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Agents in Movement

—István Zoltán Zárdai*

Abstract

The paper discusses the category of one of the most fundamental expressions of agency, those movements of agents that are actions. There have been three dominant views of action since the 1960s: 1. the Causal Theory of Action, 2. the Tryings/Willings view, and 3. Agent Causation. These views claim that actions are: 1. events of bodily movements which have the right causes; 2. specific types of mental events causing events of bodily movements; 3. instances of the causal relationship between agents and events of bodily movements. Among other arguments, a specific interpretation of the difference between transitive and intransitive verbs has been taken by defenders of the Tryings/Willings views and Agent Causation to support their main claims.

The paper argues that these three views mischaracterise actions of bodily movements. It argues for this by highlighting some implausible claims and problems with the three views; by offering an interpretation of the difference between transitive and intransitive verbs that does not lend support to these views; and finally, by providing an alternative view of actions. This view is the Pluralist View, according to which agents' movements are the activations of agents' abilities to move.

Key words: agency, action, bodily movements, agential ability, philosophy of action, theories of action, agent causation, trying, causal theory of action, Davidson

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1. Introduction

The paper discusses one of the most fundamental types of the expression of agency, those actions which are agents' movings. A simple example of such an action is Tom's standing up from his chair in his office or Amanda's stretching out her numb leg. The paper offers an overview of what the three most influential views of action say about actions of agents' moving, highlights some of the main issues with them, and offers an alternative called the Pluralist View of actions. The main claim is that the other views divided agents' moving into a causing and a caused element, whereas no such division is justified in the case of an instance of an agents' moving that is an action. A simple action like someone's moving is identical with the activation of the relevant power or ability of the agent.¹ The idea that the existence of the distinction between transitive and intransitive verbs would support such a division is also deflated.

The Pluralist View of actions proposed here fits into a wider naturalist conception of action and agency, and can be usefully employed to clarify our views of action individuation and responsibility, which are in turn important for questions of ethics and morality. The paper will first present the three main views of action (section 2), discusses the interpretation of the difference between transitive and intransitive verbs which these views take to support them (section 3), highlights some issues with this interpretation and offers an alternative to it (section 4), and moves on to discuss bodily movements (section 5). Considerations about bodily movements show that an alternative view of those actions which are agents' movings is needed, and this alternative, the Pluralist View is introduced (section 6). The paper finishes with some suggestions on the significance of getting it right what actions are and how the Pluralist View aids us in this (section 6).

2. What an action is

The most influential view of actions, the Causal Theory of Actions (CTA; also, often called the Standard View) claims that all actions are

events of bodily movements which are caused by the right mental events. Movements which are actions only differ from movements which are not actions in terms of their causes.² Defenders of two alternative views of actions, the tryings/willings (TW) view of action, and agent causation (AC) argue that actions are not bodily movements, and actions are not events of bodily movements in virtue of being caused by the right preceding mental events. According to TW actions are mental events of trying/willing which cause events of bodily movements.³ And according to AC actions are instances of causal relations between agents and the events of bodily movements caused by them.⁴ In the following pages I will illustrate what these three views claim actions are and more narrowly, what they say bodily movements are. I will use the action of Sylvia's raising of her arm as an example.

The Standard View

According to CTA there is an event, e2, of the arms going up. If e2 is caused by a suitable desire-belief pair/intention in the right way then it is an action. All actions are such movements. The occurrence of the movement is identical with the action. e2 is the event of Sylvia's body moving. This event is an action if and only if it is caused by the right belief-desire pair (Davidson 1980 essay 1)/intention (Davidson 1980 essay 5). In the figure above, you can see the end stage of Sylvia's raising of her arms. CTA represents this simply as

e1... e2... e3... e4...

Figure 2 CTAs view of actions

- e1 = the event of the onset of the suitable belief and desire pair
- e2 = the event of the bodily movement (Sylvia's arms' rising)
- e3 = an event caused by the event of the bodily movement
- ... = causal connectedness of events

On this view then, all bodily movements are in their relevant aspects alike, irrespectively of whether they are actions or not. What distinguishes bodily movements which are actions and ones which are not is solely their causal background.

