existing desire presupposes an understanding of the teleological structure of one's own future action.

Further, this approach to the intentionality of behavior entails that only those agents can act intentionally who can also have mental states like intentions and desires; which, in turn, would force us to accept some *a priori* hypotheses about the scope of animal intelligence. Nonhuman animals, just like humans, can act intentionally. If the intentionality of behavior presupposed the possibility of prior mental representations, then nonhuman animals should also be able to represent, and consciously control, their complex intentional actions. Not only monkeys and dogs, but spiders and bees as well. And this seems, for some of us at least, an *ad hoc* and truly incredible hypothesis.¹⁰

In fact, this *a priori* hypothesis is a direct consequence of the widely shared idea that 'naturalism' in philosophy is compatible only with explanations by prior efficient causes. An explanation of the purposefulness of animal behavior can then be 'naturalistic' only if it hypothesizes that animals have conscious states like (proto-)desires and intentions, which are supposed to be the inner causes of their overt actions. But this idea about 'naturalism' is based on a very limited understanding of what nature is. Teleology can be quite 'natural'; certainly, much more 'natural' than highly contentious *a priori* hypotheses about the mental causes of animal actions are.

In the sequel I shall explain, first, why the Aristotelian account of 'final causes' is well suited for capturing the distinction between intentional and nonintentional forms of behavior. Then I shall argue, negatively, that inner efficient causes cannot explain the difference between intentional and nonintentional

¹⁰ For others, it is not. See especially Steward 2012 (chapter 4).

forms of behavior. From the agent's own perspective, her behavior is intentional only when it is done for the sake of some end; and from the impersonal perspective, an action is intentional if the agent who acts participates in a process with a more or less determinately defined end. An action is unintentional when the teleological process that constitutes an agent's action 'goes astray' in the sense that it fails to reach its end.

II. INTENTIONALITY AND THE NOTION OF ACCIDENTS

Teleological explanations play a fundamental role in Aristotle's philosophy. Modern science emerged as a response to the Aristotelian-Scholastic tradition, and the rejection of Aristotelian teleology became an essential part of that response. This is the origin of the widespread conviction, mentioned earlier, that teleological explanations are incompatible with 'naturalism'. It is, of course, debatable whether contemporary sciences avoid, or should avoid, the use of teleological explanations.¹¹ My concern here is, however, restricted to the explanation of the intentionality of behavior, not scientific explanation in general.

My thesis is the following: from a broader metaphysical perspective, if an agent ϕ s at t intentionally, there must be a sense in which her ϕ -ing is not a mere accident. It is for this reason that the agent can consciously control what she does in the sense of being the initiator of her own actions. But we can understand the sense in which an action is not an accident if it is intentional only with reference to its final, and not to its efficient, causes. What makes the Aristotelian concept of final causation especially fit for explaining the intentionality of action is not so much Aristotle's own way to apply it in the explanation of natural and social phenomena, but rather his argument for its indispensability: the argument from accidents or coincidences. For it is only the teleological sense of non-accidentality that can explain the difference between intentional and nonintentional forms of behavior.

In one sense, events are not mere accidents if they can be understood as the nomological and/or causal *consequences* of some other events or conditions. However, it is possible that an event is not an accident in that sense but has nonetheless not been performed intentionally. In fact, nonintentional behavior

¹¹ One of the guiding ideas of the new sciences was that the scientific understanding of the world must be nomic: that the evolution of events is 'governed' by laws of nature. However, there is nothing in the very *concept* of nomic regularity which would entail that laws cannot be teleological. That hearts beat rhythmically in order to help providing the body's cells with oxygen does not seem to be 'less naturalistic' an explanation than it is that blood circulation is caused by regular heart beats. But within the confines of the present paper I am not concerned with the possibility of genuine ('irreducible') teleological laws or regularities. I say more on this in Huoranszki 2022, in Chapters 2 and 4. For the intentionality of a particular piece of behaviour, as I understand it here, does not assume any laws.

is perfectly well explicable nomologically or causally with reference either to the agents' environment or to their internal states. Many types of behavior are explained as mere nonintentional responses to external stimuli or some internal neural changes.

According to the standard 'causal' accounts, agents' actions are intentional if (a) they are the results of some special type of internal causes; and (b) the causal chain leading to the agent's behavior are not 'deviant' (that is, it is of the 'appropriate sort'). In the next two sections I shall argue that (a) the first condition is not necessary for behavior to be intentional; and (b) the second condition cannot be understood without reference to final causes. In this one, I shall explain further in which sense Aristotelian teleology can account for the intentionality of agents' behavior.

1. *The significance of Aristotelian final causes*

As we shall see, a contemporary teleological account of intentionality need not follow Aristotle's own account of intentional actions in every respect. However, there are at least three important characteristics of Aristotelian teleology or, with the scholastic terminology, of 'final causation' which renders it particularly suitable for explaining the intentionality of actions.¹²

First of all, Aristotelian 'final causes' are not to be confused, as they often seem to be, with *backward efficient causes*.¹³ For if backward causation occurs at all, backward causes must actually exist. But the goals or aims for the sake of which an intentional action occurs may never actually come to pass. This means, further, that final causation is not to be understood as a relation between actual events. If it is a relation at all, it is a relation between an agent to whom we ascribe the end and the potential result of a process in which the agent participates in order to reach that end.

