Are all Actions Movements of the Agent's Body?

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Abstract

Davidson famously contended that all actions are movements of the agent's body. It has been objected, however, that Davidson's view is incompatible with his own definition of primitive actions. This paper argues that this objection is based on an incorrect reading of Davidson's argument. I will show that by reading "movements", in "all actions are bodily movements", transitively, Davidson's definition of primitive actions ceases to conflict with his thesis that all actions are bodily movements.

Introduction

The present paper champions Davidson's thesis that all actions are movements of the agent's body. I defend this view against Danto's and Feinberg's proposals according to which only "basic actions" are bodily movements, whereas causally "complex actions" take place outside the confines of the agent's body. I argue that Davidson succeeds in showing that all our actions are basic (or primitive) and that causally complex actions are identical with basic actions.

However, it has been argued that by endorsing Davidson's definition of "primitive actions" one is unable to uphold the thesis that all actions are bodily movements. For to raise my arm I first have to bring about cerebral events and muscle contractions that then cause the rising of my arm. Hence, bodily movements are not primitive actions, but are, in fact, causally complex. So if all our actions are primitive it follows that none of our actions are movements of the body.

I argue, however, that this conclusion is based on a misreading of Davidson's argument. The misreading stems from an ambiguity of the verb "to move", when used in a nominal phrase. I argue that if one reads

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"movements", in "all actions are bodily movements", transitively, then Davidson's argument that all actions are primitive is not inconsistent with the thesis that all our actions are bodily movements. Instead, if all we do is perform primitive actions, then it follows that all actions are movements of the agent's body.

1

Suppose I move my fingers, thereby pressing the keys on the keyboard thereby causing various letters to appear on my screen, which in turn causes me to perceive what I have just typed. These are clearly several events; the movement of my fingers, the pressing of the keys, the appearance of the letters on the screen and my perception of these symbols. But even if infinitely extended, this chain of causal consequences would not involve all the events that are causally related to my action. It would not include, for example, the cerebral events and contractions of my muscles which take place prior to my finger's movement.

It seems undisputable that most of the events I listed above could not be described as movements of my body. *Prima facie*, only the movement of my fingers seems to qualify as a bodily movement. However, we commonly talk about our actions by making reference to events that are not bodily movements; "I pressed the key", "I wrote these words", etc. If these are genuine actions and they are not somehow identical with the movements of my finger, then it seems clear that not all actions are bodily movements.

Two philosophers who deny that my moving my fingers and my pressing the keys are one and the same action are Joel Feinberg and Arthur Danto.[1] Feinberg proposes that my action of moving my fingers cannot be identical with my action of typing something that appears on my computer screen. These are not only two (numerically) different actions but also actions of different kinds. Whilst my moving my finger is causally "simple", my pressing the keys is a causally "complex" action. Feinberg defines a causally simple action as one that is not done by "teleologically connected 'sub-acts'"[2]. In contrast, an action is causally complex if it is done by a "teleologically connected 'sub-act'".[3] For example, "[i]n order to open a door, we must first do something else which will cause the door to open; but to move one's finger one simply moves it – no prior causal activity is required."[4] Hence, Feinberg proposes that if A_2 is a causally complex action and thus effected by another action, say A_1, the relation between A_1 and A_2 is a causal one, i.e. A_1 causes A_2.[5]

Thus, the way Feinberg and Danto construe the relation between causally simple and causally complex actions entails that not all actions are bodily movements. If a person opens a door (A_2) by moving her arm (A_1), then A_1 is a distinct action that causes another action A_2. Whilst A_1 is a bodily movement, A_2 is *not* a bodily movement. In consequence, not all actions are movements of the body.

2

One should be suspicious, however, about whether the connection between these two actions ought to be construed as one of cause and effect. For by supposing that they are related causally, one seems to confuse the *effect* of my action, i.e. the door opening, with the *action* itself, i.e. my opening the door.[6] Feinberg's example implies that the event that can be described as my "simple" action, i.e. my moving of my arm, say e_1, causes another event that, under the assumed circumstances, can be described as my action of opening the door, say e_2.