The Tryings/Willings View

According to TW actions are events that cause movements which are also events. On the first pages of her book *Actions* Jennifer Hornsby (Hornsby 1980) explains that while the concept of bodily movements_T (the lower case 'T' stands for 'transitive) and bodily movements_I (the lower case 'I' standing for 'intransitive) are different, they do apply to the same kind of particulars (events), just as animal and giraffe can apply to the same substance, or 'pulling a face' and 'making Lucie laugh' can apply to one action. (1980: 5) So, one action consists in this sense in one event. However, Hannah's raising her arm and Hannah's arm's rising pick out two different events: The first one is a trying (a mental event which is the action) and causes the second one which is a bodily movement. (1980: 13)

Hornsby endorses a distinction between moving one's body and the movement of the body, identifying the former as the action, and the latter as something caused by the action. Actions are on this view mental events, tryings, which cause events of bodily movements. One of the arguments Hornsby uses to support this view is that the difference between intransitive and transitive verbs implies it. On this view also, bodily movements are all alike. Such bodily movements do not differ from bodily movements which are not caused by actions. Some of them are actions only in virtue of their causes, and all actions are tryings which cause bodily movements. TW can be represented in the following way

e1... e2... e3...

Figure 3 TW's view of actions

e1 = the mental event of trying = the action (Sylvia's raising of

- her arm)
- e2 = the event of the bodily movement (the result of the action; the rising of Sylvia's arm)
- e3 = an event caused by the event of the bodily movement
- ... = causal connectedness of events

So, this view would take the event of Sylvia's arms' rising only to be the result of the action of Sylvia, which would be mental and would precede the movement it caused. What we see from people's behavior are merely results, their actions are hidden.

Agent Causation

Recent views of agent causation (AC) have been naturalist versions of the view which claim that actions are instances of the causal relations between agents and the events their action brings about. Such AC views—defended in Bach 1980, McCann 1998, Alvarez and Hyman 1998, and Steward 2011—claim that actions are instances of causal relations between agents and events they cause. The view is represented in the following way by John Hyman



Figure 4 Agent causation's view of acts and events (Source: Hyman 2015: 50)

- A = agent
- e = event
- e1 = the event of the bodily movement (the rising of Sylvia's arms)
- e2, e3 = events caused by the event of the bodily movement
- ... = causal connectedness of events
- = A's causing of events = A's acts

The arrow between A and e1 stands for Sylvia's raising of her arm and this is what the transitive verb 'move' or 'raise' picks out. e1 is the event of Sylvia's arm rising, and it is what the intransitive verb 'move' or 'raise' picks out. A result of Sylvia's raising of her arm would then be e2, and a consequence e3. Sylvia would stand in a causal relationship to the results and the consequences of her actions. This is picked out by the arrows between A and e2, and A and e3 respectively. What is not explained is whether this relationship is different or not from the one between Sylvia and her arm's rising. Intuitively it should be. After all we move our body in different ways from moving shelves, moving people to action, or leading a movement. Bodily movements are all alike. The difference between them is whether an agent is causing them or not.

In the next section I will offer a brief overview of what the distinction between transitive and intransitive verb forms and verbs amounts to, and what supporters of TW and AC have taken it to mean for their views. Then I will discuss bodily movements and what goes wrong with CTAs, TWs and ACs, and finally move on to show that an alternative view provides a more plausible account of actions of agents' moving.

3. The distinction between transitive and intransitive verbs

The linguistic phenomenon in question is that some verbs can have one or more objects. These verbs are called transitive. There are verbs which cannot have objects, and these are called intransitive. Examples of intransitives are

- (i) I laughed.
- (ii) The book fell.
- (iii) The horse galloped.

In all of the above cases nothing is receiving the action. The following are examples of sentences with transitive verbs

- (iv) The camel *bit* him.
- (v) He *broke* the screwdriver.
- (vi) They are going to *need* a bigger house.
- (vii) David *hugged* Mary.
- (viii) He's been *singing* barbershop all day.
- (ix) I *admire* your courage.

One thing to note immediately is that there is no common, clear marker that would signal which verbs are transitive and intransitive. Several verbs are ambitransitive: the same verb form can express transitive or intransitive meaning. An example is *eat*: 'You ate' is intransitive, while 'The dog ate two cream buns' is transitive. However, a tricky example is *I walked to the park today*. It seems to be a transitive at first, but in fact *walked* does not have an object: it is followed by a prepositional phrase and an adverb.

