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EFFORT AND THE STANDARD STORY OF ACTION

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Abstract

In this paper, I present an alternative account of action that improves upon what has come to be known as the standard story. The standard story depicts actions as events that are caused by and made intelligible through the appropriate combinations of the agent's beliefs, desires, decisions, intentions and other motivational factors. I argue that the standard story is problematic because it depicts the relation between the agent and their bodily actions as causally mediated by their motivational factors. On the alternative account that I present, whenever an agent performs a bodily action, they do so by exerting a distinctive kind of effort so as to initiate, sustain, and control their own bodily capacities, an essential feature of bodily action that is absent from the standard story.

The Standard Story of Action

The standard story of action[1] occupies a prominent yet controversial place in contemporary Anglo-American philosophy of mind and action, one whose roots trace back at least to the work of Donald Davidson and subsequent modifications suggested by the likes of Michael Bratman, David Velleman, and many others.[2] At its heart, the standard story depicts bodily actions as events that are caused by and made intelligible through the appropriate interactions between the agent's motivational factors, including their beliefs, desires, and intentions. Thus, the standard story is an event-causal account of bodily action, insofar as a particular action is understood to be a discrete event that is caused in the appropriate way by the onset of the motivational factors that render that action intelligible, where the onset of the relevant motivational factors within the agent is an event that stands in the appropriate causal relation with the bodily events that comprise the action in question.

[1] The expression 'the standard story' was used by J. David Velleman in Velleman 1992.
[2] See, for example, Davidson 2001, Bratman 1999 and Velleman 2000.

For our purposes here, we can set aside a number of problems that proponents of the standard story have attempted to address, such as that of describing the conditions under which the relevant motivational factors can be said to cause the subsequent bodily events in the right way, or that of specifying the precise nature, content, and causal role of the motivational factors themselves.[3] Instead, the problem that will interest us here concerns the way in which the standard story depicts *the relation* that obtains between the agent and the bodily actions that they perform in light of the motivational factors that render their action intelligible. I will argue that the standard story misconstrues this relation by insisting that it must be mediated solely by the onset of the relevant motivational factors.

A Problem for the Standard Story

Imagine the following scenario. One day not too long ago, I decided to run a marathon. Before coming to make this decision, I deliberated about the motivational factors that support my doing so and compared them with those that support my refraining from doing so. After this process of deliberation, I decided that the motivational factors that support my running of the race were rationally stronger than those that do not, so I formed an intention to run the race and embarked upon an ambitious training plan. Today is the day of the race and the relevant conditions are normal but while running the last mile of the marathon, I find myself confronted with a tremendously powerful desire to stop. I am in pain, I am exhausted nearly to the point of collapse, I desperately desire to stop, and I come to believe that these newfound motivational factors that suggest that I stop running are rationally stronger than my previous ones. However, in spite of this, I manage to overcome this potent desire and the accompanying belief and finish the race, thereby displaying what we can call 'strength of will'.[4] How do I manage to overcome such persistent and powerful motivational factors and continue to perform the action in question?

On the standard story, we can explain the situation as follows: in normal conditions and when all goes well, my running of the marathon is caused by the appropriate interactions between those of my motivational

[3] For discussion of the former, see, for example, Peacocke 1979; for discussion of the latter, see, for example, Dancy 2000.
[4] I borrow this notion from Richard Holton. See Holton 1999, 2003 and 2009.

factors that make intelligible my doing so, where the relevant motivational factors exert the requisite causal force in virtue of their superior rational strength. Thus, on the standard story, those motivational factors that are rationally strongest also exert the strongest causal force, thereby moving my body in the required manner for the duration of the marathon.[5] But at the moment when I am confronted with the tremendously powerful desire to stop running and the belief that my newly acquired motivational factors are rationally stronger than my previous ones, the original motivational factors that explained and caused my running of the race are no longer rationally strongest, so according to the standard story they can no longer cause me to run. It follows, then, that I must stop running. The standard story thus rules out the possibility that I might exert *effort* while struggling to resist my newly acquired motivational factors as I force myself to continue running through the pain and discomfort.

