

# VOLITION, INTENTION, AND RESPONSIBILITY

ROBERT AUDI†

The philosophical theory of action is important for the law in many ways. There are difficult questions about what constitutes human action—the chief focus of both the analytical efforts of action theory and the regulatory efforts of the law. There is the perennial problem of characterizing freedom of action, with its related difficulties in classifying and appraising impairments of freedom. And with respect to both the conceptualization of action and the theory of punishment, there are questions about the nature of intention, deliberateness, premeditation, and other notions that are important for understanding and judging actions.

Michael Moore's *Act and Crime*<sup>1</sup> is a major contribution to this important and growing area of intersection between philosophy and legal theory. The book develops a theory of action in the light of a fine-grained survey of contemporary philosophy of action; it explores legal notions, such as those of an act, of intent, and of liability, in relation to both philosophical and legal literature; and it brings various elements in the theory to bear on a number of important problems in the law. The book is especially noteworthy for its wide-ranging analysis of significant positions in the literature; here, it performs a valuable service not only for legal theorists but for philosophers as well. It is among the most comprehensive and sophisticated treatises in the philosophy of action to appear in many years.

This Article will attempt three tasks: (1) to explicate key elements in an important part of Moore's theory, namely, its use of the notion of volition; (2) to appraise that part of the theory and, in the light of the appraisal, to offer an alternative approach to the same problems; and (3) to indicate how the resulting conception of action is significant for some aspects of moral responsibility and the law.

---

† Professor of Philosophy, University of Nebraska, Lincoln. This Article has benefitted from comments by Robert F. Schopp and from discussions with my fellow symposium participants at the University of Pennsylvania Law School.

<sup>1</sup> MICHAEL S. MOORE, *ACT AND CRIME: THE PHILOSOPHY OF ACTION AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR CRIMINAL LAW* (1993).

## I. VOLITION AND INTENTION

I address the theory of volition and its place in the wider theory of action in the context of a causal conception of human action and its explanation. Specifically, I assume that actions are caused by psychological elements in the agent, that these elements provide the materials for explaining the actions they cause, and that such causation may be, though it need not be, nomic, in the sense that there are laws, universal or statistical, linking the elements to the actions they explain. These assumptions are controversial, but I have defended them elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> They are points which, even if I am mistaken in thinking that Moore would accept them in some form, will not affect the discussion to follow. It is particularly important to consider volition in the context of a causal theory of action. The interest in volition seems to lie primarily in its promise of providing a kind of causal ground of action that roots actions in the agent in just the way appropriate to the kinds of behaviors that are paradigms of the sorts of actions the law seeks to regulate or, when necessary, to punish.

One difficulty in approaching the topic of volition is that there is little we may presuppose in the way of a pretheoretical characterization. We might say, in line with both philosophical tradition and common speech, that volitions are *acts of will*; but no plausible volitional theory—which I shall call “volitionalism” for short—posits a substantive will as a kind of agent capable of its own acts.<sup>3</sup> If volitions are acts of any kind, as opposed to events that underlie acts, they are acts of an agent in the ordinary sense of the term “agent” as applicable to persons.

Moore is well aware of these difficulties, and he rejects the problematic view that basic action simply is volition,<sup>4</sup> which implies that the overt physical deeds we *call* actions are not basic but are volitional acts under a behavioral description. Working within the constraints of what he terms the “mental-cause thesis,” he proposes

---

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., ROBERT AUDI, *The Concept of Wanting, in ACTION, INTENTION, AND REASON* 35 (1993) [hereinafter AUDI, *Wanting*]; ROBERT AUDI, *Acting for Reasons, in ACTION, INTENTION, AND REASON, supra*, at 145 [hereinafter AUDI, *Acting for Reasons*].

<sup>3</sup> This would, of course, raise the question whether another layer of volitions would be needed to account for volitional acts.

<sup>4</sup> See MOORE, *supra* note 1, at 95-108.

“to take ‘volition’ to name a species of intention.”<sup>5</sup> The broad conception he arrives at deserves full statement:

Happily we have no need to resort to a fourth kind of mental state in order to think of volitions, for bare intentions fit the bill nicely. As we shall see, in order to execute even simple practical syllogisms, in order to resolve conflicts between our desires and between our beliefs, in order to account for the phenomenon known as weakness of will, and in order to save us from being ‘Sartrean persons’ (where everything is always up for grabs at all times), there must be states of bare intention. Such states execute our background motivational and cognitive states into actions, do so even when our desires or beliefs are in conflict, account for our failures to execute such beliefs or desires (as in cases of akrasia, or weakness of will), and project our resolutions in these matters into the future so that we need not redecide such matters again and again. Volitions fit into this executory role of bare intentions very neatly, for they are simply such bare intentions having as their objects the simplest bits of bodily motion that we know how to do. Volitions are simply the last executors both of our more general intentions and of the background states of desire and belief that those more general intentions themselves execute.<sup>6</sup>

This conception is developed by Moore both in the course of answering various objections to volitionalism and in his development of a positive characterization of volition. Among the more important objections are (1) the claim (which Moore takes to be implicit in theses of Michael Bratman’s)<sup>7</sup> that, unlike intentions, volitions can be directed toward actions which one does not take to be possible,<sup>8</sup> (2) the view that, as intermediate causes, volitions are ripe candidates for elimination,<sup>9</sup> and (3) the psychological contention that we do not experience all the willing we should experience if volition, conceived as a kind of willing, plays the pervasive role in action that Moore assigns to it.<sup>10</sup>

Let us start with *the rationality objection*. To Bratman’s contention that intentions must satisfy rationality constraints that volitions do not, Moore replies that not all intentions satisfy the constraints

---

<sup>5</sup> *Id.* at 120.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.* at 121.

<sup>7</sup> See *id.* at 122-23; see also MICHAEL E. BRATMAN, INTENTION, PLANS, AND PRACTICAL REASON 113-19, 130-35 (1987).

<sup>8</sup> See MOORE, *supra* note 1, at 122.

<sup>9</sup> See *id.* at 123-24.

<sup>10</sup> See *id.* at 129.

in question: "I can intend to hit a target even though I know I can't hit it; and I can rationally intend to hit target 1 and intend to hit target 2, even though I do not intend to hit both targets 1 and 2."<sup>11</sup> As for the worry that volitions, as intermediate causes, are needless posits—which I shall call *the eliminability objection*—Moore responds, in part, that "it is largely the inability of states of belief and desire to rationalize our acts that lead[s] us to posit the executory state of volition."<sup>12</sup> And to the objection that we are insufficiently conscious of volitions to warrant giving them the pervasive role volitionalism assigns to them—which I shall call *the phenomenological objection*—Moore replies that while "[u]ndeniably we learn to string together various of our bodily movements into complex routines with such dexterity that, once we have mastered the routine, we can literally not pay attention to what we are doing (at the level of bodily movements)."<sup>13</sup> Still, given

that we seek phenomenal clues to the nature of those mental states that execute desires into action, a good place to look for such clues is at the mental states we had to acquire in order to acquire our various skills of action. The objects of those states were bodily motions. It is a reasonable (although far from inevitable) hypothesis that those same states exist to cause those same motions when they occur later in life as part of speaking or playing, even though awareness of those states has receded.<sup>14</sup>

In laying out a positive case for volitionalism, Moore makes a number of points, only some of which I propose to consider. A central one is

that the basic thing that gives rise to the inference (that there must be volitions) is the existence of human actions as a natural kind. Our sense has long been that 'something' is indeed 'left over' if we subtract the fact that our arm rises from the fact that we raised our arm, to paraphrase Wittgenstein's famous observation.<sup>15</sup>

If we call the problem Wittgenstein articulated *the subtraction problem*, then the point here is, in part, that this problem is not soluble without positing volitions as the crucial differentia distinguishing action from bodily movement.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> *Id.* at 123.