The idea that actions simply are bodily movements with certain causes originates with Hobbes. In *Leviathan* 1.6 Hobbes defended the idea that all actions are voluntary motion, which proceed from "(...) the last appetite or aversion immediately adhering to action, or to the omission thereof (...)". (1.6.53) There is also an often quoted passage by Wittgenstein: "What is left over if I subtract the fact that my arm goes up from the fact that I raise my arm?" (Wittgenstein 1953 § 621.) To take this to motivate a search for the difference in form of a mental cause is arguably to completely misunderstand what Wittgenstein meant in this passage. Wittgenstein did not mean this passage to encourage an exercise of finding a mental complement to a bodily movement that qualifies the bodily movement as an action whenever they occur together. What he meant was to ridicule the idea that something like a mental cause, a preceding event, a certain experience, or other attitudes accompanying the bodily movement are what make one's raising of one's arm an action. (See Schroeder 2010)

The most influential 20th century defender of the idea that actions are identical with bodily movements with specific causes was Davidson. In his

‘Agency’ he argued that actions are a subclass of events, and if we take ‘bodily movements’ generously enough to encompass such actions as standing fast and computing in one’s head then regular event causality will deliver a good criterion of which events are actions. All actions are primitive intentional bodily movements, and may be other things too, under a different description, but it is events of primitive (basic) bodily movements which receive those descriptions. (Davidson 1980: 49–50)⁵ He rejects that actions would involve more than the primitive (basic) movements of the body. Results and consequences merely lend new descriptions to the same event of a bodily movement. (51–61) Davidson stated that “We must conclude, perhaps with a shock of surprise, that our primitive actions, the ones we do not do by doing something else, mere movements of the body—these are all the actions there are. We never do more than move our bodies: the rest is up to nature.” (59) So, according to CTA, when Dorothy is editing Danna’s manuscript, her action, Dorothy’s editing of Danna’s manuscript, is a description of bodily movements of Dorothy.

The idea that all we ever do is our basic actions has been fruitfully challenged (von Wright 1971, Dretske 1988, Coope 2007, Haddock 2010, Ford 2015, Stout 2018), but it is still influential, despite the widespread agreement that it cannot account for agents’ active control over their action, their ownership of action, and their role in changing their actions. Even those who reject CTAs often endorse the view of basic actions as bodily movements in combination with the idea of redescription. This is where the distinction between transitive and intransitive verb forms enters. Philosophers who accept that all that we really do is move our bodies are understandably most interested in movements and the verb ‘move’. Those who want to challenge CTAs think that paying attention to these verbs can help them forge an argument that CTAs are wrong about movements.

The difference between the transitive and the intransitive reading of ‘move’ is often understood then by philosophers as marking a distinction between two elements: the first one, a causing of an event of a bodily

movement, the second the bodily movement caused.⁶ This is taken to show by defenders of TW that only the former is an action. Hornsby (1980, ch1) argues that these causings are mental events of trying.⁷ Defenders of AC take actions to be causings. Maria Alvarez and Hyman (1998; see also Alvarez 2013) argue that they are instances of causal relations between agents and events of bodily movements. Sentences describing actions like 'Umberto moved his arm' feature a transitive verb according to defenders of TW and AC. Hence something needs to be caused by the actions the verb refers to. What is caused according to them is the event of the movement. Hence, they say, such sentences are not about events of the agents' bodily movements. They are about actions, and those actions are not identical with the bodily movements. The actions are according to TW the causing events, mental events of trying or willing, and according to ACs they are causal relations between the agents and the events of bodily movements. Hornsby explains her view in the following way: when Umberto moves his arm, his arm movement (transitive sense) and his arm movement (intransitive sense) pick out two distinct events. The first is Umberto's moving of his arm, the second is the movement of Umberto's arm. The first event causes the second.

What I try to show is that the fact that 'move' has a transitive and intransitive meaning can be accommodated by a view of action without taking the difference to support the idea that movements are not actions and without falling back onto CTAs. That is, it can be understood without taking it to support a view of action according to which agents' doings are causings of events of bodily movements. The transitive-intransitive distinction does not serve to contrast events of causing other events and these caused events. To do this I will first provide an understanding of what functions the transitive-intransitive distinction can serve in communication. This will help us to see that just because move has a transitive and an intransitive sense it does not mean that our bodily movements are never our actions. Then I will move on to discuss moving and movements in more detail.