In order to explain the fact that I can overcome the strongest of my motivational factors at a given moment in time, we need to make room for the distinctive sort of effort that I can exert in the process of overcoming a desire and belief that threatens to thwart my performance of an action as I continue to perform it. In such conditions, since the original motivational factors that explained and caused my performance of that action have lost their superior rational strength, they cannot explain my continued running; and since I continue to run in spite of the potency of my newfound motivational factors that suggest I stop running, they cannot explain and cause my continued running either. Something else must explain the fact that I continue to use the relevant bodily capacities in the midst of this struggle. I suggest that this additional feature can be understood in terms of the effort that I exert in using the relevant bodily capacities, an effortful struggle that cannot be reduced to the motivational factors that are at play in the standard story, and which can be explained by postulating the existence of a distinctive causal power that I use when exerting the effort required to initiate, sustain and control my bodily capacities in the performance of an action. The effort that is required in the use of bodily capacities is not obvious in every case, but it is present nonetheless and its presence is especially manifest in (1) cases of *paralysis* and (2) the distinction between

[5] Davidson is explicit about this aspect of the standard story. See Davidson 2001, xvi: "if reasons [what I am calling 'motivational factors'] are causes, it is natural to suppose that the strongest reasons [i.e., motivational factors] are the strongest causes."

the *active* and *passive* relations in which an agent can stand with their own bodily capacities, in addition to those situations in which the agent displays strength of will.[6]

Consider first the notion of paralysis. In conditions of paralysis, effort can be manifested as such in the failure to bring about an action. For example, imagine someone who is awakening from surgery after having been administered a general anaesthetic and muscle relaxant, and who has yet to realise their present condition. Imagine further that in this state of disordered ignorance, they attempt to perform a basic bodily action such as moving a finger or opening their mouth. In such conditions, by attempting to perform the basic action in question this person can come to the sudden and perhaps frightening realisation that they remain paralysed.[7] In coming to this realisation, they become aware of their *failed effort* to activate a bodily capacity. Crucially, in attempting to activate the relevant bodily capacity, they are doing something, namely, exerting effort in their failed attempt to activate a bodily capacity, but they are not performing the basic bodily action in question. In such cases there will be *some* kind of event occurring as they engage in the failed effort to activate a bodily capacity, something that occurs as a direct causal consequence of their making the failed effort in such strange circumstances, but the event will not be the basic action that the agent is attempting to perform. By attempting but failing to perform a basic bodily action in circumstances of this kind, the agent can come to the realisation that they are exerting effort to activate the relevant capacity.[8]

Consider next the contrast between the active and passive relations in which an agent can stand with their own bodily capacities. The contrast is most obvious when comparing distinct scenarios where the same type of bodily capacity is activated but only in one of the scenarios does the agent themself activate the capacity. For example, compare a situation in which someone's leg twitches or spasms, with a situation in which that person

[6] Note that the sense in which effort is 'present' is *not* one in which such effort must figure in or otherwise be registered by the agent's conscious experience when they are engaged in the performance of an action.

[7] There are cases like this called 'anaesthesia awareness' or 'intraoperative awareness'. According to the American Society of Anesthesiologists, such cases occur approximately one to two times per every thousand uses of general anaesthesia.

[8] A parallel account can be given of paralysis in the case of mental actions, but I set that aside for the sake of brevity.

moves the very same leg in a superficially similar way. In the former situation, the agent stands in a distinctively passive relation with the capacities that enable them to move their leg. Such cases can be described in this manner precisely because the agent does not activate the relevant capacities; the leg twitches or jerks without their doing anything. By contrast, in the latter situation the agent stands in a distinctively active relation with those very same capacities, and we can describe the agent as *controlling* their leg as they move it, however briefly or sporadically. Such cases can be described in this manner precisely because the agent stands in an active relation with the movement of their leg through exerting the effort required to employ the relevant bodily capacities.[9]

Thus far, I hope to have made a plausible case for the claim that even in the performance of mundane bodily actions there is *something* that the agent does in order to bring those actions into being. In particular, I have claimed that the agent must exert effort in order to initiate, sustain, and control the activation and employment of the relevant capacities, however brief in duration this might be. When doing so, the agent employs effort as a means by which the action in question is brought into being, and, crucially, their doing so is something that they cause. The effort in question is what goes missing in the standard story of action.

