

## Action as a form of temporal unity: on Anscombe's *Intention*

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### ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to display an alternative to the familiar decompositional approach in action theory, one that resists the demand for an explanation of action in non-agential terms, while not simply treating the notion of intentional agency as an unexplained primitive. On this Anscombean alternative, action is not a worldly event with certain psychological causes, but a distinctive form of material process, one that is not simply caused by an exercise of reason but is itself a productive exercise of reason. I argue that to comprehend the proposed alternative requires an account of the temporality of events in general. An event does not simply have a position in time, but is itself temporally structured. With the inner temporality of events in view, the Anscombean conception of action as a specifically self-conscious form of temporal unity is made available for critical reflection.

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### Introduction

You will agree that Pynchon's third *Proverb for Paranoids* is equally suited to philosophers: 'If they can get you asking the wrong questions they don't have to worry about the answers.' I begin by contrasting two familiar ways of motivating and framing the problem of action: the *standard (decompositional) approach* through Wittgenstein's question 'What is left over?' and *Anscombe's approach* through a sense of the question 'Why?' These ways of entering into philosophical reflection are correlated with distinct and opposed conceptions of intentional bodily action: on the one hand, as a compound of metaphysically independent inner psychical and outer material elements joined by a generic bond of causality, and, on the other, as an essentially self-conscious and rational form of

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material process. These approaches are also correlated with a number of salient, though infrequently discussed, differences of emphasis, diets of example, habits of expression and strategies of argument. The contrasting features typically figure as part of the pre-theoretical background. In holding them up against an alternative, my hope is that such features will lose the appearance of innocence and inevitability. Still I believe that the decompositional project, not Anscombe's has been the primary beneficiary of a false appearance of inevitability, and I think that once this appearance is dissolved, the attractions of the Anscombean alternative will come into view. In what follows, I try to show that reflection on the temporal structure of movement in general and action in particular is the crucial first step. Only by proceeding in this way can we understand what it could mean to say that action is a form of temporal unity.

## Wittgensteinian arithmetic

### *Mere movements*

Wittgensteinian arithmetic is the standard point of departure in contemporary action theory:

Let us not forget this: when 'I raise my arm,' my arm goes up. And the problem arises: What is left over if I subtract the fact that my arm goes up from the fact that I raise my arm? (1963, §621)

This matters because the question itself forces a definite shape on subsequent reflection. It presupposes that an account of what it is to do something intentionally – what it comes to that, say, I raised my arm – will be a description of a compound of metaphysically distinct explanatory factors.

When I raise my arm, my arm rises; when I move a matchbox, the matchbox moves. 'Raise' and 'move,' like 'open,' 'close,' 'cool,' 'break,' 'burn,' 'sink' and 'melt,' are members of a class of English verbs with transitive and intransitive uses where the following holds:

(Movement)  $X A_{\text{transitive}}$  -ed  $Y$  only if  $Y A_{\text{intransitive}}$  -ed.

My arm's rising and the matchbox's moving are physical events, elements of the observable world of matter in motion. Of course, one's arm might rise or a matchbox might move even if one does not raise the one or move the other – maybe it's just the wind. It will seem to some that in such a case, we have a movement which may be 'exactly the same' as the movement in an intentional action (Searle 1983, 89).<sup>1</sup> A presupposition of Wittgensteinian arithmetic is that an account of the nature of action begins with a not-intrinsically-intentional movement (my arm's rising<sub>intransitive</sub>, the matchbox's moving<sub>intransitive</sub>), and through the addition of further distinct factors to the equation, comes to characterize what amounts to intentional action (I raised my arm, I moved the matchbox). On this view, action consists of a not-intrinsically-intentional happening, a 'mere happening,' occurring in a context where certain further facts obtain. The basic task for the

philosophical investigation of action is now set: to arrive at a specification of these further facts. The central questions of action theory then concern how to specify the something else (beliefs, desires, intentions, policies, acts of will, the agent herself, others?), and how to characterize the sort of relation (event-causal, agent-causal, triggering, structuring, sustaining, others?) joining this to 'what merely happens' when someone does something intentionally.

Whatever the disputes about how to execute this task properly, those taking it up share two further, intertwined assumptions, one about causality, the other about thought. Taken together, these constitute the framework of the *decompositional approach* to the theory of action.

### **Causality as a factor in the equation**

When I raise my arm, but not simply when my arm rises, and when I move the matchbox, but not simply when the matchbox moves, it is natural to speak of me as generating, authoring, producing, or bringing about something, as making something happen. This is a harmless way of marking the causal character of concepts used in ordinary thought and talk of action. It is equally harmless to mark this by speaking explicitly of 'cause': If I moved the matchbox, I caused the matchbox to move; If I raised my arm, I caused my arm to rise. Indeed, the following holds of any member of the class of verbs with transitive and intransitive forms:

(Causality)  $X A_{\text{transitive}}$ -ed  $Y$  only if  $X$  caused  $Y$  to  $A_{\text{intransitive}}$ .

The schema makes plain that causality, in some sense, is central to agency and its exercise in action (Hornsby 1980). But on the decompositional conception, it reveals more than this: it identifies a further distinct factor that can be added to the Wittgensteinian equation. According to the decompositional theorist, doing something intentionally (I raised my arm, I moved the matchbox) *is* a mere happening (my arm's rising, the matchbox's moving) *caused* by some factor  $x$ , so that solving for this  $x$  would be tantamount to laying bare the metaphysical structure of action.