4. Is the transitive-intransitive difference relevant?

First, some philosophical reasons why the distinction and the use it is put to can be doubted. Davidson has raised sensible worries about inferring too much about the nature of actions from grammar. In ‘Agency’ (Davidson 1980, essay 3) he cautions that a verb might occur and be transitive, but not indicate agency, as in ‘I contracted malaria’ and ‘Smith was outlived by me’. (Davidson 1980: 44; although some of these analyses can be debated, see Hyman 2001) Also, sentences like ‘I spilled the coffee’ are ambiguous: one can spill the coffee intentionally, or unintentionally as a result of one’s action, or the spilling might be caused by the effect of some external force on us. We cannot read off from the verb whether our spilling of the coffee was an action or not. (Davidson 1980: 44-45)

Rowland Stout also highlights a problem with putting the distinction between transitive and intransitive to use the way Hornsby and those following her do. (2005: 149) Stout’s worry is that Hornsby relies in her interpretation of these verb forms on the idea of causal priority in a Humean way. That is, she presupposes that what the transitive verbs pick out are causing events, wholly distinct from what the intransitive verbs pick out, which are events caused. Stout’s point is that this seems to bely the nature of what is happening in the case of several occurrences, especially ones which are extended in time and change through their unfolding. To illustrate this, he writes “The process of seawater washing away a sandcastle causes the sandcastle to be washed away, but it is not *prior* to the sandcastle being washed away. The sandcastle’s collapse into the sea belongs to that process. In the same way the finger moving (intransitively) belongs to the process of the agent moving their finger: not something that happens afterwards.” (2005: 149) That is, on Stout’s view in many cases the results produced belong to the process and cannot be separated from it. “An agent moving their finger is not an input into a process that results in their finger moving. It is itself a process that results in their finger moving. And it does this because the movement of the finger *belongs*

to that process.” (2005: 150) At the current point what is important is that Stout’s examples of the sea washing away the sandcastle and an agents’ moving their finger show that it is not clear the transitive and intransitive verbs pick out two separate occurrences, a causing and a caused event. I will return to this point in the next section.

Consideration of the current linguistic analysis of the difference indicates that there are several distinctions that the transitive and intransitive verb forms can mark, not just that between an event causing something and the caused event. Take for example the general characterisation of the pattern of transitive verbs offered by Ashild Næss (Næss 2007, ch. 5) according to which in the Spanish phrase ‘*Me gusta*’ (‘I like it’) ‘*gusta*’ (‘like’) is transitive and expresses that the speaker is a recipient or beneficiary of something, for example of the Spanish language. The Spanish language then surely holds some benefit for the speaker but it is not a causing event that ‘*gusta*’ picks out.

Another example of transitives which are not causatives are the ditransitive verbs that take as objects a theme and a recipient. Examples are ‘He gave Mary ten dollars.’, ‘Jean read him books.’, and ‘She is baking him a cake.’. In these examples ‘gave’, ‘read’ and ‘baked’ do not cause their objects. Consider also the example ‘I bet you a pound that he has forgotten.’ In this case the agent is not actually causing the pound to be bet. The agent proposes a bet, which needs to be accepted by the other party for there to be a bet.

According to defenders of TW and AC ‘raised her arm’ should be taken to mean that there is a raising which is an action, and the arm’s rising, which is the result of the action. That is, the direct objects of ‘raise’ would be what the intransitive verb ‘rose’ would apply to. But the examples just mentioned show that in itself the occurrence of transitive verbs and that they have a direct object does not mean that a causing and a caused event or an action and its result are what the sentence is about, or at least not in the way proposed by TW and AC. If we should really take ‘raising my leg’, ‘swinging my arm’ and ‘stand up’ to pick out causes of events of

bodily movements then that has to follow from what movements are. And there is no uniform causal pattern which is tracked by the transitive-intransitive distinction on which we could rely to support the view that this is how we should understand movements. So, further considerations about movements will need to be addressed.

Attributive ditransitive verbs are also relevant: these verbs attribute one object to the other, that is, they highlight not a causal relationship but a relation of creation, possession, or transformation. Examples of such verbs are ‘make’, ‘name’, ‘appoint’, and ‘turn into’. ‘Name’ appears in ‘I will name him Galahad.’ This can be understood to mean that there was an event of my naming of him Galahad, and that this caused him to be named Galahad. However, it would be implausible to say that, as TW does, that the event of my naming him Galahad caused another event of him getting named Galahad. (See also ch 3 of Hyman 2015) It is equally strange to say, as ACs do, that my naming him Galahad is a causal relation between me and the event of him getting named Galahad. This shows that the causing-caused understanding of the transitive-intransitive distinction does not generalise to all transitive verbs, and hence in itself it is not something that reveals the nature of agents’ moving.

