

A CRITIQUE OF CARL GINET'S INTRINSIC THEORY OF VOLITION

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ABSTRACT: This essay presents an analysis in the area of the theory of human action. Philosophers and psychologists are interested in theories of action because action defines those behaviors that are under our control as opposed to behaviors that in some sense just happen. In its wider context, a theory of action has implications for legal reasoning or moral reasoning. Throughout the history of this topic, one of the leading theories of action has been the volitional theory. Volition, in its simplest sense, refers to an act of will. In this essay, I evaluate the work of Carl Ginet, who is one of the leading modern advocates of the volitional theory of action. I argue below that Ginet's sophisticated volitional theory of action suffers from certain internal problems that result from Ginet's project of removing causal relations from his account of action. Ultimately, I argue that when he does this, Ginet reduces the theoretical resources for explaining how volition is connected to both overt behavior and to the agent. Furthermore, I believe that elucidating such problems is valuable just because this process reveals why we should focus our efforts upon a leading alternative to the volitional theory, namely the belief/desire theory of action. In this way, my analysis of Ginet reveals the strengths of an externalist rather than an internalist approach to the problem of action.

Key words: Ginet, action, volition, agency, volitional theory of action, agent causation, belief/desire theory of action, unbidden thoughts.

Carl Ginet, in his book *On Action*,¹ defends a volitional theory of action. According to a volitional theory, there are mental events called volitions that mark off actions (those behaviors that are in the control of the agent) from non-actions (those behaviors that are not in the control of the agent). In this section of the essay, I will first explain why the volitional theory is thought to provide a successful answer to some of the most important questions raised in the philosophy of action. Second, I will show why Ginet's theory can be seen as an advance over past volitional theories. In this way, I will show in a preliminary fashion why Ginet contends that his own intrinsic account of volitions is the most successful volitional theory. I will finish with an exposition of one of Ginet's central definitions of action.

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¹ All references to Carl Ginet in this essay are to his *On Action* (1990), hereafter cited in the text by page number.

The first presumed strength of the volitional theory of action is that it is especially well suited to answer Wittgenstein's question: "Let us not forget this: when 'I raise my arm,' my arm goes up. And the problem arises: what is left over if I subtract the fact that my arm goes up from the fact that I raise my arm?" (1967, sec. 621). Wittgenstein is referring here to the fact that some instances of what we normally call action are manifest to us as physical behavior. At the same time, we recognize that such behavior can occur without its being under the control of the agent. So, to define the nature of action, we must have some criterion that can mark off those behaviors that qualify as actions from those that do not. The manner in which Wittgenstein poses the question indicates that there is a remaining element that could serve as this criterion. According to the volitional theory, this remaining element is the volition.

A limitation of the traditional volitional theory, however, is that volitions appear to serve as a criterion of action only because the concept of a volition is specifically tailored to answer Wittgenstein's remainder problem. As an illustration of this, Davis (1979) gives volitions a functional definition: volitions have no description other than that which exists in the gap between reasons and behaviors (p. 24).² As such, this theory indeed tells us that there are such things as volitions, but it tells us little about what type of entities volitions are. Furthermore, postulating a functional definition of volition does not mean that we can use this definition to define acts, because no descriptive properties have been associated with the volition itself that could be used as criteria. It now remains an open question whether there is a special volitional experience that allows for such an identification (see also Davis, 1979, p. 18). So, it seems that for a functional theory of volition, there is no reason beside theoretical convenience to believe that volitions exist.

Ginet, on the other hand, denies that volitional theories must be limited to a functionalistic account in which the volition is *extrinsically* defined—that is to say, defined from the outside. A functionalist account is extrinsic to the extent that it defines the volition in terms of its relation to other events. Ginet insists that an *intrinsic* account of volitions can be given; here, intrinsic means defining volitions from the inside. Furthermore, for Ginet, volitions have their own unique phenomenal feel, and so they can be defined independently from their relation to other events. By basing his account of action on volitions that he says we all experience, Ginet can claim that volition is the mark by which we *know* that an event is under the control of the agent.

A volition has been characterized by James (1981, pp. 1166-1168) in terms of attention with effort, as "a strain of attention" that we experience when we choose between competing courses of action. By comparison, Ginet places his emphasis on the feeling of volition and the self-sufficiency of this feeling as a mark of action. However, while Ginet agrees with James that an intrinsic or introspective account of

² For his part, Davis (1979, p. 24) claims that the volition may turn out to be identical to a brain event. However, at the present stage of scientific knowledge, this is a promissory note. The brain event certainly is nothing that could be identified by the agent or by the ordinary observer.

volition can be given, he disagrees with him concerning some of the details of the latter's volitional theory. Specifically, Ginet disputes James' claim that the propositional content of volitions are kinesthetic images. Ginet's reasons for rejecting James' formulation are that (a) a representation does not on its own determine a content—it needs a person to do the representing and (b) the representation is unnecessary if there is some extrinsic factor doing the representing (Ginet, p. 37). Although Ginet claims that there is a kinesthetic perceptual element, he insists that it must be distinguished from the proper volitional part. Nevertheless, he agrees with James that volitions are marked off by some sort of internally available phenomenal experience: while in James' case it is an attention with effort (p. 1166), in Ginet's case it is a kind of trying that has an "actish phenomenal quality" (p. 13-15).

A second and related strength of the volitional theory is that it avoids problems of causal deviance. Accounts that rely on an extrinsic theory of action must define the action by reference to other events and this relation is often causal. However, there is a problem here concerning whether the relation between the action and the other event is indeed appropriate. An example of causal deviance is the following: the fact that a person intends to shoot another person may cause such emotion that the actor's hand shakes and the trigger is pulled. Here, it becomes difficult to know whether the event of shooting person-B was really an action by person-A for the reason that a causal anomaly or deviance occurred within the actor. Having become notified of the emotional factor, many people would claim that the event of the trigger being pulled was not an event that was under the control of the agent.