Let us briefly look at the potential and actual causal consequences of e_2. According to Feinberg's thesis, e_2 *may* cause a further (complex) action. Beyond that, it seems also clear that e_2, i.e. the action of opening the door, *will* cause an event which is the opening of the door, say e_3. However, independently of e_2 causing e_3, it seems that e_1 is causally sufficient to cause e_3. That is, my moving of my arm (e_1) is the cause of the door's opening (e_3). But this means that the event of my moving my arm (e_1) not only causes me to open the door (e_2) – which then causes the door's opening (e_3) – it also immediately causes the door's opening (e_3).[7]

Unless one believes that one and the same event (e_3) can be caused directly by an event (e_1) whilst at the same time being caused by another event (e_2) which is itself caused by e_1 one must find this result implausible.[8] Since I think it undeniable that my action of moving my arm (e_1) causes the opening of the door (e_3), Feinberg's and Danto's view that simple acts *cause* causally complex ones cannot be upheld.

Clearly, this does not mean that my action of moving my arm and my action of opening the door are not somehow related. In the following, I discuss Davidson's solution to this problem and look at its consequences for the view that all actions are bodily movements.

3

Davidson tackles the problem by arguing that the relation between "simple" and "causally complex" actions is one of identity. If I open the door by moving my arm, my moving of my arm and my opening the door are one and the same action.[9] The two verb-phrases "moving my arm" and "opening the door" are just varied descriptions of one and the same *descriptum*, namely my action.[10] The difference between these descriptions lies in the latter's portrayal of the action *qua* a less and a more remote consequence.

Davidson's argument for this thesis relies on a consideration I discussed above; namely that my moving of my arm is identical with doing something that causes the door to open. That is, "doing something that causes the door to open" is also identical to "causing the door to open". Hence, "causing the door to open" cannot be something that causes the causing of the door's opening, as Feinberg suggests. Instead, it *is* the direct cause of the door opening.[11]

Davidson thinks that the urge to separate my action of opening the door and the action of my moving my arm stems from confusing a "feature of the description of an event" (i.e. the event being described by including a reference to its effects) with a "feature of the event itself" (i.e. being the cause of a sequence of events).[12] It is often supposed that describing an event e_1 by including a reference to one of its consequences e_2, implies that e_2 is a part or feature of e_1.[13] This supposition leads to the questionable result that if my movement of my arm causes the door to open, the event that is the door's opening is part of the event that is my movement of my arm. Thus, to avoid this problem, philosophers like Feinberg and Danto assume that if I open the door by moving my arm, my arm's movement causes my (action of) opening the door. Accordingly, my moving my arm then includes the action that causes the door to open.

However, Davidson shows that this worry is unfounded. If my action of moving my arm causes the door to close, the event that is the closing of the door, say e_1, does not become part of the event that is the movement of my body, say e_2. Rather, e_1 is a distinct effect of e_2, of which e_1, my action, is the cause. Thus, my moving my arm is not causing the cause of the door's opening, but, as Davidson emphasises, it is the cause of the event that is the door's opening.

Consequently, Davidson identifies those actions which Feinberg singles out as "causally complex" with those that are "causally simple". They are one and the same action. A "causally complex" action is just a dif-

ferent description of an action that is (also) a "causally simple" action.[14] But this means that there must be a description for all of our actions that does not include a reference to their effects. Our actions must be describable in "primitive terms", i.e., without including events that are caused by our actions.[15] Davidson holds that these primitive descriptions of our actions are always constituted of bodily movements. This is because, when I move my finger, I do not do so by doing something that causes my moving of my finger; rather "[d]oing something that causes my finger to move [...] *is* moving my finger".[16] Thus Davidson holds that "our primitive actions, the ones we do by not doing something else, [are] mere movements of the body".[17] That is to say, whenever we describe an action without including a reference to its effects, what we end up with is a description of a bodily movement. Davidson concludes from this that, in fact, *all* we *do* is to move our bodies. He expresses this view by supposing that if the queen kills the king by moving her hand in such a way that she pours poison in his ear, it would be absurd to ask, "after the queen has moved her hand in such a way as to cause the king's death, [whether] any deed remains for her to be done or to complete". For "[s]he has done her work; it only remains for the poison to do its."[18] Hence, our primitive actions "are all the actions there are. We never do more than move our bodies – the rest is up to nature."[19]

In sum, Davidson argues that: (i) all primitive actions are bodily movements; and (ii) all our actions are primitive. By combining (i) and (ii) it then follows that all actions are movements of the body.