Second, Aristotelian final causes are *immanent* in the sense that they are attributed to (animated or inanimate) agents in virtue of their participation in some goal directed processes. Consequently – and contrary, for instance, to the typical Platonic use of teleology – the goal directedness of processes is not explained by some antecedent conscious planning or 'design' which then determines the evolution of events or the shape of human actions. Teleology is not to be understood

¹² The expression "causa finalis" is a legacy of scholastic philosophy. Final causes are one of the four types of Aristotelian causes. However, if we follow Aristotle, it would be more appropriate to distinguish four types of explanatory factors that give different kinds of answers to the question "Why has something happened?". See especially Moravcsik 1974. I use "final cause" because my interest here is not how we can explain what an agent did on a particular occasion, but what makes her behavior intentional.

¹³ This important feature of teleological causation is further explained in Hawthorne and Nolan 2006.

as efficient causality in disguise. Aristotelian final causation is a feature of some natural processes that include animal and human behavior.¹⁴

Third, and relatedly, Aristotelian final causality does not require the truth of panpsychism, neither is it ‘anthropomorphic’ in the sense that it would involve some illicit projection of human powers and capacities to inanimate substances or to members of some lower species. In Aristotelian final causation the goals or ends for the sake of which an agent behaves in the way she does, need not be antecedently represented by the agent who is involved in the teleological process. And since such aims need not be represented by the agent whose actions they explain, final causation is not to be interpreted as efficient causation by the agent’s inner mental states.¹⁵

This aspect of Aristotelian final causation is crucial for a teleological account of action. As we have seen, no one would deny that intentional behavior must in some sense be teleological: typically, agents act intentionally when their behavior has a goal or aim. But according to the standard version of causal accounts of action, behavior is intentional if it is a causal consequence of the agent’s prior or concomitant representation of those aims by her desires or intentions. In contrast, an Aristotelian account of teleology does not require that the aims for the sake of which an action is performed be necessarily antecedently represented by the agent.

I shall mention Aristotle’s own example to elucidate the sense of non-accidentality which is, in my view, indispensable for explaining the intentionality of behavior. Suppose a debtor goes to the market in order to buy some goods. The creditor, who has long desired to get her money back, goes to the market to sell tickets to a feat. As it happens, they meet, and the debtor pays back then and there what she owes to the creditor. Thus, the desired or wanted consequence occurs. But it occurs as an accident in the sense that the creditor did not go to the market for the sake of getting her money back (Aristotle, *Physics* ii 4, 196b).¹⁶

Importantly, the same would be true, if the agents did not go to the market intentionally but were taken there by some brute force. Even if the creditor has some desire and hence some end in view when he goes to the market, the event of encounter necessary for reimbursement did not happen *for the sake* of satisfying that desire.

¹⁴ About the Platonic understanding of teleology see Lennox 1985. About natural theology as a form of denying immanent teleology, see Johnson 2005, 30–35.

¹⁵ For a critical overview of the attempts to reduce Aristotle’s final causes to efficient ones see Charles 2012, 235–238.

¹⁶ For further relevant examples and an alternative interpretation of the problem see Sorabji 1980, 3–26. According to Sorabji’s account, accidents or coincidences have no causes. But this seems plausible only if “causes” are restricted to Aristotelian final causes since the event of encounter has obviously some efficient (not to mention some material) cause.

My suggestion is that this Aristotelian example of an accident captures the essence of the sense in which behavior can be intentional. Davidson's question, with which I began, clearly indicates that the intentionality of actions can only be understood in contrast to those episodes in an agent's life that *merely happen* to her. But what does it mean that things 'merely happen' to an agent? Such 'mere happenings' can certainly have prior 'efficient causes'. What 'merely happen' to an agent are those episodes in her life which are accidents or mere coincidences in the sense that, although they have prior causes which can explain why they have happened, they do not happen for the sake of an end.

2. Normativity and mental causes

Thus, as I see it, Aristotelian teleology can capture well the sense of non-accidentality that is the essential feature of the intentionality of behavior. This does not mean, however, that I propose to follow Aristotle's own account of intentional actions in every respect. There are at least two aspects of my proposal in which it diverges from Aristotle's own account.

First, the ascription of final causes in the sense I shall understand them in the present context does not have any *direct* normative implication. The fact that an action is performed for the sake of an end does not in any way justify what an agent does. Put otherwise, that an agent's behavior has final causes does not imply that it was good for the agent to act in that way.

Final causation need not justify an agent's behavior even in the weak sense that what she has done must always be interpreted as a *good* means to achieve an end. When I lose my sense of direction, I may start walking towards the north, even if my end is to reach a place that lies south of where I am. My behavior was then intentional rather than nonintentional, even if it is a most inefficient means to achieve the end for the sake of which it occurred; and even if I unintentionally ended up in a place I did not intend to.

Aristotle himself often attributes goals on the ground that they are good for the agent in the sense that the agent benefits from the satisfaction of the ends for the sake of which she acts. But the application of Aristotelian teleology, particularly in the context of intentional actions, does not require the use of this metaphysically more loaded notion of final causation. The ascription of final causes itself need not have such normative implications. When behavior occurs for the sake of an end this is a *fact* about it; irrespective of whether or not the end is reached or whether or not it is reached by some more or less effective means; and irrespective of whether or not the agent should have that end at all.¹⁷

¹⁷ The question about normativity is further complicated by the fact that Aristotle distinguishes between real and apparent good, and one might want to argue that every goal must

Nonetheless, Aristotle is certainly right to the extent that it is a necessary precondition of the rational and moral evaluability of actions that they are done for the sake of some end. An agent's action is rational if she chooses it as the most efficient means to satisfy the ends for the sake of which she acts; and an agent's action is good if she follows the end(s) for the sake of which she ought to act. The teleological structure of actions can provide the basis of their normative evaluation.

