

# THE INDIVIDUATION OF ACTIONS

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## A. Austin's problem

There are three passages, the first in 'A Plea for Excuses', the second in *How to Do Things with Words*, and the third in 'Three Ways of Spilling Ink', which have obvious affinities of content and purpose and which I would like to consider together.<sup>(1)</sup> In them Austin raises the important philosophical problem of the individuation of actions. The passages themselves, however, while containing useful hints as to what Austin's intuitions were about the subject, do not provide any definite, well worked out solution. It is important, therefore, to try to understand the nature of the problem raised by Austin and to examine critically the various solutions which have been suggested.

In 'A Plea for Excuses' Austin calls our attention to a certain feature of actions, to a way of talking about actions, which he finds striking. He says:

....it is in principle always open to us, along various lines, to describe or refer to 'what I did' in so many different ways.... Apart from the more general and obvious problems of the use of 'tendentious' descriptive terms, there are many special problems in the particular case of 'actions'. Should we say, are we saying, that he took the money, or that he robbed her? That he knocked a ball into a hole, or that he sank a putt? That he said 'Done', or that he accepted an

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1. J.L. Austin, 'A Plea for Excuses', in *Philosophical Papers*, (Oxford University Press; Oxford 1979) 175-204; 'Three Ways of Spilling Ink', in *Philosophical Papers*, pp. 272-287; *How to Do Things with Words*, (Oxford University Press; Oxford 1976). In subsequent footnotes I shall use the following abbreviations: 'A Plea', 'Three Ways', *HTD* to refer to each of these three texts respectively.

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offer? How far, that is, are motives, intentions and conventions to be part of the description of actions? And more especially here, what is *an* or *one* or *the* action?<sup>(2)</sup>

Although Austin felt that this was 'altogether too large a theme to elaborate' in the context of his discussion of excuses, he returned to it briefly in *How to Do Things with Words*. Here he writes:

That we can import an indefinitely long stretch of what might be called the 'consequences' of our act into the act itself is, or should be, a fundamental commonplace of the theory of our language about all 'action' in general. Thus if we asked 'What did he do?', we may reply either 'He shot the donkey' or 'He fired a gun' or 'He pulled the trigger' or 'He moved his trigger finger', and all may be correct. So, to shorten the nursery story of the endeavours of the old woman to drive her pig home in time to get her old man's supper, we may in the last resort say that the cat drove or got the pig, or made the pig to get, over the stile.<sup>(3)</sup>

Austin realises that in all these examples something is being redescribed. Although his terminology is imprecise, it is clear that he has raised a genuine problem. In 'Three Ways of Spilling Ink' he is still struggling with it. He shows his puzzlement by putting a number of phrases in scare-quotes and leaves the fundamental question unanswered:

We do not say 'A wounded B for the purpose of killing him'. Why not? Because the killing and the wounding are 'not sufficiently separate' – are 'too intimately connected'; because they are not '*two things*' that are done? But what does this really mean?<sup>(4)</sup>

Austin's genuine puzzlement shows that we need a more solid theoretical framework to deal with the questions he raises. I think the best framework is provided by the theory of the individuation of actions proposed by G.E.M. Anscombe in *Intention*<sup>(5)</sup> and further developed by Donald Davidson in a number of papers now collected in *Essays on Actions and Events*.<sup>(6)</sup>

2. 'A Plea', 200-1.

3. *HTD*, 107-8. In the paragraph immediately following the quoted passage, Austin says that 'the problem of excuses and those of *the different descriptions of actions* are throughout bound up with each other'. 'A Plea', 201 (my emphasis).

4. 'Three Ways', 275-6.

5. (Blackwell; Oxford 1963).

6. (Clarendon Press; Oxford 1980). This theory has also been defended by Eric D'Arcy in *Human Acts* (Clarendon Press; Oxford 1963) and by D.S. Schwayder in *The Stratification of Behaviour* (Routledge and Kegan Paul; London 1965).