4

Some philosophers argue that the conclusion that all actions are movements of the body is incompatible with one of Davidson's arguments concerning the intentionality of internal events that are necessary to cause bodily movements.[20]

> "A man who raises his arm both intends to do so with his body whatever is needed for his arm to go up and knows that he is doing so. And of course the cerebral events and movements of his muscles are just what is needed. So, though the agent may not know the names or locations of the relevant muscles, nor even that he has a brain, what he makes happen in his brain and muscles when he moves his arm is, under one natural description, something he intends and knows about."[21]

That is, if I raise my arm, this action includes my intentional action of bringing about the event that causes my arm to rise. James Montmarquet points out that, considered on its own, Davidson's remark could have at least three distinct interpretations.[22] However, since Davidson identifies "doing something that causes my finger to move" with "moving my finger", what he must intend to say here is that my raising my arm is identical with doing something (or bringing about an event) that causes my arm to rise.[23]

Montmarquet argues that this view is problematic. For it implies that "arm-raisings are identical with acts which cause arm risings."[24] That is to say, the event that causes my arm to rise is identical with its effect, i.e. the event of the actual arm rising. However, since cause and effect cannot be one and the same event, Davidson's contention that doing something that causes my finger to move *is* moving my finger turns out to be untenable. In fact, Davidson himself, in another example, seems to admit implicitly that this is so. He argues that "to trip my self [...] is not identical with what it causes [i.e. my tripping]."[25] So what causes my tripping and my tripping must be two different events. If this is correct, the same must also hold for causing a bodily movement and the bodily movement itself. But if the event of an agent's bodily movement is distinct from its cause and is thus not included in the event that is the movement of the arm, it seems clear that the cause of the arm's movement must; (i) be prior to bodily movement; and (ii) be located inside the body of the agent.

Montmarquet, amongst others[26], argues that the non-identity between the cause of a bodily movement and the bodily movement itself implies that Davidson cannot maintain that bodily movements are primitive actions. For when I move my arm, I do not do so without doing something else first. That is to say, to raise my arm, I must bring about internal events (neural events and muscle contractions) that then cause my arm to rise. Thus, the raising of my arm is done by my bringing about these internal causes. According to the Davidson-Anscombe thesis[27], bringing about these internal events and my moving my arm must be regard as one and the same action; saying "I moved my body" simply describes my action by including a reference to one of its consequences. But this means that my bodily movements must be typified as "causally complex" and not as primitive actions. Thus Montmarquet concludes that "[a]cts of bringing about bodily movements are not identical with the bodily movements in whose bringing about they consist."[28] The act of my raising my arm is thus an internal event that causes my arm to

rise, but not the event that is the rising of my arm itself.

Consequently, bodily movements are not primitive actions. Combining this with the second of Davidson's conclusions that I discussed above, i.e. all actions are primitive, implies that no action is a movement of the agent's body. The picture we get can be described as follows.

> "When I move my hand, the movement of my hand, though an effect of my action, is not itself an action, and no one who considered the matter would say it was any more than he would say that the death of Caesar, as distinct from his murder, was an action or even part of an action."[29]

Accordingly, the action itself is not identical with the movement of my arm, but with the event that causes the movement of my arm.

However, even though this picture may seem convincing, I do not think that it is an inevitable consequence of Davidson's view that none of our actions are bodily movements. In the following, I argue that Davidson's argument only leads to this result if it receives a profound misreading.

5

Davidson argues that when I move my hand, thereby (say) pushing a key which causes a letter to appear on my computer screen, I have performed *one* action that can be variously described by including references to its more or less remote consequences. However, this is not to say that my action is either identical with the events that are the appearance of the letter or the key being pressed. Instead, Davidson identifies the action with the event that is my movement of the finger. He expresses this view by saying that "[d]oing something that causes my finger to move [...] is moving my finger". The problem of this view is that it seems to identify the event that is the movement of my finger with its cause. However, since cause and effect can not be one and the same event, my doing something that causes my body to move cannot be a bodily movement itself. But this implies, as I discussed above, that bodily movements cannot be primitive actions; yet since, according to Davidson, all we do is perform primitive actions, bodily movements cannot be actions at all; or so it is argued.

