

Lecture 14: Central Themes

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1. The Question

What is the mark that distinguishes actions? (Davidson 1971).

‘The problem of action is to explicate the contrast between what an agent does and what merely happens to him’ (Frankfurt 1978, p. 157).

2. Davidson’s View

The mark that distinguishes actions is intention.

An action is an event which stands in some specific (but here unspecified) relation to an intention.

‘According to causal theories [...] the essential difference between events of the two types [actions vs things that merely happen to an agent] is to be found in their prior causal histories: a [pattern of joint displacements and bodily configurations] is an action if and only if it results from antecedents of a certain kind’ (Frankfurt 1978, p. 162).

3. Frankfurt’s Argument from Spiders

The lecture slides contain an attempt to reconstruct this argument which is not included on your hand-out.

‘the contrast between actions and mere happenings can readily be discerned elsewhere than in the lives of people. There are numerous agents besides ourselves, who may be active as well as passive with respect to the movements of their bodies.’

Including spiders.

‘The two contrasts [one in the case of humans, one in the case of spiders] are the same [...] Each contrasts instances in which purposive behavior is attributable to a creature as agent and instances in which this is not the case.’

Explications of the distinction between actions and events that merely happen to an agent cannot rely on ‘distinctive higher faculties which characteristically come into play when a person acts’, nor ‘upon concepts which are inapplicable to spiders’ (Frankfurt 1978, p. 162).

4. Frankfurt’s Further Objections to Causal Theories of Action

The lecture slides contain attempts to reconstruct some of the following arguments which are not included on your handout.

4.1. Knowledge of One’s Own Actions

‘Causal theories imply that actions and mere happenings do not differ essentially in themselves at all.’

‘They are therefore committed to supposing that a person who knows he is in the midst of performing an action cannot have derived this knowledge from any awareness of what is currently happening, but that he must have derived it instead from his understanding of how what is happening was caused to happen by’ (Frankfurt 1978, p. 157).

4.2. Deviant Causal Chains

‘No matter what kinds of causal antecedents are designated as necessary and sufficient for the occurrence of an action, it is easy to show that causal antecedents of that kind may have as their effect an event that is manifestly not an action but a mere bodily movement’ (Frankfurt 1978, p. 157).

‘A climber might want to rid himself of the weight and danger of holding another man on a rope, and he might know that by loosening his hold on the rope he could rid himself of the weight and danger. This belief and want might so unnerve him as to cause him to loosen his hold, and yet it might be the case that he never chose to loosen his hold, nor did he do it intentionally. It will not help, I think, to add that the belief and the want must combine to cause him to want to loosen his hold, for there will remain the *two* questions *how* the belief and the want caused the second want, and *how* wanting to loosen his hold caused him to loosen his hold’ (Davidson 1980, p. 79).

4.3. Being in Touch

‘... the most salient differentiating characteristic of action: during the time a person is performing an action he is necessarily in touch with the movements of his body in a certain way, whereas he is necessarily not in touch with them in that way when movements of his body are occurring without his making them.

‘A theory that is limited to describing causes prior to the occurrences of actions and of mere bodily movements cannot possibly include an analysis of these two ways in which a person may be related to the way in which an action is being performed or movements of his body. It must inevitably open the possibility that a person, whatever his involvement in the events from which his action arises, loses all connection with the movements of his body at the moment when his action begins.’ (Frankfurt 1978, p. 158).

References

Davidson, D. (1971). Agency. In R. Binkley, R. Bronaugh, & A. Marras (Eds.), *Agent, Action, and Reason*, (pp. 3–25). Toronto: University of Toronto Press. Reprinted in Davidson, D. (1980) *Essays on Actions and Events*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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Frankfurt, H. (1978). The problem of action. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 15(2), 157–162.