

What is Action?

Matthew Chrisman and Graham Hubbs

Introduction

In characterizing something as an action we are – to modify a metaphor from Sellars – not giving an empirical description of that thing but placing it in the logical space of reasons, of being able to rationalize what one does.¹ But what is this thing that we place in the logical space of reasons? That is, what is an action? This is our leading question in this paper. To have a working example, consider Julia, who has decided to walk to school (instead of taking the bus, say), and now she is walking to school. It is natural to think of what Julia is doing as an action, something she is doing for reasons. So, our leading question becomes: What are we saying of Julia in describing her as performing an action, in this case, the action of walking to school?

Our initial answer is that it depends on why you are asking. One reason philosophers have wondered about the nature of action is that they have been interested in the relationship between an agent's reasons for acting and the action itself. Another reason philosophers have wondered about the nature of action is that they have been interested in the relationship between an action and the sub-actions, which may be said to be performed as parts of performing the larger action. A third reason philosophers have wondered about the nature of action is that they have been interested in the nature of agency and the possibility of what is sometimes called "agent-causation". However, we think a more basic reason than these to wonder about the nature of action is that this category forms a natural locus of evaluations of practical rationality and some forms of ethical responsibility.² Here, with this concern in mind, we want to propose an account of action that links action

1 In the original, Sellars is concerned with attributions of knowledge: "...in characterizing an episode or state as that of knowing, we are not giving an empirical description of that episode or state; we are placing it in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says"(1956: §36). There has been much discussion of this metaphor. See for example CITES. For our purposes, the importance of the metaphor is the essentially rational or normative, as opposed to purely empirical, character of the category of actions.

2 Two other reasons philosophers have been interested in the nature of action are because of an interest in the relationship between action and bodily movement (Smith: forthcoming, CITE OTHERS), and because of an interest in the alleged difference between action and omission (CITES). We don't demur at these interests, but we think that they motivate theoretical distinctions at different levels of the account of action than the one with which we are concerned.

essentially to decision. As we see things, decision is a mental activity that constitutes a distinctive sort of judgment – a practical judgment about what to do – that is typically reached through practical reasoning, which includes reflection on the contents of one’s beliefs and desires. Actions are, we think, things explicable by appeal to such decisions.

We will attempt to motivate this account by first considering what we take to be the dominant “belief-desire” account of action and raising a problem for it, which has inspired an alternative account. We will then examine this alternative “action” account, arguing that it leaves out an important insight of the belief-desire account.³ Finally, we will conclude by sketching an alternative “decision” account that draws upon elements both accounts and yet better reflects our concern with actions as the natural locus of evaluations of practical rationality and some forms of ethical responsibility.⁴

The Belief-Desire Account

One can discern the beginnings of a dominant story about what action is in Anscombe’s famous claim that “Intentional actions are ones to which a certain sense of the question ‘Why?’ has application” (1957/2000: 11). The “certain sense” is the one that demands response not in the mode of statement of what is objectively good in the action (sometimes there may be nothing) but rather in the mode of a statement of what makes the action intelligible from the agent’s point of view. This latter sort of response is what Davidson (1963/1980: 3) has called “rationalization”, and his account of it generates what we think is fair to think of as the account of action which is predominantly assumed in much action theory, metaethics, and certain aspects of

3 If the belief-desire account speaks to an interest in the relationship between an agent’s reasons for acting and his action, and the action account speaks to an interest in the relationship between actions and sub-actions, then a third account that speaks to an interest in the possibility and nature of “agent-causation” might be called the “agent” account of action. We hope to address this kind of account in an expanded version of this paper. For we think the account we favor has some affinities with that kind of account, but we also think there are some important differences having to do with the proper role of causal notions in an account of action. But for now, we can only bracket the issue.

4 We say “some forms of ethical responsibility” because we think that although actions are one of the things for which agents are ethically responsible, there may be others that are not directly related to actions. For example, Julia may do something (e.g. attract the attention of looming kidnapers) but not know what she is doing, and yet this ignorance and thus the doing could be something for which Julia is ethically responsible even though there is no relevant action for which she is so responsible. Also, one may be responsible for states of character (e.g. Julia may be responsible for her cluelessness) and sometimes even the states of others (e.g. Julia’s parents may be responsible for her cluelessness) even though there is no relevant action on which to pin responsibility.

the philosophy of mind.

Davidson's account is motivated by two observations about the way in which action descriptions place something in the logical space of reasons.

1. Actions may be described in ways that reveal their character as actions and in ways that obscure this character. For example, Julia walked to school, but she may have also unwittingly put herself at danger of kidnap. In this case, Julia's action may be described either by "She walked to school," which reveals the event to be an action, and "She put herself at danger of kidnap," which does not.⁵
2. There is an important difference between "She ϕ -ed, and she had reason R to ϕ " and "She ϕ -ed *because* she had reason R to ϕ ."⁶

These observations motivate Davidson to suggest that actions are events⁷ that are describable in a way that allows us to portray aspects of the relevant agent's psychology as their causes. More specifically, for any description of an event as "A ϕ -ed", if it is a description of an intentional action, Davidson thinks that we should be able to cite one of A's desires for G and A's belief that ϕ -ing is a part of the best available means to achieve G as causes of the event.⁸

This constraint characterizes what we will call the *belief-desire account* of what an action is. According to it, although an event may be describable in other ways that do not meet this constraint, if it cannot also be described in a way which does meet it, it's not a genuine action. This is how the account respects Davidson's first observation. And, although an agent may have beliefs and desires of this sort, if they do not cause the event which is the action, then they cannot be cited in response to the application of Anscombe's question: "Why did A ϕ ?" This is how the account respects Davidson's second observation.

In addition to respecting these observations, the belief-desire account also

5 Davidson's (1963/1980: 4-6) original example is of performing the action describable as "He turned on the light" and also as "He alerted the prowler."

6 Davidson (1963/1980: 9).

7 He writes, "We may be taken in by the verbal parallel between 'I turned on the light' and 'I wanted to turn on the light'. The first clearly refers to a particular event..."(1963.1980: 5). Similarly: "If I fall down, this is an event whether I do it intentionally or not. If you thought my falling was an accident and later discovered I did it on purpose, you would not be tempted to withdraw your claim that you had witnessed an event"(1980: 113).

