



# On the Problem of Action

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## On the Problem of Action

Douglas Lavin

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### 1. Introduction

You will agree that Thomas Pynchon's third *Proverb for Paranoids* is equally suited to philosophers: "If they can get you asking the wrong questions, they don't have to worry about the answers." I begin by contrasting two ways of motivating and framing the basic problem of action theory: the *standard (decompositional) approach* through Wittgenstein's question 'What is left over?' and *Anscombe's approach* through a sense of the question 'Why?'. Neither philosophers nor paranoids will be surprised that the form of a question can determine the answer arrived at, that ways of getting into philosophical reflection are correlated with ways of getting out. In this case, the two approaches to action are correlated with substantively different conceptions of the nature of intentional bodily or physical action: on the one hand, as a compound of metaphysically independent inner-psychical and outer-material elements joined by a generic bond of causality, and, on the other, as an essentially self-conscious and rational form of material process.<sup>1</sup> These approaches are also correlated with a number of salient, though infrequently discussed, differences of focus and emphasis, diets of example, habits of expression, and strategies of argument. I want to describe some of these differences as well. The contrasting features typically figure among the innocent preliminaries and as part of the pre-theoretical background. My hope is that such features will lose the appearance of innocence and inevitability when held up against an alternative. I end with some remarks on a particular place where the differences between these two approaches come to a head, specifically in the idea of teleologically basic action: an action is basic in this sense when no means are taken in its execution. My aim is to raise

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I would like to thank Matthew Boyle, Eric Marcus and Ram Neta for very helpful discussion of drafts of this paper.

<sup>1</sup> To avoid misunderstanding let me say that the following discussion is concerned with specifically *intentional* action, though I usually speak simply of action. This is a terminological choice. For discussion of the importance of recognizing the more abstract category of self-movement, of which intentional self-movement is a species, see my and Matthew Boyle's "Goodness and Desire," in *Desire, Practical Reason and the Good*, ed. S. Tenenbaum (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 161-201.

some doubts about the legitimacy of this concept and thereby about the merits of the decompositional approach, which crucially depends on it. Where our understanding of action is organized around basic action, I will suggest, we cannot make sense of the specifically practical or productive character of self-awareness in action. When we give it up, the meaning and appeal of the Anscombean conception of will as a power of practical cognition, “the cause of what it understands,” comes into view.

## 2. Wittgensteinian arithmetic and the decompositional approach

*Wittgensteinian arithmetic.* “Let us not forget this: when ‘I raise my arm,’ my arm goes up. And the problem arises: What is left over if I subtract the fact that my arm goes up from the fact that I raise my arm?”<sup>2</sup> It is safe to say that this bit of Wittgensteinian arithmetic is the standard point of departure in contemporary action theory. It elicits and directs philosophical curiosity and interest. This matters because the question itself forces a definite shape on subsequent reflection. It presupposes that to spell out what it is to do something intentionally – what it comes to that, say, I raised my arm – is to describe a compound of metaphysically distinct explanatory factors.<sup>3</sup>

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

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

My arm’s rising and the matchbox’s moving are physical events, elements of the observable world of matter in motion. Of course, one’s arm might rise or a matchbox might move even if one does not raise the one or move the other — maybe it’s just the wind. It will seem to some, as it does to John Searle, that “in such a case we have a bodily movement which may be *exactly the same* as the bodily movement in an intentional action.”<sup>4</sup> A presupposition of

<sup>2</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1963), §621.

<sup>3</sup> I do *not* mean to suggest that Wittgenstein’s aim in displaying the naturalness of thinking about action through this question is to encourage us to answer it.

<sup>4</sup> John Searle, *Intentionality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 89. But does the fact that  $S$ ’s being  $F$  implies  $S$ ’s being  $G$ , but that  $S$  can be  $G$  without being  $F$ , entail that it must be possible to decompose  $S$ ’s being  $F$  into  $S$ ’s being  $G$  and  $S$ ’s being  $H$ , where  $H$  is some nontrivial further condition, not identical to  $F$  itself? Answer is: No. For instance,  $S$ ’s being red implies  $S$ ’s being colored, and  $S$  can be colored without being

Wittgensteinian arithmetic is that an account of the nature of action begins with a not-intrinsically-intentional movement ('my arm's rising<sub>intransitive</sub>', 'the matchbox's moving<sub>intransitive</sub>'), and through the addition of further distinct factors to the equation, comes to characterize what amounts to intentional action ('I raised my arm,' 'I moved the matchbox'). On this view, action consists of a not-intrinsically-intentional physical event, a 'mere happening,' occurring in a context where certain further facts obtain. The basic task for the philosophical investigation of action is now set: to arrive at a specification of these further facts, of what is to be added. The central questions of action theory will then concern how to specify the something else (beliefs, desires, intentions, policies, acts of will, the agent herself, others?), and how to characterize the sort of relation (event-causal, agent-causal, triggering, structuring, sustaining, others?) joining this to 'what merely happens' when someone does something intentionally.

Whatever the disputes about how to execute this task properly, and there are many, those taking it up share two further, intertwined assumptions which together constitute the framework of the *decompositional approach* to the theory of action. The first concerns causality, the second, the role of the mind in action.