Furthermore, in some languages transitives can stand for what happens to an agent, as in Spanish ‘Me estoy hundiendo’ (‘I’m sinking’) can mean that I’m the patient but also that I’m the agent (sinking myself). Of course, one can cause oneself to undergo certain changes but this seems markedly different from the way in which we move. Another relation that does not fit the causal pattern required by TW and AC to support their view of bodily movements, is that exemplified by sentences like ‘We’re gonna need a bigger boat.’ In this sentence ‘need’ does not express anything that would cause something. The need for a new boat might spur the agents into action by giving them a reason to act, but it is not in itself a causing action of anything.

Regarding bodily movements and verbs like ‘move’, ‘raise’, ‘stretch’, ‘wiggle’, and ‘shake’ a reading of their transitives can be proposed

that accommodates the existence of the distinction between transitive and intransitive verbs without committing to the idea that these always points to a caused and a causing event respectively. Transitives can be understood as tools to pick out only those movements which are actions and occur, while intransitives can be taken to be less specific and to pick out both those movements which are actions and those which are not, for example movements which just happen to an agent, like being pushed aside on a packed subway. On this understanding transitive forms would lexicalise more than intransitive forms. But whether they pick out causings would still depend on the meaning of the particular verbs. That such alternative understandings of what the transitive and intransitive verbs mean is possible shows that one interpretation of them cannot be taken to lend much support to any theory of action.

An even deeper problem regarding transitives and intransitives is that the distinction between them is a distinction of linguistic categories. This in itself does not establish that the verbs belonging into both categories always stand in the same relation regarding their causal connections or that all verbs that are transitive pick out causing events (TW's claim) or instances of causings (AC's claim). In linguistics category distinctions are not necessarily functional distinctions. Several categories can have the same functions, and vice versa, some elements in the category can have very different functions. As such, the difference between transitive and intransitive verb forms is a classificatory tool in linguistics at the morpho-syntactic level. This distinction does not track a single deep semantic difference underlying it. What functions particular transitive or intransitive verb forms have is contingent; that is, the classification into transitive and intransitive verb forms is not based on the semantic aspects of the verbs.

In this section I offered an overview of some reasons to doubt that the use TW's and AC's want to make of the difference between transitive and intransitive verbs is justified. TW's and AC's suggest that transitive verbs always pick out causing elements or instances of causal relations and intransitives always pick out caused elements. In the case of actions

of an agents' movements what is the action is an event causing the bodily movement (TW), or the causal relation instantiated between an agent and the event of the agent's movement (AC). They assume that the transitive verb 'move' picks out the causing of an event of a movement, and the intransitive verb 'move' picks out the caused event of a movement. And if this pattern can be found in the case of every human action of moving then actions are more likely to be the causing elements or the causal relations, than the caused movements. They hold that transitive and intransitive verbs stand in this relation in general and hence such patterns of cause and caused can always be unpacked with their help.

I argued that there is no good reason to think that this would be the right understanding of the transitive-intransitive distinction. Hence these views do not receive support from the distinction. The distinction seems to be merely a linguistic one, and as I suggested it can be interpreted in a way in which it differentiates between two different levels of specification of the same event of a movement, rather than between two events. TW and AC then need to be motivated by further considerations about the nature of actions of agents' moving. Hence the distinction is not relevant to action theory.

5. Actions and bodily movements

In the following passages I will discuss some of the problems with the view that TWs and ACs offer of bodily movements of agents, before moving on in section 6 to propose my alternative view of agents' movings. TW and AC face some of the same issues. This is so because structurally they are similar. They reject CTA but endorse one of its fundamental assumptions. This assumption has two parts. The first is that when an agent is moving there are always three elements: i) some events causing her movement, ii) the causal relation between the causing element and the caused event of the movement, and iii) the caused event of the movement. The second part of the assumption is that all actions are one of these three elements. CTAs claim that actions are the caused events (iii), TW claims

that they are the causing events (i), and ACs claim that they are the causal relations between the two (ii) (and additionally that these relations hold between the agent and the event). Because these views endorse the same assumptions they are vulnerable to some of the same problems.