This step is non-trivial, not a mere restatement of the innocuous verbal implication captured by (Causality). To see this, consider first a parallel verbal implication: I painted the door red only if I colored the door red; and likewise I stained (lacquered, dyed, glazed ...) the door red only if I colored the door red. Obviously, we do not articulate a distinct factor in the analysis of intentional action by displaying this common element of 'coloring.' This is not only because the 'verbs of coloring' are such a limited class, but because 'I colored the door red' is itself simply another ordinary action description. It raises exactly the same questions as the more determinate reports of action (I painted ..., I lacquered ...). Admittedly, the class of transitive causative verbs is more abstract and wide-ranging than the class of coloring verbs. Should this raise hopes that

(Causality) is a significant step in the decompositional analysis of action? After all, if 'cause  $Y$  to  $A_{\text{intransitive}}$ ' is itself just the verb phrase in an ordinary action description, the implication licensed by (Causality) would not reveal the causal element in everyday practical thought to be a distinct factor that might figure in a non-trivial analysis of action. Why think it is otherwise?

The decompositional theorist's interpretation relies on a further transformation. If I caused the matchbox to move, I caused the matchbox's moving; If I caused my arm to rise, I caused my arm's rising. We can state this generally as

(Event Nominalization)  $X$  caused  $Y$  to  $A_{\text{intransitive}}$  just when  $X$  caused  $Y$ 's  $A\text{-ing}_{\text{intransitive}}$ .

This principle allows transposition of subject-verb statements ( $X$  caused  $Y$  to  $A$ ) into a grammatically relational form ( $X$  caused  $Y$ 's  $A\text{-ing}$ ). Here the causality involved in action takes on the appearance of a relation joining particulars, and thus as belonging to the same category as 'is as large as' and 'hates.' The decompositional approach characteristically takes appearances at face value: it presupposes that the causal element introduced by the transitive verbs employed in ordinary representation of action is a *real relation* between distinct, fully determinate particulars – some factor  $x$  and a mere happening.<sup>2</sup> The relation here is itself *generic*: the principles that transform 'I moved the matchbox' into 'I caused the matchbox's moving' also transform 'the sun warmed the stone' into 'the sun caused the stone's warming.' And the causal element involved in intentional action description appears to be the same as the causal element involved in descriptions of what happens that are not intentional. And again the decompositional theorist characteristically takes appearances at face value: the causality involved in action is, he assumes, just an instance of causality we encounter elsewhere, perhaps everywhere else, in nature.

We thus arrive at the problem of action as the decompositional theorist conceives it: what differentiates the specifically rational case is neither what happens (movement) nor how that derives from something else (causality). It must then be what it derives from, the cause. In this way, the discipline of action theory becomes focused on the question of the distinctive source of what merely happens.

### **Mind and action**

This brings us to an assumption about the role of mind in action characteristic of the decompositional approach. Again, our starting point is a truism. When I do something intentionally or with reason, I do not do it unwittingly, but knowingly in execution of an aim. We use certain forms of emphasis to mark this (*I did it, I myself*). We speak explicitly of the person or rational agent as the source and guide of what happens. And we speak of the mind (*I've got a mind to ...*) and certain determinations of mind (*This is my will ...*) in this role: in action I give the world a piece of my mind, I impose my will on the world. This is unruly language.

We domesticate it a bit by replacing talk of mind and will with a certain range of psychological judgments: When I raise my arm, I want (intend, try, aim) to raise it. Quite generally, where  $X$ 's  $A$ -ing is an intentional action:

(Mind)  $X A_{\text{transitive}}\text{-ed } Y$  only if  $X$  wanted (intended, aimed) to  $A_{\text{transitive}} Y$ .

Where (Causality) explicitly registers a causal element in everyday talk of action, (Mind) explicitly registers an element of thought: an action is a kind of happening that bears a certain relation to the subject's own thought. One does not need to be a decompositional theorist to recognize something sound in this observation: anyone who understands what action is should admit it. But again, the decompositional theorist characteristically adopts a certain non-trivial interpretation of the point. He first observes that the following is possible: someone intends (wants, aims, etc.) to raise his arm, even though his arm does not go up – maybe he has had a change of mind, maybe he is prevented, maybe once upon a time William James has secretly etherized his arm upon a table, in which case nothing at all happens. And this observation appears to confirm what his interpretation of the other elements involved in the constitution of action already implies: that the psychological factor involved in intentional action is analytically distinguishable from the elements of movement and causality. The latter elements – the rising of an arm or the moving of a matchbook, and the causal relation in virtue of which these events are connected to something mental – are not themselves intrinsically mind-involving. The arm-rising is of a kind that could occur whether or not it is caused by an intention, and the causal relation to the arm-rising, too, is not a special kind of causal nexus, say, a connection partly constituted by intention, but a generic causality that also binds, say, the sun to a stone, fire to smoke, or a dog to its bone. And by the same token, the existence of the psychological element involved in action does not by itself imply the existence of any outward movement or change. Whatever might tend to follow in its wake, the condition of mind involved in intentionally doing something is entirely complete in its existence even when it remains utterly without effect: it is, in this respect, like a wish or a daydream, a 'purely interior' thing.

Thus we can say that, on the decompositional view, the operation of mind through which what happens (typically a bodily movement) is an expression of intelligence and will is not itself an act of making something happen. It is rather a merely interior state or event which contributes to the constitution of an act of making something happen only when it stands in a not-intrinsically-intention-governed causal relation to a not-intrinsically-intention-governed movement or happening. If we take Wittgenstein's question to set the topic for action theory, this way of looking at things seems nearly inevitable. What could an understanding of the nature of action be if not a description of when a manifold of elements, none of which severally presuppose the notion of someone's making something happen intentionally, constitute someone's making something happen intentionally?

## Anscombe's 'enquiries into the question "why?"'

Anscombe's *intention* contains the seeds of a wholly other, non-decompositional approach to understanding action, an approach grounded in a different sort of inquiry, prompted by a different sort of demand. When our outlook is shaped by the decompositional approach, Anscombe's question, the task it sets, and the answer it delivers can be difficult to recognize.