<sup>12</sup> *Id.* at 124.

<sup>13</sup> *Id.* at 129.

<sup>14</sup> *Id.* at 129-30.

<sup>15</sup> *Id.* at 134 (citing LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN, *PHILOSOPHICAL INVESTIGATIONS* § 621 (3d ed. 1958)).

<sup>16</sup> Moore does not neglect to consider mental movements, such as the spontaneous

A second central point is that we cannot account for the nature of practical reasoning without positing volition as its concluding element. Specifically, "we must conceptualize this concluding propositional attitude as a bare intention, not as a belief (say, that one will go downtown) and not as a desire (say, to go downtown)."<sup>17</sup> One might think that motivating desires, means-end beliefs, and desires to perform the action would suffice. But that hypothesis will not do. "The problem with this attempt to conceptualize concluding propositional attitudes as being the strongest competing prima-facie desires to do an act is that it leaves out the resolving function of such concluding propositional attitudes when there is (as there always is) conflict."<sup>18</sup> These two points are developed and defended in later sections of the book,<sup>19</sup> but there is one more issue that should be noted before beginning an assessment of Moore's case for volitionalism.

It is well known that any causal theory of action must reckon with *deviant causal chains*—that is, strange, wayward sequences running from desires and beliefs of the kind that usually produce intentional action, but do not do so in the case in question because of the way in which they cause the relevant bodily (or, in principle, mental) motion. A machine, for instance, might cause my arm to go up just as it would have if I were signaling a question in a lecture, but only because my relevant desires and beliefs triggered the machine's manipulations, and not because I in any sense willed to raise my hand. I might thus be surprised at the way my arm rises; even if it does so at the right time and is what I was motivated to bring about (in order to ask my question), I may not feel that I am moving it, or at least may not feel that I am moving it in the normal way. Moore rejects the idea that we should rule out these chains by, say, making the *content* of intention rich enough to

---

occurrence of an image, as contrasted with calling that same image to mind. But it seems odd that, along with Donald Davidson, whom he quotes to this effect, Moore seems willing to conceive bodily movement as encompassing mental acts like deciding and computing, or at least as encompassing mental states, if the latter can be willed. See *id.* at 82 (citing DONALD DAVIDSON, *ESSAYS ON ACTIONS AND EVENTS* 49 (1980)). I do not see why countenancing an action-movement distinction in the mental realm is necessarily a problem for the kind of theory Moore is developing. The analysis of action must, to be sure, be broader than one reducing it to willed bodily movement; but there would appear to be a gain at least in providing a definite place for what is commonly and plausibly conceived as mental action.

<sup>17</sup> *Id.* at 138.

<sup>18</sup> *Id.* at 140.

<sup>19</sup> See *id.* at 149-55.

specify the (or a) right way to raise one's hand.<sup>20</sup> Rather, he prefers

to keep the object of volitions simple—that one's arm rises, for example—but adjust the causal requirement for action (that a volition *cause* a movement [of the sort characteristic of the action, as a hand's moving is characteristic of one's moving the hand]) by saying that volitions must *directly* (or proximately) cause such movements.

. . . [A]s lawyers well know, some notion of 'proximateness' is required whenever we refer to causation, so there is no special problem in using such a notion as part of one's criteria for action.<sup>21</sup>

## II. VOLITION, MOTIVATION, AND THE DYNAMICS OF ACTION

Before beginning an appraisal of Moore's volitionalism, let me emphasize some of its important elements. First, Moore rightly stresses that volitions have an executory role in action.<sup>22</sup> This is an appropriate emphasis, particularly if we speak of volitions in the context of a causal account of action, for beliefs and desires—indeed, even intentions as they are very commonly conceived—are dispositional states, in a sense entailing that they can exist without undergoing or producing any change. Like the brittleness of glass, beliefs, desires, and intentions can be present for indefinite periods without having any effects. In order to have their characteristic effects in action, such as producing behavior aimed at fulfilling an intention, these intentional states must be triggered by an appropriate event—an *elicitor*, we might say. Volitions, as—roughly speaking—"acts" of will, can play this triggering, hence causally executory, role. Second, such a role is also needed, in Moore's view, to provide mediation between the beliefs, desires, and other dispositional elements figuring in the premises of practical reasoning on the one hand and, on the other hand, the action in which practical reasoning issues.<sup>23</sup> Third, Moore sees conflict as a pervasive element in our desire and belief systems. Action cannot occur without resolution of such conflicts; volition here plays the role of reconciler, or, at least, of referee.

---

<sup>20</sup> See *id.* at 159.

<sup>21</sup> *Id.* at 159-60 (citations omitted).

<sup>22</sup> See *id.* at 149.

<sup>23</sup> See *id.* at 121.

Let us start with Moore's response to some significant problems for volitionalism. On the matter of the rationality objection, I would note that Moore may go further than he needs to go. The view to be addressed is not, I think, that intending to perform an action, *A*, is inconsistent with a belief that one *cannot A*—which seems an immensely plausible view—but the thesis that intending to *A* is inconsistent with a belief to the effect that one will probably fail to *A*. This thesis is plausible both intuitively, in its own terms, and because, as “practical” attitudes that we presuppose in planning, intentions do not attach to what we take to be unlikely.<sup>24</sup> Planning on the basis of what we think less than likely (as opposed to preparing oneself in case it should happen) is not the main strategy of rational agents, if it is a strategy of theirs at all. The same might be said even of planning without believing something positive, say something at least as strong as that the action in question is likely to achieve one's end. Thus, I can plan to reach New York by nightfall because I intend to take an afternoon train that I know is scheduled to arrive by then, and I believe, partly in virtue of having this intention, that I will take that train. I do not plan on the basis of a belief that I may well miss the train, which I think unlikely. If I believe that I will likely miss the train, I will only *hope* to catch it, and only hope, but not plan (unconditionally), to reach New York by nightfall. We can, however, act in desperate hope, especially where we know that failure will be disastrous, and here volition is plausibly thought to be required or, at least, likely. What Moore could say, then, is that while *long-range, future-directed intentions*, the kind most important in planning, must meet the relevant belief condition, *bare intentions*, the kind plausibly identified with volition, need not.

I might also suggest that intention is only *one* candidate to constitute volition, and since volition must in any case be explicated, Moore could redescribe volition with minimal theoretical cost. He would not in that case have a “reductive” account of volition, but

---

<sup>24</sup> For a case on the intuitive point, see ROBERT AUDI, *Intending, in ACTION, INTENTION, AND REASON*, *supra* note 2, at 56, 57-58 [hereinafter AUDI, *Intending*]. For a discussion of the role in planning, see BRATMAN, *supra* note 7, at 14-49. See also Robert Audi, *Intention, Cognitive Commitment, and Planning*, 86 *SYNTHESE* 361, 370-72 (1991). I should add, however, that in saying this I do not mean to imply—what is surely false—that one cannot act intentionally when one does something in order to achieve an end one merely hopes, but does not intend, to achieve thereby. This is important for moral responsibility and law insofar as an action's not being intentional might reduce responsibility for it, or bear on the character of the agent.

this would be of limited theoretical cost because he would not need any new raw materials beyond those he uses. Indeed, in one way, he would gain. As normally understood, volitions are events in the usual sense in which events *happen* and the occurrence of an event at a time entails that of a change at this time. This is in fact how volitions must be understood if they are to play the dynamic, triggering role Moore and other causal theorists have in mind for them. But it is questionable whether intentions are ever events; for one thing, they do not happen. Their *formation* is an event; their manifestations, especially in speech and action, are events; their effects on practical reasoning are events. But to intend is to be in a kind of state, even if momentarily; it is not to be doing or undergoing something.<sup>25</sup> I am inclined to believe, then, that to call volitions intentions is to use "intention" in a technical sense and that, far from making the notion of volition more familiar, this makes both volition and intention seem less so.

