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Acts According to Hyman

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John Hyman's *Action, Knowledge, and Will* is richly historically informed, replete with vibrant examples, full of ideas, and a pleasure to read. The idea that determines how the book proceeds is that 'a convincing philosophy of action needs to disaggregate the four different dimensions of human action'—'the physical, the ethical, the psychological and the intellectual'. It is indicative of the book's breadth that it treats of all these dimensions; and one doesn't need to agree that disaggregation of the sort Hyman means to implement can be effected in order to find the breadth very welcome. In what follows, I'll be concerned with what some might think of as a fifth dimension—the metaphysical. Specifically, I'll be concerned with whether Hyman's view of acts as causings can accommodate what is said when action verbs are used with imperfect aspect—as when it's said, for instance, that John *is raising* the flag or *was raising* the flag (rather than that John *raised* the flag, where 'raised' has perfect aspect).

Hyman defines an act as 'an instance of an agent's causing some kind of change' (p.43), and often calls the event or change which an act is an instance of an agent's causing a *result*. He thinks that acts are particulars—'doubly dependent particulars', inasmuch as the identity of any act depends both upon the event of which it is the causing and upon the substance that undergoes the change. (This double dependence, he says, 'does not prevent us from including acts [along with] events and substances, in Quine's super category of "objects", an object being "the material content of a portion of space-time"' (p.61).) Hyman rounds off his discussion of acts and events saying that acts are 'excluded from [the category of relations] because they are dynamic rather than static' (p.74–5). When he calls acts dynamic, I take Hyman to mean to allow that acts may be, or may have been, ongoing—in progress. And I take him to be alert to a possible problem about allowing this when he says:

the fact that one can fail to complete an act is sometimes thought to require a qualification of the idea that to act is to cause a certain kind of change. (n. at p.34)

I'll suggest that there may be a genuine problem here. I'll go on to suggest that no-one really thinks that acts themselves are included in the category of relations. Hyman's real opponent here, I think, is someone who wants to allow that relational predications may be made with action verbs.

In 'fail to complete an act', 'an act' apparently has to be taken to be something "telic": reaching an end—a sort of result—amounts to the act's completion. 'Swimming the Hellespont is an act', Hyman says (p.34). He also says that "'Byron swam the Hellespont" reports an act' (p.35). But the act reported by this sentence about Byron presumably *is* a particular (which some will take to be an

“object” in Quine’s super-categorial sense), whereas swimming the Hellespont—completed by all who’ve swum the Hellespont and attempted by those who were (/are) swimming the Hellespont but who did not (/may not) succeed in getting across—is surely *not* a particular, not an *instance* of anything. Let me call swimming the Hellespont an ACT. Then an act in the sense of Hyman’s definition—‘an instance of an agent’s causing ...’—may be thought of as something there is when an ACT has actually been instanced by an agent.

Consider one of Hyman’s examples apparently well-suited to the view of acts as causings. “‘Paul melted the butter’ reports an act’ (p.35). The act in question is Paul’s causing of a certain result—of the butter’s being molten. Contrast ‘Paul was melting the butter’. This apparently does not report an act in Hyman’s sense: unless and until the butter came to be molten there was no result of the butter’s being molten to be Paul’s causing of. If one wants an example of ‘the fact that one can fail to complete an act’, then one might imagine that the phone rang just after Paul had set out on getting the butter melted and that Paul then abandoned the project of making a sauce for which he needed molten butter. But there is no need to contrive such an example in order to raise a question about how ‘Paul was melting the butter’ may be supposed to be understood.

Let me now quote, and proceed to comment on, the passage which contains Hyman’s response to ‘what it sometimes thought’.

[O]ne can be engaged for a time in drying a plate without completing the task. But it is argued that one cannot properly be said to be engaged in causing (as opposed to attempting to cause) a plate to become dry unless this result occurs. If that is right, then we cannot infer from the fact that *to do* an act of a certain kind is *to cause* a change of the corresponding kind to the fact that *to be doing* an act of the same kind is *to be causing* a change of the corresponding kind. (n. at p.34 contd.)