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

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red, but there is no prospect of analyzing what it is for *S* to be red into *S*'s being colored plus some nontrivial further condition. Likewise with lots of cases: being a parent and being an ancestor, arguably; being a horse and being an animal, arguably; knowing something and believing something, arguably (cp. Timothy Williamson, *Knowledge and Its Limits* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000]); perceiving something and having an experience of something, arguably (cp. John McDowell, "Criteria, Defeasibility and Knowledge," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 68 (1982): 455-79). To infer that, if being *G* is a necessary but not sufficient condition for being *F*, there must be some nontrivial *H* which, when conjoined with *G*, constitutes a necessary and sufficient condition for being *F*, might be called the *fallacy of analysis*. For particular application to the analysis of action see Anton Ford, "Action and Generality," in *Essays on Anscombe's Intention*, ed. A. Ford, J. Hornsby, and F. Stoutland (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), ch. 2.

with transitive and intransitive forms:

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

The schema makes plain that causality, in some sense, is central to agency and its exercise in action.<sup>5</sup> But on the decompositional conception, it reveals more than this: it identifies a further distinct factor that can be added to the Wittgensteinian equation. According to the decompositional theorist, doing something intentionally (I raised my arm, I moved the matchbox) *is* a mere happening (my arm's rising, the matchbox's moving) *caused* by some factor  $x$ , so that solving for this  $x$  would be tantamount to laying bare the metaphysical structure of action.

It is crucial to note that this step is non-trivial, not a mere restatement of the innocuous verbal implication captured by (Causality). To see this, consider first a parallel verbal implication: I painted the door red only if I colored the door red; and likewise I stained (lacquered, dyed, glazed...) the door red only if I colored the door red. Obviously, we do not articulate a distinct factor in the analysis of intentional action by displaying this common element of 'coloring.' This is not only because the 'verbs of coloring' are such a limited class, but because 'I colored the door red' is itself simply another ordinary action description. It raises exactly the same questions as the more determinate reports of action ('I painted...', 'I lacquered...'). Admittedly, the class of transitive causative verbs is more abstract and wide-ranging than the class of coloring verbs. But why should this fact raise hopes that (Causality) is a significant step in the decompositional analysis of action? After all, if 'cause  $Y$  to  $A_{\text{intransitive}}$ ' is itself just the verb phrase in an ordinary action description, the implication licensed by (Causality) would not reveal the causal element in everyday practical thought to be *a distinct factor that might figure in a non-trivial analysis of action*. Why think it is otherwise?

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

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<sup>5</sup> Here I am following Jennifer Hornsby's discussion of causative transitive verbs in *Actions* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), ch.1 and Appendix A.

(Event Nominalization)  $X$  caused  $Y$  to  $A_{intransitive}$  just when  $X$  caused  $Y$ 's  $A$ -  
ing<sub>intransitive</sub>.

The principle of (Event Nominalization) allows us to transpose subject-verb statements (' $X$  caused  $Y$  to  $A$ ') into a grammatically relational form (' $X$  caused  $Y$ 's  $A$ -ing'). Here the causality that agency involves takes on the appearance of a relation which obtains between distinct particulars, and is, to that extent, logically and metaphysically like, say, the relations 'is larger than,' 'is on top of' and 'precedes.' The decompositional approach characteristically takes appearances at face value: it presupposes that the causal element introduced by the transitive verbs employed in ordinary representation of action is a *real relation* between distinct, fully determinate particulars — some factor  $x$  and a mere happening.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the relation here is itself generic: the principles that transform 'I moved the matchbox' into 'I caused the matchbox's moving' also transform 'the sun warmed the stone' into 'the sun caused the stone's warming.' So it appears that the causal element involved in intentional action description is no different from the causal element involved in the description of interactions that are not intentional actions. And again the decompositional theorist characteristically takes appearances at face value: the causality involved in action is, he assumes, just an instance of causality we encounter elsewhere, perhaps everywhere else, in nature.

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

*Mind in action.* This brings us to the second characteristic assumption of the decompositional approach, about the role of mind in action.

Again, our starting-point is a truism. When I do something intentionally or with

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<sup>6</sup> But *must* we take these appearances seriously? At the very least, there is room for a different view of the matter. After all, the verbs 'wore' in 'Jones wore a smile,' 'take' in 'Smith took a bath,' and 'perform' in 'I performed an act of moving the matchbox' do not express real relations even though the surface grammar of these sentences is relational. For further discussion, see John Hyman, "-ings and -ers," *Ratio* 14 (2001): 298-317, and Wilfrid Sellars on the logic of 'looks' in "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind," in *Science, Perception and Reality* (Atascadero: Ridgeview Publishing Company, 1991), 127-196.

reason, I do not do it unwittingly, but knowingly in execution of an aim. We use certain forms of emphasis to mark this (*I* did it, *I myself*). We speak explicitly of the person or rational agent as the source and guide of what happens. And we speak of the mind ('I've got a mind to...') and certain determinations of mind ('This is my will...') in this role: in action I give the world a piece of my mind, I impose my will on the world. This is unruly language. We domesticate it a bit by replacing talk of mind and will with a certain range of psychological judgments: When I raise my arm, I want (intend, try, aim) to raise it. Quite generally, where *X*'s *A*-ing is an intentional action:

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

Where (Causality) explicitly registers a causal element in everyday talk of action, (Mind) explicitly registers a psychological element: an action is a kind of happening that bears a certain relation to the subject's own aims and purposes. One does not need to be a decompositional theorist to recognize something sound in this observation: anyone who understands what action is should admit it. But again, the decompositional theorist characteristically adopts a certain non-trivial interpretation of the point. He first observes that the following is possible: someone intends (wants, aims, etc.) to raise his arm, even though his arm does not go up — maybe he has had a change of mind, maybe he is prevented, maybe once upon a time William James has secretly etherized his arm upon a table, in which case nothing at all happens. And this observation appears to confirm what his interpretation of the other elements involved in the constitution of action already implies: that the psychological factor involved in intentional action is analytically distinguishable from the elements of movement and of causality. The latter elements — the rising of an arm or the moving of a matchbook, and the causal relation in virtue of which these events are connected to something mental — are not themselves intrinsically mind-involving. The arm-rising is of a kind that could occur whether or not it is caused by an intention, and the causal relation to the arm-rising, too, is not a special kind of causal nexus, say, a connection partly constituted or governed by intention, but a generic causality that also binds, say, the sun to a stone, fire to smoke or a dog to its bone. And by the same token, the existence of the psychological element involved in action does not by itself imply the existence of any outward movement or change. Whatever might tend to follow in its wake, the act of mind

involved in intentionally doing something is entirely complete in its existence even when it remains utterly without effect: it is, in this respect, like a wish or a daydream, a ‘purely interior’ thing.