However, by using mental events like volitions for a criterion of action, rather than requiring a match between action and the cause of action, the volitional theory is able to avoid causal deviance. Ginet's account is especially well suited to avoid causal deviance because an intrinsic account of volitions does not require volitions to be defined with reference to causal relations. As I will explain, Ginet claims that the volition is a simple mental event that does not involve any complex causal structure. The lack of complex structure eliminates the possibility that one could have a volition without at the same time acting. Ginet offers, as an example of such a simple mental act, the act of thought. Just as the thought comes to us as soon as we bid it to, so the volition straightaway indicates that an action has taken place.

So, in Ginet's account, the answer to Wittgenstein's question is in some way self-evident. We all know what a volition feels like, according to Ginet, by the presence of an "actish phenomenal quality" (p. 13-15). This actish phenomenal quality is the feeling of trying, and it is not necessarily connected conceptually with a result: the feeling of trying is sufficient to constitute the experience of action. This is because, for Ginet, the experience of the actish phenomenal quality just *is* acting.

Accordingly, Ginet gives the following preliminary definition of action:

«*S*'s *V*-ing at *t*» designates an action if and only if either (i) it designates a simple mental occurrence that had the actish phenomenal quality or (ii) it

designates *S*'s causing something, that is, an event consisting in something's being caused by an action of *S*'s.³ (p. 15)

In order to fully understand this passage, it should be noted that when Ginet uses the expression "if and only if," he means to identify the necessary and sufficient conditions of action. Ginet wants to be able to mark off actions from non-actions. Now, certain types of philosophers tend to think that if they can find a condition that operates as both a sufficient and necessary condition, then they have found the essential and defining characteristic of the object of their inquiry. Ginet believes he has found the means to distinguish actions from non-actions by stating the necessary and sufficient condition for action—the presence of a volition that is either the presence of the actish phenomenal quality or the result of such.

We now have before us a basic overview of Ginet's theory. In what follows, I will examine some main tenets of Ginet's intrinsic definition of action. At several points in Ginet's exposition, I believe that questions can be raised concerning claims that he considers intuitively obvious or compelling. I will argue that the cumulative effect of these claims does show how a volition could be a sufficient and necessary criterion of action, but only at the cost of reducing agency to passing mental episodes disconnected from an enduring agent that both responds to and acts upon its environment.

Extrinsic Accounts of Action

In this section, I will show what Ginet finds wrong with extrinsic accounts of action and also how his own account arises from a criticism of these accounts. Ginet's argument for an intrinsic account of volition begins by showing how accounts of actions, that are defined in terms of causal relations, can go wrong. Note first that I use the term "causal relation" not as scientific term but rather in the sense in which it enters into a conceptual analysis. By conceptual analysis, I refer to the effort to identify or construct a theoretical framework. So, in this context, a conceptual analysis of action will require us to construct a framework wherein, once an event is given, we then must work backwards to postulate what type of thing functions as the stipulated cause. What is sought is a cause that must be of the appropriate conceptual nature to be connected to the event of interest; that is, what is sought is a conceptual compatibility between cause and effect. I take it that this theoretical process precedes the actual scientific effort of testing through manipulation the cause so stipulated by the proposed theory.

As such, in a theory of action, a causal analysis shows that all causal definitions of action can be termed extrinsic to the extent that they require the action to be related to something distinct and outside of the action. More specifically,

³ While Ginet contributes more detailed versions of this definition of action, this first attempt covers most of the issues that will be addressed in this paper. I will treat one refinement in the conclusion of the paper.

something is an action for the belief/desire theorist because there is a causal relation between the belief/desire pair and the action that is suitably matching, while something is an action for the agent causality theorist because it has the appropriate causal relation to the agent.⁴

Let us now examine Ginet's reasons for rejecting these two extrinsic theories of action. First, Ginet addresses his objections to the belief/desire thesis. These theorists claim that events under an agent's control are those that are caused by the agent's beliefs and desires. Here, the term "beliefs" simply refers to informational mental states that are relevant to the environment in which the agent's behavior would occur. However, by themselves, such informational states would tell us nothing about what the agent might do in that environment. To be able to predict an agent's behavior, we would also need to know what kind of orientation the agent has to that environment, and that aspect is provided by identifying the agent's desires. Simply put, for the belief/desire theorist, when we know what information is available to that agent, and when we know what an agent wants to do, we then have the means necessary to predict that agent's behavior.⁵ Belief/desire theorists hope to give an objective account of how our beliefs and desires are linked to our behavior: there is something beyond a mere subjective feeling that defines the relation; there is the appropriateness of the links between desires and beliefs (which can be expressed objectively) and actions (which can be observed objectively).

