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Philosophy of Action 1945-2015 **Maria Alvarez and John Hyman**

1. Introduction

The philosophical study of human action begins with Plato and Aristotle. Their influence in late antiquity and the Middle Ages yielded sophisticated theories of action and motivation, notably in the works of Augustine and Aquinas.¹ But the ideas that were dominant in 1945 have their roots in the early modern period, when advances in physics and mathematics reshaped philosophy.

In particular, the theories of matter and causation that developed in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries made action by conscious agents seem like a curious and isolated phenomenon in the natural world, because they encouraged philosophers to conceive of matter as ‘a substance altogether inert, and merely passive’.² One of the main achievements in philosophy since 1945 has been to challenge positivist orthodoxies about causation, and to rehabilitate causation by substances and causal powers. But applying these ideas to the philosophy of action was still a work in progress in 2015.

Two large questions dominated the philosophy of action in the mid-twentieth century. First, what is the causal structure of voluntary action? How do desire, volition, imagination and motion fit together when we act? Second, what are the circumstances in which an agent is morally responsible for an act? However, these questions received increasingly independent treatment during the period covered in this article, and we shall mainly confine our attention to the first.

The orthodox answer to the first question at that time was that a voluntary act is a movement of the body or a muscular contraction with a specific kind of mental cause. This was either thought to be a ‘volition’ or ‘act of will’—i.e. a conscious act of choosing or willing—or a memory-image of the sensation associated with a movement. Volitions or memory-images were in turn held to be caused by desires, and desires were either held to be uncomfortable sensations, such as hunger and thirst, which was how empiricists since Locke had conceived of them, or else dispositions to engage in patterns of behaviour that cease when their object is achieved, as Russell proposed in the *Analysis of Mind*.

This picture of the causal structure of voluntary action was combined with the doctrine that causal explanation consists in the subsumption of events under generalisations or laws, as it had been by empiricist philosophers since Hume. Together, these ideas yielded a positivist conception of the social sciences, whose most influential defence in twentieth-century philosophy is by C.G. Hempel, but whose classic statement is by John Stuart Mill:

The Science of Human Nature may be said to exist, in proportion as the approximate truths, which compose a practical knowledge of mankind, can be exhibited as corollaries from the universal laws of human nature on which they rest.³

In the history of philosophy, as in the history of architecture, periods of structural

¹ Augustine 2012; Augustine 1998, 5.10; Aquinas 1964–1973, 1a2ae, 6-21; Aquinas 1964. See also Dante 2008, cantos 17 & 18.

² Reid 2010, I.6.

³ Mill 1846, 6.3.2; Hempel & Oppenheim 1948; Hempel 1965.

change alternate with periods of decorative embellishment. In the philosophy of action, the first half of the period under consideration in this volume was a period of structural change. Accordingly, the arguments of R.G. Collingwood, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Gilbert Ryle in the 1940s, and of Elizabeth Anscombe and Donald Davidson in the 1960s and 1970s, have continued to be the most important up to the present, so far as philosophy in the analytic tradition is concerned. The most influential philosophical writings on human agency outside the analytic tradition in this period were by Jean-Paul Sartre.

Sartre's existentialist philosophy is discussed in chapter 30 of this volume. He follows Heidegger in claiming that the human form of existence and engagement with the world is basically active and practical, rather than cognitive and theoretical. But what is distinctive in Sartre's philosophy, and accounts for its lasting appeal, is his celebration of spontaneity and freedom—freedom from Weber's 'iron cage' of bureaucracy and rationality, and from tradition, religion, and bourgeois social norms. The individual conceived in *L'être et le néant*, which Sartre wrote in Paris during the German occupation, was absolutely free, and he defined himself by the free choices that he made. '*L'être humain est un projet qui se fait peu à peu. En conséquence, il se définit par l'ensemble des ses actes.* [A human being is a project that is formed step by step. Hence, he defines himself by the sum of his acts.]'⁴

Collingwood, Wittgenstein, Ryle, Anscombe and Davidson were responsible for four main developments in philosophical thought about human agency, each of which is described in more detail in sections two and three below.