For the sake of concreteness, suppose that Ann is now engaged in such activity on her part as it takes for some plate to be becoming dry. The opponent Hyman envisages here will argue that Ann’s being thus engaged cannot really be a matter of her causing the plate’s becoming dry because there won’t be a result of the kind required for an act of drying the plate unless Ann completes the task. That seems right: so long as she is drying the plate, there is as yet no result. One might wonder now why it should matter whether or not Ann will complete the task—will actually finish drying the plate. Even if Ann will carry on and finish, so long as she is drying the plate—is engaged in doing so—there is no result, no ‘event or change’. Indeed it can seem not to matter whether or not ‘dry the plate’ is interpreted as “telic”. Irrespective of how dry the plate has come to be when Ann stops drying it, Ann’s activity appears not to have any result until she stops.

Hyman suggests that any difficulty here will go away if a certain inference is disallowed. In order to find the inference faulty (to find that ‘we cannot infer ...’), one needs to accept that ‘*to do* an ACT’ can be understood using ‘cause to ..’, but refuse to allow that ‘*to be doing* an ACT’ can be similarly understood. Well, what is it ‘*to do an ACT*’? Suppose the ACT is V-ing—drying a plate, melting the butter, swimming the Hellespont, whatever. Presumably to do it is to V—to dry a plate, to melt the

butter, .. . It is hard then to see how *to be doing* it could be anything other than *to be V-ing*; and then it doesn't seem possible to agree with Hyman that to dry the plate is to cause a certain change, yet to deny, as Hyman would like to be able to, that to be drying the plate is to be causing such a change. Of course Hyman has reasons for 'insisting 'that to raise, move, .. dry,..etc., something is to cause it to rise, move, .. become dry, ..etc'(pp.36–37).¹ In presenting his view, he uses only unmarked infinitives. But given that acts take time, I assume that he is committed to both imperfective and perfective versions, so that he should endorse both (i) to be raising (moving, drying, ..) X is to be causing X to rise (move, become dry, ..), and (ii) to have raised (moved, dried, ..) X is to have caused X to move (rise, become dry, ..).

If there is a problem here, it may not be a problem specifically about the 'cause to —' glosses which Hyman uses to understand a range of transitive verbs which have intransitive counterparts—'move', etc. etc. Perhaps the explicitly causative treatment of 'A is moving X', with its introduction of results, simply brings attention to a problem about the imperfective, a problem that there seems to be whether or not A's ongoing moving of X is said to be A's causing of something. If X's *ongoing moving*, when A is moving X, is not itself an event or change, then equally it seems that A's *ongoing moving of X* is not itself a particular—never mind whether it is correctly described as 'a causing'. But however that may be, the 'cause to—' glosses can seem to be objectionable in their own right. Suppose that John set his plate drying machine to start in five minutes' time. One might think that in this case it was the machine, not John, that dried the plate; and that here John did cause the plate to dry: he did so by setting the machine. It is then a question whether the word 'cause' as it occurs in 'John caused ..' in this example, also has application to someone who simply dried the plate herself—who did so 'directly' to use Hyman's term. Hyman argues that the fact that we would not actually say of someone who had directly dried a plate that she had caused it to become dry can be explained on Gricean principles (p.37). But given that we understand 'cause X to —' perfectly well when it would actually be used with a person (or other substance) as subject, it must be a question whether this word means what it would need to mean if Hyman were right to equate 'to raise (move, ..) X' with 'to cause X to rise (move, ..)'. One finds a reason to doubt the equation by considering that if 'raise X' meant 'cause X to rise', then one would expect 'John raised the flag slowly' to be equivalent to 'John caused the flag to rise slowly'. But the latter sentence conveys that the flag's rising was slow. It doesn't convey, as the former does, that John did something slowly. One

¹ Hyman's reason is that 'this is the most plausible way of explaining what these verbs mean' (p.37). It will be evident that I think that the tense and aspectual behaviour of verbs needs to be brought into account in explaining what they mean. This has to be my excuse for scrutinizing a matter which Hyman, despite his distinguishing activities from acts (p.34), confines to a footnote.

I should say that Hyman has a distinctive view of acts, and provides careful arguments which succeed in ruling out a number of alternatives. One such alternative that he refutes is taken from Hornsby (1980): there I presented a view that I've long since abandoned.

might think that if John raised the flag slowly (and didn't cause it to rise slowly), then the flag's rising and John's raising it must alike have been slow. And then one might think that the flag's rising simply was its being raised by John.