In his first argument against an extrinsic account of actions, Ginet says that a belief/desire theory of action fails to prove that desires are a necessary condition for action. The first example he gives is that of merely voluntary actions: "Many a time, for example, I have voluntarily crossed my legs for no particular reason" (p. 3). Yet, Ginet insists that such voluntary bodily movements are actions; we do recognize the difference between these movements and involuntary movements. These types of

⁴ Ginet at first identifies the agent causality account as intrinsic: "S's *V*-ing at *t* was an action of *S*'s if and only if it was (that is consisted in) *S*'s causing something. This is an intrinsic account; it is not to be confused with saying that *S*'s *V*-ing at *t* was an action if and only if it (*S*'s *V*-ing at *t*) was caused by *S*, or with saying that it was an action if and only if it caused something" (p. 4). But all that this seems to say is that the agent-causality theory is not completely extrinsic (identifying the act *only* by its relation to the subject.) In fact, Ginet later clarifies that the complete account of agent causation will include an extrinsic connection: "For the agent causation analysis to apply, there must be within the simple mental act an event that is only a part and not the whole of it, an event such that its having the extrinsic agent-causal relation to the agent constitutes the whole act" (p. 12). It would seem from this quote that to give a complete account of action, the agent causality theorist would have to add an extrinsic relation with the agent to the simple mental act that Ginet characterizes purely intrinsically. Ginet adds: [T]he mental act does *not* consist of an event just like the unbidden occurrence plus its having a certain extrinsic relation to the subject. Rather, the mental act differs from the passive mental occurrence intrinsically" (p. 13). When Ginet denies that extrinsic causal relations are necessary for a definition of action, he appears to include agent causality accounts in the category of at least partially extrinsic accounts. Therefore, I will treat Ginet's criticism of the agent-causalists in this section about extrinsic accounts of action.

⁵ Cf. Dennett (1971, p. 92).

actions are thought to raise problems for the belief/desire model because they present an example of an action that is not caused by a desire.

Of course, the belief/desire theorist could claim that there is a desire to cross the legs but the agent is not aware of it (e.g., Bishop, 1989, p. 19 and pp. 106-107). However, Ginet presses the case that action does not require a matching desire by showing that one may perform a voluntary action that is *against* the agent's recognized desire.⁶ Ginet says that a person believing her arm was paralyzed may decide she wants to feel what it would be like to not succeed in an attempt to move the arm. In addition, the agent may be in some position where movement of the arm is not desirable; for example, she is playing the part of a dead body in a theatrical production. However, because, unknown to the agent, the arm is actually not paralyzed, she will succeed in moving the arm while desiring not to move it. In this case, there is a known desire present (and so, presumably, no unknown or overlooked desire as the belief/desire theorist might claim), but the desire does not match the behavior. Because the act is at the same time voluntary and contrary to the agent's desire, matching desires are not necessary to action (Ginet, p. 9).

I find Ginet's argument unconvincing as it stands. First, the agent acted against her explicit desire not because desire did not play a role in determining the action but because she had a mistaken belief. The desire here is *to try to move the arm without really moving it*, and the belief is *the arm is paralyzed so that the desire (to try to move without moving) can be fulfilled*. The fact that the belief is mistaken explains the miscarrying of the intention⁷ while remaining within the theoretical structure of the belief/desire theorist. An unintentional action presents no special problems to the belief/desire theorist as long as it is explicable through the combination of the actual desire plus the actual belief. That is, as long as we consider the belief/desire pair as a conjunction and not as a disjointed set of necessary conditions, the desire will not be considered in isolation from its accompanying belief and the model will still work effectively.

For my part, I think that because the belief introduces the background conditions that indicate how the agent is situated in his or her environment, the belief will be crucial in determining how the act is understood. As we will see, Ginet insists that the best analysis of an action is one that is noncausal. So, these types of global considerations of how the action is to be assessed as a response to and manipulation of the agent's environment are missing from Ginet's account.

Whether or not Ginet's argument against the belief/desire theorist is ultimately convincing, it does indicate his general objection against extrinsic accounts. Because an action is defined by its causal relation to something else (in this case, a

⁶ Ginet later uses this counterexample to show that a *volition* to move the arm may be present without any desire to move the arm (p. 32).

⁷ Ginet uses the terms "desire" and "intention" interchangeably (p. 3). More commonly, intention means having a goal in mind and being self-consciously directed towards that goal. Given this definition, it makes sense that Ginet (p. 5) along with Davis (1979, p. 6) claim that reflex behaviors do not count as actions.

belief/desire pair), there is always the possibility that this relation will fail to hold. Just the fact that the desire is a separate entity from the action means that there is the possibility that the appropriate relation between them will fail to occur.

Ginet provides next an examination of agent causality as the second model of an extrinsic account of action. In the agent causality theory of action, an act is identified as an event that has an agent as its cause. Ginet's position concerning the agent causality theorist is sometimes hard to pin down. Indeed, he begins by defending agent causality against a common objection about its sufficiency. According to this objection, agent causation is not necessarily action because an agent might cause something while at the same time not acting (e.g., knocking over something by losing one's balance). Ginet says that this sort of event is not a genuine example of an agent causing something because there is a distinctive mark of agent causation that is missing. Ginet illustrates this by borrowing the agent causality theorist's use of italics in the following example:

The movement of my body knocked the drink over but since *I* did not cause that movement, I did not cause its effect, the drink's falling over. Speaking strictly, it is false that *I* knocked over the drink, just as false as it would be if I had been unconscious and someone else had used my arm to knock it over. (p. 5)

It is important to notice here that Ginet does find credence in the possibility that the mark of agency is a feeling or intuition that "I cause this." However, Ginet differs from the agent causality theorist by saying that the mark of agency is not located in the causal relation between the act and the agent.

Accordingly, Ginet distinguishes his volitional theory from the agent causality theory by saying that the agent causality theorist mistakenly adds to the feeling that "I cause this" an extrinsic relation to an agent (p. 12-13). Ginet claims that there is no need to involve this extrinsic relation in order to come up with a sufficient account of action. If such a causal account were needed, then the volition on its own would be insufficient and as a result there could be a "seeming" volition that was not really an act of will. Such a seeming volition, Ginet indicates, is not coherent: it would be hard to imagine what would be missing if there were no causal connection to the agent, or how we could ever determine that something were missing (p. 13).