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

### *3. Anscombe’s question ‘Why?’ and a non-decompositional approach*

“*Enquiries into the question ‘Why?’*” I want to suggest that G. E. M. Anscombe’s *Intention* contains the seeds of a wholly other, non-decompositional approach to understanding action, an approach grounded in a different sort of inquiry, prompted by a different sort of demand.<sup>7</sup> But when our outlook has been shaped by the decompositional approach, the heterodoxy of Anscombe’s question, the task that it sets, and the account it delivers can be difficult to recognize.

Some familiar ways of placing *Intention* on the action theoretical map read it, in effect, as addressing the kinds of questions that arise within the decompositional framework.<sup>8</sup> Although I understand the impetus to read Anscombe through this lens, it does not square

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<sup>7</sup> G.E.M. Anscombe, *Intention* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000). Further references to this text, by section number, will be internal.

<sup>8</sup> Think, for example, of the tendency to read Anscombe’s opening remarks on three ways we use the word ‘intention’ as showing that the concept applies both to minds (inner mental states) and movements (outer worldly happenings), with a view to then raising familiar, decompositionally-oriented questions about their interrelations, but then subsequently developing unfamiliar answers, which give explanatory priority to an outer, merely behavioral element. Or think of the tendency to treat her dismissive remarks about an appeal to the concept ‘cause’ in an account of action as displaying allegiance to an alternative candidate for the real relation joining thought and movement when someone does something for a reason.



with her text.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, at several points, she seems to express opposition to the entire decompositional approach: it is a mistake, she says in §47, to begin with the idea of a prior and independently constituted domain of material events and then to go looking for a difference within this; “we do not add anything” to what happens, she says in §19, in describing someone’s doing something as intentional. But if that is not the shape the understanding of action takes, the decompositional question ‘What is left over when I subtract what happens from what I do intentionally?’ is not the way to make the need for such understanding palpable. But then what else, if anything, is?<sup>10</sup>

It might appear that to reject the enterprise of decomposition is simply to give up on the project of explaining what action is. And yet, Anscombe also opposes those who would take ‘doing something intentionally’ to be a conceptual or metaphysical primitive. Now, as everyone knows, Anscombe defines the concept of intentional action in terms of “a certain sense of the question ‘Why?’”: action is what “gives application” to this question; it is such as to figure in a certain form of explanation or account (§5).<sup>11</sup> What exactly is the relevant sense of “Why”? It is, she says, the sense that asks for a ‘reason for acting’, but she then rejects this characterization on the ground that it is unilluminating. We do not elucidate the concept of

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<sup>9</sup> The recent collection *Essays on Anscombe’s Intention* contains a number of essays especially concerned to bring out just how utterly different Anscombe’s account is from anything available within the decompositional framework. I have already mentioned Ford’s “Action and Generality”; see also, in this volume, Jennifer Hornsby, “Actions in Their Circumstances,” Richard Moran and Martin Stone, “Anscombe on Expression of Intention: An Exegesis,” Fredrick Stoutland, “Anscombe’s *Intention* in Context,” and Michael Thompson, “Anscombe’s *Intention* and Practical Knowledge.” Elsewhere, see Rosalind Hursthouse, “Intention,” in *Logic, Cause and Action*, ed. R. Teichmann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) and Candace Vogler, “Anscombe on Practical Inference,” in *Varieties of Practical Reasoning*, ed. E. Millgram (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001).

<sup>10</sup> As I read it, the central aim of Anscombe’s opening discussion of the three ways we speak of ‘intention’, as well as of a number of other early remarks, is to show that an account is needed by inducing a condition of Augustinian perplexity. She says that when we are inclined to speak of different senses of a word which is not equivocal, we are “in the dark” about the *kind* (not simply the content) of concept it represents. And yet, what could be more familiar—the phenomenon of intention is a pervasive and ineliminable part of human life. Moreover, unlike some other pervasive and ineliminable parts of human life, such as cell division, intentional action seems to be a process of which we necessarily have immediate and privileged knowledge. As Anscombe observes, if our concern were simply to determine on any particular occasion whether someone’s saying “I am going to such-and-such” is a prediction or an expression of intention, or if our concern were to determine, when someone is doing such-and-such, whether this is something she is doing intentionally, we could simply ask the subject. The subject who acts is in a special position to tell us what we want to know. And, as we will see, Anscombe’s approach to the general theory of action presupposes this: it is essentially an interrogation of one who does things for reasons. The resulting account is merely the development of the self-consciousness of the agent.

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

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

Now, one respect in which Anscombe’s approach contrasts with the decompositional approach comes out in this characterization of the concept ‘intentional’ as grounded in a special “*form* of description of events.” The characterization implies that event description – the description of worldly happenings unfolding over time – takes several distinct forms, and that we make progress in philosophical understanding by differentiating them. By contrast, the decompositional theorist is committed to showing apparently diverse forms of event description – transitive descriptions of intentional actions, and intransitive descriptions of events that carry no implication of agency – to be of a single basic form. On his view, the only form of description of worldly happening we must recognize in the analysis of action carries no implication of intentional agency: intransitive, not-intrinsically-intentional descriptions of mere (bodily) movements. Understanding intentional action does not require

recognizing another, irreducibly different form of event description for an analysis: events describable as intentional actions turn out just to consist in intransitive, not-intrinsically-intentional (bodily) movements with certain specific causes. Thus the project of the decompositional theorist is precisely not to understand action by specifying its distinctive form of event description; his project is rather to identify a single, homogenous class of event descriptions common to intentional actions and non-intentional happenings, and then to specify further features that events describable in this way must exhibit when someone has done something intentionally.<sup>12</sup>