## B. The Anscombe-Davidson solution

The reason why we do not say that A wounded B 'for the purpose of killing him' is not because, as Austin proposed with some hesitation, the killing and the wounding are 'not sufficiently separate', or because they are 'too intimately connected', or because, as he even more reluctantly suggested, 'there are not *two things*' that are done'. If A killed B by wounding him, then there were at least *two things* which A did: one thing A did was wound B, another thing he did was kill him.<sup>(7)</sup> Austin himself thought of the reasons he gave as purely tentative and ultimately unsatisfactory. ('What does this really mean?', he asks at the end of the passage). The right answer, Anscombe and Davidson would suggest, is that in the case where we say that A killed B by wounding him, A's wounding B and A's killing B are the same action.

By moving his finger a man flips a switch, turns on the light, illuminates the room, and alerts a prowler.<sup>(8)</sup> Davidson thinks that 'insuperable difficulties stand in the way'<sup>(9)</sup> of considering the man's moving his finger, his flipping the switch, his turning on the light, his illuminating the room, and his alerting the prowler as five different actions. 'This welter of related descriptions', Davidson says, 'corresponds to a single descriptum'.<sup>(10)</sup>

Another man stops the car by pressing a pedal. Here again we cannot 'saddle the agent' with two actions.<sup>(11)</sup>

A third man, Anscombe's this time, operates a pump by moving his arm up and down, thus replenishing the water-supply and poisoning the inhabitants.<sup>(12)</sup> Moving his arm up and down with his fingers round the pump *is*, in these circumstances, according to Anscombe, operating the pump, replenishing the water-supply, and poisoning the inhabitants. So there is one action with four descriptions.

7. Even Davidson, by failing to distinguish clearly between actions and things done in acting, is not free of the ambiguity which afflicted Austin. This is how Davidson introduces the discussion of his famous switch-flipping example. 'I flip the switch, turn on the light, and illuminate the room. Unbeknownst to me I also alert a prowler to the fact that I am home. Here I need not have done four things, but only one, of which four descriptions have been given'. ('Actions, Reasons and Causes', *op.cit.*, p. 4). But if I flip the switch, turn on the light, illuminate the room, alert a prowler, surely there must be these four things I do: what I do is (1) flip the switch (2) turn on the light (3) illuminate the room (4) alert a prowler. What is redescribed is not the things I do but my doing of them, i.e. the action. The things done correspond to the effects, outcomes or consequences in terms of which the action is described. In this example my action has four effects: it is an action of four kinds.

8. Davidson, 'Agency', *op.cit.*, p. 57.

9. *ibid.*, 59.

10. *ibid.*

11. *ibid.*

12. *Intention*, §23 ff.

To avoid misunderstanding one should emphasize that the subject which is being redescribed – what Davidson calls the ‘descriptum’ – is a particular action, e.g. the pumper’s, on a particular occasion. The identity concerns particular actions (doings), not action kinds.

One kind of item, whether object or action, cannot be the same kind of item as another kind of item, but one item can be an instance of more than one kind....<sup>(13)</sup> Shooting and killing are different kinds of acts, though one and the same act may be of both kinds.<sup>(14)</sup>

We may put the matter in a slightly different way by saying that since an action is the doing of many things, in cases such as those described by Austin, Anscombe and Davidson, someone’s doing one thing (e.g. the man’s pulling the trigger) is the same as his doing another thing (e.g. the man’s shooting the donkey). A lot of things are done, but only one action occurs. The old woman’s action seen as one kind of doing is the same as her action seen as another kind of doing. When does this happen? When do we discern action identities?

Consider a different case. The man fires his gun and misses. Seconds later a brick falls on the donkey – but not as a result of the shooting<sup>(15)</sup> – and kills him. The identity we noted in Austin’s story between the man’s firing the gun and his killing the donkey is absent in the later case where the man fires and misses and the donkey is killed through some other means. The crucial word – the word which indicates identity – is ‘by’.

### C. ‘By’

It is only when somebody is said to have done something *by* doing something else that philosophers like Anscombe and Davidson have wanted to talk about action-identities.

Consider these two sentences: ‘He poisoned the inhabitants *by* operating the pump’. ‘He poisoned the inhabitants *while* operating the pump’. The first sentence reports that the pumper’s operating the pump *caused* the inhabitants to be poisoned. And if we are then told that the inhabitants died as a result of their drinking the poisoned water, we thereby learn that his operating the pump caused, or brought about, their death. In the ‘while’ sentence, however, there is no causal link between the events introduced by the descriptions on either side of the preposition. Whereas the first sentence gives us more information about the *means* the

13. A.R. White, ‘Shooting, Killing and Fatally Wounding’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, vol. 80 (1979/80)2.