Ginet continues his critique of the agent causality theory by arguing that it is incoherent to deny that agent causality can be reduced to event causality. In order for the subject *S* to be the cause of an event *E*, Ginet insists that there must be some event that can be attributed to the subject that is the event cause of *E*. If it is the agent as a brute fact that acted as the cause of an event, there would be no explanation of the fact that the event *E* happened at one time rather than another, or that it had the specific characteristics it in fact had (Ginet, p. 13-14). It is only if the agent is the subject of some such determinate event *C* that it can be the cause of *E*.

So, the reasonable agent causality theorist would have to point to what is special about *C* that allows it both to be an action of the person and to cause the

event *E*. But if acting is still understood as *causing* something, the agent causality theorist is faced with the following three theses:

- 1) The thesis that action consists in causing something.
- 2) The thesis that the *event*-causation analysis always applies to a *person's* causing something.
- 3) The thesis that when a person causes something, the cause event must be an action. (Ginet, p. 7)

Ginet insists that if the three theses are accepted, then we are left with a regress. If what qualifies something as under the control of the agent is having an action as the cause (#3), and at the same time every action conceptually presupposes a causal relation (#1), then every action must have another action standing behind it. Whatever we identify as an action will at the same time be the consequence of some prior action. Ginet writes:

S's causing something always consists in an action of *S's* causing it, and this action of *S's* always consists in *S's* causing something. Given that nothing can cause itself, this entails that every action is an infinite, beginningless nesting of distinct action-consequence pairs. (p. 7)

This is a problem for anyone who seeks a nonreductive account of action: if action is its own category and if action must always be defined in terms of a causal relation, then action must be defined as something caused by an action, and then it will be impossible to locate a "first" action.⁸ The goal is to see which of the three theses can be eliminated in order to avoid the regress.

While the agent causality theorist attempts to reject thesis #2, I have already indicated why Ginet finds this incoherent: it cannot account for the act happening at a specific time and with specific characteristics. The belief/desire theorist would reject #3, thereby asserting that a reductive account of action is possible. But as Ginet has already claimed, this specific reduction does not succeed because desires may not be necessary for action (as in the counterexamples of merely voluntary actions and of acting against desire).

An alternate reduction of action would be to identify the action with a neurophysiological event. But Ginet claims that this account is untenable because it would require that the agent have neurophysiological information in order to judge whether he or she is acting or not (p. 10). Ginet insists that persons can judge whether they are acting, and so neurophysiological information cannot be necessary for act identification. Even under an identity theory (where the agent is aware of the brain events but just does not know that they are brain events), Ginet does not

⁸ This criticism was brought against a causal construal of the volitional theory by Ryle (1984, p. 67). If the criterion of an action is that it is *caused* by a volition, then what caused the volition to give it this special status? It seems that only something voluntary and so itself an action could account for this status. But what caused this action? And so on.

concede that this indicates that these brain events are non-actions. Instead, he sets out to prove that such brain events would have to be actions.

According to Ginet, one can best defend a nonreductive account of action by rejecting thesis #1. The causal event *C* can be an action and escape any hint of regress only if it can be characterized without bringing a causal relation into its definition. Ginet, as I will discuss in the following section, claims that because the volition is a simple mental act, it is not defined in terms of a complex causal relation. The volition is not the criterion of action because it is the cause of the action, nor is the volition the criterion of action because it is caused in some special way. The volition is the criterion of action because it just *is* the act.

Ginet's Intrinsic Account of Volitions

The way to find out whether there can be an action that is not causally characterized is to perform the subtraction that Wittgenstein's question proposed: What is left over when I subtract the fact that my arm goes up from the fact that I raise my arm? We shift our attention away from the external behavior and focus on whatever mental event is the remainder of such a subtraction. According to a volition theorist such as Ginet, the remainder is a volition.

There are two ways to interpret what part the volition plays. On the one hand, the volition could be a necessary condition of action; that is, volitions could account for the special connection that guarantees that the causal chain from prior mental states to behavior is nondeviant (see Goldman, 1976, p. 68; Bishop, 1989, p. 141). On the other hand, the volition could be both necessary and sufficient: here volition is the mark of agency because it *is* an act. When Ginet insists that action can be given an intrinsic account, it is this second interpretation of volition that he supports. As a consequence, for Ginet's theory if volitions are actions and if an intrinsic account can be given of volitions, then the conceptual necessity of causation for a definition of action can be denied.

The importance of an intrinsic account of action for Ginet can be illustrated by turning to the case of the neurophysiologist who is trying to identify the brain event that is the cause of voluntary exertion. How would such an event be identified? According to Ginet, the crucial test for whether the correct event has been identified is as follows: "If such a brain process occurs but, owing to some unusual circumstance, fails to cause the normal exertion, then it must seem to the subject that she has at least tried to make the exertion" (p. 10). Here, our ability to identify the brain event is parasitic on our access to it as a mental event.

As a result, even an appeal to a neurophysiological account is in no way a concession on Ginet's part that there will be some third-person way to identify an action. The neurophysiologist's role is to find out what brain state correlates with the subject's mental state of trying to act. Presumably, neurophysiology on its own would be incapable of identifying the brain state that is the mark of action. As Ginet states, "The concept of action can be acquired only from the 'inside,' only from the

experience of acting” (p. 22). The experience of acting is not just one way of attributing agency; it is the only way.

Moreover, notice that in this illustration the mark of action is not only to be found in the successful carrying out of the agent’s intention; rather, the mark of action is found even when the agent has failed to act in the specified way. It is not just that the mental event is identified as a necessary condition for action (the first way of reading Wittgenstein’s question); it is also that the mental event that remains is sufficient for action. The mental event that is the trying or volition is already an action. Whenever the agent tries to act, the agent has already performed an act—“To try to act is to act” (Ginet, p. 10).