- First, Collingwood and Wittgenstein claimed independently that explanations of voluntary acts do not subsume them under laws, and Collingwood argued that the eighteenth-century ambition to construct a science of human nature failed for this reason. 'Its method', he wrote, 'was distorted by the analogy of the natural sciences.'
- Second, Ryle and Wittgenstein both attacked the idea that voluntary acts are caused by volitions or acts of will, not merely on the grounds that postulating volitions is unnecessary, as James and Russell had already claimed when they defended theories that postulate memory-images instead, but on the more radical grounds that the very idea that a voluntary act is a bodily movement with a specific kind of mental cause is misconceived.
- Third, Anscombe accepted both of the positions attributed to Wittgenstein above, and argued (i) that the kind of action in which human agency is principally expressed is *intentional* rather than *voluntary*, (ii) that voluntary action can be defined in terms of intentional action and knowledge, and (iii) that intentional action can be defined by means of the concept of a *reason for acting* (and the related concept of *goodness*).
- Finally, Davidson accepted (i)-(iii) above, although his concept of a reason differed substantially from Anscombe's, but he argued that explaining action in terms of the agent's motive or reason for acting *does* identify its cause, and *does* imply that it falls under a law. Wittgenstein and the others who denied these things, he argued, did so because they failed to understand the subtle relationship between causes and laws.

As a result of these developments, philosophers working in the subject-area we are focusing on in this article have engaged with two large and interconnected sets of questions since the 1960s: first, metaphysical questions about the individuation and location of acts,

⁴ Sartre 1946, p. 21.

and their relationship with movements of the body; second, logical and metaphysical questions about reasons and reasoning, and about the relationship between reasons and the acts they motivate and explain.

The same developments also transformed philosophical thought about responsibility and free will, principally by encouraging philosophers to regard the capacity to respond to and endorse reasons as the factor that makes human action susceptible to moral assessment, instead of causation by volitions. The intense debates that ensued, and still continue, echo earlier ones about the relationship between freedom and necessity, but they have accorded greater importance to an individual's autonomy, sense of self, psychological integration and self-control (as Sartre did), as well as her responsiveness to reasons (as he did not), and they have examined various factors that undermine these, such as addiction and mental illness.⁵

2. Collingwood, Wittgenstein and Ryle

Collingwood claimed that the eighteenth-century ambition to construct a science of human nature modelled on the natural sciences was destined to fail. Both historians and natural scientists investigate the causes of events, he argued, but in historical studies the term 'cause' is used in 'a special sense'. In science, discovering the cause of an event means 'bring[ing] it under a general formula or law of nature', whereas in history, it means discovering 'the thought in the mind of the person by whose agency the event came about'. It is a mistake to imagine that history is 'the study of successive events lying in the dead past, events to be understood as the scientist understands natural events, by classifying them and establishing relations between the classes thus defined'. Unlike the natural scientist, the historian is not interested in events as such, 'he is only concerned with those events which are the outward expression of thoughts, and is only concerned with these in so far as they express thoughts'. Hence, 'all history is the history of thought'.⁶

Wittgenstein's position was more radical than Collingwood's. He too believed that identifying the reason or motive for a voluntary act is quite unlike classifying events and establishing relations between the classes thus defined. But instead of postulating a special sense of the word 'cause', he inferred that it is not a matter of identifying a cause at all.