Familiar ways of placing *Intention* on the action theoretical map read it, in effect, as addressing the kinds of questions that arise within the decompositional framework. Think, for example, of the tendency to read Anscombe's opening remarks on three ways we use the word 'intention' as showing that the expression applies both to minds (inner mental states) and movements (outer worldly happenings), with a view to then raising familiar, decompositionally oriented questions about their interrelations, but then subsequently developing unfamiliar answers, which give explanatory priority to an outer, merely behavioral element.<sup>3</sup> But is Anscombe's intention to characterize distinct mental and worldly elements and the relations between them? This is a bad fit with, for example, her later remark that 'to a certain extent the three divisions of the subject made in §1, are simply equivalent' (2000, §23).<sup>4</sup> Or think instead of the tendency to treat her dismissive remarks about an appeal to the concept 'cause' in an account of action as displaying allegiance to an alternative candidate for the real relation joining thought and movement when someone does something for a reason.<sup>5</sup> But is Anscombe's intention to deny the causal character of action explanation? This is a bad fit with the fact that her inquiry culminates with the thought that intentional action just is the content of a specifically practical form of knowledge—knowledge that is 'the cause of what it understands' (§48).<sup>6</sup> Although I understand the impetus to read Anscombe through this lens, it plainly does not square with the central narrative of her text.<sup>7</sup> At several points, she expresses opposition to the entire decompositional approach: it is a mistake, she says in §47, to begin with the idea of a prior and independently constituted domain of material events and then to go looking for a difference within this; 'we do not add anything' to what happens, she says in §19, in describing someone's doing something as intentional.

It might appear that to reject the enterprise of decomposition is simply to give up on the project of explaining what action is. And yet, Anscombe also opposes those who would take 'doing something intentionally' to be a conceptual or metaphysical primitive.<sup>8</sup> Now, as everyone knows, Anscombe defines the concept of intentional action in terms of 'a certain sense of the question "Why?": action is what 'gives application' to this question; it is such as to figure in a certain form of account (§5). What exactly is the relevant sense of 'Why?' It is, she says, the sense that asks for a 'reason for acting,' but she then rejects this characterization on the ground that it is unilluminating. We do not elucidate the concept of action by locating it within an interdefinable circle of concepts. If

we are to explain the very idea of doing something intentionally in terms of the applicability of the question 'Why?', Anscombe says, we must isolate the relevant sense of the question in terms that do not presuppose an understanding of the concept of intentional action. The Anscombean approaches the topic of action through this question 'Why?' The task it sets is to isolate the relevant sense in accord with this methodological constraint.

In proceeding under this constraint, while at the very same time eschewing the project of decomposition, Anscombe shows, I think, that she aims to lay hold of a form of thought or mode of predication that gives rise to the whole circle of concepts. Near the end of *Intention*, she says quite specifically that 'the term "intentional" has reference to a form of description of events' (§47). Her idea seems to be that the concept 'intentional' is a formal category, perhaps as the Fregean notions of 'object' and 'concept' are. These are concepts that characterize what fall under them in terms of their suitability to figure in a certain distinctive form of thought: an 'object' is whatever can be designated by the subject-term of an elementary Fregean proposition of the form '*a* is *F*' and a 'concept' is whatever can be designated by the predicate of such a proposition. Similarly, on the Anscombean approach, 'intentional' is to be understood through reflection on a certain form of bringing something under a concept, specifically through the articulation of a distinct species of event predication or, as I say below, *kinēsis* (movement) ascription.

One respect in which Anscombe's approach contrasts with the decompositional approach comes out in this characterization of the concept 'intentional' as grounded in a special '*form* of description of events.' The characterization suggests that event description – the description of worldly happenings unfolding over time – takes several distinct forms, and that we make progress in philosophical understanding by differentiating them.<sup>9</sup> By contrast, the decompositional theorist is committed to showing apparently diverse forms of event description – transitive descriptions of intentional actions, and intransitive descriptions of events that carry no implication of agency – to be of a single basic form. On his view, the only form of description of worldly happening we must recognize in the analysis of action carries no implication of intentional agency: intransitive, not-intrinsically-intentional descriptions of mere (bodily) movements. Understanding intentional action does not require recognizing another, irreducibly different form of event description for an analysis: events describable as intentional actions turn out just to consist in intransitive, not-intrinsically-intentional (bodily) movements with certain specific causes. Thus the project of the decompositional theorist is precisely not to understand action by specifying its distinctive form of event description; his project is rather to identify a single, homogeneous class of event descriptions common to intentional actions and non-intentional happenings, and then to specify further features that events describable in this way must exhibit when someone has done something intentionally.<sup>10</sup>

Another contrast between Anscombe's approach and the decompositional approach comes out in details of the 'scene of action' launching her inquiry. Recall that the decompositional approach begins here: someone *has done* something (I moved the matchbox, I raised my arm). The crucial first step in raising the problem of action is to *eliminate* the point of view of the agent from the description of what takes place (The matchbox moved, My arm rose), here conceived as fully determinate particulars (the matchbox's moving, my arm's going up). At the outset, our attention is focused on what is already there and not anybody's doing. The subsequent investigation is chiefly an attempt to make our way back. Anscombe's approach begins elsewhere: someone observes another *in the midst of doing* something (I see that she is walking upstairs). And then, in a crucial step in framing the task for action theory, the observer addresses an explanatory question to the observed (I ask her 'Why are you walking upstairs?'), thereby entering *the point of view of the self-conscious subject*. At the outset, our attention is focused on the standpoint of the agent looking ahead – the view from within, on what is not yet done (Why am I walking upstairs, you ask? I am walking upstairs because ...). Anscombe's subsequent investigation is essentially an interrogation of this practical self-consciousness. The approach presupposes that knowledge of the nature of agency, of the efficacy of will, is internal to it. Here the task for the philosophy of action is not to substitute knowledge for ignorance, but to make explicit what must, in some sense, already be known simply in being an agent.