14. *ibid.* 6.

15. The bullet does not break a string from which the brick is suspended.

pumper used to poison the inhabitants, or, at any rate, about the way in which it came about that they were poisoned,<sup>(16)</sup> the second suggests that the man operated the pump and simultaneously poisoned the inhabitants by some means independent of the operation of the pump.<sup>(17)</sup>

We may further illustrate this point by borrowing Davidson's example, where I turn on the light by flicking the switch. Here two events — the switch being flicked and the light going on — are causally related. But it would be a mistake to think that my (action of) flipping the switch caused my (action of) turning on the light: in fact it caused the light to go on.<sup>(18)</sup> Having flipped the switch (moved my finger in this way) I did all that was required of me, all I could do, all that was in my power, to bring on the light. The rest, as Davidson put it, was 'up to nature'.<sup>(19)</sup> The same applies to cases where the effects of the action are not causally related, as when I greet a lady by raising my hat, or apologize by saying sorry. Here 'the rest', rather than being simply 'up to nature', depends on such social conventions, practices and institutions which make our actions the kinds of actions they are.

It has been objected that in order to be able to decide whether to speak of one action or different actions we need to know more about the context, and that maybe in a lot of cases we cannot tell because we have incomplete descriptions.<sup>(20)</sup> The question here is 'How much is enough?', and it can be asked not just in the case of actions, but also in the case of individuals or objects.<sup>(21)</sup> 'The man in the brown hat went to the bank this

16. This *caveat* is introduced to avoid giving the impression that the pumper must have poisoned the inhabitants *intentionally*. Any such claim would obviously be mistaken. The pumper need not have known that the water was poisoned, and still poisoned the inhabitants by operating the pump.

17. The contrast is reflected in the grammar; for while the second sentence may be paraphrased in such a way that the verb in the subordinate clause is conjugated in the indicative ('He poisoned the inhabitants while he operated the pump'), the first cannot. For we do not say 'He poisoned the inhabitants by he operated the pump'. 'By' then does not link descriptions of actions, but combines with verb phrases to form verbs out of verbs. We have the verb 'to replenish the water supply', and we can form the more complex verb 'to replenish the water supply by operating the pump'. The phrase 'by operating the pump' retains a constant grammatical form as the verb 'replenish' is inflected for person and tense'. Jennifer Hornsby, 'Verbs and Events', in *Papers on Logic and Language* (ed. Jonathan Dancy), (University of Keele; 1979) 97.

18. Davidson, 'Actions, Reasons and Causes', *op.cit.*, 14.

19. Davidson, 'Agency', *op.cit.*, 59.

20. This objection was made e.g., by Myles Brand in his review of Alvin I. Goldman's *A Theory of Human Action*, in *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 69/9 (1972) 252. 'In order to judge whether different descriptions express a single action, it is necessary to have complete descriptions and a complete background story'. Brand directs his criticism at *both* Goldman and Davidson.

21. Myles Brand admits that "adequate description" and "adequate background story" might be better terms than "complete description" and "complete background story", 'since

morning'. Is this an incomplete description? Clearly it doesn't tell us absolutely everything about the man; but if *that* is what we are after, then anything we say will be incomplete. The relevant question is: does the description pick out an *individual*? If it does, then we have enough 'context' to establish his identity. And we could then ask, about the individual picked out in this way, further questions like 'Is he the (same) man wanted by the police?' We adopt the same procedure in looking for action identities. We ask about a *particular* action, e.g. the pumper's moving his arm up and down with his fingers round the pump on a particular occasion: 'Is it the same action as his poisoning the inhabitants?' And we answer 'Yes – if he poisoned the inhabitants *by* operating the pump'. In looking for action-identities, 'by' gives us all the context we need; for it is in cases where we say things like 'He Q-ed by X-ing' ('He did something *by* doing something else') that Davidson and Anscombe think that his Q-ing was the same as his X-ing.

