

The background of the slide is a textured, aged, light-brown paper. On the left side, there is a large, dark, irregular ink splatter that spreads outwards, with many smaller, scattered black dots and splatters extending across the left and top-left portions of the page. The overall aesthetic is that of a vintage or artistic document.

What is an action?

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What is an action?

- 'Consider a question “What is the stove doing?”, with the answer “Burning well” and a question “What is Smith doing?” with the answer “Resting”. (...) Someone who was struck by this might think it remarkable that the same expression “What is __ doing?” should be understood in such different ways (...).Such a description as “paying his gas bill”, when all he is doing is handing two bits of paper to a girl, might make an enquirer say: “Description of human action is something enormously complicated, if one what is really involved in it – and yet a child can give such a report!”’ (Anscombe 1957: 80)

What is an action?

- Enquiry into the nature of action
- What makes it different from other happenings in the world? E.g. natural events.
- What is/isn't distinctive about agency?

What is an action?

- Acting is being able to *choose* to intervene or not in the course of happenings.
- E.g. one may choose to vote, or not to vote.

What is an action?

- 'A stone can't lie in ambush waiting to trip you up. A cracking branch of a tree doesn't aim at the cups and glasses it breaks in falling.' (Anscombe 1993, 149)

What is an action?

- An action is normally considered under one or several descriptions.
- The characterisation of some event as an action is not indifferent to the description under which it is considered (Davidson, Anscombe)

Action and the reason-seeking Why question

- 'But who says that what is going on is the building of a house, or writing 'I am a fool' on the blackboard? We all do, of course, but why do we? We notice many changes and movements in the world without giving any comparable account of them. The tree waves in the wind; the movements of its leaves are just as minute as the movement of my hand when I write on a blackboard, but we have no description of a picked-out set of movements or a picked-out appearance of the tree remotely resembling "She wrote 'I'm a fool' on the blackboard". Of course we have a special interest in human action: but *what* is it that we have a special interest in here? It is not that we have a special interest in the movement of these molecules - namely the ones in a human being; or even in the movement of certain bodies - namely human ones. The description of what we are interested in is a type of description that would not exist if our question "Why?" did not. It is not that certain things, namely the movements of humans, are for some undiscovered reason subject to the question "Why?" So too, it is not just that certain appearances of chalk on blackboard are subject to the question "What does it say?" It is of a word or sentence that we ask "What does it say?"; and the description of something as a word or sentence at all could not occur prior to the fact that words or sentences have meaning. So the description of something as human action could not occur prior to the existence of the question "Why?", simply as a kind of utterance by which we were *then* obscurely prompted to address the question.' (Anscombe 1957: 83)

Action description

- The same action can receive several descriptions
(Anscombe, Davidson)
- All these descriptions are true of the same action

Action description

- '[a] A man is pumping water into the cistern which supplies the drinking water of a house. Someone has found a way of systematically contaminating the source with a deadly cumulative poison whose effects are unnoticeable until they can no longer be cured. (...) [b] The man's arm is going up and down. [c] Certain muscles, with Latin names which doctors know, are contracting and relaxing. [d] Certain substances are getting generated in some nerve fibres – substances whose generation in the course of voluntary movement interests physiologists. [e] The moving arm is casting a shadow on a rockery where at one place and from one position it produces a curious effect as if a face were looking out of the rockery. [f] Further, the pump makes a series of clicking noises, which are in fact beating out a noticeable rhythm.' (Anscombe 1957, §23, 37)

Two questions

- (1) What kind of answer could be given to 'What is this man doing? What is *the* description of his action?' (if there is such a thing as '*the* description of his action')
- (2) 'Are we to say that the man who (intentionally) moves his arm, operates the pump, replenishes the water supply, poisons the inhabitants, is performing *four* actions? Or only one?' (Anscombe 1957, §26, 45)

Action description

- Amongst the descriptions that are true of the same action, only a bunch of them are descriptions under which the action is intentional or voluntary.

Action individuation

- What is *the action* that makes all these descriptions true? = an extensional theory of action (Davidson)

Circumstances...