One of the main problems with TWs is that it seems that taking only mental antecedents to be actions is an arbitrary slicing up of actions: it is very counterintuitive that the action is wholly distinct from the rising of Sylvia's arms, since without their rising there is no raising of the arm. Also, the view renders agents' acting invisible, basically claiming that any observable behavior is merely a result of actions. It also subscribes to the idea of redescriptions, mentioned in section 3, which Davidson proposed. Hence talk about, for example, Joy's driving of her new car across town is on this view strictly about a mental event preceding movements of Joy.

The problem with AC views was well diagnosed by Davidson (1980: 52): they face a dilemma. Either an instance of the causing relation between the agent and the action is an event itself, in which case it is either an action or not, and we owe an account of it. If it is not an action then why is the agent the cause? If it is an action then what causes it? Or, the causal relation is simply a relation, but then a cause is still wanted. Where I differ from Davidson's view is that I think this problem only affects simple actions, like moving our bodies or thinking of something. Doing such things consists in exercising a power or ability that we have. That is why we do not need to stipulate a separate cause and effect within a single movement to explain and understand it. In cases of simple movements, like Sylvia's raising of her arm, the activation of the power to raise her arm is the action, and it includes the arms' going up. There are no separable causing and caused items, and hence also no causal relation between them, which could contend for the title of action. Philosophers usually use a sharp conceptual knife and look for important and often overlooked differences, but sometimes they cut things the wrong way, and they do not carve nature around its joints, but rather cut through ligaments, destroying them. Looking for a complex causal structure becomes interesting in cases when we have to

do with things that are not simply identical with the activation of a power.

A problem that affects both TWs and ACs is that they distinguish between the causes of bodily movements and bodily movements in a way which leads to two mistakes

1. It reinforces the false event causal idea that actions are bare movements, that they are events made special by their causes/what they cause; and
2. It dissects actions and their intrinsic results, which are the success conditions of actions. Without the occurrence of intrinsic results, it is not true that the action occurred.⁸ The occurrence of intrinsic results is often a condition of the occurrence of the action. There can be unsuccessful attempts without them, but these are failed actions. In the case of moving such views commit an even worse mistake: they separate one thing into two, rather than separating two things. That is, when one moves there are no two things to separate, only one movement. Whether something is a cause and something its result cannot be read off from the applicability of the transitive-intransitive distinction. The features of the particular type of action have to be taken into consideration.

Further general considerations also speak against the views of agents' movements proposed by CTAs, TWs and ACs. Agents' movements are different from movements of bodies that are not activations of an agents' ability to move. Movements which are not an agents' actions of her ability to move are the results of causes beyond the agent. Such movements are different also in their underlying neural processes and the muscle and other sub-agential level bodily operations which realize them, from those movements which are activations of agents' abilities to move. (Dretske 1988: 29) The latter, an agents' moving, has specific underlying neural processes of control, coordination, feedback, etc., it links up with other processes such as perception, proprioception, and those processes in the agent—reflexes, habits, ideas, emotions, desires, plans, intentions, etc.—which make the agent act or with which the agent acts. Neither CTAs, TWs or ACs can accommodate such fundamental differences be-

tween the bodily movements which are actions and the ones which are not. Hence in the next section I propose a fourth view, the Pluralist View, which can account for this.

6. A fourth view of bodily movements

Defenders of TWs and ACs often caution us that rejecting their position will inevitably lead to falling back into endorsing CTA. They claim that their position and CTA are the only defensible views of what actions are. This is a false dilemma. Instead of falling back on a conservative CTA, we have other options when rejecting TW and AC, namely the option of endorsing a Pluralist View (PV). PV claims that a) an agents' moving is the activation of their ability to move, b) there are actions which do not involve movement at all, and c) some actions are partially constituted by the agents' moving but have other constituents too. The view is 'pluralist' because it rejects the Davidsonian idea that all we ever do is to move our bodies, and the idea of TW that all we ever do is mentally will/try to do something. It recognises that there are simple mental and bodily actions, and also more complex actions with several constituents. Simple actions, like Tobias' waving to Sarah or Bob's thinking about his cat, are identical with the activation of the relevant agential ability of the agent. Complex actions, like Josef's writing of a book, Esmeralda's traveling through Argentina, or JAXA's building of a new spaceship have several constituents, with complex relations between them. According to CTAs, TWs, and ACs it is simple actions, specifically agents' movements, which we need to understand first in order to understand actions in general. While PV does not endorse this idea, since this paper focuses on the main views of bodily actions, I will not discuss complex actions here.