In taking the Anscombean approach, we must not ever leave *either* the point of view of the self-conscious subject, *or* the sphere of description of material events. It is difficult to see what she might have in mind, exactly what this approach is meant to involve and where it could lead. To get this into view, I think we must attend to certain features of ordinary thought and talk of events: not to the features at the center of Davidson's 'The Logical Form of Action Sentences,' (e.g. adverbial modification and nominalization transcription), but rather to temporal features and their interpretation. Event description is characteristically of what 'takes time' and 'comes to completion' – a temporally bounded whole with distinct phases. Against this background, we begin to see what it might be for action theory to have the task of elucidating a distinct form of event description, or as I will often say a distinct form of event. This, it will emerge, is the task of articulating a unity of part and whole – more specifically, a distinct *form of unity* of a developing process and its phases, one that captures the aspects of 'causality' and 'mind' that must be part of any illuminating treatment of the progress of the deed.

### ***The internal temporality of movement***

To display this temporal structure properly, we must focus on the representation of movement in complete thoughts.<sup>11</sup> Consider the following:

- (1) Jones was walking across the street.
- (2) Jones walked across the street.

The subject (Jones), predicate (walk across the street), and tense (past) are common features of these thoughts. And yet they are not the same: that Jones was walking across the street does not entail that Jones walked across the street. The propositions differ in aspect. What the proposition with imperfective aspect (1) represents as in-progress, the correlated proposition with perfective aspect (2) represents as completed. 'Walk across the street' can also enter into thought bearing the present tense:

- (3) Jones is walking across the street.

The subject (Jones), predicate (walk across the street), and aspect (imperfective) are common to it and (1). But they are not the same: that Jones was walking across the street does not entail that Jones is walking across the street. They differ only in tense: what (3) casts in the present tense (1) casts in the past. And, now, what of the other past tense thought, the past-perfective (2)? What contrasts with it simply in bearing the present tense? Answer: nothing. Perfective aspect is logically incompatible with present tense meaning.<sup>12</sup> There are, then, two possibilities for predicating 'walk across the street' in the past tense, but only a single possibility in the present. Put into a metaphysical register, the point is this: 'walk across the street' has two ways of 'being past' (being in progress and being complete), yet only one way of 'being present' (being in progress).

The distinction of aspect (as well as the corresponding metaphysical contrast between being underway and being complete) has nothing especially to do with 'walking across the street,' or quite generally, with concepts deployed in action. The predicative materials in, say, 'The sun is setting,' 'The cherry tree is blooming,' 'The robin is flying to its nest,' and 'Jones is baking a cake' admit the contrast of aspect which is captured in this abstract table of judgments:

(Kinēsis 1)

	Past	Present
Imperfective	S was $\varphi$ -ing	S is $\varphi$ -ing
Perfective	S $\varphi$ -ed	

I am drawing on a tradition reaching back to Aristotle whose abstract category of *kinēsis* (movement) is specified in these aspectual terms. A predicate expresses a *kinēsis* when it generates the contrast of aspect, that is when it can enter into propositions of the distinct forms represented in (Kinēsis 1).<sup>13</sup>

'Jones walked across the street' and 'Jones is walking across the street' are not simply independent propositions: they have the same subject and predicate. And, no one should deny that the difference is, in some sense, temporal: (2) is past while (3) is present. The question is, how should we understand this temporal difference if not as the sum of a difference in tense, available prior to and independent of the contrast of aspect, plus an additional difference of

aspect? Our three propositions come as a package, and we grasp the distinctive temporality of movement through reflection on the relations among them.<sup>14</sup> I want to make two points in this connection. First, walking across the street, flying to a nest, and movement generally, *take time*. The contrast of aspect specifies a duration internal to movement: *S*  $\varphi$ -ed only if *S* was  $\varphi$ -ing but had not yet  $\varphi$ -ed. At the heart of the perfective is the idea of *progress come to completion*. Second, walking across the street, flying to a nest, and movement generally, can be *interrupted*. The contrast of aspect specifies an end or limit internal to movement: *S* is  $\varphi$ -ing only if *S* has not yet  $\varphi$ -ed but looks forward to having  $\varphi$ -ed. At the heart of the imperfective is the idea of *completion not yet attained*. But in what sense does, say, 'Jones is walking across the street' involve the description of the here and now in the light of completion? Not by incorporating the actual future into the description of current events. Being in progress is compatible with never finishing: *S* is  $\varphi$ -ing does not entail *S* will have  $\varphi$ -ed. Still, the concept deployed in imperfective judgment (walk across the street) specifies a terminus or limit (being across the street), a point beyond which progressive truth cannot continue. Only this stopping point is internal to the description of the proceedings: it specifies what is to be, even if not what will be in fact. When things don't turn out (bus accident half-way across), we say that things were interrupted, that something interfered. And these expressions, like progressive truth itself, presuppose the presence of a real tendency toward (and not just an idle hope of) completion (Boyle and Lavin 2010, sec. 4).

I have said that action, indeed, *kinēsis* (movement) quite generally, takes time and tends toward completion. When a movement is underway and so not yet complete, it is incomplete by degree (just getting going, about half-way done, almost there). This is a presupposition of the thought that a *kinēsis* is quick, slow, or some speed: when something is underway, there is a rate at which it is approaching completion. Typically, as *X* is doing *A* through an interval, less and less still needs to be done. Things are coming along. What exactly does such progress consist in? It consists in a connection to *other* movements, themselves at various stages of completion. When something has begun, is in progress, and not yet complete (*X* is doing *A*), something else has already been done and other things are underway: the sun is setting: the sun went partially below the horizon, it is now sinking further below; the cat is stalking a bird: the cat crouched down, the cat is now slinking along; I am walking from Athens to Delphi: I walked from Athens to Thebes, now I am walking from Thebes to Delphi. It will be possible to link the process ascription '*X* is doing *A*' with these others by saying 'in that,' and then mentioning other things that have already happened (a minute ago it did *A*\*\*), and further things that are happening (at the moment it's doing *A*\*):

(Kinēsis 2) *S* is  $\varphi$ -ing in that *S*  $\psi$ -ed and *S* is  $\omega$ -ing.