Second, Aristotle's own way of applying teleology in the explanation of intentional behavior seems to be mentalistic. Aristotle himself holds that animals who lack rational capacities can still act intentionally because they have some 'thought and desire' which direct their behavior towards some ends.¹⁸ As mentioned earlier, whether or not we want to follow him in this respect depends on whether or not we find plausible the idea that all animals that are capable of intentional actions – not only cats or dogs, but also ants, flies or bees – have 'thoughts and desires'. I find such mental ascriptions entirely *ad hoc* in most cases. And an Aristotelian-teleological understanding of intentional action does not require it.

It is for this reason that I prefer using "for the sake of which" to express the goal-directedness of an agent's behavior, even if the use of "with the intention that" may sound more natural. The use of "with the intention that" intimates that the intentionality of behavior requires some prior or concomitant intention with which the action is performed; or that the action must have been *intended* by the agent. In fact, even most contemporary non-causal accounts of action assume this.¹⁹ They agree with the efficient-causal accounts in that the explanation of the intentionality of actions must be mentalistic.

However, one of the central aims of this paper is to argue that an account of the goal-directedness of behavior need not be mentalistic. The explanation of how goal-directed behavior can be consciously controlled by the agent partici-

be understood at least as apparently good. However, I have two concerns about applying this distinction in the present context. The first is that when I put salt instead of sugar into my coffee in order to sweeten it, I do something intentionally which does not at all appear to me good. It might be true that salt appeared to me to be sugar, but this does not mean that it appeared to me good to put salt into my coffee. The second is that the very concept of apparent good presupposes a mentalistic understanding of teleology which, for reasons I shall present in the next few paragraphs, I reject.

¹⁸ "Now we see that the living creature is moved by the intellect, imagination, purpose, wish and appetite. And all these are reducible to thought and desire" (Aristotle, *Movement of Animals*, 700^b15). For a contemporary account of intentional action similar in this respect to Aristotle's see Hyman 2015, 106–111. Importantly, for Aristotle, "thought" need not entail the use of the intellect, which is a rational capacity, and which is characteristic only of humans. But it does presuppose the capacity of memory, perception, and desire which is the inner mental cause of action.

¹⁹ See for instance von Wright 1971, Wilson 1989, or Ginet 1990. A rare example for an early non-mentalistic teleological account of action see Collins 1984.

pating in it is, of course, mentalistic – what else could it be? But the question about the possibility of conscious control should not be confused with the question concerning what makes behavior intentional in the first place.

Of course, we can often explain *why* an agent did something by ascribing some intention or desire to her; and then we assume that the agent who performed the action must have had some end *in view*. My point is that the ascription of such states does not explain why what the agent did was intentional. What explains the intentionality of actions is always the fact that the agent's behavior occurs for the sake of some end. In certain cases, those ends need not even be represented by the agent; whereas in others, even if they are represented, this does not explain why the behavior that may satisfy them is intentional.

This is not to deny the importance of agents' intentions in the explanation of their behavior. Rational agents can exercise conscious control over their own behavior only if they are able to choose action with some end in view. To have an aim in mind, together with a plan about how to achieve that aim, is necessary for the exercise of conscious control over one's own behavior.²⁰ But, again, even if the capacity to represent one's own aims is necessary for rational guidance, what explains the guided behavior's intentionality is not its efficient, but its final cause: the fact that the behavior did occur for the sake of an end.

III. THE INDISPENSABILITY OF TELEOLOGY

In this section then, I shall argue that, as far as the explanation of the intentionality of behavior is concerned, final causes are indispensable and irreducible to inner efficient causes. First, as the possibility of animal agency shows, we can ascribe ends to agents and to the processes in which they participate without assuming that those ends are antecedently represented by the agents who act. But more importantly, even when the relevant aims can indeed be so represented, we cannot understand the intentionality of behavior without reference to the intrinsic teleological nature of the processes in which the agent who acts participates.

1. Actions, movements, and the agent as a cause

As Aristotle already observed, animals are self-movers. Following this observation, some recent accounts of action suggest that we can understand the intentionality of behavior with reference to the exercise of agent's capacity to initiate

²⁰ For questions about how representations of aims can causally guide actions see, among others, Bratman 1987 and Mele 1992.

their own movements.²¹ Such accounts note that there is an interesting ambiguity in the use of some English verbs which can describe an agent's action.²² "Move", for instance, can be used both transitively and intransitively. When we say that an agent's arm moves, we describe an event which may or may not be the agent's action. It seems, however, that saying that *the agent moves her arm* entails that what she does is her action. And it is her action because the movement of her arm is the *causal result* of what she does. This observation about the use of some action-verbs seems to countenance the idea that bodily movements are intentional if, and because, they are caused by the agent as a mover.

There is another observation about the language of action which can be invoked in support of the idea that agency is manifested on those occasions when an agent is causing her own movements. Sentences which have an agent as their grammatical subject and contain a transitive verb need not describe intentional actions. They can, for instance, describe perceptual states or processes. However, the use of verbs describing perceptual states and processes does not reflect *the direction of efficient causality* that may be involved in the processes of the acquisition of such states. An agent can see, hear, feel etc. certain things; but she does not thereby cause them to be seen, heard, or felt. In contrast, the use of verbs expressing intentional movements does seem to reflect the direction of efficient causation. When an agent *raises* her hand, she causes the movement of her body.²³

It can be objected that such observations about the language of action cannot be generalized, since many verbs – like running, crying, flying, or writing – can unambiguously describe actions even when they are not used transitively.²⁴ But one can retort that the performance of any such action must involve, in one way or another, some bodily movements. Since overt physical behavior cannot be performed without the movement of the agent's body, one can insist that behavior is intentional if and only if the relevant movements have been caused by the agent as a mover. Bodily movements themselves, when "movement" is understood intransitively, are events which are the *results* of the agent's moving her body. Such movements manifest agency only to the extent that they are parts of the agent's causal activity: her moving the body.