8 Strictly speaking, this can be only a necessary condition, according to Davidson, because a belief and desire may cause an event of A's having ϕ -ed in some causally deviant way. See Davidson (1973/1980: 79) for a case, which requires Davidson to appeal to the event of A's ϕ -ing being caused in the right way.

appears well placed to explain the following:

3. Actions are directed at a goal, such that we can always characterize them saying “A ϕ -ed” in order to achieve G, where G is plausibly thought to be one of A's goals.

The way that the belief-desire account explains 3 is related to the way it explains 2. The fact that it would be good for her health to walk to school may have been a reason for Julia to walk to school. Indeed she may even know this, but, unless Julia's concern for her health plays a certain sort of role in causing the action, it doesn't seem right to say that this was *Julia's* reason for walking to school. The belief-desire account captures this well. In the case where the health benefits of walking are part of Julia's reason, they will figure in the content of the desire, which interacts with a means-ends belief to cause the event which is thought to be her action; otherwise, such concerns may be a reason, but they are not *Julia's* reason for walking. Similarly, sometimes an agent has a desire for G and a belief that ϕ -ing is a means for achieving G, but we intuitively think that the agent's real reasons lie somewhere else. For example, Julia may want to maintain perfect attendance and believe that walking is a means for achieving this goal, but her real reason for walking may instead involve the desire to see a boy who regularly walks part of the same route that she does. In this case, although the original belief-desire pair may be a reason for walking, it seems that Julia's reason lies elsewhere. The belief-desire account will capture this by saying that Julia's desire to see the boy and belief that walking to school is a means to achieving this goal causes the event of her having walked to school; the other belief and desire, though present, do not stand in the right causal relation to the event, and so they do not rationalize it.

Merely explaining what causes an action would not be enough to explain 3, for causal explanations come at different levels. For example, if we are trying to say what caused the event describable as “Julia walked to school,” we might say any of the following: (i) the laws of nature and the prior state of the universe determined that Julia would do so, (ii) this and that complex of neurons fired in the right way thus causing Julia to do so, (iii) her mother told her to do so. Although each of these causal explanations of the event may be correct at some level of causal explanation, none of them seem like they are suited to connect an action to a goal. For one thing, they do not wear any connection to one of Julia's goals on their sleeve. For another, each of these types of causal explanation can be put to use in other cases

of events of someone's having done something which we would not naturally think of as actions because they're not goal-directed. For example, with (i), we could just as well cite the laws of nature and the prior state of the universe as an explanation of what caused Julia to dream of bears. Likewise with (ii): neurons firing can cause Julia to drift off to sleep or to snore, so this cannot make the difference to an event's being an action. Perhaps it is (iii) that comes the closest to being a true competitor to the belief-desire account; however, it seems that Julia's mother telling her to do so may cause other sorts of things that we wouldn't naturally classify as actions, such as her having woken up from a deep slumber. In contrast to these sorts of causal explanations, the belief-desire account cites a desire for goal as part of the cause of an action. If being caused by a desire for a goal is a necessary⁹ part of what it is for some event to be an action, then that explains the goal-directed nature of action.

Despite the virtues involved in explaining 1-3, we think there is a problem with the belief-desire account. We can bring this out in a rough and ready way by noticing that, when it comes to actions, although "A ϕ -ed" implies "A was ϕ -ing," the converse is not true. So, it could, for example be the case that Julia was walking to school but she never walked to school (perhaps she got kidnapped or was distracted by interesting and mischievous boys). In this case, it seems wrong to say that the event of Julia's walking to school was caused by her desire to maintain perfect attendance and belief that part of the best means for satisfying this desire is to walk. For there is no complete event which can be said to be so caused.¹⁰ Nevertheless, it still makes sense to ask "Why was Julia walking to school?" in Anscombe's "certain sense", which we think indicates that what is described by "walking to school" is an action, with a place in the space of reasons.¹¹

9 It may seem unpromising to think every action is caused, in part, by a desire, if we conceive of desires either as immediately accessible mental states or as merely one species of goal-directed pro-attitudes (alongside things like intentions, wishes, plans, etc.). However, defenders of the belief-desire account would not think of desires in this way. Rather they would think of them as dispositional states that aim to get the world to fit them rather than vice versa. Thus, all goal-directed pro-attitudes will count as desires. See Smith (1994: 111-116). We could reserve the term 'desire' for a narrower class of these pro-attitudes with a specific phenomenology or epistemology, but then we'd just have to use the awkward label 'belief-goal-directed-pro-attitude account of action'.

10 Is there perhaps an "incomplete event" that could be properly said to be caused by one of Julia's beliefs and desires? We are skeptical of the notion of "incomplete events", and in any case it seems wrong to talk about the causes of "incomplete events", given that they don't completely happen. There may, of course, be an event of Julia's having incompletely walked to school. But we think the most natural way to view this is as a complete event on a par with Julia's having walked halfway to school, which we think can completely happen though – as we argue below – cannot be plausibly viewed as Julia's action of walking to school.

11 Compare Thompson (2008: 134-137).

One may object that even if there is no event of Julia's *having walked to school*, in this case, there's still an event of her *walking to school* – for, after all, she does walk in the direction of school, and this walking begins at one time and ends at another. That is, an objector may ask: Why not call what happened in the segment of time between when Julia started to walk and when she ceased to walk *the event of her walking to school* and let the belief-desire account say that this event is caused by her belief and desire?

In response, we'd suggest that the phrase 'the event of her walking to school' is ambiguous between 'the event of her walking *all the way to school*' and 'the event of her walking *part of the way to school*'.¹² One should not object to our stipulation that the former event does not occur in our case; Julia never makes it to school. And we allow that the latter event does occur. It is just that we do not think that the latter event can be plausibly said to be Julia's action of walking to school, on the belief-desire account, since it is implausible to think of this event as caused by one of her beliefs with the content 'Walking part of the way to school is part of the best means for satisfying my desire for [e.g.] maintaining perfect attendance.'