The main influence on Wittgenstein's philosophy of action was Schopenhauer's theory of the will, which he seems to have fully accepted in 1916, and which still influenced his thinking in 1947. Schopenhauer had argued, against the empiricists, that an act of will cannot be an impression or thought, because impressions and thoughts are mere phenomena, and therefore quite passive and inert. Schopenhauer's own view was that the act of will and the act willed—the action of the body, as he called it—are one and the same thing, 'perceived and apprehended in a twofold manner', from the 'interior' perspective of the agent and from the 'exterior' perspective of an observer.⁷

In Wittgenstein's *Notebooks*, these ideas are repeated.⁸ But in the 1930s he abandoned the thought that willing is an event that presents two different faces to 'interior' and 'exterior' perception, and argued instead that if willing *is* acting, then it is so 'in the ordinary sense of the word':

so it is speaking, writing, walking, lifting a thing, imagining something. But it is also striving, trying, making an effort—to speak, to write, to lift a thing, to imagine

⁵ These debates were initiated especially by Strawson 1962 and Frankfurt 1969. The literature on these issues is vast and we can merely provide some pointers through representative collections and review essays, such as Watson 1982; Fischer 1999; Widerker and McKenna 2003; Levy and McKenna 2009; and Kane 2002 and 2011.

⁶ Collingwood 1946, pp. 208, 214–17, 228. See also Dray 1995, chs. 2–3.

⁷ Schopenhauer 1966, p. 36. Brian O'Shaughnessy (1980) defends a theory inspired by Schopenhauer.

⁸ Wittgenstein 1979, pp. 87–89.

something, and so on.⁹

These are all things we normally do voluntarily, and as such they are all that willing can possibly consist in. There is no additional internal psychic push—no ‘will force’, as James called it. It is true that there is willing without acting: trying to lift a heavy weight is an exercise of the will, whether or not the attempt succeeds. But we should not imagine that every act is preceded by an effort or attempt: ‘When I raise my arm,’ he writes, ‘I don’t usually *try* to raise it’.¹⁰ So ‘trying’ is not the vernacular name for a volition or act of will.

Wittgenstein also rejects the idea that voluntary movements are caused by memory-images of kinaesthetic sensations. James and Russell had argued that we possess a repertoire of ideas of possible movements, laid down in infancy, and composed of the memory-images of the kinaesthetic sensations that make us aware of the movements we perform. These images, they claimed, are the immediate mental antecedents of our voluntary acts. But in a searching criticism of James and Russell, which is of a piece with the anti-sensationalism of the *Investigations* as a whole, Wittgenstein rejects the very idea that kinaesthetic feelings make us aware of the movements of our limbs.¹¹

Finally, Wittgenstein considers the idea that voluntary acts are movements caused by decisions:

Consider the following description of a voluntary action: “I form the decision to pull the bell at 5 o’clock; and when it strikes 5, my arm makes this movement.”—Is that the correct description, and not *this* one: “... and when it strikes 5, I raise my arm”?—One would like to supplement the first description: “And lo and behold! my arm goes up when it strikes 5.” And this “lo and behold!” is precisely what doesn’t belong here. I do *not* say “Look, my arm is going up!” when I raise it.¹²

Wittgenstein’s remarkable conclusion is that the movement does not qualify as voluntary because it is caused by a decision, but because ‘voluntary movement is marked by the absence of surprise.’¹³ This is not intended as a *definition* of voluntary action. Rather, Wittgenstein thinks of the absence of surprise as part of a ‘family of phenomena’ that are characteristic of voluntary action.¹⁴ It is, he claims, the *context* of action that makes it voluntary, ‘its character and its surroundings’,¹⁵ including, in most cases, the absence of surprise:

Voluntary movements are certain movements with their normal surroundings of intention, learning, trying, acting.¹⁶

Wittgenstein’s conclusion signals his determination to reject the doctrine that a voluntary act is a movement with a particular kind of cause, but it is not widely accepted by philosophers today. A voluntary act is more commonly defined as an act the agent could have avoided doing, or alternatively, as an act that is not due to ignorance or compulsion.¹⁷

Ryle’s attack on the ‘doctrine of volitions’ is one of the most influential passages in *The Concept of Mind*. It forms part of the author’s attack on a dualist conception of human life, which, he says, is due mainly to Descartes. The theory that voluntary acts are caused by volitions is indeed an important feature of Descartes’s psychology, although it is separable

⁹ Wittgenstein 1958b, §615.

¹⁰ Wittgenstein 1958b, §622.

¹¹ Wittgenstein 1958b, p. 194.