A positive suggestion that might be incorporated into the main points of Moore's theory of action is that volitions should be taken to be a kind of trying, as they indeed have been taken to be by various action theorists.<sup>26</sup> Not only is trying an event (on some views, because it is an act of some sort), it is also like intending in being intentional (having an intentional object), and, on at least one point, it seems to serve Moore's purpose better than intending. It is possible to try to do something one believes is very unlikely; and it is, I think, more plausible to claim that one can try to do what one thinks is impossible than to claim that one can intend to do this. Here, trying would involve not intention to achieve the result, but "hoping against hope" that one would succeed. I suspect that insofar as one is really trying to do something, and not simply doing something that would ordinarily be called trying to do it, or making a try at it, one has ceased to believe, if one did, that it is impossible. Consider a small elderly man pushing against a heavy truck on level ground. Perhaps he can "make a try at" rolling it, while believing success impossible; but even if this is so, it is doubtful that he can be said to be really trying to roll it, as opposed to pushing against

---

<sup>25</sup> See AUDI, *Intending*, *supra* note 24, at 57-66; ROBERT AUDI, *Volition and Agency, in ACTION, INTENTION, AND REASON*, *supra* note 2, at 94-95 [hereinafter AUDI, *Volition*] (defending, though largely indirectly, the view that intentions are not events).

<sup>26</sup> See AUDI, *Volition*, *supra* note 25, at 76-77 (citing these action theorists and discussing their views of volition).



it, if he believes (and has not temporarily forgotten) that his moving it is impossible. Whatever conclusion one draws on this issue, however, it is only the possibility of trying to do what one believes very unlikely that Moore would need to exploit here if trying is to play the role in his theory that is played by volition as he understands it.

Moore's other main point concerning rationality seems plausible to me. Propositional attitudes (of which believing, wanting, and intending are paradigms) are not in general conjunctive. It is, for instance, quite possible to believe  $p$  and also believe  $q$  without having a single belief that  $p$  and  $q$ . That is, having a conjunction of beliefs does not entail having a single belief with conjunctive content consisting of the propositional object of the first belief and that of the second. One can believe that one is eating ice cream, and also believe that one is gaining weight, without believing, at the time, that one is eating ice cream and is gaining weight. The burden of showing that intentions, even in most cases, are conjunctive is heavy. Granted, if I am *rational* and actions  $A$  and  $B$ , which I separately intend, are in some significant way *related*, I will, under certain conditions, *form* the single intention to do both.

Consider cases in which (a) I am asked whether I intend both  $A$  and  $B$ , and I thus get both before my mind at the same time or, more important, (b) it is obvious that I cannot do one without doing the other, as with paying a bill by mail and writing a check or a charge authorization. Here I may form a conjunctive intention, rather than simply retaining or forming two related intentions. But once we see how difficult it is to formulate sound conjunction conditions for intentions in general and how easily a conjunction of intentions may exist without yielding a conjunctive intention, there is at least less reason for special worries about accounting for the degree of conjunctivity of volition. Indeed, as my examples suggest, conjunction is to be expected above all when there is some occasion to get the two objects of the propositional attitude in question before the mind at once, and this is less likely with a momentary state than with a long-term one, such as an intention to pay a bill or to educate one's children.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> Here and elsewhere, I presuppose distinction between a dispositional intention—the usual case of intention as opposed to the case in which the intended action is before one's mind and the intention is in that sense "occurrent"—and a disposition to intend—a state of readiness to form an intention given an appropriate stimulus. I am disposed to intend, but do not ordinarily intend, to step over a strip of grass

Regarding the eliminability objection, Moore may well be right in suggesting that the basic ground for positing volitions is to distinguish actions from bodily movements.<sup>28</sup> I think there is no doubt that volitions can play this role, and in roughly the way he suggests. What I miss is a case that rules out the best competing candidates to play the role. He does argue, persuasively I think, that desires and beliefs cannot play this role.<sup>29</sup> As I would put it, we need genuine *events* to serve as the dynamic, causal elements required to explain how such dispositional states as desires, beliefs, and long-term intentions are realized. In presenting my own sketch of an account of the dynamics of action, I will suggest what seem to me to be the most promising nonvolitional candidates for this causal role.<sup>30</sup>

This brings us to the phenomenological objection. I would certainly agree that the phenomenology of learning is an important area of investigation for the topic of volition, as for other topics in action theory, and Moore is among a relatively small number of theorists to take it seriously. But he seems to put too much stress on the hypothesis that the states necessary in learning to perform certain actions continue to "exist to cause those same motions when they occur later in life."<sup>31</sup> A shovel may be needed to drain a waterlogged yard, but once the trenches are dug, the water flows naturally through them. Habits may be similar. Indeed, one would think that the notion of a habit is, in part, defined by an ability to do the relevant kind of thing without any more than a cue indicating its appropriateness, and much of our behavior is habitual. And while skill is defined mainly in terms of behavioral results, it may be a subsidiary element in the concept that an exercise of a skill bypasses much of the initial monitoring required to learn it. I would be, at best, eccentric if I were able to play a sonata only by going through the self-promptings needed to learn it. Quite apart from all this, however, is there not still a problem: does our

---

that I routinely cross when leaving my parking lot (it is not lawn and no particular consideration is called for). Still, on finding dampness on the grass, I will consider whether to go over it and (normally) form the intention to do so, if it is not muddy. For a theoretical account and defense of the distinction between dispositional attitudes and dispositions to form them, see Robert Audi, *Dispositional Beliefs and Dispositions to Believe*, 28 *NOÛS* (forthcoming Mar. 1995).

<sup>28</sup> See MOORE, *supra* note 1, at 87.

<sup>29</sup> See *id.* at 137-49.

<sup>30</sup> See *infra* part III.

<sup>31</sup> MOORE, *supra* note 1, at 129-30.

experience of action contain even a modicum of what it should contain if we are experiencing (or engaging in) volition?

This question is even more difficult than it appears. For one thing, if we focus on our actions, we become self-conscious, and what we experience is then not representative. Indeed, self-prompting should be expected to be necessary more often where self-consciousness reduces our concentration on the action than where we simply perform it in the normal course of events. Think of driving in difficult road conditions, or of listening to oneself speak instead of simply tracking the point one is making. For another thing, intention and—if it is different—volition are what we might call *reflection-sensitive attitudes* (or events). We tend to form them when, in a context where they are appropriate, we reflect on certain things, especially on whether we have them or on their would-be objects, that is, on what their objects will be if we form them, such as an attractive course of action or an obviously true proposition. When I go to a concert, I may have no intention to break my last twenty-dollar bill in paying; but, if someone asks me whether I intend to do this—or if I ask myself whether I must do it—against the background of my recollection of what cash I have and of my knowledge that I will need the bill to pay, I may form the intention to break it. And if, as I am slicing meat, I am on automatic pilot but am asked whether, or I ask myself whether, I am trying<sup>32</sup> to slice it thin, I may then start to “will” to keep the knife so directed and may become conscious of an effort of self-direction in moving my hand to keep the slices thin. Thus, even if we find volition in many of the cases in which we might naturally look for it, we cannot conclude that it is not often a product of our search, any more than one can conclude from the readiness with which I would agree that I am not now puffing two Cuban cigars, that, before the subject came up, I already believed this proposition. If I did, I would presumably have been retrieving it from memory; in fact, I had to dream it up.