The problem Julia's incompleting action causes for the belief-desire account is that it seems that these two cases have something essentially in common. The same piece of practical reasoning could have led to (a) Julia's having been walking to school and then having (completely) walked to school, as led to (b) Julia's having been walking to school but not having (completely) walked to school (because of kidnappers or interesting boys). Thus, the issue of whether A's ϕ -ing comes to completion seems to be irrelevant to understanding the nature of A's reasons for ϕ -ing and thus also what makes ϕ an action, with a place in the space of reasons. Yet,

12 If we are more careful about the metaphysics here, we might see the idea of an event of Julia's walking as a conflation of two categories of occurrence. That is, following Mourelatos (1978) who himself is making some refinements on Vendler (1957) and Kenny (1963: ch. 8), we might divide occurrences (which are different from states of affairs) into activities and events. The idea is that activities are ongoing and homogeneously divisible, whereas events have a beginning and end and are not homogeneously divisible. If someone is running, it's true at every sub-section of the time in which he is running (e.g. for four minutes) to say that he is running – this is a mark of an activity. By contrast, if someone ran a mile in four minutes, his having run a mile begins at one time, and then four minutes later it ends; and it is not true at each sub-section of the four minutes to say that in that sub-section he ran a mile – this is a mark of an event. Thus, *running* is an activity and *having run a mile* is an event. If this is a cogent distinction, then it raises the question: are incompleting actions like Julia's walking to school properly classed as events or activities? We don't know the right thing to say about the metaphysics (and we suspect it is actually irrelevant to the interest which initially motivates our wondering what an action is). However, the belief-desire account, as well as the objection to the problem we raised in the text above, assumes that Julia's walking is an event, whereas it seems to us that this is pretty clearly an activity by Mourelatos's test. Compare also Bach (1980), Stoecker (1993), and Alvarez and Hyman (1998), who argue that actions are not events.

rationalizing an agent's action of ϕ -ing in terms of the belief and desire that caused the event describable as "A ϕ -ed" – as the belief-desire account encourages – cannot even begin if there is no event of A's having ϕ -ed (as in the case where the process of ϕ -ing didn't reach its proper end).

At first blush, this problem for the belief-desire account of action may seem easily overcome. For, even when a process of ϕ -ing doesn't reach its proper end, surely one of ϕ -ing's sub-processes, which we could call ψ -ing, does reach its proper end. For instance, even if Julia's having been walking to school never results in her having walked to school, her having been walking halfway to school may have resulted in her having walked halfway to school. And, if not that, then some smaller part of her walking to school will have been completed (e.g. walking a quarter of the way, walking an eighth of the way, or even starting to walk to school). If this is right, then it may seem that a proponent of the belief-desire account can redescribe any case where an apparent action fails to come to completion by insisting that, although these are not cases describable as "A ϕ -ed", they are rather describable as "A ψ -ed". And under the latter description, the belief-desire account can again encourage us to cite one of A's beliefs and one of A's desires as causing the event in the appropriate way, and thus rationalizing the action.

The problem with this response is that the belief-desire account's ability to explain each of 1-3 mentioned above turn on the connection between the description of the event and the content of the agent's means-ends belief. If the event is correctly describable as "A ϕ -ed", then, according to the account, part of A's reason for ϕ -ing is that she believed that ϕ -ing was part of the best means to satisfying one of her desires. However, if in response to cases where A's ϕ -ing never came to completion, we describe a different event as "A ψ -ed", then the belief-desire account would count this as a description under which A acted only if a belief whose content is that ψ -ing is a means to satisfying one of her desires is part of what caused the event. Yet, often it seems that agents will not have means-ends beliefs about all of the sub-processes and sub-events necessary to perform one of their actions; or, even if they do have such beliefs (perhaps tacitly), it does not seem that these beliefs are properly thought of as the causes of the action. For example, it is not plausible in general to think that someone's walking to school was caused by a belief about what walking halfway to school would be a good means for. Of course, in a particular case, one's action could have been caused by such beliefs. For instance,

Julia could believe that walking halfway to school is a good means for meeting that interesting boy. However, in these cases, it is not plausible to think that her action was in any way caused by beliefs about what walking one quarter of the way, or one eighth of the way, or one sixteenth of the way, etc., is means for. Yet, clearly the action of walking any of these distances could be cut off by looming kidnappers, in which case there would be no event of having walked that far. And the belief-desire rationalization of action would then not get off the ground.

Another possible response to the problem with incomplete actions would be to find the minimal first part of the process of some ϕ -ing and argue that the event that is the action is really this minimal first part, chalking everything else “up to nature”.¹³ But what is the minimal first part of Julia’s walking to school? Is it the first step she takes on the path? Is it her opening the door? Is it her moving her arms to put on her coat? It is difficult to say what the minimal first part of Julia’s walking to school is. Some philosophers suggest that there is a category of *basic actions*, which are things one can do without having to do anything else (e.g., Julia might signal to the bus by raising her arm, but there may be no more basic action by which she raises her arm).¹⁴ However, whatever the putatively basic action would be in our case of Julia incompletely walking to school, in order to overcome the problem with apparently incompleting actions, it would have to be some action whose completion is guaranteed once it is begun. And nothing like *taking the first step, opening the door, pulling on her coat* seems to do the trick. Perhaps one could suggest that the minimal first part is *Julia’s starting to walk to school*. However, in addition to thinking it implausible to treat this as identical to Julia’s action of walking to school, we think it only pushes the question back to: What constitutes the event of Julia’s starting to walk to school? Again, whatever it is, it will have to be something whose completion is guaranteed once it is begun.

One possibility for such a thing that some philosophers have explored is the act of trying.¹⁵ Perhaps, that is, we should think of Julia’s action, i.e., the thing towards which her practical reasoning is directed, as the action of trying to walk to school. For, even if she is thwarted by looming kidnappers, it will still be true to say of her that she *tried* to walk to school. Then the belief-desire account can say that

13 CITE

14 O’Brien (2007: PGNUM), CITE OTHERS?

15 O’Shaughnessy (1980: ch. 11), McGinn (1982: 90 ff.), Jackson (1982), Hornsby (1997, Ch. 6), Thompson (2008).

this event of having tried to walk to school is an action just in case it was caused by a belief and a desire in the right way.