An Alternative Account of Action

As it has thus far been described, the alternative account of action highlights the importance of the distinctive kind of effort that an agent must exert in the performance of a bodily action. The effort in question has a specific function, namely, that of enabling the agent causally to initiate, sustain, and control his or her own bodily capacities in the performance of an action. When performing an action, the agent exerts effort so as to activate the relevant bodily capacities, an exertion on the part of the agent that is active but not an independent or isolable event. The exertion of such effort is what distinguishes the active and passive relations in which an agent can stand with their capacities, and is what is present when an agent tries but fails to perform an action in cases of paralysis, and is what enables

[9] A parallel account of the distinction between the active and passive relations in which an agent stands with their own cognitive capacities can be given, but I set that aside for the sake of brevity.

the agent to continually perform an action in cases where they display strength of will. Crucially, since such effort is a causal phenomenon, the exertion of effort by the agent always brings about some event or other, both in cases of successful action and in cases of paralysis. And since neither the agent nor the effort exerted by the agent is an event of any kind, the causal relation that obtains between them is not one between distinct events, and the agent's exertion of effort is not itself an independent or isolated event of any kind. Rather, the causal relation is one of the *actualisation* of a *disposition* that has a characteristic range of effects, like that of an iron magnet when attracting particular kinds of metals, or that of the spontaneous radioactive decay of an atomic nucleus.[10] Equally as crucially, the effort by which the agent initiates, sustains, and controls their capacities in the performance of bodily actions is neither a bodily nor a cognitive capacity. It is not a bodily or cognitive capacity because (1) its exertion has a unique range of characteristic effects that differ in kind from that of bodily and cognitive capacities, and (2) unlike bodily and cognitive capacities, effort cannot be exerted by anything or anyone other than the agent. That is to say, although bodily and cognitive capacities are understood as dispositions the actualisations of which have characteristic effects, their effects are different in kind from each other and also from that of the effort exerted by the agent. Roughly put, in the case of bodily capacities, their actualisation consists in the distinctive movements of particular bodily parts, such as when an agent moves their legs as they walk; in the case of cognitive capacities, their actualisation consists in representational content coming to mind in a capacity-specific way, such as when a thought comes to mind in the process of recalling a fact about the past.[11] Both types of capacity can be actualised by the agent or by factors that are external to the agent. When the agent through their exertion of effort actualises such a capacity, an action occurs; when someone or something other than the agent actualizes such a capacity, a superficially

[10] For a useful account of the notions of a disposition and causal power, see Molnar 2003. As they are used here, the idea of a disposition and causal power are understood to be a species of 'potentiality' in the sense that Aristotle intended.

[11] I take no stand here on the nature of "representational content", i.e., whether it is to be understood 'externally' or 'internally' or through some combination thereof, and I take the idea of such content 'coming to mind' to be explicable through examples. The sense in which such content comes to mind in a capacity-specific way just is the relevant differences between, say, the ways in which imagination and memory present something to mind.

similar non-action event occurs. When the agent exerts effort *in the performance of an action*, it causes the initiation of the relevant bodily capacities; when effort is exerted by the agent *in conditions of paralysis or failure of some kind*, it causes an event of some kind or other that is not the action in question. Thus, in suitably normal conditions and when all goes well, the range of characteristic effects of the exertion of effort by the agent consists in the performance of an action, which is itself the initiation of bodily capacities by the agent and their sustained actualisation over time as the agent controls the relevant capacities. In abnormal conditions and when all does not go well, the exertion of effort by the agent initiates the onset of a non-action event, which need not be the actualisation of a bodily capacity by the agent. The effort in question distinguishes the active and passive relations in which an agent can stand with their capacities, it is present when an agent tries but fails to perform an action in cases of bodily paralysis, and it is what enables the agent to continue to perform an action in the presence of powerful desires that threaten to thwart their performance thereof. Crucially, such effort is something that the agent does or exerts, and it is thus something that we attribute directly *to them*, and so it cannot be reduced to or identified with the motivational factors that figure in the standard story of action.

Concluding Remarks

In this paper, I have criticised what has come to be known as the standard story of action and presented an alternative account. The standard story depicts actions as events that are caused by and made intelligible through the appropriate combinations of the agent's beliefs, desires, decisions, intentions, and other motivational factors. By introducing an example in which an agent displays strength of will in overcoming a persistent desire and belief that threaten an action that they are in the midst of performing, I argued that the standard story is problematic because it depicts the relation between the agent and their bodily actions as causally mediated by their motivational factors. On the alternative account that I presented, I claimed that whenever an agent performs a bodily action, they do so by exerting a distinctive kind of effort so as to initiate, sustain, and control their own bodily capacities, an essential feature of bodily action that cannot be reduced to or identified with the motivational factors that figure in the standard story of action.[12]

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