But I think that, despite the last quote, Davidson is not committed to the view that an action can be identified with the event that is the bodily movement, at least in the way that leads to the alleged cause/effect

identity. This interpretation is based on a misreading of Davidson's argument that stems from an ambiguity of the verb "to move".[30]

The verb "to move" (cognate verbs, such as "to rise", "to boost", "to melt", etc.) is ambiguous between its transitive and intransitive forms. In "I moved my body", "move" occurs transitively; in "my body moved", "move" occurs intransitively. Embedded in a whole sentence, its usage is normally revealed through the context; yet when it occurs in a nominal phrase, it proves ambiguous.[31] That is, "moving my finger" may signify a transitive relation between me and my finger's movement, indicating that I cause my finger to move. Or it may signify no relation, in which case it refers to the event that is the motion of my finger. (To avoid any further ambiguity, I shall follow Hornsby by using the subscripts "$_T$" and "$_I$" to distinguish the transitive and the intransitive forms.[32])

The philosophical significance of this ambiguity springs from the connection that holds between what is expressed by the transitive form and the intransitive forms. For if a billiard ball (B_1) moves$_T$ another billiard ball (B_2), this implies that B_1 causes B_2 to move$_I$.[33] Clearly, the same relation holds between "I move$_T$ my body" and "my body moves$_I$". Thus "I move$_T$ my body" implies that I cause my body to move$_I$. By assuming that "agent causation" is reducible to event causation, saying "I moved$_T$ my arm" describes the event that causes my arm to move by including a reference to (one of its) effects (i.e. the movement$_I$ of my body).[34] That is, "I move$_T$ my arm" is a description of the event that causes my arm to move$_I$. But does it then follow that Davidson is committed to the proposition that "the action that is the moving$_T$ of my arm is identical with the event of my arm moving$_I$", as it is assumed by Davidson's critics?

I think the answer to this question is "no" if one interprets the first occurrence of the verb "to move" in "[d]oing something that causes my finger to move [...] *is* moving my finger" as being used transitively and the second "move" as being used intransitively. For if I startle my friend by opening the door, though the opening of the door and the startling of my friend are one and the same action, Davidson's view does not imply that the event that is the startling of my friend is identical with the event that is the opening of the door. Instead, these are separate events that are causally connected and caused by my action. The same holds for the case where I move$_I$ my arm by moving$_T$ my arm. The event of my moving$_T$ my arm is not identical with the event of my arm moving$_I$. Recall, however, that Davidson's critics premised their verdict that for Davidson *no* action can be bodily on Davidson's view that "moving my

arm$_T$" is identical with "my arm moving$_I$". This is precisely what was supposed to follow from Davidson's remark that "[d]oing something that causes my finger to move [...] is moving my finger". However, as I stated above, Davidson holds that "doing something that causes my finger to move" is identical with "causing my finger to move". Combining this with what we have just established, namely that "I move$_T$ my arm" refers to the cause of my arm's moving$_I$, all that Davidson seems to suggest here is that the moving$_T$ of my finger is the moving$_T$ of my finger – something that is hardly deniable and apparently does not identify the cause of a bodily movement$_I$ with the bodily movement$_I$ itself. Accordingly, Davidson's view does not lead to any contradictory results.

Admittedly, this result depends on a particular interpretation of Davidson's proposition that "[d]oing something that causes my finger to move [...] is moving my finger". This statement only leads to a non-contradictory result if the first "moving" in this statement is used intransitively and the second is used transitively. But why should we think that this is the way Davidson intended to use the verb "to move" in this sentence? I think Davidson answers this question in his "Actions, Reasons, and Causes" where he writes: "Obviously, the problem is greatly aggravated if we assume, as Melden does [...] that an action (raising one's arm) can be identical with a bodily movement (one's arm going up)."[35] To avoid this mistake himself, Davidson *must* intend to say that the something I do that causes my finger to *move*$_I$ is my *moving*$_T$ my finger. In consequence, Davidson's statement does indeed not lead to a contradictory result.