The problem with this is very similar to the problem with the previous response to the problem. It may be possible to perform actions of trying, i.e., actions correctly describable using the formula “A tried to ϕ ”. However, if this were generally the correct way of describing actions, then, according to the belief-desire account, it would in general have to be the case either that the correct characterization of a desire that figures in a rationalization specifies a trying or that the correct characterization of a means-ends belief that figures in a rationalization specifies a trying. Neither option is plausible. Regarding the first option: Suppose Julia wants to cross paths with the interesting boy on her way to school. Her desire is not to try to cross paths with the boy, for she may succeed in this trying without bumping into the boy. In general, we do not desire to try to bring about results; we desire the results. Regarding the second option: we think it is also incorrect to characterize the means specified in a beliefs that figures in a rationalization as generally involving a trying. It is not rational for Julia to think that merely by trying to walk past the boy's house, her path will cross his; rather, it is rational to think that by actually walking past the boy's house, her path will cross his. In general, it is not reasonable to believe that just because one tries to perform a goal-oriented action that the goal in question will be achieved. Because of this, we think the belief-desire account will have a hard time meeting the objection raised by the possibility of apparently incompleting actions by appealing to actions of trying as the minimal first part of a process.

A final response to the worry one might try on behalf of the belief-desire account appeals to a ‘disjunctivist’ idea modeled on disjunctivist accounts perception. These seek to accommodate the possibility of illusion without positing some ‘common factor’ – such as a sense-datum, experience, or seeming – between the good case of, e.g., seeing a frog and the bad case of, e.g., hallucinating a frog.¹⁶ These accounts are guided by the idea that it is a mistake akin to failing to recognize the distinction between determinables and determinates to think that there is some further fact about someone’s visual experience beyond the fact that she is (i) seeing a frog, or (ii) hallucinating a frog, which might be formulated and grasped as the fact that she is (iii) *simply* having an experience as of a frog.

Applied to the case of actions, such as Julia’s walking to school, the

¹⁶ Compare Snowdon (1980-1, 1990-1), McDowell (1995), Martin (2002, 2005).

disjunctivist idea would be that it's a mistake to think there's some further fact about action beyond the fact that (i) Julia was walking to school and then later had walked to school, or (ii) Julia was walking to school but at no later point had walked to school, which might be formulated and grasped as the fact that (iii) Julia was *simply* walking to school.¹⁷ This might be thought to help address the problem we raised above for the belief-desire account of action, if it's plausible to say that Julia's walking *completely* to school is the action of Julia's walking to school, whose causes can be explored in a belief-desire rationalization, but Julia's walking *incompletely* to school is not an action at all. Any impression one might have otherwise may be due to a failure to appreciate that (i) and (ii) mention different ways for Julia to have been walking to school, but that doesn't imply that there is a further fact that (iii) Julia was *simply* walking to school, which mentions one of Julia's actions that cannot be rationalized by the belief-desire account.

The problem we see with this strategy, however, is that it commits the belief-desire account to unpalatable characterizations of the bad cases like (ii), where the event that would be the action never comes to completion. To see why, consider a disanalogy between hallucinating something and performing an action which doesn't come to its proper completion. Suppose Mitch is hallucinating a frog. Suppose his hallucination ends. It is never true to say that Mitch was seeing a frog; all he ever did was hallucinate one. Julia's case is different. When she sets out towards school, it seems that she is, at that moment, walking to school. Both of these sentences are true: 'Mitch did not see a frog', 'Julia did not walk to school.' But both of these are not: 'Mitch was never seeing a frog', 'Julia was never walking to school.' In the perceptual case, Mitch is never significantly similar to Rich, his friend who sees a frog – indeed, the disjunctivist emphasizes this fact. But Julia, at least for a while, is significantly similar to Sally, friend who makes it to school – at some point, both of them were walking to school.

If a disjunctivist position on action like the one we've just described is going to be tenable, it is committed to saying that there is no significant common factor present in both of Julia's and Sally's cases, even as both are on their way to school, because one of them fails to make it to school while the other is successful. The "significant common factor" the disjunctivist rejects here must be a common action-

¹⁷ This is different from the disjunctivist idea about bodily movements that Hornsby (1997: 102-110) sketches. Her concern is the difference between bodily movements that are directly related to actions (e.g. A raises her arm) and those which aren't (e.g. A's arm is raised by a pulley). See also Haddock (2005).

type—if the disjunctivist claims that for a time both Julia and Sally perform the action of walking to school, he thereby asserts exactly what his approach set out to deny and thus is not a disjunctivist. Now if there is no significant common factor between the two cases, then the type of belief-desire pair that rationalizes Sally's successful action cannot rationalize Julia's unsuccessful one. So either Julia has completed no action at all, or she has completed a different one, which is not rationalized by the type of belief-desire pair that rationalizes Sally's action. We may quickly reject the latter option, for there is no other type of belief-desire pair relevant to the scenario. The disjunctivist strategy leads us to conclude, then, that she performed no action. But this seems wrong. To accept this is to accept that when Julia and Sally start off to school, only one of them – Sally – is performing an action. The disjunctivist response to the problem of incompleting actions has lost whatever allure it may have had if it leads one to this conclusion.

In this section we have presented what seems to us to be the account of action that is assumed in much action-theory, metaethics, and certain aspects of the philosophy of mind: the belief-desire account. This account is motivated by its ability to explain 1-3 mentioned above. However, it faces a difficult problem having to do with the possibility of incompleting actions, like Julia's having been walking to school but never having walked to school. We've explored three (increasingly desperate) avenues for responding to this problem from within the belief-desire account and found each of them lacking. In the following section, we want to consider the alternative account of action this problem has inspired Michael Thompson to develop.

The Action Account

Although the belief-desire account is the account of action assumed in much action theory (as well as ethics, metaethics, and some aspects of the philosophy of mind), Michael Thompson (2008: part 2) has recently proposed an alternative. It stems from the observation that, although we sometimes do say things of the form “A ϕ -ed because she desired G and believed ϕ -ing to be a good way to achieve G,” it is much more common to rationalize action in terms of other actions of which they are a part. Thompson (2008: 85-87) cites examples, such as “Why are you pulling that cord? Because I'm starting the engine,” “Why are you cutting those wires? Because I'm repairing a short-circuit,” and “Why are you breaking those eggs? Because I'm

making an omelet.” In each of these cases, he concedes that a more sophisticated rationalization may be available in terms of the agent's beliefs and desires. For instance, after the fact, the first example might be transposed: “Why did you pull that cord? Because I wanted to start the engine and I believed that pulling the cord would be a good way to start the engine.” However, Thompson argues that taking such sophisticated rationalizations of action as more basic than the types of naïve rationalizations presented in his examples will obscure the essentially active, ongoing, or progressive nature of action.

