

ACTIONS AND BODILY MOVEMENTS

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In my last contribution to this review⁽¹⁾ I showed why it was necessary to distinguish between particular actions and action-kinds. Failure to make this distinction, I argued, generates misunderstanding. One thesis which can lead to a great deal of perplexity, precisely on account of such failure, is Davidson's claim that actions are bodily movements.⁽²⁾

We can react to such a claim in different ways. We may say: "This cannot be a claim about all actions," and mention cases where it doesn't apply. I can carry out long sums in my head, stand to attention when told to, allow you to pass, decide to read a book tomorrow, lie perfectly motionless in bed. In all these cases I may be said to be engaged in some kind of action or activity, though my body can remain quite still.

This is, of course, true; but if we are convinced, as I think we should be, that there is an interesting and important truth in Davidson's claim, then we might agree to limit the field to what we pick out as (intuitively) physical actions⁽³⁾ – including *inhibitions* of bodily movements, like standing to attention, but excluding all mental actions – and see whether Davidson's theory applies to *them*.

Davidson asks us to interpret the idea of a bodily movement generously. "The generosity," he says,

must be openhanded enough to encompass such "movements" as standing fast, and mental acts like deciding and computing.⁽⁴⁾

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1. *Melita Theologica*, Vol. 38, 1987, n. 1, pp. 19–22.

2. D. Davidson, "Agency", in *Essays on Actions and Events*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1980, p. 49.

3. The class of actions that is being invoked here is roughly the same as is referred to by Austin in his paper "Pretending". In considering the construction in which "pretend" is followed by "to A" or "to be A-ing", Austin asks us to focus especially on "cases where the verb "A" is one which describes the doing of some *deed* (for example "bite" as opposed to, for example, "believe"), and more particularly when that deed is of a pretty "physical" kind (for example, biting as opposed to giving)". And he speaks of "public physical actions" in which "there must be . . . something public that I am actually doing" and that I can pretend to do (as when I "pretend to take a bite out of your calf"). J.L. Austin, *Philosophical Papers*, OUP, 3rd ed., 1979, p. 258.

4. D. Davidson, *loc.cit.*

Many of us, I am sure, would feel rather reluctant to be as generous as Davidson expects us to. I offer the suggestion of eliminating such actions as computing and deciding as an alternative strategy which should make Davidson's proposal look less obviously controversial but would still allow us to deal with a wide variety of interesting examples.

However, even if the suggestion to limit the field as proposed is accepted, we would still need to distinguish between the transitive and the intransitive senses of the verb "to move" and insist that the "movements" in "Actions are bodily movements" be interpreted in the transitive, not the intransitive, sense. Jennifer Hornsby writes:

The sort of answer we expect to the question "What did he do?" is not "His body moved" ("His arm rose", "His knee bent") but rather "He moved his body" ("He raised his arm", "He bent his knee"). It is the same when we go beyond the agent's body to describe his action: what he did, we say, was melt the chocolate; and we cannot say that what he did was the chocolate melted.⁵

It may be that some of the resistance to Davidson's claim that actions are movements of the body comes as a result of his failure to distinguish clearly from the start between these two senses of "movements of the body"; so we do well to remove the ambiguity.

But at this stage a different kind of reaction is possible, one which, I suggest, completely misses the point of Davidson's claim. For an objector might think of all the things we do over any period of time – build houses, cross bridges, drive cars, play chess, load guns – and point to these – the things we "achieve" – as flatly contradicting Davidson's thesis. "Of course", we can hear our objector protest, "when I give my girl-friend flowers on her birthday, I move my body in some way. But is that all there is to it? Is that how you would describe my action?"