If this line of reasoning is correct, then we cannot understand physical actions without relying on the prior concept of the agent as a mover or a causer. Behavior

²¹ This observation plays a crucial role in Helen Steward's account of agency, see Steward 2012, 71–72.

²² See Hornsby 1980.

²³ This is also the ground of trying to categorize certain mental states with reference to their 'direction of fit'. See particularly Searle 1983. My point here, of course, is *not* about mental states, for the theories I discuss emphasize the role of the *agent* in the etiology of intentional action in contrast to the agent's states.

²⁴ As it has been noted in an early review of Hornsby's book by Watson 1982.

is intentional in virtue of having a peculiar kind of efficient cause. Since physical movements are results and hence effects, they must have prior efficient causes. The metaphysical problem of agency and action seems then to boil down to the question about the nature and operation of such efficient causes; that is, to an account of how agents as persisting substances can cause their own behavior.

It seems certainly right that – as our language of action suggests – agents are typically self-movers. And I see no good reason to deny, as some may do, that agents can be the causes of at least some results of their own actions. Moreover, on this view, just as in the teleological account, actions are not taken to be momentary *events* like instantaneous movements of the body, but *processes* with some results.

However, even if it is true that when agents act, they often exert their causal capacities and thereby cause certain events to happen, this cannot explain the difference between intentional and nonintentional forms of behavior. For even if agents are typically self-movers, an agent's causing the movement of her own body is neither necessary, nor sufficient for the intentionality of her behavior.

2. Agent-causation and the intentionality of actions

The first thing to note about the capacity of self-movement as the explanation of intentionality is that not only agents' actions, but also their omissions can be intentional (as opposed to being *nonintentional*). Obviously, intentional omissions do not involve the agent as a mover at all. Thus agent-involving efficient causation cannot be *necessary* for the intentionality of behavior in general. According to the testimony of *Phaidon*, Socrates stayed intentionally in Athens after his condemnation, even if, as he says, he could have already been in Megara (Plato, *Phaidon*, 99a). And that he remained in Athens in the circumstances in which he did certainly manifested his agency because it was a form of conscious intentional behavior.

In many moments in their life, agents do things intentionally without moving their own body. And even more often, whether and how they move their body is simply irrelevant to the intentionality of their behavior.²⁵ If Socrates had chosen to escape, his action of escaping would have been intentional even in the moments of motionlessly sitting on a cart on his way to Megara. In general, people can do intentionally many things without thereby causing anything to happen. Intentional agency can be manifested even in those moments when agents do

²⁵ Attempts have been made – for instance by Smith 2010 – to answer this problem by saying that whenever the agent intentionally omits to do something then she does something else. But that is entirely irrelevant, since whatever we do, we omit countless other things unintentionally. See also the exchange between Carolina Sartorio and Randolph Clarke in Aguilar and Buckareff 2010.

not move their body; or rather, when the movements, even if they are caused by the agent, are simply irrelevant to what they do intentionally.

But further, and more importantly, even on those occasions when the performance of an intentional action does require that an agent be the mover of his own body, his being the efficient cause of his own movements cannot explain why the movement was intentional. Many persisting substances that are incapable of acting intentionally can still be the causes of their movement or some changes in their surroundings. The hemlock poisoned Socrates thereby causing his death; sugar sweetened my coffee (caused it to become sweeter by dissolving in it); and my alarm clock wakes me up by making (causing) that terrible noise in the morning. In fact, it is arguable that the causative use of transitive verbs is the most common way to express causal claims.²⁶ And when we express a causal claim in this way, we assign a causal role to a substance. It seems then that substances can be causes even if they are not able to act intentionally.

Human agents are, among other things, persistent physical and biological substances with many causal powers; and they can, merely in virtue of being such substances, cause many kinds of events. I can break a glass, make a noise, stir the air around me, and warm up a bed without acting intentionally. Some of the things that I cause, I cannot do intentionally; others I can, but I might cause them only accidentally. And the same is true even in those cases when the action's results are the movements of my own body.²⁷

Here is an often-discussed case. Suppose a neurologist taps my knee with her rubber mallet. Then, as a spontaneous neural reaction, I move my leg. My moving of the leg manifests my power to move it in certain circumstances; and further, it bears witness of my – in this respect at least – properly functioning neural system. But the movement was not intentional even if *I* did raise my leg and even if my leg's movement was a result of my moving it.

Advocates of the agent-causal account of intentional action may reply that, whenever an agent's movement is 'only' a reflex-response to a stimulus, 'merely neural and muscular processes operate'. But even if this is certainly right in a sense, that can hardly explain why my behavior was not intentional. Presumably, whenever an agent performs an overt physical action, intentionally or not, neural and muscular processes operate. Saying that nonintentional movements are the results of some *merely* neural and muscular processes cannot explain the difference between them and intentional movements since the question is pre-

²⁶ See Anscombe 1993, Strawson 1985, and Lowe 2009.

²⁷ According to some versions of the agent-causal account of actions – like, for instance, Taylor 1966 or Clarke 2003 – agents cause their own actions, not the movement of their body (which is the result of the action). However, for reasons well exposed by Hyman and Alvarez 2002, Hornsby 2004, and Lowe 2009 those versions of the agent-causal view do not seem to be coherent.

cisely why bodily movements caused by the agent are ‘merely such and such’ in certain cases while manifest intentional agency in others.