Because of this, Thompson proposes to reverse the strategy for accounting for an action common to Anscombe and Davidson. Anscombe and Davidson both characterize actions in terms of their goals. For Davidson, the goal is formulated as the content of a desire; for Anscombe, the goal is ultimately formulated by what she calls a “desirability characterization”¹⁸; in either case, it is by stating the goal that one answers the question “Why?”. Thompson, on the other hand, explains actions in terms of their sub-processes, which we can view as providing answers to the corresponding question “How?”.¹⁹ His account turns on the observation that many actions are divisible into heterogeneous parts or sub-actions that are clearly intentional. “Such is the relation of egg-breaking and egg-mixing to omelet-making, of brick-laying and door-framing to house-building, and of writing the letters 'a' and 'c' to writing the word 'action'”(2008: 106-107). His idea is that a person who is, e.g., breaking eggs and then mixing eggs may be doing so because he is making an omelet. This is precisely how naïve rationalization proceeds. And to respect the essentially active, ongoing, or progressive nature of action, he thinks that we need take such rationalizations as more fundamental than sophisticated rationalizations which proceed in terms of belief and desires (i.e. mixing eggs because of a desire for an omelet and belief that this is part of the necessary means for satisfying that desire).

Thus, as an at least as a provisional statement (and he never gives anything more in his 2008), he suggests that we can isolate the category of “intentional action proper” with the formula: “X's doing A is an intentional action (proper) under that description just in case the agent can be said, truly, to have done something else *because he or she was doing A*. The intended sense of 'because' is, as usual, the one deployed in rationalization” (2008: 112). This means that rather than developing

18 Anscombe (1957/2000: 70-78).

19 Thanks to Anton Ford for helping us to see Thompson's account this way.

an account of action by citing the special way in which it is rationalized, Thompson wants to develop an account of action by citing the special way in which it rationalizes its parts or sub-actions. He characterizes his account, writing “The proposed definition is a sort of reverse of the one formulated in Anscombe's *Intention*...[according to which] actions [are what admit of]...a certain sort of account or explanation or ground. We say rather that an intentional action is *itself* a certain sort of account or ground – an *explanans*, not an *explanandum* (though perhaps it is that too)” (2008: 112fn).

Because, on Thompson's account, actions are identified by their ability to ground other actions (i.e. their sub-actions), we will call this the *action account of action*. As noted above, instead of using the application of Anscombe's “certain sense” of the question “Why?” as a test for action, Thompson can be read as encouraging us to use the application of a certain sense of the question “How?” as a test for action. It's the sense that demands an answer in the form of some sub-action of the action in question.

Importantly, this elides the distinction between completed and incompleting actions. For the same sorts of answer can be given to the question “How did S ϕ ?” as to “How is S ϕ -ing?” For example, the same sorts of things might answer the questions “How did Julia walk to school?” and “How is Julia walking to school?” (e.g. “By taking the path through the woods”). The same is not true of the belief-desire's account of how to answer Anscombe's question “Why?” In this case, the question, e.g., “Why did S ϕ ?” can be answered by citing a belief and a desire as the causes of the event mentioned in the question (e.g. “Why did Julia walk to school? Her desire to get to school and her belief that walking was part of the best means for satisfying this desire caused her to do so”), but – as we showed above – the same answer cannot be given to the question “Why was S ϕ -ing?” in cases where S never completely ϕ -ed. Thus, it is by reversing Anscombe's order of explanation that the action account overcomes the problem of apparently incompleting actions that we pressed against the belief-desire account above.

Moreover, we think they do so in a way that continues to explain the first two features that motivated the belief-desire account. These were:

1. Events which we might characterize as actions, e.g. “She walked to school”, may also be described in other ways that obscure their character as actions, e.g. “She put herself in danger of kidnap.”

2. There's an important difference between "She walked to school, and she had reason R to walk to school" and "She walked to school *because* she had reason R to walk to school."

The key to explaining 1 was Davidson's observation that actions can be described in many different ways, some of which are ripe for rationalizations that reveal their character as actions and some of which do not. Although the action account needn't commit to treating actions as *events* (it will depend on how we understand this category²⁰), it can incorporate Davidson's observation quite easily. For example, although it may be true to describe Julia as walking to school, it may also be true to describe her as putting herself in danger of kidnap. A proponent of the action account will say that the former description of what Julia is doing is ripe for rationalizing other things she is doing, such as taking the path through the woods, and this is what reveals Julia's walking to school to be an action. However, the latter description of what Julia is doing may still be true, yet we don't say, e.g., that Julia's putting herself in danger of kidnap rationalizes anything else she is doing.

Similarly, a proponent of the action account can explain the difference between acting and having a reason, on the one hand, and acting because she had that reason, on the other hand. An action like taking the path through the woods may be one that Julia does because she is walking to school; we might say that *her* reason for taking the path through the woods is that she was walking to school. However, in another case, she may be taking the path through the woods and she may be walking to school, but it may be false to say that *her* reason for taking the path through the woods is that she is walking to school, for the reason may instead be that she is meeting the interesting boy. Thus, although the action account looks to the 'bigger' action of which a 'smaller' action is a part for the rationalization of the smaller action, while the belief-desire account looks at the psychological states which caused the action, there are similar resources in both accounts to explain (2).

Despite its ability to overcome the main problem we raised for the belief-desire account and its ability to explain the first two features of action that motivated the belief-desire account, we think the action account faces a similarly difficult problem. This has to do with explaining the third feature of actions which we cited above as a motivation for the belief-desire account. This was

3. Actions are directed at a goal, such that we can always characterize them

²⁰ See note 12, plus Thompson (2008: PGNUM).

saying “A ϕ -ed” in order to achieve G, where G is plausibly thought to be one of A's goals.