As before, this is part of a depiction of the abstract category of movement and thus a structure that we find in any determinate form of movement (process or event).

The happenings here represented as phases, stages, or parts of an event might in other circumstances be a *mere heap*: it is not enough that the sun sank partly below the horizon, and is now sinking even further below, for it to be the case that the sun is setting – we might be in the Arctic Circle for summer holiday; walking from Athens to Thebes and then walking from Thebes to Delphi would not add up to a single event of walking from Athens to Delphi were I to get the idea of walking to Delphi only after I was already in Thebes. Not just any collection (*A, B*) or succession (*A* and then *B*) of events is a unity (*C*). But when such happenings (*A, B*) constitute the progress of a wider process (*C*), when they are lesser phases of some more inclusive going on, the whole is in the parts. Exactly this is marked by the fact that, at a certain resolution, what has gone on can be exactly the same (the sun went partly below the horizon, and is now moving upward), and yet in one case this is an interruption (a sunset spoiled by a giant, wayward asteroid colliding with earth), while in another case it is not (only the ‘midnight sun’ of the Arctic summer). A *kinēsis* (movement, process, event) is a principle of unity of temporal phases.

### ***A form of description of events***

Having noted these structural features of event and process description in general, we can return to clarifying the approach to understanding action implicit in Anscombe’s claim that the term that ‘intentional’ relates to a ‘form of description of events’ (§47). A principal result of our consideration of the temporality of movement was this: where a process unfolds over time, there is some principle in virtue of which the phases of the process constitute a whole. Accordingly, there will be grounds for distinguishing different *forms of event* where there are distinguishable *forms of principle of unity* of parts in a whole. In particular, we would have grounds for recognizing intentional action as a distinctive form of event, if we had grounds for recognizing a distinctive type of unity that belongs specifically to intentional actions – a kind of unity we look for when we consider what happenings in a person’s life are intentional actions, a unity whose presence is implied by event-or-process descriptions rightly characterized as ‘intentional.’ I want to suggest that Anscombe’s investigation of action has given us grounds for recognizing such a distinctive form of unity, and that the perspicuous representation of it of it just is the substance of her account of action.

Anscombe’s account famously begins by identifying of a special sense of the why-question and proceeds to describe a distinctive sort of order (the *A–D* order) that characteristically structures answers to it (2000, §26). I already noted that her account of the relevant why-question privileges the standpoint of the agent, inasmuch as this question is characteristically put *to the agent herself* at a moment *while she is acting*, and is supposed to be ‘refused application’ if an agent says, of some activity *A*-ing about which she is queried, ‘I didn’t know I was *A*-ing’ (2000, §6?). This characterization of the why-question’s addressee

must be supplemented with a positive characterization of the kind of answer that it invites – the kind of answer it accepts as an explanation of a person's intentionally doing something. In the course of her discussion, it emerges that the special question 'Why are you *A*-ing?' admits of a variety of kinds of answers: the kinds I give when I say that I am tapping a spot on the wall 'for no particular reason,' kicked Jones 'out of anger' or 'because he killed my brother,' return five dollars to Smith 'because I promised,' massage my foot 'because I like to,' or seek to help another 'for its own sake.' Yet the characterization of one particular kind of answer is the heart of her account. This answer takes a teleological form: it cites a further objective pursued in *A*-ing, an aim spelled out by saying

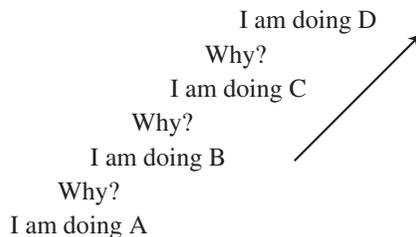
to do *B*.

or

I am doing *B*.

It is this specific kind of answer that shows the capacity for intentional action to be a power to realize concepts.<sup>15</sup>

Anscombe suggests that explanations of this type can and characteristically do come in chains or nested series, so that the kind of explanatory structure at issue is properly called an *order*. To take her well-known example of a man pumping poisoned water into a house cistern: he is moving his arm up and down (*A*), operating the pump (*B*), replenishing the house water supply (*C*), and poisoning the inhabitants (*D*). As Anscombe imagines them, such a list is not mere aggregate (*A, B, C, D*), or mere sequence of actions (*A* and then *B*, *B* and then ...), but elements of an explanatory order of means and ends. The end accounts for the means: it is the reason *why* the means are taken. (Why are you moving your arm up and down? I am operating the pump). The of the why-question displays our actions as an *order of ends*:



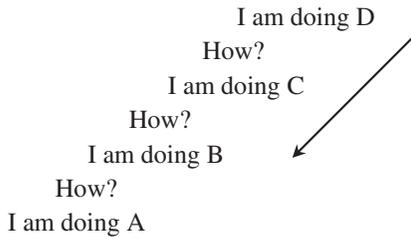
But equally, the means account for the end: the means are *how* the end is realized. (How are you poisoning the inhabitants? I'm replenishing ...) This how-question does not simply ask 'How is it happening?'; but 'How are you doing it?' (§26). And the answer cites a further venture, one contributing to the realization an aim, a contribution spelled out by saying

by means of doing *C*.

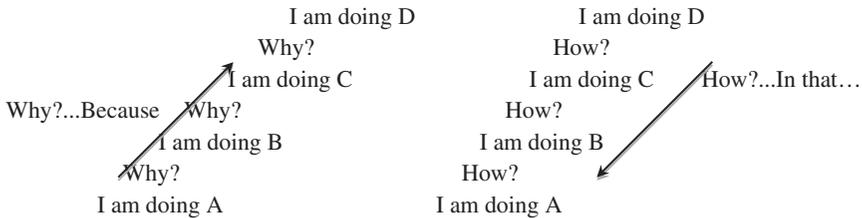
or

I am doing *C*.