Perhaps one would want to deny that in the case described *I* moved my leg, because although my leg indeed moved, it was not *me* but the neurologist who moved it (by tapping my knee with her rubber mallet). I was, as it were, a *mere patient* in this process. However, neither the emphasis on personal pronouns nor a more detailed inspection of the causal *history* of my movement can answer the problem here. For even if the neurologist’s action was, in the circumstances, a necessary causal condition of the movement, it would be bizarre to claim that thereby *my* raising the leg was *her* intentional action. What the neurologist wants to check by tapping my knee is whether or not, when my knee is hit, *I* shall move my leg. She is not interested in whether or not *she* can move it (by being able to strike a strong enough blow on it, for instance).

Thus, the transitive and causative use of the verb describing a patient’s behavior is as essential here as it is supposed to be in the case of intentional actions. Even if the movement of the leg was a causal consequence of what the neurologist did, this does not show that the patient has failed to be the mover of his own body. His causal contribution was as necessary for the movement in this case as it is when the doctor *asks* him to raise his leg in order to check whether or not he can do so. In both cases, the doctor’s action might be a causal antecedent of the movement of the patient’s leg. But in neither case would the movement have occurred without *the patient* moving his leg. In fact, even if the neurologist indeed caused the movement of the patient’s leg, it would be wrong to say that *she moved his leg* instead of him.

Imagine, further, that before the patient goes to the doctor, he is aware of the purpose of the test, and that he wishes or desires that he raise his leg as a response to his knee being hit. In this case, he had a desire that has been satisfied by his own causal activity. But all this does not make his behavior intentional. And the reason why his behavior was not intentional is that he did not move his leg *for the sake of* that end, never mind how much he wished or desired that the movement occur. In fact, curiously, if he had moved his leg for the sake of that end, his wish or desire could not have been satisfied.

In sum, an agent can be a self-mover and hence the cause of her own action without acting intentionally. And conversely, an agent’s behavior – like Socrates’ staying in Athens – can be intentional and manifest agency without the agent causing anything. Whether or not behavior is intentional depends on whether or not it was performed *for the sake of* an end that we can ascribe to the agent and hence to the process in which he participates. Moving one’s own body and hence being in this sense the efficient cause of one’s own behavior is neither necessary nor sufficient for manifesting intentional agency.

3. *Volitions and intentional actions*

Our considerations in the previous section can be summarized like this. We observe that many verbs expressing overt physical actions are transitive and causative. This suggests that agents can be considered as efficient causes of their actions' results. What we have seen is, however, that mere reference to the agent as a cause cannot explain the difference between intentional and nonintentional forms of behavior.

We may seek to remedy the weakness of the purely agent-causal account by specifying some kind of internal event that the agent can cause directly, and the causal operation of which can guarantee the intentionality of overt behavior. The problem with the purely agent causal account of intentionality might be that it takes the agent to be the direct cause of the movement of her body. But agents as persisting substances can cause the movement of their body in many different ways.

We might want then to specify a pertinent way in which an agent must cause her own behavior in order to make it intentional. We might say that whenever an agent acts intentionally, she causes *directly* some sort of event which occurs 'inside' her and by which she initiates the movement of her body and hence her overt actions. The agent's overt behavior is intentional if it is a causal product of the occurrence of that sort of event. Otherwise, the behavior is nonintentional.

As we have seen, (efficient-)causal accounts of intentionality are grounded in the assumption that whenever agents act intentionally, they exercise some control over what they do. But for the exercise of the pertinent kind of control it is not sufficient that they as persisting substances cause their own behavior. They must cause it through exercising direct control over the occurrence of a special kind of internal event. Agents cause changes in their environment by moving their body. But they do not cause the movement of their body directly. Rather, they cause them by causing first the occurrence of an internal event, which is then the event-cause of their external behavior.

Then, the intentionality of physical behavior might be explained by the fact that intentional movements have been caused indirectly by the agent's first causing something else directly. Reflex behavior is not intentional because it is not caused by the agent's causing first a kind of event which is the necessary causal antecedent of every movement that is intentional. Although there are other ways to identify the relevant sort of event that the agent might directly cause, it shall serve my purposes here to follow a long tradition and call such events as 'conscious volitions' or 'acts of will'.²⁸

²⁸ For a useful summary of the modern history of volitional theories see Hyman 2015. Chisholm claims that the agent can directly cause a cerebral event; others (like O'Connor

There is a standard objection to the volitionist accounts of intentional action which I set aside for the moment. Ryle has famously argued that if we understand volitions themselves as actions, then the volitionist account leads to a vicious infinite regress; whereas if volitions are understood as episodes that merely happen to the agent, then they cannot explain the intentionality of behavior.

Yet, even if this is indeed an objection to the idea that *every* event is an action in virtue of its causal origin, it does not show why the intentionality of overt behavior cannot be explained by its volitional origin. Perhaps volitions are intrinsically actions; or perhaps they are actions in virtue of being directly caused by an agent. In either way, overt behavior might be intentional because by willing an agent causes the results of her volition.²⁹

Nonetheless, a fundamental problem remains. Any event, and particularly things that agents do, can have many actual consequences. It is hard to see why volitions as internal psychological or psychophysical events would be different in this respect. It is obvious though that not every causal consequence of such events is an action. Willing to perform an action can result in many psychological, physiological and behavioral changes (excitement, rising blood pressure, trembling hands) which are not intentional. On the volitionist account, behavior is intentional if it is part of a process initiated by the agent's volitions. But since there are probably always many sequences of events that are initiated by a psychological or psychophysical act of volition, we need to explain why only certain causal consequences of this volitional act or event are intentional.