So far, I have been taking the pervasiveness of volition to be an empirical question. But while Moore and other volitionalists are concerned to show that volitions are precisely as common as they should be, given their role in action theory, many also seem to think that, at least insofar as we can distinguish conceptual from empirical

---

<sup>32</sup> Trying, particularly of this self-conscious sort, is the kind often identified with volition.

questions, the presence of volition in the genesis of intentional action is verifiable conceptually by a proper analysis of the notion of action.<sup>33</sup> To understand what action, as opposed to movement, is is in part to see the relevance of volition in the genesis of the former. Indeed, on one kind of volitionalist view, the kind held by H.A. Prichard, volition is basic action;<sup>34</sup> physical action is simply volition under an appropriate physical description. To parody Donald Davidson, this view claims that all we ever do is move our wills; the rest is up to nature.<sup>35</sup> My view, to be explained shortly, is that however pervasive volition is in the performance of actions, the concept of volition, important as it may be in a complete picture of human action, is apparently not a necessary element in the analysis of the concept of action.<sup>36</sup>

Let us now turn to the positive role of volitions in relation to practical reasoning. Here Moore seems to have two main points. One, concerning the dynamics of action, has already been introduced, but it has special application to action based on practical reasoning, at least insofar as such action occurs "straightaway" upon the agent's concluding the reasoning. As Moore puts it, "Aristotle's notion that action follows 'straight away' from a belief-desire set seems to leave something out: don't I have to form some propositional attitude having as its contents that I go into the barber's shop, before I do that act?"<sup>37</sup> If we conceptualize the "concluding [element] as a bare intention," the problem is solved.<sup>38</sup>

Moore's second point in relation to practical reasoning seems to be that volitions are needed in a kind of refereeing role that cannot be played by beliefs and desires, for to posit just the latter two kinds of elements in connection with the conclusion of practical reasoning "leaves out the resolving function of such concluding propositional

<sup>33</sup> See, e.g., RAIMO TUOMELA, HUMAN ACTION AND ITS EXPLANATION 141-42 (1977) (describing volitions as antecedents of action tokens).

<sup>34</sup> See H.A. PRICHARD, MORAL OBLIGATION 193 (Oxford Univ. Press 1968) (1949) (stating that "[a]n action . . . is an activity of willing some change").

<sup>35</sup> See DONALD DAVIDSON, *Intending*, in ESSAYS ON ACTIONS AND EVENTS 83, 89-91 (1980) (arguing that "action is forming an intention").

<sup>36</sup> See *infra* part III.

<sup>37</sup> MOORE, *supra* note 1, at 137-38.

<sup>38</sup> *Id.* at 138. I note in passing that the view attributed to Aristotle is not clearly found in his work; he seems, in fact, to imagine something like "choice," which is at least close to volition, as playing just the sort of role Moore imagines. For a detailed discussion of Aristotle on this point, see ROBERT AUDI, PRACTICAL REASONING 32-36 (1989) (discussing Aristotle's views on the structure of action).

attitudes when there is (as there always is) conflict."<sup>39</sup> Volition—as bare intention whose direction is the action in favor of which the reasoning concludes—plays this role.

I agree that resolution may be needed before an agent who has conflicting propositional attitudes can act. But I do not see that positing volition here solves the problem. Let us begin with a distinction. Moore's claim that there is always conflict is plausible if applied to *contentual conflict*: the kind that holds between logically or probabilistically incompatible beliefs (where the incompatibility is strictly between their propositional objects) or between desires whose objects cannot be jointly realized, such as wanting to go to Scotland for a few days and wanting to go to France for the same days. In normal persons there will be conflicting desires in this sense, for example desires to have teenage children free and independent and to have them obedient. But this *objective* conflict, grounded in relations between the *contents* of propositional attitudes, is normally not relevant to more than a relatively narrow (if significant) range of one's actions, especially if one has a roughly hierarchized set of major goals. It is *episodic conflict*—the *subjective* kind that occurs when one faces a choice between satisfying one or the other of two about equally strong conflicting desires—that normally needs resolution before action on one of the conflicting desires is possible. Here we have not mere behavioral tendencies going in different directions yet not actually competing for dominance, but head-to-head conflict. How does positing volitions help to explain the needed resolution?

Even granting that the formation of a volition favoring *one* of the desires, and hence one of the incompatible actions, must be formed in order for the agent to pursue that action over the other, *why* is this volition formed? Do we not need an explanation of that, since we are not taking the will to be arbitrary but instead rooted in the person's overall character? And is the explanation not likely to be in terms of, for instance, one desire's gaining the ascendancy over a competitor because it becomes *aligned* with a third, say a desire to lend the teenager a car, formed because one believes that this action will serve both to nurture independence and to preserve obedience by making one's restrictive policies seem less burdensome? In this resolution, it is often the occurrence of thought which, in part by generating beliefs, resolves the conflict. I have

---

<sup>39</sup> MOORE, *supra* note 1, at 140.

already suggested thinking of a new consideration leading to the formation of an ally for one of the conflicting desires; one might also think of a compromise and thereby form a new desire stronger than any of the competing ones. Volition seems more a product of such resolutions than their creator.

We can grant, then, the executory role of volition Moore posits, so long as we take it to be a causal role relative to getting dispositional states to yield action, a sort of triggering role. But this role does not suffice to explain the needed reconciliation; there are the same kinds of questions about why one desire is triggered as about why it prevails over an episodic competitor in the first place. We cannot explain why one of two desires prevailed in action by saying that it led to a volition; rather, it seems, the same factors that explain why it prevails are likely to be crucial in explaining why it led to a volition. If volition is really basic action, this is obviously to be expected. But on any conception of volition, its role seems to lie more in explicating the nature and dynamics of action than in providing an element essential in analyzing the explanation of action.

My last point by way of appraisal of Moore's case for positing volition concerns deviant causal chains. I applaud his unwillingness to make use of the self-referential approach to this problem proposed by John Searle.<sup>40</sup> As Moore notes, putting into the content of intention elaborate expectations about how one will perform the intended action renders intentions so complicated as to make them seem unfamiliar.<sup>41</sup> Granted, we can reflectively back into self-ascriptions of such intentions. Recall the case in which a machine (by evoking appropriate desires and beliefs in me) causes my hand to rise, and imagine that it rises faster than it usually would when I am signaling a question.<sup>42</sup> Asked whether I intended my hand to rise so fast, I might say I did not intend that, but rather I intended it to rise in the normal way characteristic of raising it in order to ask a question. But did I intend just this, or is it that, although I did not have an intention to raise it fast, I know that I *would* have intended to raise it normally if I had considered how to raise it? Why not say that I have formed a retrospective belief

---

<sup>40</sup> See *id.* at 143; see also JOHN R. SEARLE, INTENTIONALITY 135-40 (1983) (discussing the role of deviant causal chains in action and perception).

<sup>41</sup> See MOORE, *supra* note 1, at 145-47.

<sup>42</sup> See *supra* text accompanying note 20.

attributing a would-be intention, rather than that I have remembered a (subliminal) intention I actually had?

One might reply that surely I at least intended my hand to rise as a result of my intention to raise it. But one can back into an attribution of this intention as well, by simply reflecting on how one normally brings about one's hand's rising, and noting that intention has causal power in producing that action. Moreover, if this complicated intention is required for intentional action, what are we to say of children who are too conceptually undeveloped to have the concept of intention, yet are clearly capable of intending to raise their hands?<sup>43</sup> Surely the performance of intentional action precedes the development of the concept of such action; but one cannot have an intention with a certain content, for example to raise one's hand as a result of one's intending to raise it, without having (an understanding of) the concepts figuring essentially in that content.