The action account can capture the goal-directed nature of *some* actions. It can do so when the bigger action – i.e. the one of which the smaller action is rationalized as a part – averts to the goal for which the smaller action is done. For example, perhaps it is true that Julia was taking the path through the woods because she was walking to school, in which case we might say that Julia was taking the path through the woods in order to walk to school. However, the problem arises when we ask about the action of walking to school. What rationalizes this action, and does it similarly avert to the goal for which it is done? For example, how should we complete the sentence “Julia is walking to school in order to ...”? It's not always clear what to say on the action account.

To be clear about our worry: there may of course be a way to complete the sentence in particular cases. For example, perhaps it is true to say that Julia was walking to school because she was maintaining perfect attendance, in which case a proponent of the action account might reveal the goal directed nature of her action of walking to school by saying that she was walking to school in order to maintain perfect attendance. However, that just pushes the issue back one stage, where we want to ask what rationalizes this even bigger action? The problem for the action account is that by viewing rationalizations of an action in terms of some bigger action of which it is a part as the basic for of action explanation, we will never have a way to view the last action in any chain of such rationalizations as goal-directed.

This makes the action account vulnerable to the belief-desire account. For proponents of the belief-desire account will insist that what's needed at the last stage of any chain of rationalization is the citation of a belief and a desire, where the content of this desire can be viewed as the goal, towards which the whole chain of actions was directed. (Consider, e.g., “Julia is walking to school because she wants to maintain perfect attendance and believes that walking, taking the path by the woods, etc. is part of the best means to satisfying this desire.”)

However, this may seem to be a problem only at the periphery of the action account. For a proponent of the action account could argue that it's only when we get to the *end* of a chain of rationalizing ‘smaller’ actions in terms of the ‘bigger’ actions of which they are parts that we need to appeal to something else, such as beliefs and desires. If correct, this might mean that the action account is not wrong

but incomplete. The idea would be that actions are typically things ('smaller' action) an agent can be said to be doing because he is doing something else ('bigger' action), with the exception of the 'biggest' actions, which require a different form of rationalization or account.

Now, even if the problem for the action account is only at the periphery of the account, we think it still represents a significant liability, at least from the perspective of one interested in the nature of practical rationality and certain forms of ethical responsibility. For when one performs an action, such as walking to school or breaking an egg, the action account will have no way to completely explain what it was that lead the agent to perform the action; that is, there will be no way to spell out in full what, from the agent's perspective, made the action seem like a good thing to do. And we think that means there will be no way – as far as the action account goes – to determine whether the action was practically rational and/or ethically praise-/blameworthy.

We also doubt, however, that the problem we have raised is a problem only at the periphery of the action account. This is because there are, in very many cases, many different ways to perform a 'bigger' action, and a full account of practical rationality and ethical responsibility needs to be able to say what makes the difference between choosing one way over another, in order to explain ultimately which if either was more rational and/or ethically praise-/blameworthy. For example, walking to school and taking the bus to school are two different ways for Julia to maintain perfect attendance. If we follow the action theorist and explain why Julia is walking to school in terms of a 'bigger' action like maintaining perfect attendance, that leaves it completely unexplained why she chose this way rather than the other, which in turn leaves it unexplained which way was the better way (i.e., more practically rational and/or more ethically praiseworthy) to get to school. There may, of course, be answers the action account can give in particular cases, e.g., "she's walking instead of taking the bus because she getting some exercise before school." However, not all cases are like this and, moreover, this just pushes the question back a stage: "Why, though, is she walking to school instead of riding her bicycle?" By contrast, the belief-desire account can explain why Julia chose walking over taking the bus or riding her bicycle in terms of the beliefs and desires that caused her action; and we can at least begin to evaluate the practical rationality of this action in terms of the rationality of those mental states, which (perhaps in tandem with other information about Julia) may give us some handle on issues of ethical responsibility.

In this section, we have considered an account of action designed to overcome the problem raised for the belief-desire account of action in the previous section. While we think that this action account of action also meets the first two explanatory desiderata that originally motivated the belief-desire account, we raised a serious problem for it stemming from the third explanatory desideratum that originally motivated the belief-desire account. This has to do with the account's inability to capture the goal-directed nature of action in a way that serves the interests of an account of practical rationality and ethical responsibility. In the following section, we attempt to do better.

The Decision Account

So far, we have suggested that the dominant account of action is one that specifies an action as an event caused by an agent's belief about which action would achieve a particular goal and desire for achieving that goal. We have seen that the account faces a problem in cases where the action fails to come to proper completion; such cases generate an unfortunate mismatch between the action that figures in the content of the belief and what, in fact, happens. The action account does not face this problem, for it specifies actions as sub-parts of bigger actions. Even if an action fails to come to proper completion, we can understand what happens prior its improper termination as an action that is a sub-part of the bigger action being performed at that moment. We argued, however, that this account cannot satisfactorily capture the goal-directed nature of actions, which in turn meant that it obscures issues about the rationality of choosing one action over alternatives as well as certain sorts of ethical responsibility.

In this section, we seek to overcome these problems by sketching an account of action that turns on the notion of a *decision*. More specifically, we think an account of action needs to link actions of ϕ -ing to decisions to ϕ . This will explain why an agent performs a particular action instead of alternatives, which was the main stumbling block for the action account of action. Moreover, we believe the connection between action and decision can also help to capture the goal-directed nature of action without succumbing to the problem with the belief-desire account. Nevertheless, we think the belief-desire account offers an important insight: one of the central ways that agents make decisions to act is by reflecting on the contents of their beliefs and desires. It is in this way that we hope to capture what's right about

the preceding accounts while overcoming their problems.

What is a decision? We think a decision is a mental activity; more specifically, it is a type of judgment. Some judgments are theoretical judgments about what *is* the case, but decisions, as we are thinking of them are a different species of judgment. They are practical judgments about what to make the case. When one decides to ϕ , we say that one has “made up one’s mind.”²¹ Then, when one performs the action of ϕ -ing, one simple answer to the questions “Why did A ϕ ?” is that A had *decided* to ϕ (and – we might pedantically add – A didn’t change her mind and the world cooperated when the time for ϕ -ing came). The nice thing about this answer is that it suits just as well the question “Why was A ϕ -ing?” even in cases where the action fails to come to its proper completion. For example, if we ask why Julia was walking to school, an initially appropriate answer, even if she never made it to school, is that she had decided to take the path. So, the account so far avoids the principle problem with the belief-desire account.