#### D. Goldman's objections

Goldman begins his book on action<sup>(22)</sup> by describing a case as follows: Suppose that John does each of the following things (all at the same time): (1) he moves his hand, (2) he frightens away a fly, (3) he moves his queen to king-knight-seven, (4) he checkmates his opponent, (5) he gives his opponent a heart attack, and (6) he wins his first chess game ever.<sup>(23)</sup>

He then asks, 'Has John here performed *six* acts?', and ascribes to Anscombe and Davidson the answer that only one act occurred, whereas he goes on to argue for a much more fine-grained approach.<sup>(24)</sup>

But naturally, as Anscombe points out,<sup>(25)</sup> neither she nor Davidson can have any views on the case *as described*. It soon becomes clear from the discussion that Goldman means: 'in a case where John checkmates his opponents *by* moving his queen', or, 'in a case where he frightens away the fly *by* moving his hand', or, in general, as Anscombe puts it,

the latter suggest exhaustive descriptions'. While complaining that 'the nature of adequate action descriptions is rarely discussed', he admits that he does not 'have anything very helpful to say' about the subject, *ibid*.

My discussion is intended to show how *little* is required to provide an 'adequate description' or 'an adequate background story'.

22. Alvin I. Goldman, *A Theory of Human Action* (Prentice Hall; Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey 1970).

23. *ibid.*, 1.

24. See also A. Goldman, 'The Individuation of Action', *Journal of Philosophy* 68 (1971) 761-74.

25. G.E.M. Anscombe, 'Under a Description', *Noûs* 13 (1979) 223.

in a case where he *did* do all that just by what it is rather natural to call one act. He wasn't, for example, playing half a dozen games of chess at once, in one of which he moved his queen while in another he checkmated his opponent, simultaneously frightening away a fly by blowing a raspberry, etc...<sup>(26)</sup>

Goldman, however, thinks that in the case when a grandmaster checkmates his opponent by moving his queen, the grandmaster's checkmating his opponent and the grandmaster's moving his queen are two actions; and indeed in any example of this kind Goldman finds as many actions as there are descriptions. Why does he think this?

Much of Goldman's argument against Anscombe and Davidson depends on his analysis of 'by'. 'By', Goldman says, is asymmetric and irreflexive.<sup>(27)</sup> If John turns on the light by flipping the switch, then he does not flip the switch by turning on the light (*asymmetry*). And it would be odd to say that John turned on the light by turning on the light, or that John checkmated his opponent by checkmating his opponent (*irreflexivity*).<sup>(28)</sup>

But why should Anscombe and Davidson be required to say any of the things which Goldman finds objectionable? Their theory, as I have emphasised throughout, is a theory about particular actions. But if an action is the doing of many things, then, if we focus our attention on the things done, undoubtedly we shall find that while certain kinds of relation between these things hold, others do not. Goldman's examples show simply (and unsurprisingly) that while action *a* may be of kind *k* by being also of kind *k'*, it may not be of kind *k'* by being also of kind *k*. The man's action of moving his arm up and down with his fingers round the pump is an action of the kind 'poisoning the inhabitants' by (in virtue of) being also an action of the other kind 'replenishing the water supply'; but it is not an action of the kind 'replenishing the water supply' by (or in virtue of) being also an action of the other kind 'poisoning the inhabitants'. This does not show that what is picked out by the descriptions 'moving his arm up and down', 'replenishing the water supply', 'poisoning the inhabitants', is not

26. *ibid.*, 224.

27. Goldman, *A Theory of Human Action*, 5.

28. *ibid.*

the same action. It only shows that the descriptions are related to each other in different ways.<sup>(29)</sup>

If an action is the doing of many things, then one thing the man does is flip the switch; and another thing he does is turn on the light. And he does the second thing by doing the first, but he does not do the first thing by doing the second. Again, this does not show that his flipping the switch and his turning on the light are not the same action; all it shows is that *the things done* by him are related to each other in different ways.

Anscombe invites us to consider an analogue.<sup>(30)</sup> The U.S. President is the U.S. Commander-in-Chief by being President, while the Commander-in-Chief is not the President by being the Commander-in-Chief. Does this show that the President and the Commander-in-Chief are not the same man? Certainly not. Then why should the fact that if 'John killed Sam by shooting him' is true then 'John shot Sam by killing him' isn't, be thought of as an argument against identifying the shooting with the killing? If the event of the switch being flipped causes the event of the light coming up, then no wonder the reverse isn't true. But this says nothing against identifying A's flipping the switch with A's turning on the light when A turned on the light by flipping the switch.