¹² Wittgenstein 1958b, §627.

¹³ Wittgenstein 1958b, §628.

¹⁴ Wittgenstein 1958a, p. 152.

¹⁵ Wittgenstein 1967, §587.

¹⁶ Wittgenstein 1980, §776.

¹⁷ Ryle 1949, pp. 56f; Hyman 2015 p. 77. Both definitions stem originally from Aristotle: *NE* 1110a, *Met.* Θ, 1046a-1048a.

from the doctrine that the mind is an immaterial substance. However, Ryle regards the theory as a myth. It is, he says, ‘a causal hypothesis, adopted because it was wrongly supposed that the question, “What makes a bodily movement voluntary?” was a causal question.’¹⁸

Ryle presents several arguments against the doctrine of volitions, of which two have generally been accorded the greatest weight. The first is that we do not know how to answer a variety of questions about volitions, which we would be able to ask if the theory were true: ‘Can they be sudden or gradual, strong or weak, difficult or easy, enjoyable or disagreeable? [...] Can we take lessons in executing them? Are they fatiguing or distracting?’ And so on. According to the theory, volitions should be encountered ‘vastly more frequently than headaches, or feelings of boredom’, but ‘if we do not know how to settle simple questions about their frequency, duration or strength, then it is fair to conclude that their existence is not asserted on empirical grounds.’¹⁹

In reply, it can be pointed out that while few of Ryle’s questions about volitions have straightforward answers, and it is hard to say anything sensible about their frequency, duration or strength, the same can be said about other mental operations, whose reality is not in doubt. How often do I acquire a belief in the course of a day? How many beliefs do I acquire when I walk into an unfamiliar room? Is acquiring beliefs a fatiguing or distracting business? And so on. But although Ryle’s argument is not decisive, it effectively put the volitionist on the back foot.

Ryle’s second influential argument is that the theory that voluntary acts are caused by volitions leads to an insoluble dilemma:

Some mental processes [...] can, according to the theory, issue from volitions. So what of the volitions themselves? Are they voluntary or involuntary acts of mind? Clearly either answer leads to absurdities. If I cannot help willing to pull the trigger, it would be absurd to describe my pulling it as ‘voluntary’. But if my volition to pull the trigger is voluntary, in the sense assumed by the theory, then it must issue from a prior volition and that from another *ad infinitum*.²⁰

This argument, which was sometimes described as a dilemma and sometimes as a regress, was widely regarded as conclusive for at least twenty years. For example, Anthony Kenny describes it as ‘decisive’.²¹ But the consensus weakened in the 1970s. For example, Jennifer Hornsby claimed that the argument is only effective against a theory that identifies volitions both with causes of actions and with actions themselves:

For the fundamental step is: whenever there is one action, there are two actions; and the conclusion is: there are infinitely many actions.²²

Arguably, both of these views about Ryle’s argument are partly right and partly wrong. For it is one thing to explain what makes an act or bodily movement voluntary, and another to explain what makes it active rather than passive, i.e. attributable to the agency of the individual whose body moves. Philosophers have tended to amalgamate these questions, but volitions can be postulated *either* to explain voluntariness or to explain agency. Arguably Ryle’s argument is effective against a volitionist theory of voluntariness, which is how Kenny interprets it, but not against a volitionist theory of agency, as Hornsby points out.²³

Collingwood, Wittgenstein and Ryle initiated a radical change of direction in the philosophy of action, because between them they shattered the empiricist consensus that a voluntary act is a movement of the body or a muscular contraction caused by a specific kind

¹⁸ Ryle 1949, pp. 54.

¹⁹ Ryle 1949, pp. 64f.

²⁰ Ryle 1949, p. 54.

²¹ Kenny 1975, p. 14.

²² Hornsby 1980, pp. 48f.

²³ Hyman 2015, ch. 1.

of conscious mental event, and challenged both the natural assumption that explanations of human behaviour refer to causes, and the positivist claim that they must therefore refer to regularities or natural laws.