One may think that the explanation is very simple: the willed physical behavior is intentional only if it is 'content matching' in the sense that only those consequences of willing should count as the agent's actions that somehow 'match' the content of her volitions. However, and crucially, the content of a volition cannot be the movement of the body (or some other result of the action). It seems obvious that one can will – as opposed to wish, desire, or hope – to perform only actions that are intentional. Thus, volitions cannot explain the intentionality of the acts willed by the agent. They presuppose it.

Imagine that someone desires or intends to replace a table. This does not mean that she can will that the table move from one place to another. A person who could achieve that a table moves simply by willing that *it* moves would do simple magic. What an agent can will is to move the table; that is, to initiate, and participate in, a process with the end of the table's being replaced. In general,

2000) talk about the agent's causing action-triggering intentions. These accounts differ from each other in detail, but these differences are largely irrelevant for my point here.

²⁹ About the standard objection see Ryle 1949, 62–75. For the different versions of volitionist accounts of intentionality see McCann 1974, McGuinn 1982, Ginet 1990, and Lowe 2000.

the agent can only will to perform an intentional action with a certain result. Similarly, the agent cannot will that a hand of her rise; she can only will to raise a hand; that is, to do something (mentally and then physically) for the sake of her hand's rising.

Hence, although it might be true that reflex responses are not willed by the agent, this does not explain how volitions can make actions intentional. It is rather the other way around: one *cannot will to* perform a reflex response because a reflex response is a kind of nonintentional behavior. Similarly, one cannot will to perform accidentally a bodily movement or any other action, because neither accidental movements nor their consequences can be brought about intentionally.

This means that if volitions are psychological events with content, then their content can only be intentional actions; and hence they can hardly explain the very intentionality of actions. If acts of volitions occur at all, they occur because they are the initial parts of some behavior which is performed for the sake of some end. Acts of will cannot explain the intentionality of an agent's behavior; rather they too are explained by the end(s) for the sake of which they occur.

Consequently, while the possibility to will an act may help explain how an agent can consciously control what she does, it cannot account for the very intentionality of the action done. The possibility of volitions as internal mental events presupposes, rather than grounds, the intentionality of certain forms of behavior that the agent might be able to control by willing to perform it. The ground of intentionality still seems to be that the agent's behavior, which may or may not be subject to her conscious control, has been performed for the sake of an end.

IV. TRYING AND THE MODALITY OF INTENTIONAL ACTIONS

So far, I have argued that the intentionality of actions can be explained only teleologically. A piece of behavior is intentional only if we can identify an end for the sake of which it is done. Similarly, conscious omissions are intentional in the same sense: we can consider an agent's omission as a form of intentional behavior only if the agent omits an action that she would otherwise be able to perform in the circumstances for the sake of achieving some end.

However, it might seem that even if an action cannot be intentional unless it is done for the sake of some end, the teleological structure of a process in which the agent participates cannot be sufficient for explaining the difference between intentional agency from nonintentional one. My heart plumps blood for the sake of providing the cells in my body with oxygen. Nonetheless, my heart cannot act intentionally; only I as an agent can. Moreover, although I am an agent, not

everything that I do for the sake of an end is an exercise of my agency. When I run for a while on a hot day, I start sweating. I sweat in order to cool down my heated body. Nonetheless, the secretion of sweat is not my intentional action.

In fact, it is partly such examples which may lend support to the view that it is at least necessary for a kind of behavior to be intentional that it be causally initiated by some of the agent's inner mental states. However, in this last section I shall argue that we need not turn to the causal-mentalist hypothesis to explain the distinction between teleological processes which are the agents' intentional actions and teleological processes which merely involve an agent without being her actions.

Davidson once argued that behavior manifests agency "if what [the agent] does can be described under an *aspect* that makes it intentional" (Davidson 1980, 46, my emphasis). I suggest that there is a special aspect or mode of the teleological processes in which an agent participates that explains why they are also the agent's actions. Whenever agents ϕ intentionally, it must be true that they also try to ϕ . Trying to ϕ seems to be the universal aspect or mode in terms of which actions can be redescribed if they are done intentionally. Similarly, "trying to..." is also the special mode or aspect of omissions that explains how they can be intentional.

I need to address two objections to this idea. According to the one, we cannot say of every intentional action that the agent who performs it also tries to do it. In fact, if the objection is correct, we can say of an agent that she is trying to do something only in special circumstances. For "trying to" applicable only when an intentional actions have failed to reach their aim.

According to another objection, "trying" is merely an interpretation of "willing" and hence trying is not a special mode of description that the intentionality of action entails, but rather the initial phase or the mental antecedent of the intentionally performed bodily movements. If this were right, then my claim that the possibility of intentional actions is logically/metaphysically prior to the possibility of conscious initiation of such actions would be wrong. Since then, bodily behavior would be made intentional after all by its necessary mental-causal antecedent, and not by the intrinsic telic feature of the processes that constitute an agent's intentional action.