Clearly in this case the objector has moved from speaking about particular actions – the subject of Davidson's claim – to speaking about the kind of action his or her action was of. From the simple truth that you can describe your action as a bodily movement, you should not derive the (reductivist)

5. J. Hornsby, *Actions*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980, p. 3. Compare Wittgenstein: "I should not say of the movement of my arm, for example: it comes when it comes, etc. And this is the region in which we say significantly that a thing doesn't simply happen to us, but we *do* it. 'I don't need to wait for my arm to go up – I can raise it'. And here I am making a contrast between the movement of my arm and, say, the fact that the violent thudding of my heart will subside". L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Part I, § 612. We have here different ways of expressing Aristotle's definition of a voluntary action as one in which the principle that moves the instrumental parts of the body is in the agent. *Nicomachean Ethics* III, 1110a 15 (tr. W.D. Ross, Oxford University Press, 1925).

conclusion that all other descriptions are equivalent to bodily movement descriptions. If you gave your girl-friend flowers (you did not ask someone to deliver them for you), then you must have moved your body in some way or other. (This is the “simple truth” our objector accepts when he says “Of course”). Davidson’s thesis, however, while capturing this idea, clearly does not prevent you from (further) describing your action as an expression of love, devotion, etc. (This is the point of the objector’s protest “But is that all there is to it”).⁽⁶⁾

In “A Plea for Excuses” Austin writes:

There is indeed a vague and comforting idea in the background that, after all, in the last analysis, doing an action must come down to the making of physical movements with parts of the body; but this is about as true as that saying something must, in the last analysis, come down to making movements of the tongue.⁽⁷⁾

To rid ourselves of this idea, Austin says,

We need to realize that even the “simplest” named actions are not so simple – certainly are not the mere makings of physical movements – and to ask what more, then, comes in (intentions? conventions?) and what not . . .⁽⁸⁾

In similar vein he says in “Performative Utterances”:

Philosophers at least are too apt to assume that an action is in the last resort the making of a physical movement, whereas it’s usually, at least in part, a matter of convention.⁽⁹⁾

Our question must be: what hangs on “mere” in Austin’s remark that our actions “are not the mere makings of physical movements”? And what is the force of the expressions “in the last resort” and “in the last analysis” in the other passages I quoted? If (as it seems) Austin’s point is that we have not said all that matters about an action when we have described it as a bodily movement, then it is hard to see how anybody could disagree.⁽¹⁰⁾ If, on the contrary, it is that we can never identify a person’s particular action

6. I point at a dog. I say: “That’s an animal”. Am I wrong? Certainly not. I am not denying that one can give a more detailed, fuller account of what a dog is. What I’m saying is, simply, that it would be wrong to *deny* that a dog is an animal.

7. J.L. Austin, “A Plea for Excuses”, in *Philosophical Papers, op.cit.*, p. 178.

8. *ibid.*, p. 179.

9. J.L. Austin, “Performative Utterances”, in *Philosophical Papers, op.cit.*, p. 237.

10. Austin, in fact, does not accuse any *particular* philosopher of such reductivism. He speaks of “a vague and comforting idea in the background” and attributes to philosophers generally the assumption which he then goes on to attack.

with that person's moving (a part of) his body, then the claim is counterintuitive and, moreover, goes directly against Austin's insights as manifested in those other passages where he sees quite clearly that we can describe the same action in different ways; and that in many episodes of a person's doing something, one of the descriptions we give of his actions is in terms of some sort of bodily movement.

It is important not to confuse these two claims; and it is rather unfortunate that Davidson does not always express himself unambiguously in this respect. For whereas the sentence "All actions are bodily movements" says about particular actions that they can be described in terms of the agent's moving (parts of) his body, the sentence "We never do more than move our bodies," which Davidson also uses,⁽¹¹⁾ gives the impression that all descriptions of actions can be reduced (or are equivalent) to bodily movement descriptions. On Davidson's own account, however, this cannot be right. For if it is true, as Davidson clearly thinks it must be, that "we are capable, for better or for worse, of building dams, stemming floods, murdering one another, or, from time to time, hitting the bull's eye,"⁽¹²⁾ then here are some examples of the things we do *beyond* or *over and above* moving our bodies: what we do is build dams, stem floods, murder one another, and hit the bull's eye.