In the next generation, some philosophers, notably G.H. von Wright, William Dray and Peter Winch, pursued Collingwood's idea that explanations in the social sciences are quite different from ones in the natural sciences, because the former aim to understand and interpret human action, whereas the latter seek to facilitate the prediction and control of natural events.²⁴ Others focused on the explanation of individual human action.²⁵ Among these, Anscombe and Davidson were the most influential, mainly because they persuaded philosophers—except for those who worked in philosophy of law—to stop thinking about voluntary action, and to think about intentional action, and action done for reasons, instead. It was as if the very concept of voluntary action had been discredited or rendered relatively unimportant by the destructive arguments of Wittgenstein and Ryle.

3. Anscombe and Davidson

Anscombe's book *Intention* (1957), which was mainly influenced by Aristotle, Aquinas and Wittgenstein, set the agenda for subsequent work in the philosophy of action, both directly and through its influence on Davidson.

In *Intention*, Anscombe sets out to elucidate a concept of intention that is common to three presumably related phenomena: (i) an intention to act, (ii) an intentional act, and (iii) an intention with which a person acts. Anscombe's approach was to focus on (ii) and (iii), and then to argue that (i) can be explained in terms of them (1957: §50f. p.90). Davidson initially agreed that an intention to act can be understood in this way but he subsequently came to regard 'pure intending' as 'the basic notion on which the others depend' (Davidson 1980: xvii). Various debates ensued, centred on whether Anscombe's or Davidson's view is right and, if Davidson is right, whether an intention to act is a *sui generis* mental state or attitude, possibly with the character of a mental plan or programme, or whether it can be reduced to some combination of judgements, beliefs and desires.²⁶

The most important ideas defended in *Intention* are, first, that the main kind of action that is characteristic of human beings is *intentional* rather than *voluntary* action; and, second, that an intentional act is one of which we can sensibly seek a particular kind of explanation. This is not a causal explanation. Instead, it gives the agent's *reason or justification* for doing the act. In other words, it explains what made the act seem worth doing from her point of view. Anscombe accepts that human action *can* have mental causes. For example, if you march up and down because you are excited by some martial music, hearing the music causes you to march up and down. But this does not mean that hearing the music is your *reason or justification* for marching up and down—in the case imagined you are not supposed to have a reason or justification—and Anscombe denies that a reason or justification is a mental cause.

Anscombe's proposal that intentional action can be defined by means of the concept of a *reason for acting* has been highly influential. But it is not obvious that it is true. For if we can sensibly ask for an agent's reason whenever she acts intentionally, it appears that we can ask the same question about some acts that are not intentional, notably ones that express emotions. For example, someone who reacts to a piece of news with a laugh or a curse may not do so intentionally, but it would not be plausible to insist that in that case she cannot be laughing or cursing for a reason. Of course, it may be a poor or insufficient reason. But

²⁴ von Wright, 1963 and 1971; Dray 1995; Winch 1958.

²⁵ Hampshire, 1959; Melden 1961; G.H. von Wright 1963 and 1971; Kenny 1963; Taylor, R. 1966.

²⁶ See Anscombe 1957; Davidson 1978; Searle 1983; Bratman 1987 and 1999; Velleman 1989; Setiya 2007; Thompson 2008.

equally, it may be a perfectly good reason, which fully justifies reacting in that way. We can certainly ask for an agent's *intention* or *goal* when she acts intentionally. But arguably 'reasons for acting' inform a broader range of human behaviour than intentions or goals. Anscombe's suggestion that the concept of a 'reason for acting' can be explained in terms of the good has also been disputed.²⁷

Another idea Anscombe defends in *Intention*, which also stimulated extensive debate, is that we need to be aware of the different descriptions that can be applied to a single act. Anscombe draws attention to the fact that we often do one thing by doing another thing. For example, suppose a man kills some people in a house by poisoning its water supply, which he does by working a pump, which he does by moving his arm up and down. How are these acts related? Is moving his arm *part* of killing the people? Or is one *cause* and the other *effect*? Or are they *one and the same* act described in different ways?