When, however, Moore suggests that deviant chains are properly dealt with simply by taking volitions as proximate causes of action,<sup>44</sup> I would dissent. One problem is that a volition itself might be deviantly caused, in which case it is, at least, not clear that behavior it produces has any claim (based on its genesis in volition) to be action. Another problem is that there may, for all we know, be causal intermediaries that normally do intervene between volition and action; the concept of action does not rule out that possibility. It does not even clearly rule out the possibility of a *psychological* intermediary, such as a process of monitoring the willed movements, as where they are difficult to perform. I hasten to add, however, that Moore is not alone in offering only a schematic solution to this deviant chain problem,<sup>45</sup> and most of what he needs to accomplish in the book does not depend on his proposed solution to the problem of deviant chains.<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup> See AUDI, *Acting for Reasons*, *supra* note 2, at 159-60 (defending this sort of reasoning).

<sup>44</sup> See MOORE, *supra* note 1, at 159-60.

<sup>45</sup> See, e.g., ALVIN I. GOLDMAN, *A THEORY OF HUMAN ACTION* 61-62 (1970) (requiring "that action-plans not merely *cause* basic acts, but that they cause the basic acts 'in a certain characteristic way'").

<sup>46</sup> See Audi, *supra* note 43, at 530-38 (arguing that one need not rely on volition in developing the solution nor assume that it can play no role in that solution).

### III. THE MULTIFARIOUS CAUSES OF ACTION

As serious as some of the difficulties raised for Moore's volitionalism may be, his theory of action is, on the whole, a rich and plausible one whose full resources I do not have space to canvass here. A better contribution at this point would be to sketch an alternative approach to the nature and dynamics of action that seems to solve the sorts of problems he is concerned with more economically and perhaps more plausibly than his own view. This Part will concentrate mainly on the dynamics of action.

Let us start with the question of whether volitions can play the executory role Moore imagines, which is largely a matter of providing the sorts of event causes of action which a causal theory demands. *Prima facie*, they can. We must avoid, of course, postulating a one-to-one correspondence between volitions and actions. It is surely not plausible to suppose that for each action I perform in, say, clipping roses, there is a distinct volition. But as a number of defenders of volitional theories have pointed out, a single volition might govern a unified sequence of actions.<sup>47</sup> If I know a form in the martial art of tae kwon do well enough, then, once having decided to do it, I may get lost in the movements until I have finished. Moreover, there is no reason not to construe some complicated behavioral sequences, such as playing a musical passage, as a single basic action performable at will by people proficient enough.<sup>48</sup>

The first question to pursue here is what alternatives there are to volitions as the event causes of actions. There are at least six types of variables to be noted. Three are quite common. First, consider *perceptions*. Suppose that Mary intends to drop a key down a stairwell to a person waiting below. She watches it swing back and

<sup>47</sup> For discussion of how volitions may correspond to sets of related actions or to complicated basic ones, see, for example, Alvin I. Goldman, *The Volition Theory Revisited*, in ACTION THEORY 67, 71-76 (Myles Brand & Douglas Walton eds., 1976).

<sup>48</sup> Not all volitional theorists would be hospitable to extending this notion very far, however, particularly if volition is strongly associated with the sense of exertion. Ginet, for example, cautions that

[v]olition is a fluid mental activity whose content is continually changing; at each moment, it is concerned only with bodily exertion in the immediate present. I can all at one time decide to swim another length of the pool, but I cannot all at one time *will* the whole sequence of bodily exertions involved in swimming another length, anymore than I can *perform* that sequence of exertions all at one time.

CARL GINET, ON ACTION 32-33 (1990).



forth from the tag to which it is attached, and when she first sees it come to rest above the waiting hands of the person below, she releases it. Her perception of the awaited opportunity is what seems to cause the action (at least in the sense of "cause" appropriate to the perceptual triggering that sets her fingers in motion). There can be a volition, and perhaps would be if her fingers went to sleep while she waited, but there need be no such event.

Second, *thoughts*, such as the thought that in order to save the coffee from burning one must turn it off right away, can be event causes of action. Third, decisions, choices, resolutions, and the like—what we might call *executive actions*—can apparently play the appropriate role. Resolving to decline a second helping at the banquet can cause one's declining, at that time, a piece of bread one is offered; one might make the resolution at the very moment one sees the breadbasket approaching. A resolution can also be a *basis* on which, later, one's *noticing* the host's offering one more piece of bread causes one to reject it almost automatically. The resolution is a motivational event; the noticing simply connects the action with antecedent motivation. In both cases, it is motivation that explains why one does the deed; but it is the relevant event that triggers one's doing it and explains the *timing* of the action. It both sets one in motion and (typically) provides an explanation of why one acts at the time one does.

Granted, decisions and the like are similar to volitions, but they are not equivalent to them. For one thing, they are not pervasive enough, since many actions, like impulsively pushing over a dead stump on a walk in the country or steering around a puddle that may splash pedestrians on the sidewalk, occur automatically or so spontaneously that they are not appropriately traceable to, for example, decisions. They are, however, intentional and should thus be under the control of volition. For another thing, unlike volitions, executive actions are very often comparative (or involve making a comparison) in a sense that entails the agent's actor considering more than one option; and even when they are not explicitly comparative, executive actions typically arise from considering a prospect or reflecting on what one is to do. In any event, if volitions ever *are* equated with any of these, the resulting theory should be accordingly recast to reflect the diversity of these elicitors of action, and then assessed in the light of the more familiar concepts that shape it.

This brings us to the fourth and fifth kinds of nonvolitional variables that can be event causes of action. Neither is generally

discussed, but both can straightforwardly cause action. One is a *change in the balance of motivational forces*. Suppose I must choose between two attractive magazines at a newsstand. I may look from one to the other and, through my desire for one of them simply becoming the stronger of the two and tipping the motivational scale, buy that one. To be sure, I could just plump for one of them by an act of will intended to save me from the fate of Buridan's Ass.<sup>49</sup> But no such intervention need occur in the kind of case in question, where one may be quite warranted in simply waiting for the stronger desire to prevail. It is not as if there were any need to push oneself; here the desire that spontaneously emerges as stronger may be, for just that reason, the one it is best for me to follow.

The other, similar, case is the overcoming of inertia. Intending to leave for home upon seeing that it is dark and approaching dinner hour, one may still linger in one's chair, simply relaxing after a long day. After a certain point is reached, presumably as one's motivation to leave or one's realization that one may be late grows stronger relative to one's inertia, one may get up. Granted inertia may arise from a conflicting desire to stay at the office, in which case we might have an instance of action due to a change in the balance of motivational forces, but conflicting desire *need* not be the source of such inertia. This could be a case in which the flesh is weak from dead weight, not from inclination or temptation.

In the sixth case, there is no antecedent desire that is, as it were, waiting to be aroused, nor need there be a thought (at least a propositional thought—a thought *that* something is the case, for example that one must turn off the coffee to save it). Consider humming a melody that reminds one of a theme from Bach, which in turn puts before one the image of the chamber music group one was told is playing tonight. If the prospect of hearing that group now comes before one's mind, hearing it can become appealing, and one may suddenly reach for the phone to call for a reservation, or may say to one's spouse, "Why don't we go hear the chamber music?" A thought, such as the thought that the chamber group will be playing, can yield an appealing prospect; but even a prospect occurring to one in a daydream may have sufficient appeal to

---

<sup>49</sup> That is, caught between two equally attractive piles of hay, the ass was stymied and died of indecision.

generate action. Such spontaneous action is both caused and intentional, but apparently need not arise from volition.