Simple actions, like bodily movements and some mental actions, are the activation of the agents' specific ability to move or to think or to remember, and so on. The view I propose, PV, claims that when agents move, their ability to move is activated. Such an ability is not activated unless the agent has actually moved. The agent's moving is the action, it is the occur-

rence of the movement. There are no two separable components here, one an action and one its cause or product. The difference between actions of moving, and movements which are not actions, is that the latter are not identical with the activation of the agents' ability to move. Humans are biological beings with constituent parts, and have some of their powers in virtue of their biological constitution.⁹ Movements which are not actions are movements of the agents' body which are not caused by any abilities or powers which the agent has in virtue of their overall constitution qua agent. So, when someone trips me, or an external force, say, a strong wind, pushes me backwards, the movements of my body are not my actions.

This is a non-reductivist, naturalist view of action, broadly compatible with current views in psychology, cognitive science and neuropsychology. The activation of agential abilities fits into the natural causal order on this view.¹⁰ That is, there are essential differences at the biological, neurological, and agential level between movements which are agents' movements and movements which are results of external causes affecting the agent. PV can accommodate these characteristics of agents' movements, while it can also account for the activeness of agents when they are acting. At the same time, CTAs, TWs, and ACs seem to mischaracterise bodily movements. Bodily actions are neither bodily movements that are actions in virtue of their causes, nor causes of causings of bodily movements.

The following illustrates what Sylvia's raising of her arms is on this view

e1 (Activation of Ap) ... e2

Figure 5 Constituent view: Simple actions (exercises of a single agential power/ability)

e1 = Ap = the activation of agential power/ability = event of Sylvia's raising of her arms = the action of Sylvia's raising of her arms
 e2 = events caused by the event of the agents' moving
 ... = causal connectedness of events

On this view there are no separate components into which a simple action like raising one's arm could be analysed. This does not mean that there are no more complex actions. Katja's making of a pumpkin pie, Donald's writing of a book, or the Diet's conducting of an investigation might have several constituents and some of these might stand in causal relations with each other. But simple actions such as thinking of someone, remembering a date, or raising one's eyebrow, are actions which are single occurrences. And they are not occurrences which are actions in virtue of what causes them or in virtue of what they cause. As long as Sylvia's raising of her arms is the activation of her agential ability to raise her arm, there is nothing more that is required for it to be an action. It follows from this view that not all actions are intentional actions. For example, Sylvia's raising of her arms is not an intentional action, if Sylvia raises her arms while she is stretching after waking up, or when she is just automatically raising her arms to protect her face from a fast approaching football. Still, in these cases her raising of her arms is an unintentional-action since it is the activation of her agential ability to raise her arm. I will here not enter into a discussion of the possible structure of more complex actions or of intentional, unintentional, and voluntary actions, due to constraints on space.

PV has then several advantages: it is a naturalistic view which can explain not only intentional and voluntary actions, but also non-intentional and involuntary ones. It respects some important differences between the bodily realisation of bodily movements which are actions and ones which are not. It is a view which can be used to understand not only human agency but also animal agency, and arguably the agency of artificial agents, and other non-living complexes. The view can also be helpful when addressing issues of individuation: since it is a superior view of actions compared with CTAs, TWs, and ACs, its rejection of the idea of redescriptions—that all connected action descriptions apply to one event—can be taken to be instructive. This is helpful when one is discussing responsibility and explanation: one might be responsible for what one did, while not being responsible for a connected but non-identical thing done, and for some of

the results of one's doing. The same goes for explanations: if the descriptions 'my raising of my arm' and 'my turning on the light' do not pick out identical actions then it is clear that there is room for different explanations for them. What actions are is also of paramount importance for the issue of what the objects of our moral judgments are when we judge someone's doings and deeds.¹¹ If PV is right, and there are several connected actions differing in complexity, rather than a single event described in different ways when an agent performs a complex action, then different actions performed can merit different moral evaluation depending on factors like whether the agent intended them, whether they are in line with her goals, whether the agent knew about them, could know about them or should have known about them or foreseen them, and so on. All in all, PV offers new answers, and hence the promise of progress in old debates.