We can raise this second objection in another way as well. Suppose that the first objection is answerable and hence whenever an agent does something intentionally, she also tries to do it. What explains this? One possible explanation seems to be that an overt action can be intentional only if it has an initial mental phase which consists in the agent's merely trying to perform the overt action. So interpreted, trying to ϕ is an action that is performed 'within the agent's skin' or 'within the spatial envelop of her body' before her body begins to move. Hence trying to ϕ would always refer to some psychological or psychophysical action that precedes the overt physical behavior. Trying would not be the aspect or

mode under which every overt intentional action can be described. Rather, as in the mentalistic accounts, actions would be intentional because they begin with the agent's mentally or psychophysically trying to perform them.³⁰

1. *Two senses of trying*

Now, I am not disputing that there are special cases in which trying *can* be understood as an agent's purely internal and/or mental action. But it can be so understood only if it is conceived as an initial phase of a more complex process that *would* constitute an agent's action if the circumstances were 'normal'. It does indeed seem plausible that an agent could have done *something* intentionally even in those cases in which her intended action was aborted at its initial phase when no overt physical movement has yet occurred. And it seems that whatever the agent did in such cases she could have done it only internally and perhaps mentally. We may want to say then that what she did was 'mentally trying' to perform an action that, in normal circumstances, she would have performed physically.³¹

However, from the fact that sometimes agents can try to do something even when they do not perform any overt physical action, it does not follow that we need to understand trying in this way in every case. An agent can also consciously omit to do certain things (for instance, join the army) and thereby she can try to do (achieve) certain things (for instance, to stop a war), but this does not mean that she 'merely' tries to do so in the sense that she would be unable to consciously control how she acts physically.

Earlier in the first section, I argued that we must distinguish two different senses in which an agent's actions can be said to be 'intentional'. In one sense, the intentionality of an action is contrasted with what is nonintentional; in another, it is contrasted with what is unintentional. An action is intentional in the first, more fundamental, sense if the process that constitutes it has a certain teleological structure so that it is performed by the agent for the sake of an end; while an action is intentional in the second sense when it achieves what the agent has in mind by initiating it.

Similarly, and relatedly, we also need to distinguish two senses of trying to do or trying to get something. In one sense, trying can indeed be understood as a kind of mental action: it is the initial 'inner' – that is to say, not, or not yet,

³⁰ See Armstrong 1968 and O'Shaughnessy 1973. In Hornsby 1980 we can find a similar account of trying. Although McGinn 1980 and Ginet 1990 talk about willing rather than trying, their views admittedly have certain affinities to the idea that bodily movements are the results of the agent's trying to act. Searle's analysis of intention in action in Searle 1983 has also been interpreted as a version of the trying-theory by Mele 1992, and later by Searle himself in Searle 2001. See also Lowe 2000. 246–252. For a meticulous criticism of such accounts, see Cleveland 1997.

³¹ This argument originates in William James' famous case about the patient with anesthetized hand in James 1890/1983. 1101–1102.

overtly physical – part of an intentional action. It is in this sense that trying to ϕ when an agent ϕ s intentionally is also a condition of the possibility of agents' conscious control over their own behavior.

In another sense, however, trying is not meant to refer to the initial, merely inner phase of an action. It seems a perfectly good answer to the question "Why do you push that button on your keyboard?" to say that "I try to save my document". My trying to save the document then consists in an overt action of mine (pushing the button) and not in an inner mental act. My intended action is complete only when my document is saved, but by moving my finger in the way I did I also tried to do what I could in the circumstances in order to save, or for the sake of saving, my document.

In a more fundamental sense then, trying means that an agent does everything she can in circumstances C in order to ϕ or for the sake of ϕ -ing. In this sense, trying is the special aspect or mode of describing intentional actions because it captures their specific teleological structure and hence the aspect under which they are intentional. But do indeed all actions that are intentional entail that the agent tries to do them? Is trying 'ubiquitous'?³²

2. *The ubiquity of trying and the teleological structure of actions*

Observations about how we normally talk about actions do not seem to support ubiquity. For although we often say that agents tried to do something which they have eventually failed to do, we rarely say that they tried to do what they have succeeded in doing. The rare exceptions are when agents must overcome some challenge or when, for some reason, the initial likelihood of failure is relatively high.³³ But such cases aside, that is, in all cases when success is not surprising and the action has been accomplished, it sounds strange to say that an agent tried to do what she has done.

So, we need an explanation of why it is true that an agent tries to ϕ whenever she ϕ s intentionally. And we also need an explanation of why what we tend to say is not decisive in this matter.³⁴ One possibility is, again, to return to the idea that every overt physical action that an agent does intentionally must be

³² The idea that trying is ubiquitous were introduced by Hornsby 2010. Hornsby says more recently that "even if trying to ϕ is a necessary condition of intentionally ϕ -ing, still trying to ϕ does not introduce any causal element into intentionally ϕ -ing" (Hornsby 2010. 22). Rather, she claims that "to try is to do what one can" (Hornsby 2010. 20). See also Cleveland 1997 and McLaughlin 2012. 114.

³³ The original point is made by Wittgenstein, see *Philosophical Investigations* 622.

³⁴ There are many truths we would not mention explicitly because, mentioning them would have inappropriate implications in a given context. This argument, which relies on Grice's account of 'conversational implicature', has been first applied to trying by O'Shaughnessy 1973. The argument has been challenged by Watson 1982. For a recent defense see, again, Hornsby 2010.

preceded by her mental action of trying to do it. But this idea is mistaken. For the intentionality of actions *itself* does not entail anything about an agents' antecedent mental activity.

First of all, ϕ -ing intentionally entails that agents also try to ϕ even if there is no reason to assume that they can consciously represent their intentional actions before they perform it. Animals and toddlers can try to do things even if the inner phase of their actions cannot be described as 'mental trying'. A spider can try to spin a net in my study even if my cleaning activity aborts the attempt. A toddler can try to walk to her mum, even if she does not yet have any conscious representation of a process that *we* can describe as "walking to her mum".

Moreover, the intentionality of many forms of adult behavior cannot be understood with reference to a mental action that is the initial phase of the agent's physical movement. Someone on an airplane can try to reach a certain destination and hence can fly there intentionally even in those moments when she sits motionless on the plane; or even if the plane eventually lands somewhere else. Trying to do something does not require the exercise, or even the possibility, of active conscious control. Neither does it seem to require a prior mental representation of one's own behavior as a future action that the agent tries and hence starts to perform.