All of Goldman's objections follow the same pattern – and elicit the same kind of response. Consider another two of Goldman's examples:

- (1) By playing the piano John puts Smith to sleep and awakens Brown. But, while John's playing the piano caused Smith to doze off, John's awakening Brown did not cause Smith to doze off. Hence, John's playing the piano cannot be identical with John's awakening Brown.<sup>(31)</sup>
- (2) John answers the telephone and says 'hello'. He says 'hello' because he wishes to greet the caller. But he has been quarrelling with

29. The sentence above "while action *a* may be of kind *k* by being also of kind *k'*, it may not be of kind *k'* by being also of kind *k*" is ambiguous between a strong thesis (I) and a weak thesis (II). These are:

- I It is not possible that both
  - i) *a* is of kind *k* by being also of kind *k'* and
  - ii) *a* is of kind *k'* by being also of kind *k*.
- II It is possible that both
  - i) as above
  - and
  - ii) it is not the case that *a* is of kind *k'* by being also of kind *k*.

(II) is sufficient for my argument, though (I) is arguably true as well. At least it is hard to think of counter-examples to (I) which do not equivocate on 'by'. I am grateful to C.C.W. Taylor for pointing this out.

30. Anscombe, 'Under a Description', op.cit., 224.

31. Goldman, *A Theory of Human Action*, 2-3.



his wife and ... he says 'hello' very loudly ... There is a causal factor of John's saying 'hello' loudly that is not a causal factor of John's saying 'hello'. (Hence they are different actions.)<sup>32</sup>

In these examples Goldman purports to give instances of actions  $I_1$  and  $I_2$  such that  $I_1$  has an effect which is not an effect of  $I_2$  (ex. 1), and such that  $I_1$  has a cause which is not a cause of  $I_2$  (ex. 2). Hence by Leibniz's law  $I_1 \neq I_2$ . Hence Goldman's examples are put forward as counter-examples to that account.

### E. Actions and individual substances

In responding to Goldman's objection, let us consider an analogous argument about individual substances. Suppose it is maintained that substance  $S_1 =$  substance  $S_2$ , and the objection is put forward that  $S_1$  has a certain property which  $S_2$  lacks. We can meet the objection by showing either that the original theory does not in fact require the claim that  $S_1 = S_2$ , or that in fact every property of  $S_1$  is also a property of  $S_2$ .

Let us now make the corresponding moves in response to Goldman's examples. Assuming that Davidson's theory commits him to the identity of the actions of John's putting Smith to sleep and of John's awakening Brown, of John's saying 'hello' and of his saying 'hello' loudly, we can show that, contra Goldman, no breach of Leibniz's law is involved in these examples. In the first example, since the event of John's playing the piano was also (in virtue of one of its effects) an event of John's awakening Brown, and since that event also caused Smith to dose off, it is *true* that John's awakening Brown caused Smith to dose off, despite the fact that the sentence 'John's awakening Brown caused Smith to dose off' does not give an explanation of Smith's dosing off (for that we need the sentence 'John's playing the piano caused Smith to dose off').

In the second example we need to distinguish causes of the *occurrence* of the event from causes of the event's having had one character rather than another; i.e., what caused John's saying 'hello' to occur (i.e., what caused him to utter that expression, as opposed to uttering another, or saying nothing) was his wish to greet the caller, whereas what caused him to say 'hello' *in that way rather than another* (e.g. loudly rather than in a normal tone of voice) was his having quarrelled with his wife. This requires that the criteria of identity for events should not be so restrictive that any change in the character of an event necessarily produces a different event. For it is only on that condition that an event could have had some character

32. *ibid.*, 3.

other than the character it did in fact have (e.g. John's saying 'hello' could have been soft when it was in fact loud). Alternatively, if we adopt a restrictive criterion of identity for events, according to which John's saying 'hello' softly would have been *another* event than the event which in fact occurred, then the quarrel *is* a causal factor in the occurrence of *that* event, together with the desire to greet the caller. Hence, whether we adopt the strict or the lax criterion of identity for events, Davidson's claim can be defended against the charge of breach of Leibniz's law.