7. Conclusions

The paper discussed what the three dominant views of action from the past 60 years of analytic philosophy have said about actions in general and more particularly about bodily movements. It argued that these views mischaracterise movements. Also, some of them, tryings/willings views of actions and agent causal views, rely for support on an interpretation of the difference between transitive and intransitive verbs which can be contested and has alternatives. The paper then introduced an alternative, the Pluralist View of actions and attempted to show that this view can avoid the mistakes made by its predecessors, and provides a plausible account of bodily movements which are actions. If we want to understand what humans are and how we have an effect on the world it is fundamental to understand human agency and actions. The view proposed here, and its account of bodily movements, can be a step towards reaching this goal.

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Notes

- ¹ This claim and the criticism advanced are in many ways similar to disjunctivist views of actions. For a good overview of such positions see Haddock 2010. The main differences between disjunctivist positions and the position proposed here are that disjunctivists typically take the important difference between bodily movements which are actions and bodily movements which are not, to be the presence of an intention: movements which are actions are expressions of our intentions. The view advanced here is substantially broader and claims that there are unintentional and involuntary movements which are actions too. Hence, differently from disjunctivism, the view does not explain what actions are in terms of the agents' intentions, but in broader naturalist terms.
- ² See for example Donald Davidson's theory of action, developed in his essays collected in Davidson 1980 and also Mele 1992.
- ³ The view that actions are mental events of willings is defended in Prichard 1949, and the view that all actions are mental events of tryings has been defended in Hornsby 1980. Hornsby has later changed her position and came to criticise TW. However, others have embraced the position, see for example Smith 1988, and McCann 1998.
- ⁴ AC has many varieties. Its historical version, worked out by Thomas Reid, and also endorsed by Roderick Chisholm (Chisholm 1976) claimed that actions are events of bodily movements, and these events are actions in virtue of an agents' causing them. This view has often been criticised since it has a hard time to motivate the idea that an agents' causing something is not an action, while what the agent causes is an action. An updated version of historical AC is defended in O'Connor 2000, but due to space constraints in this paper I focus on AC's more widely accepted version, which claims that actions are instances of the causal relationship between an agent and the event which the agent caused.

- ⁵ Davidson's idea that descriptions of related actions all really describe the same event of a bodily movement are spelled out in Davidson's 'Agency'. The idea was developed as a reaction to what Joel Feinberg (Feinberg 1965) called the accordion effect: that when we discuss someone's actions and their responsibility for the actions there are usually several connected action descriptions. Feinberg however did not make the further claim that all these descriptions pick out the same event of a basic action, which gets several descriptions and counts as several distinct action in virtue of this. Some authors (for example Alvarez and Hyman 1998) defend a hybrid view which recognises that sometimes we describe the same action in different ways, but also that often descriptions pick out related more or less complex actions. The view proposed here, PV also defends such a hybrid view of descriptions.
- ⁶ For example, Taylor 1966, von Wright 1971, Bach 1980, McCann 1998.
- ⁷ Others besides Hornsby had addressed the idea that the transitive-intransitive distinction might have something to do with the structure of actions, but her 1980 treatment of the issue is the most detailed and became the standard reference in philosophy of action. Bach 1980, Taylor 1966, and von Wright 1971 are some examples of others writing about this.
- ⁸ Von Wright calls such actions performances. See his 1971: 86-90.
- ⁹ Similar naturalist views of agency are defended in Alvarez and Hyman 1998, Helen Steward 2011. The view that humans are biological organisms is defended in Eric T. Olson's 2007 and Paul Snowdon's 2017.
- ¹⁰ The metaphysics of such agential abilities is detailed in recent works on powers, dispositions and abilities. See for example Mumford and Anjum 2011. Other philosophers working on action who make use of these metaphysical findings in a variety of ways are Erasmus Mayr (2011), Steward (Steward 2011), Hyman (2015) and Thomas Pink (2016). The works of Mayr, Steward, and Hyman also address the issue of agential organisation, i.e. what makes certain abilities and powers agential, rather than just features of sub-agential systems, like in the case of a human agent their sub-agential digestive system. I endorse here the broad view defended in chapter 2 of Hyman 2015 on which primitive animals can also count as agents.
- ¹¹ See Constantine Sandis 2012 and 2017 for explorations of these issues.