"Agency" was presented at a philosophy colloquium in 1968 and first published in 1971.⁽¹³⁾ In a note added in 1979 Davidson admits that "while not false, the sentence ('we never do more than move our bodies') is misleading."⁽¹⁴⁾ But the example he gives in the note does nothing to remove the ambiguity. He says: "If I move the earth, this *sounds* like more than moving my body. The argument shows it is not." But clearly there is a sense in which it is plainly and straightforwardly true (not just *sounds* true) that moving the earth is something I do over and above moving my body: it is precisely one of the many things which Davidson says I could achieve, "for better or for worse," by moving my body. So, taken as a claim about things we do (i.e. action-kinds), Davidson's dictum "We never do more than move our bodies" is not just misleading but false. The misconception is removed only if we interpret Davidson's claim to be a claim about the right *sort* of things, viz., particular actions, our doings of things, not the things we do. The point could then be put thus: my particular action is identical with (i.e. is nothing other than) some movement_T of the body; e.g. Archimedes' moving the earth is the same action as Archimedes' moving his body.

11. D. Davidson, *op.cit.*, p. 59.

12. *ibid.*, p. 60.

13. See Davidson's short preface about the provenance of the essays, *op.cit.*, p. vii.

14. *ibid.*, p. 59, note 20.

Because of the way Davidson expresses himself on occasions like the one just quoted, it would be easy to construe Austin's warning – "that even the simplest named actions . . . are not the mere makings of physical movements" – as aimed directly against Davidson's position. But Austin's claim that "Actions are not the mere makings of physical movements" seems to suffer from the same kind of ambiguity as it present in Davidson's claim that "We never do more than move our bodies". In both cases the medium and the message are at odds. A reading of these remarks in the light of the distinctions which both Austin and Davidson failed to make explicit shows that the alleged conflict does not exist.

Commenting on some of Austin's examples, L.W. Forguson argued that because

a great many actions, if not all, are as much socially constituted as they are physically constituted

it follows that

an action is not to be simply identified with the bodily movements involved in its performance.⁽¹⁵⁾

But Forguson's point does not show the non-identity of particular actions with particular makings of bodily movements. All it shows is that particular actions can be variously classified, that an action which has been described in physical terms may very often be redescribed with reference to social conventions, rules of the game, etc.

We may gather further evidence for the claim that many actions are bodily movements (in the transitive sense) from Austin's analysis of what he calls "the machinery of action". Rather than warning us that actions are not "merely", or "in the last analysis", the making of physical movements with parts of the body, this time Austin talks about

the stage at which we have actually to *carry out* some action upon which we embark – perhaps we have to make certain bodily movements. . .⁽¹⁶⁾

The stage at which the action occurs – in Austin's words, the stage at which we have "actually to *carry out*" the action, or, occasionally, "*muff it*" –

15. L.W. Forguson, "Austin's Philosophy of Action", in K.T. Fann, ed., *Symposium on J.L. Austin* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), pp. 137–8. More or less similar arguments were used by P.F. Strawson and G.J. Warnock in David Pears, ed., *Freedom and the Will* (London, Macmillan, 1963), esp. p. 64; A.I. Melden, "Action", *Philosophical Review*, 65 (1956), pp. 530–2; Annette Baier, "The Search for Basic Actions", *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 8 (1971), p. 166; David Schwayder, *The Stratification of Behaviour* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965), p. 174.

16. J.L. Austin, "A Plea for Excuses", *op.cit.*, p. 193.

(as opposed to, for example, preparing for it, planning it, or merely thinking about it) – is the stage where we move our bodies. And he goes on to say that

in the stage of actually *doing* those things (getting weaving) . . . we must exercise sufficient control over our bodily parts . . .¹⁷⁾

At the crucial stage – the “executive” stage, as Austin calls it – we move our bodily parts in a controlled way. But if beyond the executive stage there is nothing we can control in a way similar to the way in which we control the physical movements with parts of our bodies, then we can argue that our moving parts of our body is the action. Such tension as there is in Austin between this passage and the ones I quoted earlier can best be explained if we accept that the claim that our (physical) actions are identical with our (transitive) bodily movements is a claim about *particular* actions, while the remark about our actions not being “merely”, or “in the last analysis”, movings of the body is a remark about the *types* under which our actions may be subsumed, the concepts under which they may fall. It is a reflection on the way we name or describe our actions in the light of our intentions, principles, aims, etc – a reminder that, as Davidson succinctly puts it, we may achieve a lot by moving our bodies.

17. *ibid.*