Anscombe's and Davidson's method of individuating actions highlights the fact that once the agent has moved his body in the appropriate way, *no further action on his part is required* for his movement to become an action of a different kind. Goldman does not seem to focus on this simple and crucial truth. In Anscombe's example, the man at the pump, having moved his arm, did not have to move an extra finger for his action to become one of replenishing and poisoning. Even if he had died as soon as his hand left the pump, he would still have poisoned the inhabitants. The executioner of Charles I, having taken the king's head off, did not have to add any further performances, namely of killing and executing, for his act to become one of killing and executing.<sup>(33)</sup> This, as Anscombe remarks,

is something that isn't a philosophical thesis at all, and which no one denies. What is under dispute is whether to speak of many different actions ... in the circumstances when Davidson and I speak of only one.<sup>(34)</sup>

So what is it that gives rise to the disagreement?

## F. Persons, properties and times

The analysis of 'by' is one factor; Goldman's views about 'the exemplification of action properties' another. Goldman defines actions via triples of persons, properties and times. He distinguishes between act-types and act-tokens. The type of an action is regarded as a property of the agent; the action itself is the agent's exemplifying that property at that time. Goldman's thesis is that if the agent exemplifies two such properties at the same time, then there are two exemplifyings-by-him of properties, and this is to say that there are two distinct actions.<sup>(35)</sup>

33. Anscombe, 'Under a Description', op.cit., 223-3.

34. *ibid.*, 223.

35. Jaegwon Kim had put forward a similar idea in 'On the Psycho-Physical Identity Theory', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 3 (July 1966) 227-235 (esp. p. 231). Richard

If by vigorously pulling the rope I ring the bell in the kitchen, thus giving the cook a fright and making him drop a plate, then according to Goldman, my pulling the rope, my ringing the bell, my giving the cook a fright, and my making him drop a plate are four distinct, particular actions of mine – as for Goldman there will be as many actions as there are exemplifyings of (different) properties.

Indeed Goldman would have us discriminate more finely. ‘Pulling the rope’ does not denote the same type as ‘vigorously pulling the rope’, nor does ‘ringing the bell’ denote the same type as ‘ringing the bell in the kitchen’. So my pulling the rope and my pulling it vigorously on any particular occasion of my pulling the rope vigorously cannot be the same action; nor can my ringing the bell and my ringing the bell in the kitchen. These are different actions, but they are, according to Goldman, rather intimately related; and Goldman develops an account of this relation, which he calls ‘generation’.<sup>(36)</sup>

Let us consider some possible combinations of persons, properties and times in the framework of Goldman’s theory.

1. We may have two different players exemplifying the same act-property (or act type) at the same time. At exactly 11.30 a.m. on a particular Saturday morning both John McEnroe, playing on Court 1, and Martina Navratilova, playing on Court 2, hit the ball into the net.

2. We may have exemplifications by the same person of the same property at different times. In the course of playing at Wimbledon, John McEnroe may exemplify the property of hitting the ball into the net at time  $t$  and then again at time  $t'$ .

In each of these examples, all parties to the dispute would agree, two particular actions of the same type have occurred: one on Court 1 and the other on Court 2, one at time  $t$  and the other at time  $t'$ . The crucial difference arises in another kind of case.

3. Losing his temper, John McEnroe hits the ball into the net and thereby loses a point.

While Anscombe and Davidson find it perfectly natural to say that John McEnroe’s hitting the ball into the net and his losing a point were one and the same action, Goldman thinks not; for whenever we have exem-

Brandt and Jaegwon Kim once more defended the idea in ‘The Logic of the Identity Theory’, *The Journal of Philosophy* 64 (1967) 516-18. Goldman’s view is that actions are different if the agents are different, or if their times of occurrence are different, or if they are exemplifyings of different properties – whether by the same agent at the same time or not. (See Goldman, *A Theory of Human Action*, 10-11).

36. Goldman, *A Theory of Human Action*, 20-48.

plifyings of different properties, then we must have different actions. Can he be right?