Anscombe's own view is the last.²⁸ But although it has the attraction of parsimony, if parsimony is considered desirable in this case, this solution faces difficulties, e.g. when it comes to determining when and where the act occurred. For if the killing *is* the movement of the man's arm, it follows that the killing and the movement happened in the same place and at the same time, and hence that the killing happened in the pump-house, some time before the victims died. Many philosophers have found these implications of the identity claim hard to accept, and have proposed alternative views about the nature, individuation and location of acts.²⁹

In his influential article 'Actions, Reasons and Causes', which developed out of a commission to write a review of Anthony Kenny's book *Action, Emotion and Will*, Davidson accepts that an explanation that identifies the agent's reason for doing an intentional act 'rationalises' or justifies the act. But he argues that it is *also* a causal explanation. An agent's reason, Davidson maintains, is a combination of a belief and a desire (or 'pro-attitude'), and when an agent acts for a reason, the reason—or an event closely associated with it, such as the onset of the desire—causes the act. It follows that when we explain an intentional act by identifying the agent's reason for doing it, this *is* a causal explanation.

Does it follow that the explanation subsumes the act and the reason—or associated event—under a generalisation or a law? For example, if a defendant charged with a criminal offence claims that he acted under duress, does he imply that he would respond to a threat in the same way again, or that he or others always respond to threats in that way? Davidson's ingenious reply to these questions is that the statement that an act was done for a certain reason *does* imply that a law covering the events concerned exists, but it does *not* imply that the same reason would always lead to the same act. For the relevant law need not be stated in the language of beliefs and desires. If beliefs and desires are physical states, the law can be stated in the language of physics instead.³⁰

Thus, Davidson accepts that if one event (becoming thirsty) causes another (reaching for a glass of water), the two events can be subsumed under a generalisation or law. But laws relate events under specific descriptions, and as Anscombe pointed out, different descriptions can be applied to a single event. Hence, it is a mistake to infer from the fact that identifying

²⁷ Velleman 1992; Tenenbaum 2010.

²⁸ Anscombe 1957 and 1979; Davidson 1970.

²⁹ Prichard 1949, O'Shaughnessy 1980, Hornsby 1980 and 1998, and Cleveland 1997 argue that acts are not movements of the body but their causes, which are instances of trying, endeavour or 'setting oneself to do something'. The problems about locating acts are if anything more acute on accounts of this kind. Others claim that acts are *sui generis* 'agential' events (Ginet 1990 and O'Connor 1995), or challenge the assumption that acts are events of any kind at all (von Wright 1963; Dretske 1988; Bennett 1995; Alvarez and Hyman 1998; Hyman 2015).

³⁰ Davidson 1970.

an agent's reason for doing an act is unlike the task of 'classifying [events] and establishing relations between the classes thus defined', that it is not a matter of identifying a cause.

After the publication of 'Actions, Reasons and Causes', Davidson's influence in the philosophy of action gradually overtook Wittgenstein's, and by the mid-1980s, the prevailing doctrine was as follows:

- An act is a movement of the agent's body, caused by a combination of mental states, which 'rationalises' or justifies it. This combination of mental states is the agent's 'reason' for doing the act.
- An agent's 'reason' causes an act *via* an intention.
- An act in its turn causes further events—such as when operating a pump causes the water in a tank to become poisoned—on account of which new descriptions can be applied to it (e.g. 'poisoning the water').
- An act is not intentional or unintentional absolutely, nor is it 'rationalised' absolutely, but only 'under' a particular description, or *qua* act of a particular kind. (The murder Oedipus committed was intentional *qua* killing but not *qua* parricide.)
- A particular bodily movement qualifies as an act, i.e. it is attributable to the agency of the individual whose body moves, because it is intentional 'under' *some* description.