Therefore, Ginet insists not only that the volition helps us to identify actions from non-actions, but also that the volition *is* an action. When a person tries to act—when a volition has occurred—something has taken place beyond any mere occurrence of a desire. The agent has already produced an event that is in the executive mode (Ginet, p. 33). A volition is an act of the will whether or not it has the intended result. Again, we are faced with the assertion of a strong intuition on Ginet’s part; he claims that the proposition “To try to act is to act” is “intuitively hard to deny” (p. 10).

Furthermore, according to Ginet, this trying or volition is a simple mental event for which no relational structure between two distinct events is conceptually necessary. The volition is an action even if the intended bodily exertion does not come about. While Ginet says that it is correct to call certain behavioral events actions, this does not mean that these events require an alternate account that is structurally complex (with the volition causing the behavior). Instead, these actions are actions only because they have this simple mental occurrence as a part (Ginet, p. 29). For Ginet, volition is that to which the voluntariness of all voluntary actions can be traced.

This is true even though the volition may have a propositional content characterized in terms of bodily motion. For Ginet, the propositional content of volitions can be characterized as follows: “certain parts of the body should just then exert a certain force in a certain direction” along with the restriction that it is “I” that does it (p. 35). However, it is not necessary for this content to be actualized in order for the volition to qualify as an action. Again, to try to act is to act.

It seems to me that Ginet’s intuition that “to try to act is to act” can be questioned in that the concept of trying is itself problematic. Trying can be seen as an indication of failure; we do not usually say that we have tried unless we have not succeeded, or at least we are unsure about our success. Furthermore, we identify a situation where a person is trying by the fact that even when they are thwarted they perform other behaviors that are directed at achieving the same goal. This indicates a link between trying and failing, and it is ultimately an indication that trying is conceptually tied to the accomplishment of some goal.⁹ To try to act may be to try

⁹ See S. T. Fiske, (1989), *Examining the Role of Intent: Toward Understanding its Role in Stereotyping and Prejudice*, p. 271.

and fail—in which case the notion of trying is only negatively characterized. I do not see that it is obvious that trying is itself an independent mental event.

In fact, it may be that some kind of feedback mechanism in consciousness is necessary for the formation of the concept of action to such an extent that human beings understand the fact of action through successful action, and then only later do they abstract from that concept the notion of trying as a separate concept. Here is where we say to ourselves: “I did it,” where this means that we perceive that our behavior conformed to our beliefs and desires without deviation. That is, we recognize ourselves as acting because we overtly demonstrated control over our behavior. Once again, the point here is that it is the perception of the result that gives us the idea of the action, not the other way around. In this way, our basic external orientation to the world will take precedence over an internal orientation for formulating a philosophical understanding of ourselves. At the very least, an account of action or agency would include complex elements rather than the simple elements postulated by Ginet.

In any event, even if we want to give some special event status to the attempt, why does it have to be the status of an act? Ginet does not appear to consider the alternative “To try to act is to try” (see Rostad & Paquin, 1991, p. 93). Although in trying, some event may have taken place, yet this event may not itself be an action but may be a necessary condition of action that lacks other necessary conditions. Even if trying may have some special status as an event in action, a volition still may not be sufficient for action (see Armstrong, 1981, p. 75). These two considerations should at least give us pause when it comes to accepting Ginet’s statement that “to try to act is to act” is “intuitively hard to deny” (p. 10).

In any event, it is important to remember why Ginet is concentrating upon trying: if trying itself is an action, he claims that this is evidence that there can be an action that is not defined by its causal link to a result. Ginet holds that even if a voluntary exertion of the body is associated with the volition, the volition is the initial part and not the cause of the exertion (p. 39).¹⁰ In this way, there is an action (volition) that is not conceptually tied to causing anything, and thesis #1—the thesis that action is defined by means of a causal relation—has been rejected.

But if, as I suggested above, trying (as a failure) is conceptually parasitic on succeeding, a causal analysis might need to be introduced. It could be that the reason we talk of trying only when we fail is that we are aware of our attempt to cause an event followed by a failure to bring about what we tried to cause. The concept of action itself may involve the notion of a successful causal event in terms of the environment in which the agent is acting. This may account for the rather *unintuitive* nature of Ginet’s thesis that an act has taken place when, under ordinary understanding, it has been thwarted.

Furthermore, Ginet’s thesis that “to try to act is to act” seems particularly open to the Rylean objection that a volition as a theoretical entity is a completely private

¹⁰ This should be contrasted with Ginet’s thesis that the perceptual part of the experience of voluntary exertion (the kinesthetic awareness) is caused by the volitional part (Ginet, 30).

event that therefore could allow no one else to tell if we acted voluntarily (Ryle 1984, pp. 65-66). It would mark off acts from non-acts only for the actor, but it leaves us no better off in terms of the actions of others (and surely, we think we know the difference—or else how do we ascribe praise and blame?)

Notice that the general ground of the criticism that I am leveling against Ginet is consistent with, but not equivalent to, the behaviorist objection to reliance on mental events. An interesting strand in behaviorist thought holds that the stimulus/response pattern is defined in terms of the way in which a whole organism behaves as a consequence of environmental stimuli (Rachlin, 1995, p. 181). I would agree with this element in behaviorism to the extent that looking for an individual mental event to capture the complex relation that identifies a behavior as being in the control of the agent (an act) is a futile effort. However, I do not agree that an adequate account of action can be arrived at without including some mental dispositions (beliefs and desires).