There may certainly be other kinds of events which, though not entailing volitions, cause actions, but the six kinds indicated cover a great variety of human actions. It must be granted that not all of these regularly provide much in the way of *explanation*. If, for example, one does not know why Mary dropped the key, saying that she saw it hanging directly above my hands will not help. However, the same applies to saying that, for example, she willed to drop it. In both cases, explanation of the action seems to demand a *reason* for it.

If we distinguish between the relations of *causing* and *causally explaining*, however, there is nothing disturbing in these points. Neither a volition to *A* nor, for example, perceiving an opportunity to *A* is supposed to provide a causal explanation of why Mary *A*-ed. But both are closely linked to prima facie causal explanations: the volition is presumably grounded in the reason(s) explaining the action, say her wanting to spare me from climbing the stairs and her believing that dropping the key is necessary to doing so; and the perception is connected with the reason(s) by virtue of, for instance, generating a belief that now is a good time, or by indicating an opportunity to realize the relevant goal, such as getting the key into my hands. Notice that by and large the nonvolitional event causes seem to give us more information, for they apparently tell us something about why the action was appropriate in the circumstances. The occurrence of a volition, however, does not imply the agent's having a conception of a propitious occasion, or a change in the balance of motivation, or anything else that fits the action into a rational pattern. The work of volition seems, most commonly, to be done after these other elements are in place.

What about the subtraction problem or, in Moore's terminology, the difficulty of distinguishing the "kind, action" from the "kind, movement"<sup>50</sup> or, in other words, of distinguishing voluntary action from other behavior? This is very difficult to do well on the basis of any currently available view. Moreover, the notion of voluntary action is significantly vague. Mere reflexes are clearly ruled out, but what about things done altogether unknowingly, such as waking a neighbor by letting one's phone ring too long, or things done accidentally, such as stepping on a toy? Are the latter simply

---

<sup>50</sup> MOORE, *supra* note 1, at 134-35.

nonvoluntary *under* those descriptions? Whatever the answer, the intuitive idea, illustrated by the contrast between ordinary intentional action and mere reflex behavior, is surely that of being under the agent's control or, metaphorically, under the control of the will.

Does an action's being under the agent's control require volition? It apparently need not. If, wanting to get me to take her car to the shop, Mary drops me the key when it finally lies still above my hands, she can have perfect control of her releasing it even if she is thinking about her work when the key finally aligns with my hand and she then "automatically" releases it. To be sure, she may have earlier decided to drop it to me to save me from climbing the several flights; but decision is surely not equivalent to volition, nor need it recur at or near the time of action, as volition is normally thought to do. Volition here seems more an aid to action than a candidate for intending that action or a factor in choosing it.

Suppose, however, that it could be shown that volition is necessary for voluntary action. Is its production of action *sufficient* for voluntariness? What if my volition is waywardly caused, say by a fortuitous electrical influence on my brain (or by the work of a demonic neurophysiologist), and produces an action for which I have no good reason, and from which I could not abstain by any amount of resistance? We thus have behavior the agent would not have willed spontaneously and, in addition, cannot prevent or control. One might argue that a genuine volition cannot be waywardly caused; but even if that is not simply an ad hoc restriction, it will render the concept of a volition less clear and less readily usable in explicating action, since we shall need to understand wayward chains to distinguish volitions from waywardly caused mental events that seem to be volitions.

In any case, there is apparently still another way in which wayward chains can raise difficulties. We might start with a normally generated volition directed toward raising one's arm and imagine that it waywardly causes the behavior, as where the normal path between the volition and the arm muscles is blocked, but the volition happens to set off an impulse, which in turn activates a machine, which then gives off a current that, by good fortune, enters the agent's paralyzed arm and causes it to rise.<sup>51</sup> This would

---

<sup>51</sup> Lawrence Davis contends that a movement caused by a volition is an action no matter how wayward the causal chain. See LAWRENCE H. DAVIS, *THEORY OF ACTION* 38-41 (1979). But the closest he comes to arguing for this is to say that "[s]ince what

seem to be a mere bodily movement, particularly if (as might well be the case) its occurrence does not feel to the agent like the expected action, and probably even if it does. Supposing, however, that one's feeling as if one is moving one's arm is important for the question of whether one, in fact, is performing that action, this need not be owing to the role of volition in action. Both the origin of this feeling and its importance for the notion of voluntariness could be explained on alternative theories. In the light of examples like this, it certainly looks as if volitional causation can explain voluntariness only in the context of conditions determining whether the agent controls the relevant behavior. Given an account of those conditions, it appears that one could also explain voluntariness without relying on volitions.

The next major domain we must consider is that of the execution of intentions and, more generally, the behavioral realization of motivational states, as where *S* chooses to attend chamber music over going to a play. It is here that we come to a different aspect of the executory role that any adequate theory of action must explain. Let us grant that intentions do not execute themselves and that a theory of action should say something about how they are carried out. Surely the sorts of things cited above in explaining how actions can have nonvolitional event causes can also explain the execution of intentions. If, plausibly enough, we think of intentions and other action-explaining motivational states, such as aims, purposes, and desires, as partly constituted by a tendency to do things believed necessary for realization of their objects,<sup>52</sup> it is to be expected that certain perceptions, thoughts, decisions, and changes in the balance of (aroused) motivational forces should be capable of accounting for the execution of intention and the realization of other motivational states. For Mary to intend to drop the key as soon as it is at rest above my hands still *is*, in part, for her to be such that, on perceiving, or in some other way coming to

---

led to the movement [for example, arm rising] was not just any doing but a volition, an event of the kind crucial to understanding action, we can say that the agent's doing an *A* was itself an action." *Id.* at 21. He adds that "it does not matter what the object of the volition is." *Id.* Thus, if one's volition to move my arm moves my leg, I still act: I move my leg, though unintentionally.

<sup>52</sup> For accounts of wanting and intending, see AUDI, *Wanting*, *supra* note 2, at 35-49; AUDI, *Intending*, *supra* note 24, at 56-65 (arguing that wants *are* in part tendencies to perform actions believed to contribute to achieving the thing wanted and further arguing that intending implies wanting). If intending implies wanting, then intending implies not only a tendency to perform the intended action, but a tendency to perform actions believed to be (say) necessary for doing so.

believe, that it is in that position, she tends to release it. And to want something, say to call Joe, is, in part, to be such that if one has the thought that now is a good time to do so by using the phone before one, one tends to use it. Similarly, to conclude practical reasoning with a judgment that one must *A* is, in part, to be receptive to perceived opportunities to *A* (at least if one takes them to be opportunities), to be responsive to the thought that now is the time to *A*, and to be disposed to form an intention to *B* if it becomes clear that *B*-ing is an excellent way to *A*.

There are at least three important points here. First, such events as the perceptions and thoughts we have cited have the appropriate content to connect the action with the intention or other motivation that explains, and in a sense rationalizes, that action. Second, such events are among the eliciting conditions in terms of which one would explicate the nature of the relevant dispositional states, and hence should be expected to figure in clarifying the manifestations of those states. Intentions, for example, are by their very nature manifested in the agent's avowing and executing them. Wants and beliefs are similarly manifested both in verbal behavior and in the intentional actions explainable in terms of them, such as releasing the key in order to get it to someone waiting to catch it below. As illustrated above, these and other dispositions are realized by thoughts and perceptions, for instance the perception of opportunities. Third, there is no reason to think that the sorts of eliciting events in question are insufficiently pervasive to account for the execution of all the intentions whose execution needs explaining. Thought and perception, for instance, are ubiquitous in our lives. The approach to the dynamics of action presented in this Part, then, seems to do better than volitionalism in dealing with the phenomenological problem.