We should be clear here that we have an inclusive view of what counts as deciding or making a practical judgment. We do not limit these practical judgments to cases where a person says to herself, either out loud or silently, “I shall ϕ ”; and we do not limit practical judgment to cases in which a person by making the judgment consciously resolves some practical uncertainty.²² On our view, a practical judgment has been made whenever Anscombe’s special sense of the question “Why?” applies. This will include many cases in which a person acts in accordance with habit. Consider, for example, the case in which Julia walks to school today because it is the way she normally goes to school. Anscombe’s question “Why?” applies here: if we ask Julia why she is walking to school and she answers that she is doing so because it is what she normally does, she thereby accepts the appropriateness of the question and answers it.

Note that the intelligibility of the question not altered if we go on to ask her specifically, “Yes, but why did you decide to walk to school *today*?” She may say, “Oh, I suppose I made a decision long ago to walk whenever it’s not raining, and it’s

21 Compare Moran (2001: Chs. 2 and 4).

22 Thus, in calling these practical judgments ‘decisions’ we are using the word in a different way from O’Shaughnessy (1980: 297) and Mele (1997: 200-201), who think that one decides to do something only when one forms an intention in the face of some initial practical uncertainty. We could give them the word ‘decide’ and hang onto our notion of ‘practical judgment’ as long as it’s understood as a judgment not about what’s the case but about what to do. Alternatively, we might insist that what they are talking about is ‘reflective decisions’, whereas what we’re talking about is something more ordinary and mundane.

not raining today.” On our view, Julia has made a practical judgment, not because at some point prior to setting off for school she thinks about how she will go; rather, she has made a judgment because, if asked, she can answer the question “Why?” as it applies to her walking to school. Our view here on making practical judgments is comparable to a plausible account of adopting or forming unconscious and tacit beliefs. Even if all she thinks about along the way is the interesting boy, we will not be surprised if once she gets to school Julia has beliefs that she can tell us about the weather between her home and school, about how noisy conditions were along the path, about the presence or absence of polar bears along the path, and about a host of other matters to which she did not explicitly attend during her walk. Somehow she make judgments about these things along her walk and somehow they get stored as beliefs, but she does not attend to these judgments and beliefs as they are formed—indeed, if never asked, she may never think about them at all. In the same way that she may make these judgments and form these beliefs without ever having to consider them consciously, she may make practical judgments that she never has to consider.

So, if that’s right, then it’s possible for an agent to decide to ϕ on a particular occasion without consciously or reflectively attending to this decision. And our idea is that however they are formed such decisions can explain why someone is acting the way she is. Of course, explaining an action in terms of decisions is only initially appropriate, since it leaves it unclear what, from the agent’s point of view, seemed good in the action, which means that it does not yet fully *rationalize* the action. However, in order to achieve this, we suggest that an explanation of the decision is needed. That is, we suggest asking further: “Why did A decide to ϕ ?”

It’s a familiar fact that this kind of question often admits of two sorts of answers. In the good case where the claims the agent would make to justify her decision are all true, we can appeal to the facts those claims state. For example, sometimes a correct answer to the question “Why did Julia decide to take the path?” is considerations such as the fact that this would be a good way for her to meet the interesting boy. However, in the bad case where such claims are false, we cannot say that she decided to take the path because of such facts – for there are no such facts. This is why we sometimes answer the question “Why did A decide to ϕ ?” instead by appealing to states of A’s mind. We say, for example, “Julia was taking the path because she *believed* that this would be a good way to meet the interesting boy and she *wanted* to meet the interesting boy.” However, we think the bad case’s

intelligibility is parasitic on the good case. That is, one cannot understand what it is for A to decide to ϕ because A believes that p, without already understanding what it is for A to ϕ because of the fact that p. For the fact that p is what, from A's perspective, justifies the action, which is a relation in the good case that we must understand before we can understand the derivative relation in the bad case of acting because of a belief that p.

In asserting that the bad case is only intelligible in terms of the good case, we follow philosophers such as Anscombe and Thompson who encourage us to begin our theorizing about action by focusing on what an agent might say when asked about how and why they are doing what they are doing. This captures the idea that the rationality of a given action can only be understood by conceiving of the action first from the agent's point of view. From the agent's point of view, the fact that she is in a certain psychological condition, which happens to be a belief that a certain means is a good way to achieve a given end, does not make a decision based on that condition rational; rather, the *fact*, from her point of view, that a given means *is* a good way to achieve a given end, makes a decision to perform the relevant action rational. If Julia is deciding how to go about meeting the interesting boy, it is not rational for her to reflect on her beliefs about the matter, considered as psychological data about herself; rather, it is rational for her to think about the world beyond her and how, by navigating it, she can cross paths with the boy. If her view of the world is mistaken, we may explain what she decides to do by characterizing her as holding some false beliefs. Our ability to draw the distinction in the bad case between how the world is and how she takes the world to be, however, depends on there being no such distinction in the good case.

In both the bad and the good case, an action is rationalizable because, from the agent's point of view, certain facts are thought to obtain. We mark the bad case, where we think the agent is wrong about whether these facts obtain, by using the vocabulary of belief. That is, we express the content of the agent's belief without endorsing this content as true by saying that the agent believed what she did. Of course, this vocabulary can be extended to the good case as well—there too it is true to say that A decided to ϕ because she wanted G and believed that ϕ -ing was part of the best means for achieving that goal. In the good case, we can go on to endorse the content of the belief as true, but the content of the bad case is still only intelligible by reflection on the good case.

Because of this, we suggest that decisions are practical judgments that can, at least typically²³, be explained by appealing to the agent's beliefs and desires. We can say that the agent made her decision on the basis of certain beliefs and desires. The desire can be appealed to in capturing the goal-directed nature of action, along the lines of the way the belief-desire account explained the goal-directed nature of action. And the belief can be appealed to explain why an agent chose one action over another. This means that it overcomes the principle problem we raised for the action account above.