- “Only more circumstances are required for A [the man moves his arm] to be B [he operates the pump] than for A to be A. (...) In short, the only distinct action of his that is in question is this one, A. For moving his arm up and down with his fingers round the pump handle is, in these circumstances, operating the pump; and, in these circumstances, it is replenishing the house water-supply, and, in these circumstances, it is poisoning the household. So there is one action with four descriptions, each dependent on wider circumstances” (Anscombe, 1957, 46)

The identity thesis

- '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.' (Davidson 1963, 4)
- 'I am writing my name. I am writing my name on a piece of paper. I am writing my name on a piece of paper with the intention of writing a cheque. I am writing a cheque. I am paying my gambling debt. It is hard to imagine how we can have a coherent theory of action unless we are allowed to say that each of these sentences is made true by the same action.' (Davidson 1967, 110)

The identity thesis

- 'But what is the relation between my pointing the gun and pulling the trigger, and my shooting the victim? The natural and, I think, correct answer is that the relation is that of identity.' (Davidson 1967, 109)
- 'Strange goings on! Jones did it slowly, deliberately, in the bathroom, with a knife, at midnight. What he did was butter a piece of toast. We are too familiar with the language of action to notice at first an anomaly: the 'it' of 'Jones did it slowly, deliberately, ...' seems to refer to some *entity*, presumably an action, that is then characterised in numbers of ways.' (Davidson 1967, 105 – my emphasis)

Actions are a subclass of events

- 'Can we now say which events involve agency? (...) I am the agent if I spill the coffee meaning to spill the tea, but not if you jiggle my hand. What is the difference? The difference seems to lie in the fact that in one case, but not in the other, I am intentionally doing *something*. (...) And so I think we have one correct answer to our problem: a man is the agent of an act if what he does can be described under an aspect that makes it intentional. (...) A person is the agent of an event if and only if there is a description of what he did that makes true a sentence that says he did it intentionally.' (Davidson 1971, 46)

Actions are a subclass of events

- 'Although the *criterion* of agency is, in the semantic sense, intentional, the *expression* of agency is itself purely extensional' (Davidson 1971, 47)
- There is a 'semantic opacity, or intentionality, of attributions of intention' (*Ibid*, 46)
- 'The relation that holds between a person and an event, when the event is an action performed by the person, holds regardless of how the terms are described. Therefore we can without confusion speak of the class of events that are actions, which we cannot do with intentional actions.' (*Ibid.*)

Events and their descriptions

- “We must not confuse the event with the event-description. We may vary the description without therewith varying the event. One and the same event may have alternative event-descriptions, just as one and the same individual may have alternative Russellian descriptions.” (Martin, 1969, 71)

Time and action

- “Puffing out, squeezing down, stretching out sound like operations performed on one and the same event; yet if, as seems clear, these operations change the time span of the event, then it cannot be one and the same event” (Davidson, 1971, 55-6)

Natural causal chains

- “This welter of related descriptions corresponds to a single *descriptum*. (...) Our primitive actions, the one 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.” (Davidson, 1971, 59)

Natural causal chains

- “Events are identical if and only if they have the same causes and effects. (...) If we claim, for example, that someone's having a pain on a specific occasion is identical with a certain complex physiological event, the best evidence for the identity is apt to whatever evidence we have that the pain had the same causes and the same effects as the physiological change. (...) Perhaps sameness of causal relation is the only condition always sufficient to establish sameness of event (sameness of location in space and time may be another).” (Davidson, 1969, 179)

Individuation and description

- “I have on occasions stared dumbly when asked: 'If one action can have many descriptions, what is *the* action, which has all these descriptions?' The question seemed to be supposed to mean something, but I could not get hold of it. (...) The proper answer to 'What is the action, which has all these descriptions?' is to give one of the descriptions.” (Anscombe, 1979, 208-9)

Individuation and description

- “Neither 'action' nor 'event' is much use as a count-noun, but there are many count-noun that apply to actions and events, e.g. 'death', 'kiss', 'explosion'. Just the same holds for material objects, or things. 'How many things are there in the room?' is unanswerable unless contextually specified. (...) Being countable or uncountable is, as Frege would tell us, not a property of objects, and there is not some curious character of 'being an act' or 'being an event' which justifies the erection of unheard of principles of individuation which would never be applied to sword-thrusts or dinners.” (Anscombe, 1979, 213)