#### IV. ACTIONS AS RESPONSES TO REASONS

In this Part, I want to outline a more positive view of how action is best conceived.<sup>53</sup> Nothing I have said implies that there are no volitions in any sense or even that volitions do not play a major role in action. Indeed, surely there are times when it is difficult to avoid positing acts of will of one kind or another. Consider focusing all of one's will power on sitting motionless as the dentist drills. "Keep

---

<sup>53</sup> See AUDI, *Acting for Reasons*, *supra* note 2 (presenting this view of how best to conceive action).

still!" might be one's predominant executive thought. It might be an expression of strong resolve and accompanied by a determined attention to clenching one's muscles. And there are times when, in building determination to do something difficult, one may reach a point at which one thinks something like "Now!" and plows forward as if the command gave one sudden energy. My thesis is not that action theory does not need volitions in some roles, but rather that neither a volitional theory of the nature of action nor a volitional analysis of the concept of action is adequately supported by the data.

Is any alternative theory more plausible? Let me suggest a conception of action which, supported by a number of the points made in Part III, seems preferable. In general terms, we might think of volitional theories as typically based largely on an *executive thrust model*: actions result when one, as it were, directedly moves oneself so that one's intentions or other motivational states are activated (or energized) and presumably directed by a volitional thrust. This model applies whether volitions are conceived as acts of will, tryings, here-and-now intendings, or in other ways, and whether actions *are* volitions under various descriptions or simply grounded *in* volitions. There are different kinds of thrusts, with different kinds of content, and different versions of the model allow differences in the complexity and temporal extent of the behaviors traceable to a single volition. In contrast, we might adopt a *guidance and control model*: actions result when energy already present in the motivational structure is released in the appropriate direction by a suitable eliciting event, such as a thought or decision or a perception of an opportunity to get what one wants, and guided in that direction by (above all) the agent's beliefs.

The chief difference between the models concerns the psychological initiation of action; the models may tend to converge regarding ongoing actions, for example, concerning how those actions are explainable by appeal to motivational factors and guided by beliefs. Still, there is a contrast of overall conception. The executive thrust model would have us understand action largely by looking inward for a thrust from below, from the foundations, one might say, and the real agent seems to be, above all, an inner executive. The guidance and control model would have us look, depending on the case, either inward or outward for the kind of event that, in the agent's situation, releases the energy. If I have been sitting alone in silence with my eyes closed, we would expect it to be internal; if I am driving in difficult conditions, we would

expect it to be my perceiving something.<sup>54</sup> In both cases, the cue is internally *registered*, but its origin may be external. The agent may exercise power in the interior arena, as where some special resolve is required to muster determination or overcome fear; but such internal exercises are not to be expected when the circumstances of action demand only that one engage the external world as its stimuli are sorted out, often automatically, when perception supplies them to the framework constituted by one's beliefs and motivational dispositions.

According to one version of the thrust model, the execution of intentions is somewhat like the firing of a rifle by pulling the trigger. The volition, the triggering, communicates energy which is then channeled in a definite behavioral direction according to the content of the volition, and that content, in turn, is expressed in the direction of the barrel (on some volitional views, the volition may even supply a measure of explosive energy).<sup>55</sup> In the guidance and control model, the motivational system is more like a compressed spring; its energy is a function of the strength and number of relevant conative elements, such as intentions and desires, and its direction depends on the agent's belief(s) about how the relevant goal(s) may be achieved. It may take little to release the spring; or, if it is opposed by another one approximately as strong, will power may be needed and may be exercised in an interior act or act-like event—a volition. To be sure, a volitional model can treat volition more as a releaser of energy than as a contributor of it, but this is not as common a conception. For instance, viewed as an act of will or as a trying, volition is conceived as carrying considerable energy. In any event, because volition has intentional content, it is a more complex releaser than is required to understand the execution of intentions, given that the relevant intentions and other attitudes already have content sufficient to direct the action—in the context of the same perceptual guidance also required by any plausible volitional account.<sup>56</sup>

---

<sup>54</sup> See Audi, *supra* note 43, at 545-46 (developing a detailed guidance and control model). For a different account that also does not require volition, see ALFRED R. MELE, *IRRATIONALITY: AN ESSAY ON AKRASIA, SELF-DECEPTION, AND SELF-CONTROL* 31-108 (1987).

<sup>55</sup> A volitional view may even attribute to the occurrence of volition a measure of explosive energy.

<sup>56</sup> To be sure, perceiving *that*, say, the key is over the waiting hands implies believing this and is thereby intentional; but simply perceiving *the waiting hands* is a sufficient trigger, given the standing beliefs and desires the agent already has.



One advantage of the guidance and control view is that it seems to do better justice to the *automaticity* of much of our action: to the way in which so many of the things we do are unselfconscious pursuits of our goals and do not require or emerge from deliberation or even a selection of the action in question from among other options. Often, it is so obvious what to do that we just do it, without considering either whether to do it or comparing it with alternatives.<sup>57</sup> To be sure, a single volition may control a whole sequence of related actions, but this point alone does little to ease the way toward volitionalism as a theory implying that every intentional action is rooted in a volition. For one thing, there are profound difficulties in determining just how much behavior can be controlled by a single volition. One difficulty is burgeoning of content in order to cover complex sequences; another is extended preservation of the initial thrust, given how much time may be required for performance. Moreover, there are not only spontaneous and automatic actions that do not seem rooted in volition at all, but also times when activity *changes* substantially without there being any reason to think a volitional event occurred. Consider, for instance, suddenly beginning to talk about a different subject and to a different person at a party; this can happen almost instantaneously.

It is of course arguable that there is a single party-conversation mode of action that is under the control of a single volition; the behavior may be quite effectively "scripted."<sup>58</sup> But suppose that, by routinely accepting an invitation, one simply forms the intention to attend a party. Then, as one proceeds through the familiar experience of the party, one has the whole behavioral sequence of

---

<sup>57</sup> As this suggests, automaticity as understood here is quite different from what, in the law, is called automatism and may not be action at all. For a detailed treatment of automatism, see ROBERT F. SCHOPP, *AUTOMATISM, INSANITY, AND THE PSYCHOLOGY OF CRIMINAL RESPONSIBILITY* 71-84 (1991).

<sup>58</sup> ROGER C. SCHANK & ROBERT P. ABELSON, *SCRIPTS, PLANS, GOALS, AND UNDERSTANDING* 38 (1977) (using the term "script"). It is an interesting empirical question how much behavior is controllable by a single volition, intention, or other psychological element: how full a script can be enacted by a single trigger. My view is neutral on this, as a plausible volitional view may be also, unless it puts too much detail into the content of volition, so that the limits of the scope of volition cannot go beyond those of the agent's ability to entertain the relevant details. When Gilbert Ryle derisively asked how many volitions were required to recite "Little Miss Muffet" backwards, he was ignoring the point that *learning* may presumably put a rather long script under the control of a single volition. See GILBERT RYLE, *THE CONCEPT OF MIND* 65 (1949).

one's conversations guided by standing motivation and beliefs, in the light of one's perceptions and thoughts. Need one, at any point, have experienced something plausibly conceived of as willing, for example, willing to go to the party? And if one does experience a volition, what is its content? One wonders if it would not have to be very complex to have the required control of such complex behavior.

In contrast with volitions, intentions, wants, and beliefs are dispositional, and they may therefore be unmanifested at least most of the time during which they exist. As dispositional states, they need not clutter consciousness, although they can enter it under appropriate conditions, as where one calls them to mind; and since they are activated by perceptual and thought events that, on any plausible theory, are pervasive in human life, it is easier to understand how we can do so much so automatically, if we take the view that action is, for the most part, motivated, belief-guided behavior elicited by perceptions, thoughts, decisions, and changes in the patterns of motivational forces.