In general, then, on the decision account of action, an action is something an agent decides to do typically on the basis of certain beliefs and desires, which explain the decision. By appealing to the beliefs and desires that explain a decision, this account can explain the three features of action that the belief-desire account was designed to explain. We've already said how it explains (3) the goal-directed nature of action, which makes it superior to the action account of action. It can also explain (1) the way in which actions can be described in ways that reveal their character as actions and ways that obscure this character. In order for A's ϕ -ing to be an action, on the decision account, it must be correct to say that A decided to ϕ . However, it could also be the case that by ϕ -ing, A is also ψ -ing, which she did not decide to do. For example, Julia was walking to school, but she was also putting herself in danger of kidnap. On the decision account of action, the relevant difference is that she decided to walk to school, but she did not decide to put herself in danger of kidnap. As long as there is at least one description under which it is correct to say that A decided to ϕ , then ϕ -ing can be correctly classified as an action. Moreover it can explain (2) the difference between an agent's ϕ -ing and her having reason R to ϕ , on the one hand, and her ϕ -ing because she has reason R, on the other hand. For the decision account of action, this difference will be a matter of why the agent decided to ϕ . Even if she knew that she had R, if this isn't why she decided to ϕ , then it's not correct to say that she was ϕ -ing because she had reason R. But if her acknowledgment of R forms the basis of her decision, then it's correct to say that she was ϕ -ing because she had reason R.

If this is right, then the decision account of action explains the three features of action that motivated the belief-desire account, which means that it overcomes the

²³ We say "at least typically" to allow for cases of radical or existential choice, as well as Burdian's ass cases where one must transcend one's beliefs and desires to decide to do something.

main problem we raised for the action account of action. Moreover, it does not require that actions be thought of as events that are caused by beliefs and desires with the right sort of content. This led to the problem with incompleting actions for the belief-desire account of action. But rather than think of actions as events that occur (but may fail to occur when the action doesn't reach its proper completion, the decision account avoids this problem by conceiving of actions as things for which Thompson's certain sense of the "How?" question has application: they are ongoing or completed processes or activities. Yet, unlike Thompson, we think they should be thought of as initiated by a decision, which in turn can typically be explained by a belief and a desire. The decision account can also respect the insight of the action account that a (if not the) basic way of explaining actions is in terms of other actions. The decision account need not deny that in many explanatory contexts it will suffice to explain one action in terms of another action. Indeed, in many explanatory contexts it will suffice to explain a decision in terms of another decision, on the model the action account provides: e.g., the omelet maker decided to break the egg because he had decided to make an omelet, and Paul decided to found churches and write letters because he had decided to preach the word of Jesus. What we have shown here is that even if the action account correctly identifies a *basic* form of action explanation, it is not one that is *exhaustive*. It may well be that in some sense, the decision account is more sophisticated than the action account, but we hope to have shown why the sophistication is necessary. Without it, one cannot describe the goal-directedness of action and, relatedly, why an agent with a particular goal chose one action over another.

At the outset of this paper, we suggested that there are several reasons one may be interested in an account of action. Depending on one's interest, different accounts of action may be appropriate. However, we think one central reason to be interested in an account of action is that it is one of the main loci of evaluations of practical rationality and ethical responsibility. Given that one can evaluate an incompleting action in terms of practical rationality and/or ethical responsibility, any account which cannot handle the possibility of incompleting actions, as we believe the belief-desire account cannot, will not be suitable for this interest. Moreover, given that a central topic for the theories of practical rationality and ethical responsibility is the merits of choosing one way of pursuing one's goals over another, any account which cannot rationalize an action in ways that make sense of such choice, as we believe the action account cannot, will not be suitable for this interest. It is these

failures that have led to the alternative sketched here, since decisions clearly can be evaluated for their practical rationality and ethical responsibility.

Bibliography

- Alvarez, Maria & John Hyman (1998) 'Agents and Their Actions', *Philosophy* 74: 219-245.
- Anscombe, G. E. M. (1957/2000) *Intention*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bach, Kent (1980) 'Actions Are Not Events', *Mind* 89: PAGES.
- Davidson, Donald (1963/1980) 'Actions, Reasons, and Causes', in (ed.), *Actions and Events*, Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.
- Davidson, Donald (1980) 'The Logical Form of Action Sentences: Criticism, Comment and Defence', in (ed.), *Essays on Actions and Events*, Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.
- Davidson, Donald (1973/1980) 'Freedom to Act', in (ed.), *Actions and Events*, Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.
- Haddock, Adrian (2005) 'At One with Our Actions, but at Two with Our Bodies', *Philosophical Explorations* 8: 157-172.
- Hornsby, Jennifer (1997) *Simple Mindedness*, Cambridge MA; London: Harvard University Press.
- Jackson, Frank (1982) 'Action, Trying, and Essentialism', *Inquiry* 25: 255-270.
- Kenny, Anthony (1963) *Action, Emotion, and the Will*, New York; London: Routledge & K Paul.
- Martin, M. G. F. (2002) 'The Transparency of Experience', *Mind and Language* 17: 376-425.
- Martin, M. G. F. (2004) 'The Limits of Self-Awareness', *Philosophical Studies* 120: 37-89.
- McDowell, John (1986) 'Singular Thought and the Extent of Inner Space', in McDowell, P. Petit and J. (ed.), *Subject, Thought, and Context*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- McDowell, John (1995) 'Knowledge and the Internal', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 55: 877-893.
- McGinn, Colin (1982) *The Character of Mind*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mele, Alfred (2005) *Motivation and Agency*, Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.
- Moran, Richard (2001) *Authority and Estrangement : An Essay on Self-Knowledge*,

Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Mourelatos, Alexander (1978) 'Events, Processes, and States', *Linguistics and Philosophy* 2: 415-434.

O'Brien, Lucy (2007) *Self-Knowing Agents*, Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.

O'Shaughnessy, Brian (1980) *The Will, Vol. 2*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sellars, Wilfrid (1956) 'Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind', in Scriven, Feigl & (ed.), *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Smith, Michael (1994) *The Moral Problem*, Oxford: Blackwell.

Smith, Michael (forthcoming) *The Explanatory Role of Being Rational*, New York: Cambridge University Press.

Snowdon, Paul (1980-1) 'Perception, Vision, and Causation', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 81: 175-192.

Snowdon, Paul (1990-1) 'The Objects of Perceptual Experience', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* supplementary volume 64: 121-150.

Stoecker, Ralf (1993) 'Reasons, Actions and Their Relationship', in Stoecker (ed.), *Reflecting Davidson*, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.

Vendler, Zeno (1957) 'Verbs and Time', *Philosophical Review* 56: 146-60.