In any event, there are some reasons to think that Ginet's thesis is not as straightforwardly intuitive as he would have us believe. So, what we are left with are two competing concepts of action: action as conceptually simple and action as conceptually complex. Because most of the actions we acknowledge to be such do seem to be linked in our mind to the determinate exertion expressed in their propositional content, Ginet faces an uphill battle to convince us of his intuition that "To try to act is to act." Ginet claims that he has shown that a simple action could avoid the regress, but he has not yet demonstrated that there is any action that is simple. Ginet addresses this issue by presenting a model of an act that he claims is evidently simple in its causal structure. This is the model of thought as action.

Thought as Action

Ginet claims that we will discover the simple act that he postulates as basic to action if we imagine ourselves willing a certain thought—like willing to mentally say to ourselves the French word "*peu*." It is simple in that it does not make sense that I must think to myself "think '*peu*'" *in order* to think it. It is a basic act in that it is one in which there is no need to perform another act in order to accomplish the act. As a contrast, a complex act is one where there is some need to perform another act to bring about the desired act. Obviously, the first thought is sufficient to bring the word "*peu*" before my mind. Because to will the propositional content is already to think it, a will to think is fulfilled in the willing (Ginet, p. 12).

In other words, it is not that one can separate the propositional content from the willing and then say that the willing brought about the propositional content as a result. Ginet holds that the willing is not an event that can be isolated from its content; the willing is just the mode under which the content is found. The volition is merely the propositional content in the executive mode. As such, there is no causal complexity evident in the notion of such mental action.¹¹ Ginet writes, "It does not

¹¹ Note that Ginet is agnostic here about whether or not it might turn out that the simple mental act

contain within itself the structure of a mental act causing another mental occurrence" (p. 30).

Ginet wants to distinguish these simple willed acts from both complex acts (e.g., using a mental image of someone in order to recall a name and thus where there is a need of some further act to bring about the intended act) and from thoughts that simply occur to me without my willing—what Ginet calls “unbidden occurrences” (p. 12). In the first case, there is a complex of action and result. In the case of an unbidden occurrence of a word, Ginet says that it would be like simply hearing the word in one’s “mind’s ear” rather than saying it (p. 13). Notice here that the difference between bidden and unbidden thoughts is a difference between two types of fully conscious events. There is no question here of a difference between conscious and unconscious processes.¹²

However, again, I find that my intuitions diverge from Ginet’s. First, it is not clear how Ginet’s description of the simple mental act can distinguish between thoughts that are acts and those that are not. The problem is this: what classifies a thought as unbidden other than the fact that it does not follow our intentions (or was even against our intentions)? Indeed, in most psychological analyses of unbidden thought, it is the fact that the thoughts are undesirable that mark off unbidden thought. For example the “white bear” experiments where subjects were told to not think of a white bear revealed that they were more likely to report thinking of a white bear under such instructions.¹³ Unbidden thoughts have also been studied in cases of depression where negative thoughts occur despite the subject’s efforts to stop such thinking.¹⁴ For Ginet, an unbidden thought is identified by its lack of status as an act, and it is not immediately clear how it wears such non-action status on its face.

If we do not want to rely on the psychological notion of unbidden thought, one way to make Ginet’s distinction is that we could determine if we had a *bidden* thought if we at first proposed it to ourselves under some alternate description (the French word for “little”) and then subsequently had the thought of “*peu*.” But this would be a willing that had one propositional content (the French word for “little”) and a result that had a different content (“*peu*”), and so it would fall outside Ginet’s simple model of action. Ginet cannot accommodate such complexity in his simple act of volition, and yet it seems that this is one criterion by which we could separate bidden from unbidden thoughts.

The problem with Ginet’s description of a simple mental act is that it is just this type of complex act that most often comes to mind when we think of willed

is identical with a causally complex neural process. Ginet is talking on the level of conceptual requirements—what are the necessary conditions of defining an act (Ginet, p. 12).

¹² In this case, there is no need to evoke modular structures that would unconsciously do the work to bring about an unbidden thought: see Fodor, (1983), *The Modularity of Mind*. As I have understood Ginet, he is simply saying that certain thoughts are the result of some mental effort on our part, while others come to us without such effort.

¹³ See Wegner & Schneider (1989, esp. p. 296).

¹⁴ See Moretti & Shaw (1989).

thoughts. If I am willing myself to think something, it seems that I am trying to trigger some thought that is not already occurrent and so is not already the content of the willing. Thought as action seems to require a sort of mental effort. This harkens back to James' characterization of volitions as "attention with effort" (James, 1981, p. 1166). Indeed if there is a distinction to be made, it seems to lie between these complex episodes and the whole realm of simply occurring thought. By contrast, Ginet draws the line down the middle of simply occurring thought in a way that is not intuitively obvious. It is not clear how there can be a criterion that can mark the difference between simple thoughts that occur unbidden and simple thoughts that occur as soon as they are willed.¹⁵

In other words, I cannot discern differences among my noncomplex thoughts—either all are willed or none are willed. If none are willed, then Ginet has failed to produce an example of a noncomplex act. But if all are willed, then the volitional account has still sustained damage because now we must say that all thinking is also willing. Here, Ginet will have trouble characterizing volition as thought in the executive mode if volition ceases to be a distinct category of thought. If every thought is an act, then there is no distinct category of thought for Ginet to point to in order to characterize volitions.

However, Ginet does not believe he has to rely on this characterization of the simple mental act in order to recognize what is an act and what is not. At the core of Ginet's volitional theory is the claim that we identify acts from the inside by means of the experience of an "actish phenomenal quality" (p. 13-15).