Davidson's philosophy of action was widely accepted in outline, although many details were disputed,³¹ and some philosophers challenged it in fundamental ways.³²

It was generally agreed that Davidson's account was incomplete. For example, he had little to say about omissions.³³ But the most widely discussed difficulty Davidson's theory faces is the so-called problem of deviant causal chains, which Davidson himself drew attention to:

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.³⁴

This example shows that a reason can both cause and 'rationalise' an act without the agent doing the act intentionally, or for that reason. Davidson therefore maintains that when an agent acts intentionally her reason does not merely cause her act, it causes it *in the right way*. But what is the right way? Davidson and Anscombe agree that it is not possible to define the kind of causal route that is characteristic of intentional action, but they interpret this result in very different ways. In Anscombe's view, it confirms that intentional acts are not caused by beliefs and desires, whereas Davidson regards it as a consequence of the fact that beliefs and desires cannot be related to physical states by strict laws.³⁵ Others claim that it *is* possible to define the kind of causal route that is characteristic of intentional action; or alternatively that the problem of deviant causal chains shows that the nomothetic theory of causation Davidson

³¹ Lepore and McLaughlin 1985; Vermazen and Hintikka 1985; Stoecker 1993.

³² Kenny 1975; Frankfurt 1978; Schueler 1995 and 2003; Rundle 1997; Stoutland 1998; Wilson 1989; Sehon 2000 and 2016; Schroeder 2001; Ginet 1990; Tanney 2009; Mayr 2011; Hyman 2015.

³³ Vermazen 1985; Williams 1995; Bach 2010.

³⁴ Davidson 1980, 79.

³⁵ Anscombe 1989 and Davidson 1987.

took for granted cannot explain the exercise of causal powers.³⁶

Davidson's ideas dominated the philosophy of action in the 1970s and 1980s, but his influence began to wane in the 1990s, partly because of a revival of interest in some of the ideas in Anscombe's *Intention* that had been overshadowed by his work.³⁷ As a result, first, the concepts of reason and reasoning, and the distinctions and relationships between different kinds of reasons, have been more widely debated, and Davidson's claim that reasons are mental states has been more widely and effectively challenged as a result.³⁸ Second, the role of knowledge in intentional action—especially (but not exclusively) an agent's knowledge of her own action—has been studied closely.³⁹ Finally, the temporal dimension of action has been accorded more importance than before, and it has been argued that we need to add the category of process to those of continuant, state and event, in order to account for the ontology of action.⁴⁰

4. Conclusion

The philosophy of action continues to develop. Many topics that we have not been able to touch upon are being studied intensively, such as unconscious motivation and 'implicit bias', virtue, character, emotion, strength and weakness of will (*akrasia*), and mental acts. The topic of acts by institutions, collectives and groups, and the question whether these are reducible to acts by individuals, have been the subject of some especially interesting work.⁴¹ Some philosophers have embraced a methodological shift towards empirical work, either by engaging in so-called 'experimental philosophy', or by drawing extensively on cognitive science, psychiatry and neuroscience, especially in connection with free will and moral responsibility.⁴² At the same time, the central questions that connect the philosophical study of human action with metaphysics, epistemology and ethics have not received definitive answers, and the arguments and problems introduced by Collingwood, Wittgenstein, Ryle, Anscombe and Davidson are far from being played out.

³⁶ See Goldman 1970; Peacocke 1979; Mele 1992; Bishop 1989; Hyman 2015. For a detailed discussion see Mayr 2011, ch. 5.

³⁷ *Intention* was reissued in 2000, having been out of print for many years.

³⁸ Raz 1975 and 1999; Parfit 1984 and 2011; Quinn, 1993; Hyman 1999; Smith 1994; Scanlon 1998; Dancy 2000; Bittner 2001; Alvarez 2010; Sandis 2012.

³⁹ See various essays in Ford, Hornsby and Stoutland 2011.

⁴⁰ Stout 1996 and 1997; Thompson 2008; Hornsby 2012; Steward 2012; Lavin 2015.

⁴¹ See for example Tuomela 2007 and List & Pettit 2011.

⁴² Knobe and Nichols 2008 and 2013, Mele 2009, Murphy, Ellis and O'Connor 2009 and Levy 2014 are representative of some of these developments.

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