Explanations of this type also come in chains or nested series, so that the structure at issue here is also an *order*. And the repeated application of the how-question eliciting such explanations displays our actions as an *order of means*



There is plainly a symmetry between purpose and efficacy: If *B*-ing is why I am *A*-ing, then *A*-ing is how I am *B*-ing; if *A*-ing is how I am *B*-ing, then *B*-ing is why I am *A*-ing. The order of means displayed by 'How?' is a mirror image of the order of ends displayed by 'Why?':



The means–end order is an explanatory order because it captures that for the sake of which things are done, and also, and equally, because it captures that by means of which things get done.

Taken together, these observations accomplish the very thing we said must be accomplished by an account of intentional action as a distinctive form of event: they characterize a specific kind of unity of parts or phases in a whole that is the principle governing our understanding of processes as actions. In the first place, they identify a specific kind of explanatory structure that unites the distinguishable parts or phases of an intentional action: these are characteristically bound together *teleologically*, in such a way that an overarching event-in-progress explains its lesser parts. We can display the relevant unity in explanations of the form

(Telic Explanation) *S* is  $\omega$ -ing because *S* is  $\varphi$ -ing

where  $\omega$ -ing is taken by the agent to be, and in the happy case is, a means conducive to, or a more specific activity constitutive of,  $\varphi$ -ing. Secondly, this ordering of means to ends is characteristically *self-conscious* in the following sense: the agent herself is aware of the elements that are ordered (for if she were not aware of them, the relevant why-question would not apply), and of the order in which they stand (for it is precisely this order that she is expected to articulate in response to Anscombe's question 'Why?'). Her awareness is not

merely a passive cognizance of the means–end structure of her own activity. Where an instance of (Telic Explanation) is true, it is *because* she takes  $\omega$ -ing to be a means of  $\varphi$ -ing, and has herself determined to  $\varphi$ , that she is  $\omega$ -ing – and so on up to whatever overarching aim governs her present activity. This is agential awareness, an awareness that does not merely record but determines the order, and thus the progress, it comprehends. And so Anscombe calls the awareness articulated in response to her why-question ‘practical knowledge,’ knowledge that is ‘the cause of what it understands.’ Such knowledge, being inseparable from the order of events-in-progress that it governs, can be articulated by the subject in explanatory propositions with a first-person subject, as in

(Agential Awareness) I am doing *A* because I am doing *B*

where the relevant ‘because’ implies the subject’s determination to do *A* in order to realize the wider aim of doing *B*.

My suggestion, in short, is that Anscombe’s *A–D* order is an ordering of elements united in such a way as to satisfy (Telic Explanation) and (Agential Awareness), and that, if Anscombe is right, this form of unity is *essential* and *specific* to the form of event intentional action is. It is essential to the extent that the applicability of Anscombe’s why-question genuinely characterizes the class of events that are actions; and it is specific inasmuch as the mode of order or unity brought out by this question belongs specially to just these events. I will not attempt to defend these claims here: to do so would be to argue for the adequacy of Anscombe’s account of action. My concern in the present essay is to make clear what sort of account is on offer and to show how its availability depends on the availability of a certain conception of the temporality of action and practical thought.<sup>16</sup> For present purposes, the crucial point is that, in the proposed characterization of this form of unity of phases in an overarching process, we do not leave *either* the point of view of the agent *or* the description of material processes themselves. The elements of causality and mind that the decompositional approach represents as separable elements in an account of action, distinct from the characterization of the material process (what happens) that constitutes the action proper, appear in this story as structuring features of the relevant sort of material process itself: we are concerned with a kind of event or process whose principle of unity just is that the parts should come about *because of* the *subject’s apprehension* of their contribution to a certain whole. If this characterization succeeds, we will have characterized an essentially self-conscious, self-constituting form of material progress, and thereby clarified what sort of thing an intentional action could be.

## Examples, time, and causality

Having now seen how, from the outset, the Anscombean approach to understanding action builds in an orientation toward the standpoint of the agent, and toward the temporal structure of action as it appears from this internal,

forward-looking standpoint, I want to note some telling contrasts with the decompositional approach. These contrasts emerge in the kinds of examples of action on which each typically focuses.

When Anscombe's argument requires her to give examples of intentional actions, the examples are, almost without exception, imagined in a certain characteristic way. In the first place, we are invited to think of an action *presently underway*, something the agent *is doing*, not yet something she *has done*. Secondly, the types of action Anscombe considers – crossing the road to look in a shop window, going upstairs to get one's camera, getting a Jersey cow, building a house, pumping poisoned water to fill a cistern and thereby poisoning the occupants of a house, etc. – are characteristically complex enterprises with discernible parts or phases, where the execution of a phase might itself take time, and might itself involve phases about which Anscombe's characteristic why-question could be raised. Finally, we are asked to imagine *the agent herself* being asked 'Why?' about the action underway – and asked in a mode that invites her to say what she knows *without observation* about the relevant happening.

With these features of Anscombe's examples in mind, if we consider typical examples of decompositional theorists, we will be struck by several contrasts. In the first place, the object of attention is typically a *completed* action (Jones buttered the toast, Shem kicked Shaun, the officer pushed the button that fired the missile that sank the Bismark), one whose real constitution from any parts belonging to it has already occurred and been settled once and for all, one that can be unproblematically referred to by a singular term denoting a concrete particular, a wholly determinate historical event (Jones's buttering the toast, The officer's sinking the Bismark). Secondly, the central focus of theoretical attention is characteristically on *brief or even quasi-instantaneous* actions in which there is *no discernible intentional structure* to speak of: such things as arm-raising, button-pushings, and trigger-pullings. To be sure, decompositional theorists acknowledge the existence of complex, temporally extended actions (dancing a tango, directing a military campaign), but they characteristically seek to reduce such complex actions to coordinated sequences of 'basic actions' of which it is true that they are severally brief or quasi-instantaneous and lacking in discernible intentional structure. It is striking that the topic of 'basic action' – intentional doings that are supposed to be performed without the agent's intentionally doing anything else in order to do them – does not so much as appear in Anscombe's discussion, whereas it is the very foundation of the decompositional approach to action theory.