Another contrast between Anscombe's approach and the decompositional approach comes out in details of the 'scene of action' launching her inquiry. Recall that the decompositional approach begins here: someone *has done* something ('I moved the matchbox,' 'I raised my arm'). The crucial first step in raising the problem of action is to *eliminate* the point of view of the agent from the description of what takes place ('The matchbox moved,' 'My arm rose'), here conceived as fully determinate particulars ('the matchbox's moving,' 'my arm's going up'). At the outset, our attention is focused on what is already there and not anybody's doing. The subsequent investigation is chiefly an attempt to make our way back. Anscombe's approach begins elsewhere: someone observes another *in the midst of doing* something (I see that she is walking upstairs). And then, in a crucial step in

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<sup>12</sup> This is not the place to enter into the details of the various ways one might work out a single, undifferentiated conception of the form of event talk. I have used formulations emphasizing the contrast of transitive and intransitive verbs to maintain contact with our earlier discussion of the decompositional theory. Still, to my mind, the account of event representation put in place by Donald Davidson in "The Logical Form of Action Sentences," in *The Logic of Decision and Action*, ed. N. Rescher (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 1966), 105-48 (which we all know has nothing especially to do with action) and worked out in terrific detail by Terence Parsons in *Events in the Semantics of English* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990) is the most powerful framework within which to develop a decompositional theory of action. The central idea is that ordinary event talk — whether transitive or intransitive ("The sun melted the wax," "The wax melted"), whether of something done intentionally or not ("Jones turned on the light," "Jones alerted the prowler") — is about a special class of concrete particulars, what Davidson calls 'events'. On this analysis, the sentences have the structure of existential quantification over this domain: 'For some event *e*, *e* is such that...'. In this framework, the commitment to the homogeneity of event description shows up most directly in this: the principle of individuation of events is prior to and independent of the truth of any descriptions of someone's having done something intentionally. And so toward the end of his seminal essay, Davidson says, "This leaves the question what logical form the expression that introduces intention should have. It is obvious, I hope, that the adverbial form must be in some way deceptive; intentional actions are not a class of actions, or, to put the point a little differently, doing something intentionally is not a manner of doing it." Davidson, "The Logical Form of Action Sentences," 104.

framing the task for action theory, the observer addresses an explanatory question to the observed (I ask her ‘Why are you walking upstairs?’), thereby entering *the point of view of the self-conscious subject*. At the outset, our attention is focused on what we might call the standpoint of the agent looking ahead – the view from within, on what is not yet done (‘Why am I walking upstairs, you ask? I am walking upstairs because...’). Anscombe’s subsequent investigation is essentially an interrogation of this practical self-consciousness. The approach presupposes that knowledge of the nature of agency, of the efficacy of will, is internal to it. Here the task for the philosophy of action is not to substitute knowledge for ignorance, but to make explicit what must, in some sense, already be known simply in being an agent.

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

*The temporality of movement.* To get this temporal structure properly in view we must not conduct our discussion using only the abstract nouns (e.g., ‘event,’ ‘process,’ ‘happening,’ ‘behavior,’ ‘action’) and event-denoting noun phrases (e.g., ‘Jones’ raising of his arm,’ ‘the matchbox’s moving,’ ‘the movement of the matchbox’) that are the stock-in-trade of action theory. We must focus on the representation of movement in complete thoughts.

Consider the following:

(1) Jones was walking across the street.

(2) Jones walked across the street.

The subject (Jones), predicate (walk across the street) and tense (past) are common features of these thoughts. And yet they are not the same: that Jones was walking across the street does not entail that Jones walked across the street. The propositions differ in aspect. What the proposition with imperfective aspect (1) represents as in-progress and underway, the correlated proposition with perfective aspect (2) represents as finished and done. The aspectual contrast is a distinction among ways in which subject and predicate combine to form a complete thought. Of course, ‘walk across the street’ can also enter into thought bearing the present tense:

(3) Jones is walking across the street.

The subject (Jones), predicate (walk across the street) and aspect (imperfective) are common to it and (1). But they are not the same: that Jones was walking across the street does not entail that Jones is walking across the street. They differ only in tense: what (3) casts in the present tense (1) casts in the past. And, now, what of the other past tense thought, the past-perfective (2)? What contrasts with it simply in bearing the present tense? Answer: nothing. Perfective aspect is logically incompatible with present tense meaning.<sup>13</sup> There are, then, two possibilities for predicating ‘walk across the street’ in the past tense, but only a single possibility in the present. Put into a metaphysical register the point is this: ‘walk across the street’ has two ways of ‘being past’ (‘being in progress’ and ‘being complete’) yet only one way of ‘being present’ (‘being in progress’).

Of course, the distinction of aspect (as well as the corresponding metaphysical contrast between being underway and being complete) has nothing especially to do with ‘walking across the street,’ or quite generally, with concepts deployed in action. The predicative materials in, say, ‘The sun is setting,’ ‘The cherry tree is blooming,’ ‘The robin is flying to its

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<sup>13</sup> The claim is that perfective thought (‘Jones walked across the street’) cannot be analyzed in terms of the past tense of a present tense thought (It was the case that *p*) because there is no present tense thought to do the relevant work. I will not try make the argument here. For discussion see Antony Galton, *The Logic of Aspect* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 1-23; Sebastian Rödl, *Categories of the Temporal: An Inquiry into the Forms of the Finite Intellect* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 154-9; Michael Thompson, *Life and Action* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 122-8.

nest,’ and ‘Jones is baking a cake’ admit the contrast of aspect which is captured in this abstract table of judgments:

(Kinēsis 1)

	<i>Past</i>	<i>Present</i>
<i>imperfective</i>	<i>S was <math>\phi</math>-ing</i>	<i>S is <math>\phi</math>-ing</i>
<i>perfective</i>	<i>S <math>\phi</math>-ed</i>	