In addition to giving a better account than volitionalism of the automaticity of much of our action, the guidance and control model is also more economical. It explicates action in terms of concepts employed on all sides in action theory, and it does so by much more modest postulations of conscious events than those characteristic of volitional theories. The latter point is not to be underestimated. Mental events take up conscious space; only a limited number can occupy consciousness at a given time. Consciousness may be a stream, but it is not a river. This is especially so when the content of consciousness at a given time is actively produced by us, as in making plans and thereby calling things to mind, and not passively developed in the way conscious content may arise in response to external stimuli.

There is, moreover, surely some basis for the point, made by critics of volitionalism, that phenomenally we are not aware of what we should be aware of if mental events of volition, under any plausible description, are as pervasive in action as the theory seems to say. Granted, if I *focus* on what I am doing in, say, clipping roses, I *become* aware of various feelings, and I can achieve a focal sense of agency. It does not follow that this awareness of agency was already there, subliminally or unnoticed. Conscious attention may create, as well as discover, objects, and it may alter those it might seem merely to observe. By contrast, at a given time, one can have indefinitely many intentional dispositions, and even a huge number

of beliefs and intentions can be causally affecting an agent's behavior at one time. Their causal work can be done without the intentional objects of these beliefs and intentions being present in consciousness, and indeed without any manifestations of them occurring in consciousness. Thus, one's actions can be controlled by motivation and cognition even when one's consciousness is almost wholly occupied with something other than one's motivational or cognitive states or even the objects toward which those states are directed.

## V. VOLITION AND RESPONSIBILITY

In the light of the foregoing assessment of volitionalism, it is appropriate to ask how the outcome of the debate over volitionalism may affect the moral and legal theories of responsibility. Moore and I are both concerned with these theories, although I believe that his defense of volitionalism has more to do with his views in action theory than with his commitment to accounting for responsibility. I begin with the free will problem and proceed to some detailed matters of responsibility.

There may be a tendency to think that volitionalism accords better with our sense of freedom in action than does any view on which we do not seem as active, internally, in our day-to-day behavior. If freedom and determinism are taken to be incompatible, and if volition is taken to be caused only by the agent as substance and not by antecedent events, this is understandable. But neither Moore nor I embraces agent causation as an irreducible category, and both of us are also compatibilists. I cannot see any advantage to either position on the matter of simply making sense of human freedom.

When it comes to detailed assignments of responsibility, however, there may be considerable differences between the positions. I quoted Moore as noting how important it is in matters of law to have proximate causes.<sup>59</sup> Should this be taken to suggest that, other things being equal, when behavior stems from volition, the agent is more responsible for it than when it is, say, inadvertent? I believe that this may, in fact, be true (other things being equal). But if it is true, that may be because volition usually implies intention, which, in turn, implies that the agent's will was directed toward the action, as it is not directed toward what is done

---

<sup>59</sup> See *supra* text accompanying note 21.

inadvertently. I cannot see that mere proximateness of a causal factor makes it more important in assigning responsibility.

Compare two angry stabbings, one stemming from an impulse aroused by an insult and immediately yielding action, the other stemming from a long-standing plan to kill, but immediately produced by a realization that one has an unexpected good opportunity. In the latter case, the most important causal factor—the plan—seems more distant from action and seems to produce it less “directly,” yet the agent would seem (other things being equal) to bear greater responsibility. I put “directly” in quotes because it is not clear how proximateness is to be determined, and one would think that our view of what constitutes the proximate cause of action will vary with the depth of our psychological knowledge.<sup>60</sup>

One might think that willing something is a kind of endorsement of it. “Is that your will?” we may ask when we wonder whether someone really means to do something, or to have it done, and where we take a positive answer to imply that the agent stands behind the action. If this *endorsement view of volition* is correct, it would give volition a special role in responsibility. But surely volition can occur where one is simply trying to overcome resistance, or to move a limb that has gone to sleep; one may be in the midst of something trivial and certainly need not consider its merits or give it the imprimatur of the will. Volition may well *reflect* an endorsement; it may indeed be appropriate to an endorsement, as a way of starting to move from words to deeds. But volition neither entails nor is entailed by endorsement.

Endorsement of an action by the will is, of course, not a necessary condition for the agent’s bearing moral or legal responsibility for it. Its absence need not even be mitigatory. Neither, I suggest, is the absence of volition. Granting that my willing something, as opposed to my doing it merely out of habit, may enhance my consciousness of what I am doing and, perhaps for that reason, increase my responsibility for it. Still, the absence of volition (as the kind of event plausibly identified with a here-and-

---

<sup>60</sup> Robert Schopp has raised the further problem of whether the relevant notion of proximateness is normatively neutral or instead determined in part by what one takes as a suitable basis for ascribing liability. See SCHOPP, *supra* note 57, at 119-20. I am assuming in the text that there is a neutral notion available, but I do question how much bearing it has on the determination of moral responsibility.

now intention) is not excusatory and not, in general, even mitigatory.

In one respect, volition may be *less* indicative of a person's will than long-standing intentions. A volition, as an act of will, indicates the momentary direction of the will. But it is one's intentions that, collectively, indicate the content of one's will.<sup>61</sup> We are people of good will or ill will because of our overall intentions (or, at least, our intentions together with desires having the potential to yield intentions), not because of any single momentary one. If, in fact, a volition should occur because momentary, passionate impulses overcome long-standing intentions (as may happen in cases of weakness of will), we speak of acting out of character.

The notion of acting out of character brings us to a further point. Surely character is very largely a matter of long-standing, stable desires and beliefs. For instance, desires to treat people justly, beliefs that other people are like oneself in needs and sensitivity to abuse, desires to be loved by God, and so forth are stable.<sup>62</sup> These desires and beliefs do much to explain why people have the long-standing intentions they do have. If those intentions indicate the *content* of the will, the deeper desires and the related beliefs about fundamental matters in life seem to indicate much about the *structure* of the will. Thus, insofar as moral and legal responsibility concern good will or ill will as manifested in action, or as conditions relevant to how to punish, the guidance and control model I have introduced can clarify responsibility in terms deeper than those of volition. This is not to deny that Moore can use the same resources. The point is that these are the main resources we have in action theory; even if we give volitions a special role, we must still, in appraising people and their actions, look at the long-standing intentions, desires, and beliefs which form the background against which volitions—if they are in character—are formed.

### CONCLUSION

Overall, then, I find volitionalism as an account of the nature of action insufficiently supported by the data. But it is a serious theory that forces us to confront problems easily ignored by causal theorists who presuppose that desires, beliefs, and intentions simply yield action without further ado. It also focuses our attention on

---

<sup>61</sup> See AUDI, *supra* note 38, at 60-63 (interpreting Kant's conception of good will).

<sup>62</sup> I, of course, include desires that are component in intentions.

volitions, which until recently have been neglected despite being an important element in providing a comprehensive picture of human action. Moore has contributed to clarifying and extending volitionalism. I share his major aims in that venture. I simply propose to accomplish those aims without positing so much conscious activity and so many conscious events. The theory of action has enough raw materials apart from volition to account for the data that seem explainable only by positing volitions. Volitions do have a role in understanding action; but nature does not seem to have made volition as pervasive as its proponents believe, and most of the jobs volitions are supposed to do in the dynamics of action are apparently done by thoughts, perceptions, and other events to which volitional theories and their competitors are already committed. Action is under the control of reasons. It is guided by thoughts, perceptions, and other natural events. And it is explainable by reference to the psychological framework in which the basic ends of our behavior are contained in our desires and intentions, and its basic direction is determined by our beliefs.