The Actish Phenomenal Quality

Ginet claims that the best way to show that volitions are the marks of agency is to give an intrinsic account of volitions. However, many philosophers are not convinced that such entities as volitions exist, much less that they can be experienced (e.g. Ryle, 1984, p. 64). Even Davis (1979), who is an advocate of the volitional theory, admits that while he needs volitions to complete his account, and while volitions may cause us to have a feeling of agency, there is no specific experience of volitions in themselves (p. 18). Ginet needs to address this skepticism concerning volitions.

To talk about our feeling of volition, Davis uses the example of attempted movement in paralysis (as originally introduced by James, 1981, p. 749). Suppose a person is not able to perceive his or her bodily movement (is temporarily blinded), a

¹⁵ It is interesting that McCann (1974), while also offering thought as the model for simple acts or volitions, does not attempt to make this distinction between unbidden occurrences and mental acts. As he points out, in both cases all that is needed for the thought to occur is a consciousness of the propositional content. The actual difference, he claims, does not lie in a difference in agency, rather: "It consists in the fact that in reverie, one comes to think of things simply by their being associated with other content already thought of, and without any further purpose, whereas in more organized thought one fastens upon an idea to further a design, usually one extending beyond that act" (p. 465). McCann accepts both types as mental acts.

temporary paralysis is induced in his or her arm, and then the arm is tied down. The experimenter next instructs the person to raise his or her arm. Under these conditions, Davis claims that the person would have an awareness that is the same as if the physical behavior actually resulted. He also claims that it is likely that this awareness is caused by whatever would normally have caused the physical behavior. This test case can be used to capture the sense of Wittgenstein's question, and consequently it is often used by volitional theorists. If anything at all happens in the agent under such circumstances, it will be that which results if the bodily exertion is subtracted from the complete action and so can be identified as the volition.

However, it is not clear that there is any special event that is being experienced. After all, even if the agent believes that he or she has moved the arm, such a belief may not be the result of some special experience. It could be that the belief is based on the ordinary inductive inference: when I have in a similar way wanted to move my arm, when there was no impediment and I did not believe there was any impediment, my arm has moved. In this case, my belief is caused by another belief (an expectation) and not by a feeling.

Ginet does not use the paralysis example to talk about volitions; instead, he addresses the thesis directly by insisting that there is indeed an experience of volition as volition. He claims that there is some "actish phenomenal quality" (p. 13-15) that is specific to volitions and that is also an infallible guide to the identification of voluntary control. Ginet offers no argumentative defense of this claim, but he merely says that trying to dispense with this element of our experience is analogous to the eliminativist trying to deny the reality of subjective sense experience (p. 24).

However, Ginet does seem to recognize that in order to convince us of the existence of this experience he needs to give us some sort of description of the phenomenal feeling that characterizes it. Ginet offers the following description of the mental acts discussed above: "It is as if I directly produce the sound in my mind's ear . . . as if I directly make it occur, as if I directly determine it" (p. 13). A voluntary exertion (which has a volition as its core) is similarly characterized in terms of its being "one that we *control* in a quite direct way" (Ginet, p. 24).

In this way, we again come to Ginet's definition of action:

«*S*'s *V*-ing at *t*» designates an action if and only if either (i) it designates a simple mental occurrence that had the actish phenomenal quality or (ii) it designates *S*'s causing something, that is, an event consisting in something's being caused by an action of *S*'s. (p. 15)

As I have noted before, according to Ginet, the mark of action is accessible only from the inside; it is only through the experience of the actish phenomenal quality that I know that I am acting.

The objection could be raised that even if there is a feeling that marks off those events that are under our control, it is still unclear whether this experience can be referenced to some single state that we call a volition. The feeling could be the

outcome of the complex event of an agent directly causing an act or of a belief/desire pair causing a physical exertion. As I stated above, Ginet would respond by denying that such cases are coherent. If the phenomenal feeling is just a sign of a causal relation, then there must be something that it is like to have the feeling without the relation being there. According to Ginet, we cannot conceive what this would be in such a case, nor how we could ever determine that it was missing (p. 13). So, just as I cannot be wrong about the fact that I have tried (and so have exercised my will), so I cannot be wrong about whether the volition itself occurs. Ginet appears to take it as self-evident that there can be no “seeming volitions.”

Ginet develops the implications of this denial of “seeming volitions” in the following manner. Not only do all experiences of volitions point to the actuality of the volition, but also there can be no volition if the agent does not have an experience of the volition. He writes: “Nothing can count as my voluntarily exerting my body if it does not seem to me at the time that my body’s exertion is in virtue of my voluntary control of it” (Ginet, p. 30). For Ginet, there is a completely transparent relation between the volition and the experience of the volition in that one cannot occur without the other. Only beings that are capable of experiencing the “actish phenomenal quality” are agents (Ginet, p. 20).

From here it is but a short step to what seems to me to be the most counterintuitive of Ginet’s theses concerning action as volition. The reason the experience of volition and the volition itself always occur together is because the phenomenal experience exhausts the reality of the volition. Ginet simply identifies the two. If I try to move my arm while unaware of its paralysis, “my having this volitional experience, of which I am directly aware *counts* in these circumstances as my trying to exert with it. And whatever counts as trying counts as acting” (Ginet, p. 30). The reason this is counterintuitive is that although we might want to say that volitional experience or awareness stands as a mark of action, Ginet is making the stronger claim that this phenomenal experience *is* the action. The action exists as a certain type of awareness.

It is at first difficult to see why Ginet should want to press this claim. As Davis (1991, p. 391) points out in his review of *On Action*, Ginet can claim direct awareness of physical exertion without any need to postulate identity between the awareness and the volition (cf. Ginet, p. 28). Furthermore, Ginet’s contention that the volition is structurally simple does not parallel the kind of simplicity that a pain has been claimed to have and that allows pain to be identical to the awareness of pain. The simplicity of a volition that Ginet has urged is the lack of a *causal* structure, but Ginet would not want to claim that its propositional content is cognitively simple.