In sum, neither Davidson's statement that "doing something that causes my finger to move is moving my finger", nor his general argument should be taken to imply that the cause of my bodily movement$_I$ is identical with its effect, i.e. the movement$_I$ of the body. It should rather be understood as the claim that my doing something that causes the movement$_I$ of my finger is my moving$_T$ my finger, i.e. bringing about internal events that cause my finger to move$_I$.

6

This paper championed the thesis that all actions are movements$_T$ of the agent's body. I defended this thesis against the view that our primitive actions, which are bodily movements, cause complex actions, which are not bodily movements. Following Davidson, I argued that my startling my friend by opening the door, does not entail that my action of opening

the door causes my action of startling my friend. Instead of causing a connected sequence of acts, my opening of the door causes a sequence of events, some of which can be picked out to describe my action. Considering all possible descriptions of an action, some descriptions will be primitive in the sense that they refer to it without including any of its consequences. These primitive actions can be identified with bodily movements, because doing something that causes the movement of my finger *is* just moving my finger. Furthermore, since every action has a description under which it is a primitive action, it follows that all actions are movements of the body.

It has been argued, however, that by embracing Davidson's view, bodily movements cannot be described as primitive actions. This is so because bodily movements do not fit Davidson's definition of a primitive action. For if I move my finger I must do something that causes my finger to move, namely contract my muscles. Further, to contract my muscles I must do something which causes my muscles to contract, etc. However, making these events occur is clearly not any bodily movement. Thus, bodily movements are (only) the effect of my actions – so they cannot be classified as primitive actions. But since, according to Davidson, all we do is perform primitive actions, it follows that no action is a movement of an agent's body.

However, I argued that a sound interpretation of Davidson's argument does not lead to this conclusion. This interpretation is based on clarifying an ambiguity of the verb "to move", which essentially allows one to say that "to move$_T$ my finger" refers to an event which causes my finger to move$_I$. Thus, if internal brain events and muscle contractions are causing my finger to move$_I$, then making these internal events occur is moving$_T$ my finger. Accordingly, the fact that my action causes the movement$_I$ of my finger does *not* imply that the movement$_T$ of my finger is caused by one of my actions. Instead, my moving$_T$ my finger is a primitive action of mine. In combination with Davidson's thesis that all actions are primitive, this leads to an unequivocal upshot: *all* actions are movements$_T$ of the agent's body.

Notes

1 [8]; [4]

2 [8, p.145]

3 Danto draws a similar distinction, by distinguishing between "basic actions" and those which are caused by basic actions [4].

4 [8, p.147]; Feinberg's emphasis).

5 [8]; Davidson thinks that [3] commits to the same mistake.

6 Cf. [5, p.56].

7 By saying that e_1 causes e_3 "directly", I mean that e_1 causes e_3 not in virtue of causing another event first, which then causes e_3.

8 In fact, for anyone who believes that all events have their properties *essentially*, (i.e. necessarily, e_1 and e_2 are different, if they have a different cause [cf. [5, p.179]; [7, p.17]]), this result must appear as a clear contradiction.

9 This thesis is sometimes referred to as the "Davidson-Anscombe thesis". Anscombe introduced this view in her book *Intention* (see [2, pp.37-47].

10 Cf. [5, p.59].

11 Cf. [5, p.58]

12 [5, p.58]

13 [5, p.58]

14 One exception to this view is the case where an agent, for example, moves her right arm by moving her left arm. For then the causally complex action seems to occur within the confines of the body.

15 Cf. [5, p.49]

16 [5, pp.49f]. Also, cf. [6, p.37] and [14, p.199].

17 [5, p.59].

18 [5, p.58]

19 [5, p.59]

20 See [10] and [1].

21 [5, p.50]

22 [10, p.137]

23 Section V argues that this is, in fact, a misinterpretation of Davidson's argument.

24 [10, p.138]

25 [5, p.47]

26 Cf. [1, p.229].

27 See note 9.

28 [10, p.140]

29 [12, p.191]

30 [9]. See also [11].

31 [9, p.2]

32 Cf. [9, p.2].

33 Cf. [1, p.223, n.9].

34 Cf. [11, p.33]. For a critique of the assumption that "agent causation" is reducible to "event causation" see [13].

35 [5, p.5, n.2]

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