This isn't what Hyman thinks. He defends a distinction between an agent's raising a flag and the motion of the flag, saying that 'we can cut the agent out of the picture, so to speak' (p.56). Well, certainly the motion of the flag can be thought about separately from whoever raises it. But the fact that there is no need to think about (or see) an agent in order to think about (or see) the flag's being raised can hardly show that the rising of the particular flag that there was when John raised that flag was not that flag's being raised by John. (Compare: although there no need to know which child left her tooth under the pillow, and no need to see Rosie when one sees the tooth left under the pillow, still if it was Rosie's tooth that one saw, what one saw could not have been the tooth of another child.) Despite Hyman's wanting to distinguish action from motion where someone's raising the flag is concerned, he says in due course, that 'Brutus killed Caesar' and 'Caesar was killed by Brutus' 'refer to the same act' (p.71). If one agrees, then one will surely think that 'John raised the flag' and 'The flag was raised by John' likewise "refer to the same act". And if one further thinks that the flag's rising when John raised it is was its being raised by John, then one will dissent from the idea that John stood in any "causing" relation to an event or result while the flag was going up. (Of course one may still find causal notions appropriate. If it is asked 'Who has caused the flag to be flying', the answer is 'John'. John was responsible for the flag's motion so long as he was raising it. The wind is (/was) responsible for the door's being open if it is blowing (/blew) the door open. It seems possible to resist Hyman's view that acts are causings without thinking it an accident that a range of transitive verbs are called causatives.)

When Hyman treats acts as *referred to* by sentences, he apparently takes on a new understanding of 'acts'. At least, when he turns to his argument that 'acts are excluded from the category of relations', he imagines neither an opponent who would claim that *melting the butter* (which I have labelled an 'ACT') is a relation, nor an opponent who would claim that what is reported by the sentence 'Paul melted the butter' is a relation. Those claims both seem very implausible, and I doubt they could really be at issue. Hyman's argument at this point depends upon distinguishing the pair 'Brutus is older than Caesar' and 'Caesar is younger than Brutus' from such a pair as 'Brutus killed Caesar' and 'Caesar was killed by Brutus'. The former pair he says 'refer .. to converse relations', whereas the latter pair 'evidently refer to one and the same act' (p.71). The idea then, is that if one grants the arguments Hyman gives against the view that converse relations are identical, one must accept that the behaviour of 'killed' cannot be assimilated to that of 'is older than'. Well, Hyman's opponent isn't likely to say that sentences, whether they report how one thing acted upon another or they report how one thing stands to another, *refer* to relations. Surely what Hyman's opponent would wish to claim is that such sentences as 'Brutus killed Caesar' or 'Paul melted the butter', like the sentences 'Brutus is older than Caesar' or 'Block *a* sits on top of block *b*', contain

expressions for relations. So 'Brutus is older than Caesar' conveys that Brutus and Caesar stand respectively in the relation in which any two things stand if the first is older than the second. Likewise, according to one whom I think we have to take to be Hyman's real opponent, 'Paul melted the butter' conveys that Paul and the butter stand respectively in the relation that any two things stand if the first melted the second. Here there is no claim that an *act* in any sense is a relation. The claim is that the two-place predicate 'melted' expresses a relation. And given Hyman's view about pairs on the pattern of 'A ϕ -d B' and 'B was ϕ -d by A', one wonders why he should find the category of relation out of place here. (I think that one might now set aside disputes about whether relations are identical with their converses. Even if it is said that different relations are expressed in 'Brutus is older than Caesar' and 'Caesar is younger than Brutus', still it can be agreed that the truth of the one is necessary and sufficient for the truth of the other. So it is, as Hyman agrees, with 'Brutus killed Caesar' and 'Caesar was killed by Brutus', and presumably, generally now, with 'A ϕ -d X' and 'X was ϕ -d by A'.)

When Hyman concludes that 'acts are excluded from the category of relations', he explains why this should be so. It is here that he says about acts that they are 'dynamic rather than static'. The dynamic character of acts is now brought out in the fact that we can ask (e.g.) *how long it took* for Paul to melt the butter. Indeed we can ask this. Paul was melting the butter for as long as it took for Paul to melt the butter. But then it seems that we must say that 'is melting' and 'was melting', like 'melted', express relations. 'A is (/was) melting X' conveys that A and X stand respectively in the relation that any two things stand if the first is (/was) melting the second. And of course neither of A or X, participants in an ongoing process, can be static throughout the time when A is acting on X. (*Acting on* here might be thought to be a causal notion without being thought to be a notion having *causing* as a constituent. So I suggested it could be with causative transitive verbs.)