However, it could be said in Ginet’s defense, if volition is constituted by no more than what is immediately accessible in the experience of volition, there can be no doubt whether or not the volitional event that is being experienced is an action. This would seem to give us a sufficient mark by which to distinguish acts from non-

act behaviors. Furthermore, because a simple mental event cannot have any hidden causal links, the experience of the volition already is necessary for action and there is no possibility of causal deviance. Presumably we would not experience a causally deviant result as an action because we would lack the actish phenomenal experience. The project that Ginet began by classifying volitions as both necessary and sufficient culminates with the claim that the volition is identical with its awareness. However, as I will argue in the next section, reducing agency to such a feeling may impoverish the concept of agency that Ginet is anxious to defend.

Ginet and Agency

I believe that Ginet's strategy of defining action intrinsically, that is, as identical with the experience of the volition, results in an inadequate account of agency. If volitions are the necessary and sufficient bearers of agency, then there is the possibility that they can have this role in isolation from what is ordinarily thought of as the agent as well as the environment that the agent is engaged in.

The belief/desire account is thought by some to reduce away the agent and to make agency simply a function of a deterministic set of events that begin outside the agent. While Ginet's source of agency is internal to what we call the person, the self-sufficiency that he has accorded to volitions may make them just as accidental to that person as in the belief/desire account. The reason is that once the volition is made necessary and sufficient, then the volition could be an isolated mental event that does not involve an enduring agent from one action to the next. So, if volitions are identical to actions, then volitions may not be necessarily connected to the agent.

Ginet could answer that the connection between the agent and the volition is already contained in the experience of the volition. The "actish phenomenal quality" (p. 13-15) is after all the feeling that "I" am doing something, and it is this feeling that allows us to distinguish between acts and non-acts. Ginet could claim that the person is the subject of his or her acts in the same way that the mind is the subject of its thoughts; to be an agent involves being the continuous ground of actions without being their cause. This would require that the volition somehow exhibits this connection to the agent.

However, by making volitions identical with their experience in a thinking subject, Ginet has limited the ability of volitions to display the connection to the agent. Because each volition is by itself sufficient for action, the "I" that is experienced in one volition may be completely separate from the "I" that is experienced in another volition. The "I" that is experienced is exhausted in each experience. It is difficult not to see this "I" as just the "actish phenomenal quality" (p. 13-15) again with no real experience of a continuing agent. As a result, it is still possible that there is nothing more to agency than a disconnected set of volitions. So, again, it is not clear whether Ginet's position can avoid reducing the "I" out of agency any better than the belief/desire account.

Furthermore, at least the belief/desire account can provide some criterion for actions to be attributed to the agent: they can be interpreted as actions if they are consistent with the agent's other desires and beliefs. In contrast, by restricting agency to an actish phenomenal quality, there is no reason not to accept as actions behaviors that deviate widely from the actor's known beliefs and desires. There is here no longer any criteria based upon coherence that can act as a limit to what we will accept as falling within the boundaries of normal agency.

However, Ginet does recognize that an account of agency requires an enduring person as the subject of actions. In a passage at the beginning of *On Action* he states:

So even if I am right in maintaining that the mark of an action is intrinsic to it, the relevant intrinsic features mark an event as an action only if that event occurs in the right surroundings. The surroundings required are not, however, a matter of how that particular event was caused—not that *it* must have arisen out of the subject's motives—but a matter rather of its having the right sort of entity as its subject. And that is a matter of there being enough events like it in that subject's history that do have that sort of cause (and, one could add, that have some minimal coherence among them and their explanations). This requirement is already taken care of for my analysis by the stipulation that it is an account only of what marks personal events as actions, where personal events are those of which persons are the subjects. For nothing can count as a person unless rational agency, acting for reasons, is characteristic of it. (p. 4)

Note here that Ginet *stipulates* that something counts as an action only when it has a rational person for its subject. This implies that his sufficient account of action does not itself have the conceptual resources to require a subject/person as a necessary condition. The crucial point here is that the experience of volitions as separate events simply does not point to any enduring subject. Although Ginet may stipulate that there must be such an entity as subject, it is important to notice that the intrinsic definition of the volition as identified with the action makes no such connections.

Recall that Ginet appeared to accept the notion that an act manifested in behavior could be distinguished from a mere bodily movement by the fact that it is "I" that did it. But now the actish phenomenal quality is not the feeling that "I" as an enduring agent did the act, but merely a feeling that is exhausted in the moment "I" feel it. There is indeed a distinction between a bodily movement and an act—a feeling or lack thereof—but this feeling points to nothing beyond itself and certainly to nothing that endures through different feelings. So, while the feeling marks the distinction, it is not clear any more what importance the distinction has. The act, in being causally simple, has become isolated from its agent.

Furthermore, the emphasis that Ginet places on the internal mark of action seems to isolate action from its connection to the environment in which the action is performed. The behavior that is under the control of the agent in this case is

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something completely internal to the agent. This goes against our most basic intuitions that behavior is an activity by which an organism interacts (sometimes responding, sometimes initiating behavior) with its environment. While behavior may not be exhausted by the externally accessible events, it does seem that an adequate theory of action should place some emphasis on such events. Notice that according to Ginet, action as a characteristic as an organism can take place without any reference to the input received from the environment or the output that introduces changes in the environment. While such a picture is internally consistent, it is not totally satisfactory. An account of action that emphasizes the situation of an organism in its environment would ultimately encompass more of what we mean when we talk about human action. This project, I believe, is more adequately performed by a belief/desire account.

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