I have been drawing on a tradition reaching back to Aristotle whose abstract category of *kinēsis* (movement) is specified in these aspectual terms. A predicate expresses a *kinēsis* when it generates the contrast of aspect, that is, when it can enter into propositions of the distinct forms represented in our table (Kinēsis 1).<sup>14</sup>

Now, ‘Jones walked across the street’ and ‘Jones is walking across the street’ are not simply independent propositions: they have the same subject and predicate. Moreover, no one should deny that the difference is, in some sense, temporal: after all, (2) is past while (3) is present. The question is, how should we understand this difference if not as the sum of a difference in tense, available prior to and independent of the contrast of aspect, plus an additional difference of aspect? Our three propositions come as a package, and we grasp the distinctive temporality of movement through reflection on the relations among them. I want to make two points in this connection. First, walking across the street, flying to a nest, and movement generally, *take time*. The contrast of aspect specifies a duration internal to movement: *S  $\phi$ -ed* only if *S was  $\phi$ -ing* but had not yet  *$\phi$ -ed*. At the heart of the perfective is the idea of *progress come to completion*. Second, walking across the street, flying to a nest, and movement generally, can be *interrupted*. The contrast of aspect specifies an end or limit internal to movement: *S is  $\phi$ -ing* only if *S* has not yet  *$\phi$ -ed* but looks forward to having  *$\phi$ -ed*. At the heart of the imperfective is the idea of *completion not yet attained*. But in what sense does, say, ‘Jones is walking across the street’ involve the description of the here and now in the light of completion? Not by incorporating the actual future into the description of current events. Being in progress is compatible with never finishing: *S is  $\phi$ -ing* does not entail *S* will have  *$\phi$ -ed*. Still, the concept deployed in imperfective judgment (‘walk across the

<sup>14</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics* Theta 6, 1048b18-35. I was introduced to the philosophical importance of the topic of aspect by Thompson’s discussion of “Naïve Action Theory” (in *Life and Action*, 85-148) and also have been helped especially by Galton, *The Logic of Aspect*, Rödl, *Categories of the Temporal*, and Sarah Waterlow, *Nature, Change and Agency in Aristotle’s Physics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).

street’) specifies a terminus or limit (‘being across the street’), a point beyond which progressive truth cannot continue. Only this stopping point is internal to the description of the proceedings: it specifies what is to be, even if not what will be in fact. When things don’t turn out (bus accident half-way across), we say that things were interrupted, that something interfered. And these expressions, like progressive truth itself, presuppose the presence of a real tendency toward (and not just an idle hope of) completion.<sup>15</sup>

I have said that action, indeed, *kinēsis* (movement) quite generally, takes time and tends toward completion. Moreover, when a movement is underway and so not yet complete, it is incomplete by degree (*X* is just getting going, about half-way done, almost there). This is a presupposition of the thought that a *kinēsis* is quick, slow or some speed: when something is underway there is a rate at which it is approaching completion.<sup>16</sup> In the typical case, as *X* is doing *A* through an interval, less and less still needs to be done. Things are coming along. But what exactly does such progress consist in? It consists in a connection to *other* movements, themselves at various stages of completion:

- The sun is setting: the sun went partially below the horizon, it is now sinking further below.
- The cat is stalking a bird: the cat crouched down, the cat is now slinking along.
- I am walking from Athens to Delphi: I walked from Athens to Thebes, now I am walking from Thebes to Delphi.

When something has begun, is in progress and not yet complete; when *X* is doing *A*, something else has already been done and other things are underway. It will be possible to link the process ascription ‘*X* is doing *A*’ with these others by saying ‘in that’ and then mentioning *other things* that have already happened (a minute ago it did *A*\*\*), and *further things* that are happening (at the moment it’s doing *A*\*):

(Kinēsis 2) *S* is  $\phi$ -ing in that *S*  $\psi$ -ed and *S* is  $\omega$ -ing.<sup>17</sup>

As before, this is part of a depiction of the abstract category of movement and thus a

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<sup>15</sup> The thought is developed in section 4 of Boyle and Lavin, “Goodness and Desire.”

<sup>16</sup> Aristotle, *EN* 1173a32-1173b5.

<sup>17</sup> Aristotle, *EN* 1174a22-24. The idea is again Aristotle’s: “In their parts and during the time they occupy, all movements are incomplete, and are different in kind from the whole movement and from each other.”

structure that we find in any determinate form of movement (or process, or event).

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

*Forms of progress.* Having noted these structural features of event and process description in general, we can return to our project of clarifying the approach to understanding action implicit in Anscombe’s claim that the term “intentional” relates to a “form of description of events.” This, in turn, will sharpen our sense of how her conception of a philosophical understanding of action contrasts with the conception characteristic of the decompositional approach.

A principal result of our consideration of the temporality of events and processes was this: where a process unfolds over time, there is some principle in virtue of which the phases of the process constitute a unity. There will, accordingly, be grounds for distinguishing different *forms* of event or process where there are distinguishable kinds of principles of unity of parts or phases in a whole. In particular, we would have grounds for recognizing intentional action as a distinctive form of event if we had grounds for recognizing a distinctive type of unity that belongs specifically to intentional actions – a kind of unity we look for when we consider what happenings in a person’s life are intentional actions, a unity



whose presence is implied by any event-or-process description that is rightly characterized as ‘intentional.’ I want to suggest that Anscombe’s investigation of action gives us grounds for recognizing such a distinctive form of unity, and that her characterization of it just is the substance of her account of action.