Again, let us consider a case involving individuals, then make the necessary comparisons. Suppose we are told that a bald man in his fifties was found hanging under Blackfriars Bridge in London, and that he was wearing a blue tie. And suppose we are then informed that the man found hanging under Blackfriars Bridge had been identified by the police as the director of the Banco Ambrosiano. We have now learnt that the man who, philosophically speaking, 'exemplified the properties' of baldness, and of being in his fifties, and of wearing a blue tie, also exemplified the (other) property of being the director of the Banco Ambrosiano. We do not for a moment believe that because four properties have been 'exemplified', each one of these has been exemplified by a different individual; or that since the property of being bald is distinct from the property of being director of a bank, anything that has the one property is distinct from everything that has the other property. It is the same individual, we say, who exemplifies the properties of baldness, of being in his fifties, of wearing a blue tie, etc.

Why should we adopt a different kind of vocabulary when we speak of actions? Let us suppose that the director of the Banco Ambrosiano hanged himself, and that by hanging himself he caused a scandal. Goldman, Davidson and Anscombe would agree that hanging oneself and causing a scandal are two quite different *types* of action. 'Hanging oneself' and 'causing a scandal' express different concepts, mean different things; there are more ways of causing a scandal than by hanging yourself, you may hang yourself without causing a scandal, and so on. But the issue separating Goldman from Anscombe and Davidson does not concern types (concepts, kinds) but tokens (i.e. particular actions). And if we apply to actions the same criteria of individuation that we applied to substances, we should see that we have been given some more information about an event that we already knew to be a hanging, namely that it caused a scandal. If we find it absurd to deny that the properties of baldness, and of being in one's fifties, and of wearing a blue tie, and of being the director of a bank, can all be 'exemplified' by the same individual, then why should we take the opposite view with regard to actions? We should feel inclined to assert that just as the same individual (the agent) exemplifies the different properties of hanging himself and of causing a scandal, so the same action exemplifies the properties of being a hanging of oneself and of being a causing of a scandal.

The question 'when is hitting a ball also scoring a point?' is ambiguous: it may mean 'When is the action's property of being the hitting of a ball the same as the action's property of being the scoring of a point?'. The answer

is, of course, never. But it may mean 'When is someone's action of hitting a ball also his action of scoring a point?' Goldman again answers 'never', Anscombe and Davidson 'occasionally, i.e. when someone scores a point *by* hitting the ball'.

Some philosophers have held that it does not make any important difference which view of individuation one holds. On Davidson's criterion, they argue, one will speak of the same action and many descriptions, whereas on Goldman's criterion one will speak of different actions; and one may also choose indifferently between them. Thus, for instance, Lawrence Davis writes:

A conclusive argument in favour of any one of the theories and doctrines surveyed ... remains elusive. Perhaps no position on these matters is 'the' correct one. In practice, it seems that whatever is said in terms of one theory can be restated in terms of any one of its rivals.<sup>(37)</sup>

I find this view very unsatisfactory. Though there may be different theories yielding different results in obscure and borderline cases, a theory, if it has to be taken seriously, must at least respect and reflect the way we talk about the normal, unproblematic case. Anscombe gives the following example:

What would we say of a theory which grants that a certain man, Dickens, wrote *David Copperfield* and *Bleak House* and that only this Dickens wrote *Bleak House* but does *not* grant that 'The author of *David Copperfield*' describes the same man as 'The author of *Bleak House*'? We'd say that it is a non-starter: any *theory* of human identity has got to fit in with the correctness of calling the author of *David Copperfield* the same man as the author of *Bleak House*.<sup>(38)</sup>

Now Goldman is full of such difficulties. He thinks, for example, that if I said 'Hello' loudly on a given occasion, then my saying 'Hello' and my saying 'Hello' loudly were two actions.<sup>(39)</sup> But whatever one means by 'action', and however one decides to go about individuating actions, one clearly ought to be suspicious of any theory which yields such awkward results. The terminological difficulty is a clear indication that something in the underlying theory has gone seriously wrong.

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37. Lawrence H. Davis, *Theory of Action* (Prentice-Hall; New Jersey 1979) 41.

38. Anscombe, 'Under a Description', *op.cit.*, 222.

39. Goldman, *A Theory of Human Action*, 28.