Consider one of Davidson's often cited examples when, on a particular occasion, someone moves his finger, flips the switch, turns on the light, illuminates the room, and alerts a burglar (Davidson 1980. 4). The descriptions of such actions are related in the following manner: the agent illuminates the room *by* turning on the light, turns on the light *by* switching the flip, switches the flip *by* moving his finger, and so on.³⁵ If we understand these action-descriptions as referring to parts of a teleological process (rather than to an instantaneous event as in Davidson), then we can also express their connection from the 'opposite direction' as it were: the agent flips the switch *in order to* turn on the light, turns on the light *in order to* illuminate the room, and so on.

However, given the ubiquity of trying, the agent in this example must also try to move his finger, try to flip the switch, and try to turn on the light. Suppose now that 'trying to ϕ ' is the initial mental phase of the action. Must then there be three (or more) antecedent mental actions that precede the movement of the

³⁵ Davidson used this example in order to support his claim that he has performed only one action which can be individuated in different ways in terms of different results. In this he follows Anscombe 2000, who is also followed by Hornsby 1980. Others (for instance Goodman 1970, Ginet 1990, Alvarez and Hyman 1998) would say that the different descriptions in the example refer to different actions. But all these accounts assume that actions are either events or the causings of some events which are their results. According to the teleological account, however, actions are processes so that the descriptions in the example refer to different phases of the same process. About actions as processes see especially Thompson 2008.

body? Or three initial mental phases of the process that constitutes his action?³⁶ But then, how are those ‘mental tryings’ related to each other and the subsequent overt action?

It seems right that the agent moved his hand intentionally because he tried to flip the switch in order to turn on the light and in order to illuminate the room. But it is hard to make sense of the view that thereby he performed the mental (or psychophysical) action of trying to move his finger in order to perform the mental action of trying to flip the switch and the further mental action to try to illuminate the room. If trying is understood as a mental action, then trying all those things must be one and the same action. But then, what the agent is trying to do initially or mentally is the whole process of his intentional action with a given teleological structure. The content of his ‘mental trying’ must be the whole action at once.

Consequently, trying to ϕ is to be understood as a mental antecedent of overt intentional behavior only in exceptional cases. “Trying to ϕ ” *can* express the initial phase of the process of an intentional action which the agent does only mentally (or psychophysically), but it need not. And hence trying is not ubiquitous because an action can be intentional only if it has an initial mental phase. Rather, whenever an overt intentional action occurs, what an agent tries to do is something that she does physically, something that has been accomplished in way of doing what she aims to do or achieve. Trying to turn on the light *is* for the agent, in the given circumstances, to flip the switch because she flipped the switch for the sake of turning on the light, irrespective of whether or not the light has eventually been turned on.

Trying is ubiquitous because intentional actions are processes with a special teleological structure. An agent tries to illuminate the room by flipping the switch in circumstances in which flipping the switch is necessary for illuminating the room; and he tries to flip the switch by moving his finger for the same reason. When an agent has tried to ϕ she did everything she could in the circumstances in order to f . It is in this sense that “trying to ϕ ” expresses the mode or aspect of actions that make them intentional.³⁷

Interpreting trying in this way explains not only its ubiquity, but also why we mention it so rarely that an agent tried to do what she did successfully. Suppose Socrates sits on his bed while he talks to his friends. It follows from this that he *can* sit on a bed while he talks. But we would mention that he can only in special

³⁶ This problem, let me emphasize, arises no matter how we answer the question about how many actions such descriptions describe. The issue is not how we individuate actions, but how logically/conceptually “doing f intentionally” and “trying to ϕ ” are related.

³⁷ Hornsby says more recently that “even if trying to ϕ is a necessary condition of intentionally f -ing, still trying to f does not introduce any causal element into intentionally ϕ -ing” (Hornsby 2010. 22). She also claims that “to try is to do what one can” (Hornsby 2010. 20). See also Cleveland 1997 and McLaughlin 2012. 114.

circumstances; for instance, when he lies in his bed and we wonder why he does so; or when, for some reason, we are astonished that he can sit. Nonetheless, since actuality entails possibility, if he does sit on his bed while he talks, it is certainly true that he *can* do so.

Similarly, if Socrates sits intentionally where he does, then he also tries to sit there, even if in most circumstances it would sound weird to mention this. But this does not entail that trying to sit on that place is a mental action by which Socrates performs his sitting on his bed; neither is it a strange way to describe what he does. It is the modal consequence of his sitting there intentionally, which we mention only in specific contexts.

In a sense then, trying is ubiquitous because the truth that an agent tries to ϕ is a modal consequence of her ϕ -ing intentionally. And trying to ϕ is a modal consequence of ϕ -ing intentionally precisely because saying that an agent tries to ϕ is a way to specify a goal or aim for the sake of which the agent's behavior occurs. When an agent acts intentionally, she tries to do something with some result. Trying to ϕ does not imply ϕ -ing, because trying to ϕ specifies the end for the sake of which a kind of behavior is performed in given circumstances irrespective of whether or not the action has been accomplished, and hence irrespective of whether or not that end has ever been reached.

However, ϕ -ing intentionally does imply trying to ϕ in the sense in which "trying to" is the most general way to identify an agent's ends at performing some actions with reference to some particular result for the sake of which she behaves in the way she does. It is for this reason, and it is in this sense, that trying is *a*, perhaps *the*, mark of exercising agency as it is manifested by intentional behavior.

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