Anscombe’s account famously begins with an identification of a special “sense of the question ‘Why?’,” and proceeds to describe a distinctive sort of order (“the A-D order”) that characteristically structures answers to this why-question. We have already noted that her account of the relevant why-question privileges the standpoint of the agent, inasmuch as this question is characteristically put *to the agent herself* at a moment *while she is acting*, and is supposed to be “refused application” if an agent says, of some activity *A*-ing about which she is queried, “I didn’t know I was *A*-ing” (§6?) In her, description of the A-D order, Anscombe supplements this characterization of the why-question’s addressee with a positive characterization of the kind of answer that it invites – the kind of answer it accepts as an explanation of a person’s intentionally doing something. In the course of her discussion, it emerges that Anscombe’s special question “Why are you *A*-ing?” admits of a variety of kinds of answers: for example, the kinds I give when I say that I am tapping a spot on the wall ‘for no particular reason,’ have just kicked Jones ‘out of anger’ or ‘because he killed my brother’, am returning five dollars to Smith ‘because I promised,’ am massaging my foot ‘because I like to,’ or am seeking to help another in need ‘from duty’ or ‘for its own sake.’ Yet the characterization of one particular kind of answer is the heart of her account.<sup>18</sup> This answer takes a teleological form: it cites a further aim or objective that I am pursuing by *A*-ing, an aim I spell out by saying

I am doing *A* in order to do *B*

or

I am doing *A* because I am doing *B*.

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<sup>18</sup> In §20 of *Intention*, Anscombe asks, “Would intentional actions still have the characteristic ‘intentional,’ if there were no such thing as...further intention in acting?” She answers: no. Her thought is that the very idea of a general capacity for intentional action contains the idea of a capacity to act on the basis of specifically instrumental thought, or again to act from a further intention or ‘forward-looking motive.’ It is this specific kind of answer to ‘Why?’ that shows the capacity for intentional action, agency, to be a power to realize or actualize concepts.

Moreover, Anscombe suggests that explanations of this type can and characteristically do come in chains or nested series, so that the kind of explanatory structure at issue here can be called an ‘order.’ Thus, to take her well-known example of the man pumping poisoned water into a house cistern: he moves his arm up and down, operates the pump, replenishes the house water supply, and poisons the inhabitants. As Anscombe imagines them, such lists are not mere aggregates (A, B, C, D) or mere sequences of actions (A and then B, B and then...), but elements of an explanatory order of means and ends. The end accounts for the means: it is the reason *why* the means are taken. (‘Why are you doing A?’ ‘To do B.’ ‘And why that?’ ‘To do C.’ etc.). The why-question eliciting these explanations has Anscombe’s special sense, and its repeated application displays our actions as an *order of ends*:

A  
in order to  
B  
in order to  
C  
in order to  
D

But equally, the means account for the end: the means are *how* the end is realized. (‘How are you doing D?’ ‘By doing C.’ ‘And that?’ ‘Doing B.’ ‘But how?’ ‘By doing A.’) The how-question eliciting these explanations does not simply ask ‘How did it happen?’ but ‘How are you doing it?’. And its repeated application displays our actions as an *order of means*:

D  
by means of  
C  
by means of  
B  
by means of  
A

The means-end order is an explanatory order because it captures that for the sake of which things are done, and also, and equally, because it captures that by means of which things get done. Indeed, there is a certain symmetry between purpose and efficacy. The order of means displayed by ‘How?’ is a mirror image of the order of ends displayed by ‘Why?’:

D	A
by means of	in order to
C	B

by means of B	in order to C
by means of A	in order to D

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

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

where  $\omega$ -ing is taken by the agent to be, and in the happy case is, a means conducive to, or a more specific activity constitutive of,  $\phi$ -ing. Secondly, this ordering of means to ends is characteristically *self-conscious* in the following sense: the agent herself is aware of the elements that are ordered (for if she were not aware of them, the relevant why-question would not apply), and of the order in which they stand (for it is precisely this order that she is expected to articulate in response to Anscombe’s question ‘Why?’). Moreover, her awareness is not merely a passive cognizance of the means-end structure of her own activity; where an instance of (Telic Explanation) is true, it is precisely *because* she takes doing  $\omega$  to be a means of doing  $\phi$ , and has herself determined to do  $\phi$ , that she is doing  $\omega$  — and so on up to whatever over-arching aim governs her present activity. In this sense, we could say that the subject’s awareness of her own activity is agential awareness, an awareness that does not merely recognize but determines the order, and thus the progress, it comprehends. Thus Anscombe calls the awareness articulated in response to her why-question “practical knowledge,” knowledge that is “the cause of what it understands.” Such knowledge, being inseparable from the order of events-in-progress that it governs, can be articulated by the subject in explanatory propositions with a first-person subject, as in

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

where the relevant ‘because’ implies the subject’s determination to do  $A$  in order to fulfill her

wider aim of doing *B*.

My suggestion, in short, is that Anscombe's A-D order is an ordering of elements united in such a way as to satisfy (Telic Explanation) and (Agential Awareness), and that, if Anscombe is right, this form of unity is essential and specific to the kind of event or process that intentional action is. It is essential to the extent that the applicability of Anscombe's why-question genuinely characterizes the class of events that are actions; and it is specific inasmuch as the mode of order or unity brought out by this question belongs specially to just these events. I will not attempt to defend these claims here: to do so would be to argue for the adequacy of Anscombe's account of action. My concern in the present essay is simply to make clear what sort of account she is offering.<sup>19</sup> For present purposes, the crucial point is that, in the proposed characterization of this form of unity of parts or phases within an overarching event or process, we do not leave *either* the point of view of the agent *or* the description of material processes. The elements of causality and mind that the decompositional approach represents as separable elements in an account of action, distinct from the characterization of the material process (what happens) that constitutes the action proper, appear in this story as structuring features of the relevant sort of material process itself: we are concerned with a kind of event or process whose principle of unity just is that the parts should come about *because* of the *subject's apprehension* of their contribution to a certain whole. If this characterization succeeds, we will have characterized an essentially self-conscious, self-constituting form of material progress, and thereby clarified what sort of thing an intentional action could be.