Finally, whereas Anscombe's question 'Why?' is characteristically posed to some 'you,' someone who would answer with a sentence beginning with 'I,' in the examples characteristic of the decompositional approach, we generally focus on agents who are specified *impersonally* (Jones, Smith, the officer). The preceding two features of the decompositional theorist's examples help to explain this shift away from the first-person standpoint. For, on the one hand, once

an action is complete, the agent herself can no longer have a special practical knowledge of its structure: though she may retain a memory of the steps she took in performing it, her guiding role has come to an end, and her deed has now become a thing that has happened, a *fait accompli* whose larger aims and lesser elements she can only remember, not determine. And, on the other hand, where the actions in question are supposed to be basic actions, the agent can have no privileged knowledge of their composition from parts or phases even while her action is underway, for a basic action is by definition one the agent performs without intentionally doing anything else in order to perform it.

Thus the entire orientation of the decompositional approach points us away from the standpoint of the agent, and toward a consideration of actions as definite, achieved realities: realities in the life of some agent, to be sure, but considered in such a way that the practical point of view of this agent toward the relevant event does not come into the foreground, and the question of what binds the parts or phases of this event into a unity does not easily arise.

These contrasts between Anscombean and decompositional examples are evidently grounded in systematic differences between the two approaches. Given that Anscombe's approach seeks, not to understand action by decomposing it into various not-intrinsically-agency-involving parts, but to articulate the understanding of the nature of action implicit in the agent's forward-looking intentional operation, it is natural for Anscombe to focus on actions in progress, considered from the standpoint of the agent herself, with special attention to her understanding of the steps she must take to achieve her end. By contrast, given that the basic aim of the decompositional approach is to analyze action as a composite of a not-intrinsically-intentional bodily movement with some special precipitating cause, it is natural that decompositional theorists should focus on cases of action that seem to lend themselves to such analysis, and should seek to analyze other actions into sequences of these. Plainly, the actions that most readily lend themselves to decompositional analysis are those bodily movements that take relatively little time to perform and whose performance does not require any conscious consideration of means. For these are the actions that are most plausibly regarded as consisting of a not-intrinsically-intentional, quasi-automatic bodily movement causally triggered by some relevant intention (and perhaps monitored as it unfolds for conformity with this intention, so that perceived deviations can launch further movement-triggerings, etc.).

The decompositional theorist's focus on brief or quasi-instantaneous basic actions thus flows from the central commitment of his approach. Moreover, the emphasis on completed actions, and the tendency to describe these actions in impersonal terms, both serve to reinforce this approach, for both draw attention away from the agent's specific understanding of the structure of an action-in-progress. And it is precisely this agent-centered understanding of action that poses the most serious challenge to the decompositional approach.

## Notes

1. Does the fact that *S*'s being *F* implies *S*'s being *G*, but that *S* can be *G* without being *F*, entail that it must be possible to decompose *S*'s being *F* into *S*'s being *G* and *S*'s being *H*, where *H* is some nontrivial further condition, not identical to *F* itself? Answer is: No. For instance, *S*'s being red implies *S*'s being colored, and *S* can be colored without being red, but there is no prospect of analyzing what it is for *S* to be red into *S*'s being colored plus some nontrivial further condition. Likewise with lots of cases: being a parent and being an ancestor, arguably; being a horse and being an animal, arguably; knowing something and believing something, arguably (Williamson 2000); perceiving something and having an experience of something, arguably (McDowell 1982). To infer that, if being *G* is a necessary but not sufficient condition for being *F*, there must be some nontrivial *H* which, when conjoined with *G*, constitutes a necessary and sufficient condition for being *F*, might be called the *fallacy of analysis*. For particular application to the analysis of action see (Ford 2011). This section develops an earlier treatment of the decompositional approach (Lavin 2013b).
2. Must we take these appearances seriously? At the very least, there is room for a different view. The verbs 'wore' in 'Jones wore a smile,' 'take' in 'Smith took a bath,' and 'perform' in 'I performed an act of moving the matchbox' do not express real relations even though the surface grammar of these sentences is relational. For further discussion, see Hyman's (2001) and Sellars (1991) on the logic of 'looks'.
3. Here is Michael Bratman: 'We use the notion of intention to characterize both people's actions and their minds ... A theory of intention must address both kinds of phenomena and explain how they are related. A natural approach, the one I will be taking here, is to begin with the state of intending to act ... Instead of beginning with the state of intending to act [some theorists] turn immediately to intention as it appears in action ... This is, for example, the strategy followed by Elizabeth Anscombe in her ground-breaking monograph, *Intention*' (1987, 5). Velleman (2007) approaches the text in a similar spirit.
4. The passage continues, 'That is to say, the answers 'I am going to fetch my camera', 'I am fetching my camera' and 'in order to fetch my camera' are interchangeable as answers to the question 'Why?' asked when I go upstairs' (§23). She seems to be thinking that these are clearly all one notion and that we are confused about what that notion is.
5. Bratman again: 'It is standing in an appropriate relation to such [mental] states that makes an action intentional ... We can cite Anscombe, Goldman and ... Davidson as, among others, subscribers to this view ... Davidson and Goldman insist, while Anscombe emphatically denies, that the appropriate relation is in some sense a causal relation' (1987, 6).
6. In light of this, we do best to treat her early disparaging remarks (§5) as simply an insistence that we should not take the idea of causality for granted in our inquiry. And, in light of her final account, it would seem that this is because what is at issue in understanding 'intention' is laying hold of a certain distinctive *form* of causality (§48).
7. A number of recent essays are especially concerned to bring out just how utterly different Anscombe's account is from anything available within the decompositional framework, for example (Hursthouse 2000; Vogler 2001; Ford 2011; Hornsby 2011; Moran and Stone 2011; Stoutland 2011; Thompson 2011).
8. As I read it, the central aim of Anscombe's opening discussion of the three ways we speak of 'intention', as well as of a number of other early remarks, is to show