#### *4. Examples of action: decompositional and non-decompositional*

Having now seen how, from the outset, the Anscombean approach to understanding action

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<sup>19</sup> A first step in defending this Anscombean approach to understanding action would be to note (1) how the generic notion of a process proceeding toward some limit admits of a distinction between *non-telic* processes, in which parts or phases accumulate toward this limit but do not accumulate *because* they tend toward this limit, and *telic* processes, in which the accumulation does occur *because* it tends toward the relevant limit, and (2) how a further distinction can be drawn within the genus of telic processes between *non-self-conscious* telic processes in which the telic accumulation of parts or phases toward an end does not depend on any apprehension of the relation between parts and whole by the subject, and *self-conscious* telic processes in which a guiding apprehension of this relation by the subject is implied in the accumulation. For further elaboration and defense of this way of characterizing the specificity of intentional action within the genus of events and processes, see Boyle and Lavin, "Goodness and Desire."

builds in an orientation toward the standpoint of the agent, and toward the temporal structure of action as it appears from this internal, forward-looking standpoint, we are now in a position to note some telling contrasts with the decompositional approach. These contrasts emerge strikingly in the kinds of examples of action on which the two approaches typically focus.

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

If, with these features of Anscombe's examples in mind, we consider the examples that characteristically appear in the work of decompositional theorists, we will be immediately struck by several contrasts. In the first place, the object of our attention is typically a *completed* action ('Jones buttered the toast,' 'Shem kicked Shaun,' 'Brutus killed Caesar,' 'the officer pushed the button that fired the missile that sank the Bismark,' etc.), one whose real constitution from any parts or phases that belong to it has already occurred and been settled once and for all, one that can be unproblematically referred to by a singular term denoting a concrete particular, a wholly determinate historical event ('Jones's buttering the toast,' 'Brutus' killing Caesar,' 'The officer's sinking the Bismark'). Secondly, the central focus of theoretical attention is characteristically on *brief or even quasi-instantaneous* actions in which there is *no discernible intentional structure* to speak of: such things as arm-raising, button-pushing, trigger-pulling, and knife-swipings across pieces of toast or throats of rivals. To be sure, decompositional theorists acknowledge the existence of complex, temporally extended

actions (buttering the toast for a dozen sandwiches, dancing a tango, directing a military campaign), but they characteristically seek to reduce such complex actions to coordinated sequences of ‘basic actions’ of which it is true that they are severally brief or quasi-instantaneous and lacking in discernible intentional structure. It is striking that the topic of ‘basic action’ – intentional doings that are supposed to be performed without the agent’s intentionally doing anything else in order to do them – does not so much as appear in Anscombe’s discussion, whereas it is the very foundation of the decompositional approach to action theory.

Finally, whereas Anscombe’s question ‘Why?’ is characteristically posed to some ‘you,’ someone who would answer with a sentence beginning with ‘I,’ in the examples characteristic of the decompositional approach, we generally focus on agents who are specified *impersonally* (‘Jones,’ ‘Smith,’ ‘the officer,’ etc.). The preceding two features of the decompositional theorist’s examples help to explain this shift away from the first-person standpoint. For on the one hand, once an action is complete, the agent herself can no longer have a special practical knowledge of its structure: though she may retain a memory of the steps she took in performing it, her guiding, determining role has come to an end, and her deed has now become a thing that has happened, a *fait accompli* whose larger aims and lesser elements she can only remember, not determine. And on the other hand, where the actions in question are supposed to be basic actions, the agent can have no privileged knowledge of their composition from parts or phases even while her action is underway, for a basic action is by definition one the agent performs without intentionally doing anything else in order to perform it.

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

These contrasts between Anscombean and decompositional examples are evidently grounded in systematic differences between the two approaches. Given that Anscombe’s approach seeks, not to understand action by decomposing it into various not-intrinsically-

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

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

##### *5. Basic action and practical cognition*

The main aim of this paper has been simply to contrast two approaches to understanding action, and to show how this contrast pervasively determines the questions these approaches ask, the examples they consider, and the general structure of their theorizing. To highlight this contrast is not yet to make a case for either approach; it is simply to draw attention to the difference between them, and thus to undermine the false appearance of innocence and inevitability that can accrue to either so long as the alternative to it is not in view.

It would be disingenuous, however, to pretend that I am simply a neutral observer of these differences. My own sympathies are with Anscombe's approach, and my larger aim in comparing it to the decompositional approach has been to bring its distinctiveness into clearer focus. I believe that the decompositionalist project, not Anscombe's, has been the primary beneficiary of a false appearance of inevitability, and I think that once this appearance is dissolved, the attractions of the Anscombean alternative will come into view.

This is not the place to mount a full-scale case for Anscombe's approach, but I will close by noting one *prima facie* challenge for the decompositionalist – a challenge that, I think, brings out the immediate appeal of the Anscombean alternative. The challenge arises when we give careful consideration to the notion of a 'basic action' that is, as we have seen, a crucial element of decompositional theorizing. The difficulty emerges when we consider these supposed actions in the way that Anscombe encourages us to consider actions in general: from the standpoint of the agent herself, with attention to her understanding of the unifying structure that determines the progress of the deed.<sup>20</sup>

What I will offer is simply a detailed description of what a basic action would have to be. It would be a mistake to represent this attempt at illuminating description as a proof of impossibility. Nevertheless, my hope is that, once the structure of a basic action has been described clearly, it will seem doubtful whether such a thing could be action at all. If this is right, then the decompositional theorist is not entitled to the building blocks that form the foundation of his theory.

What, then, is happening when I am performing a basic action? What would it be like to perform a basic action? I want to raise this question in light of our discussion of the temporal structure of processes in general. The question is difficult to raise where we are focused on examples and forms of expression characteristic of decompositional theories and where the concept of 'basic action' figures simply as part of the theoretical background.

Suppose *X* did *A* and that this is a basic action. It follows from the temporal structure of processes that earlier *X* was doing *A* and had not yet done it. Consider the time, then, when *X* is doing *A*. It follows, again from the temporality of processes, that other things have

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<sup>20</sup> In "Must There Be Basic Action?" (*Noûs*, forthcoming) I explain why the ambitions of the decompositional theory cannot be met if the concept of teleologically basic action is not legitimate. That paper also develops the following challenge in greater detail.



already happened ( $X$  did  $A^{**}$ ), and still others are underway ( $X$  is doing  $A^*$ ). Indeed, these subordinate phases have the same temporal structure. And so, earlier when  $X$  was doing  $A^{**}$  and had not yet done it, other things had already happened ( $X$  did  $A^{***}$ ) and still others were underway ( $X$  was doing  $A^{****}$ ). The action in progress ( $X$  is doing  $A$ ) is at once an ever-increasing stack of *have done*'s and an ever-shrinking list of *still to do*'s. When all goes well, the accumulation of subordinate *have done*'s constitutes the completed action ( $X$  did  $A$ ): the subject's aim of  $A$ -ing is realized in them.

We are supposing that doing  $A$  is *acting*, that doing  $A$  is doing  $A$  intentionally. And so we are supposing that, unlike when the sun is setting or when the tree is falling down, here doing  $A$  comes from the subject in execution of an aim; the subject, as agent in pursuit of a goal, is not undergoing but bringing about the process. Moreover, we are supposing that unlike the cat who is stalking a bird or the bird who is flying to its nest — both subjects of goal-directed processes — our subject, who is doing  $A$  intentionally, represents herself through the concept  $A$ , not simply as something falling under a concept (as she would were she to think that she is falling down) but as realizing the concept. In the fundamental case,  $X$  is not doing  $A$  intentionally if she does not know that she herself is doing  $A$ , or even if she knows this but only on the basis of observation or inference. As the agent, she has a special sort of knowledge of what she is doing when she is doing it intentionally: it is knowledge “without observation,” as Anscombe puts it, a sort of self-knowledge, indeed a specifically productive form of this.

Since doing  $A$  is ‘basic,’ it follows that at any point during the proceedings, what  $X$  has already done ( $A^{***}$ ,  $A^{****}$ ) and what else  $X$  is doing ( $A^*$ ,  $A^{**}$ ) do not involve anything that is *per se* an intentional action. By hypothesis, the subordinate phases of a basic action are not themselves undertaken in pursuit of the goal. (Indeed, it would seem that were  $X$  interrupted,  $X$  would not have intentionally done anything at all. For whatever  $X$  had already done would not amount to having done  $A$ , but would be only a phase of that.) Moreover, if all goes well, nothing that figures in the constitution of the whole completed action, none of the phases or proper parts of  $X$ 's having done  $A$ , will be *per se* intentional actions. The progress of the deed toward its completion is thus wholly opaque to its subject, except in the way it might be known to an observer or to someone with general knowledge of how such

things happen. In short, the subject of basic action is alienated from the progress of her deed.

In Davidson and others we encounter the idea that someone's action might be ongoing when she is asleep or even dead. This is the 'accordion-effect' agency of Davidson's naval officer who, having already launched the torpedo, is sinking the Bismarck, or the domino artist who, having already toppled the first domino, is spelling the word 'action.' The subject of basic action is in more or less the same situation with respect to the progress of her deed, but with this crucial difference: the period when nature is taking its course occupies a different position in the story of the progress of the deed. It comes at the beginning, in the first and fundamental step, and not later as one waits for the ship to sink or the last domino to fall. And it looks like performing a basic action is just being the subject of a mindless, automatic process which the subject has somehow initiated, triggered, or launched. It seems the 'I am doing *A*' of basic action is very much like the 'I am going to the moon' of a man strapped to a rocket labeled 'to the moon' that has already (somehow) been launched. Whereas in 'accordion-effect' agency, we admit this as an action precisely because we can regard it as a derivative and parasitic case, inheriting its credentials from indubitable cases of living, self-governed intentional operation, here the alienation infects the basic and fundamental case, that in virtue of which anything else is said to be a manifestation of agency at all.

When no phase of a process comes knowingly from the subject for the sake of the end, what can be the basis for thinking that the process itself, the accumulation of such phases, is rationally goal-directed? How, that is, could 'basic action' qualify as action in the intuitive sense for which we all want to account, as something the subject *brings about*, not unwittingly, but *knowingly in execution of an aim*? Heard one way, the following are merely reformulations of what defenders of basic action hold to be possible: 'I am doing *A*, but I know nothing of how this is getting done' and 'I did *A*, but I did not do what was necessary to carry it out.' Heard another way, they will, I hope, sound paradoxical, as though the second clause denies the very thing the first asserts. If the latter impression is sound, then 'basic action' seems not to be action at all. Moreover, even if we suppose that the subject is in a position to monitor the proceedings, intervening when necessary, his awareness of these proceedings would be *by observation*. All that goes to constitute his intentional progress —

what else he is (in some sense) doing — appears to him like the work of another, as an object of receptive awareness. Here I cannot do more than echo the tradition on which “the essence of passivity with respect to an event is witnessing it” and the essence of activity, and specifically productive activity, is knowing an unfolding process in some other way.<sup>21</sup> Whatever knowledge an agent might have of the progress of a basic action, it would not be *self-knowledge*, specifically that form of it Anscombe calls “practical knowledge” — the cause, not the effect, of what it understands.

There has been widespread confusion about Anscombe’s conception of doing something intentionally as doing something with practical knowledge, and thus also about her thought that we know the efficacy of will simply from its self-conscious exercise. There is, I think, reason to wonder if this confusion arises in large part from the presuppositions of the decompositional approach to action.

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<sup>21</sup> J. David Velleman, *Practical Reflection* (Stanford: CSLI Publications, 2007), xiii.