that an account is needed by inducing a condition of Augustinian perplexity. She says that when we are inclined to speak of different senses of a word which is not equivocal, we are 'in the dark' about the *kind* (not simply the content) of concept it represents. And yet, what could be more familiar – the phenomenon of intention is a pervasive and ineliminable part of human life. Moreover, unlike some other pervasive and ineliminable parts of human life, such as cell division, intentional action seems to be a process of which we necessarily have immediate and privileged knowledge. As Anscombe observes, if our concern were simply to determine on any particular occasion whether someone's saying 'I am going to such-and-such' is a prediction or an expression of intention, or if our concern were to determine, when someone is doing such-and-such, whether this is something she is doing intentionally, we could simply ask the subject. The subject who acts is in a special position to tell us what we want to know. And, as we will see, Anscombe's approach to the general theory of action presupposes this: it is essentially an interrogation of one who does things for reasons. The resulting account is merely the development of the self-consciousness of the agent.

9. A remark on *genus and species*: To define a certain *Fs* as 'members of genus *G*, with such-and-such specific differences' need not imply that we can explain what it is to be a *G* without appeal to an understanding of various concrete species of *Gs*. The genus might be, and often is, an *abstraction* from the species, rather than an independently intelligible kind-of-thing-to-be. Furthermore, if *X* and *Y* are species of a common genus *G*, and *Gs* do *A*, it need not follow that there is any direct relation between what it is for an *X* to do *A* and what it is for a *Y* to do *A*. What it is 'to do *A*' might differ essentially from species to species, so that the generic notion of 'doing *A*' is a mere abstraction, not an independently intelligible way to do something.
10. This is not the place to enter into the details of the various ways one might work out a single, undifferentiated conception of the form of event talk. I have used formulations emphasizing the contrast of transitive and intransitive verbs to maintain contact with our earlier discussion of the decompositional theory. Still, to my mind, the account of event representation put in place by Davidson (1966) (which we all know has nothing especially to do with action) and worked out in terrific detail by Parsons (1990) is the most powerful framework within which to develop a decompositional theory of action. The central idea is that ordinary event talk – whether transitive or intransitive (The sun melted the wax, The wax melted), whether of something done intentionally or not (Jones turned on the light, Jones alerted the prowler) – is about a special class of concrete particulars, what Davidson calls 'events.' On this analysis, the sentences have the structure of existential quantification over this domain: 'For some event *e*, *e* is such that ...'. In this framework, the commitment to the homogeneity of event description shows up most directly in this: the principle of individuation of events is prior to and independent of the truth of any descriptions of someone's having done something intentionally.
11. The temporality of events and actions will elude us, if we conduct our discussion using only the abstract nouns (e.g. 'event,' 'process,' 'happening,' 'behavior,' 'action') and event-denoting noun phrases (e.g. 'Jones' raising of his arm,' 'the matchbox's moving,' 'the movement of the matchbox') that are the stock-in-trade of much of action theory. The following discussion draws and improves on (Lavin 2013a, 2013b).
12. The claim is not that it is impossible to express a perfective thought in the grammatical present tense. The so-called reportative present does precisely

this (e.g. 'He shoots! He scores!'). The claim is that perfective thought (He shot. He scored.) cannot be analyzed as the past tense of a present tense thought (as of the form 'It was the case that  $p$ ') because there is no present tense thought to do the relevant work (Galton 1984, 1–23).

13. Aristotle (2006), *Metaphysics* Theta 6, 1048b, 18–35. I was introduced to the philosophical importance of the topic of aspect by Thompson's (2008, ch.2) and also have been helped especially by Anscombe (1964), Galton (1984), Rödl (2012) and Waterlow (1982).
14. I am presupposing a certain take on this material. *First*, I am working with the idea that the aspectual contrast is a distinction among *ways* in which subject and predicate combine to form a complete thought. But if aspect is a form of predication, then it is not to be understood in terms of further material contents whether, say, implicit quantification over temporal intervals (Hamblin 1971), or as implicit quantification over particular events with certain primitive properties (Parsons 1990). *Second*, I am working with the idea that the metaphysical category of *kinesis* (event, process) is to be explained through the formal contrast of aspect. I develop and argue for these claims elsewhere (Haase and Lavin *Forthcoming*).
15. Anscombe asks, 'Would intentional actions still have the characteristic "intentional," if there were no such thing as ... further intention in acting?' (2000, §20). She answers: No. Her thought is that the very idea of a general capacity for intentional action contains the idea of a capacity to act on the basis of specifically instrumental thought, or again to act from a further intention or 'forward-looking motive'.
16. A first step in its defense would be to note (1) how the generic notion of a process proceeding toward some limit admits of a distinction between *non-telic* processes, in which parts or phases accumulate toward this limit but do not accumulate *because* they tend toward this limit, and *telic* processes, in which the accumulation does occur *because* it tends toward the relevant limit, and (2) how a further distinction can be drawn within the genus of telic processes between *non-self-conscious* telic processes in which the telic accumulation of parts or phases toward an end does not depend on any apprehension of the relation between parts and whole by the subject, and *self-conscious* telic processes in which a guiding apprehension of this relation by the subject is implied in the accumulation (Boyle and Lavin 2010).

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