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Agency, Time and Naturalism

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Abstract

I look critically at accounts of human action which help themselves to a certain conception of the causal order when they treat actions as effects of mental states. Donald Davidson introduced such accounts in the shape of the "belief-desire theory." By way of examining Davidson's ideas about events, I undertake to show what conceptions of time and of causality are needed for understanding agency, and for a viable naturalism.

I

I'm going to be concerned with the idea of an event and the conception of the passage of time as these are found in the causal theory of action. The theory continues to hold considerable sway: it is widely endorsed by philosophers of mind, and often taken for granted by philosophers answering questions in meta-ethics or questions about freedom. The theory has certainly met opposition in the philosophy of action. But its opponents for the most part have wanted to present an alternative to it rather than address the thinking that lies behind it.

Naturalism is one source of the causal theory—a naturalism according to which an account of any phenomenon caught up with causality must present the phenomenon as fitted to "the event causal order." This being a Romanell lecture, its topic is "philosophical naturalism." If the failings of the causal theory of action that I hope to articulate count against the naturalism which hosts it, then unless the event causal theory is to be rejected in favour of some sort of *anti*-naturalism, there must be a question what a defensible naturalism might consist in. I won't address that question until I've said something about the origins of the causal theory of action and explained why, as it seems to me, it fails to introduce a conception of time needed for a proper understanding of human agency, or indeed of any agency.

Evidently I take naturalism to come in different versions. So too does "the" causal theory of action as I mean this. Common to all versions is the claim that when there is human action, mental states meeting certain specifications cause a movement of the body of the person whose mental states they are. Donald Davidson got the theory started: he argued for what has come to be known as "the desire-belief account" in his seminal 1963 paper "Actions Reasons and Causes." Later Davidson moved to a version of in which a desire and a belief jointly cause an *intention*. And Michael Bratman has developed a theory of intention which brings a definite conceptual addition to Davidson's account of it. Still, Bratman takes his theory to belong in "the tradition of philosophical concern with the metaphysics of human agency and its place in the natural causal order." The tradition lives on: many of those whose view of *intention* is quite different from Bratman's apparently share the metaphysical assumptions of the causal theory.

These assumptions that will be at issue here: I want to put in question whether agency should be located in the natural causal order when that is conceived as an event causal order.

It was by treating actions as events that Davidson found a place for agency in the event causal order (§II). And unlike those who've followed in his footsteps in philosophy of action, Davidson paid attention metaphysical assumptions on which his ontology of events was rested. I'm going to subject Davidson's idea of events to scrutiny (§§III and IV). I hope that examining what may be meant by "event" can reveal what conceptions of time and of causality are needed in a treatment of agency and in a viable naturalism (§V).

II

The content of naturalism being in question, it may be instructive to start with the historical antecedents of the event causal theory of action. One place to look is a debate that took place when psychology was a young science, recently separated from philosophy. Broadly speaking, psychologists were then divided into two schools, between those who favoured teleological explanation and those who favoured exclusively mechanistic explanation, the latter being said to "make use of the language of the physical sciences." When the psychologist E.R. Guthrie spoke of the opposition between these two schools, he wrote in the *Journal of Philosophy* in 1924. Philosophers responded to him. One such philosopher was C.J. Ducasse. And Davidson read Ducasse.[1]

Ducasse thought that Guthrie's distinction between mechanism and teleology was "much too loose." He wanted "to define … explanation, purpose, and purposiveness with precision." He defined explanation as consisting in "the offering of a hypothesis or fact, standing to the fact to be explained as a case of antecedent to a case of consequent of some already known law of connections" (1925, 150–1). Ducasse assumed that backwards causation is ruled out, so that when he addressed the question whether explanation could be purposive, he asked how it could be that "a fact that has not yet occurred could explain—i.e. be a possible cause of—a fact that has already occurred." His answer was that it could do so "only if an intelligence aware of the contingency of the second upon the first, and desiring the occurrence of the second, is thereby moved to bring about the first." But, then, he argued, that in "the only sort of explanation of X in which the dependence of Y on X enters, it enters not as something true, but only as something believed" (1925, 152). So, said Ducasse, if there is a genuine case of purposiveness, then:

> It is essential that the following elements be present, or be supposed, by the speaker, to be present:
> *Belief* by the performer of the act in a law … e.g. that If *X* occurs, *Y* occurs.
> *Desire* by the performer that *Y* shall occur
> *Causation by that desire and that belief jointly*, of the performance of *X*. 1925, 153.

Davidson's agenda were not Ducasse's; and there are plenty of differences between their two accounts. Davidson was principally concerned to argue that the cause of an action is found in the *explanans* of an explanation of it which is given in stating the agent's reason, whereas Ducasse simply wanted to show that explanation could be purposive. Davidson spoke of agents as possessing what have come to be known as *means-end* beliefs, whereas Ducasse credited agents with beliefs in laws. It is obscure what the instances of the "X"s and "Y"s in Ducasse's believed-in-laws might be supposed to be. But Davidson took a clear view of what caused what when an action was explained. He said that "it serves [his] argument … that the desired end explains the action only if what are believed by the agent to be means are desired" (1963, 689). And he said that a belief which combines with a want to yield an action is "a belief that the action described in a certain way has a certain property" (see (C1) at 687).[2]

Davidson illustrated his view with an explanation of a case in which he (Davidson himself) had turned on the light. In that case what he wanted was *to turn on the light*; and the description of his turning on of the light under which a reason was found was "a switch flipping." So here, on his account, his belief would be that the action described as a switch flipping has the property of being a turning on of the light. There is a problem with this, however. Davidson said "the existence of the event of my turning on the light is required by the truth of "I turned on the light" (687); and it is the truth of his belief which accounts for his having been successful in turning on the light. (Unless his belief had been true, there could be no explanation of his having turned on the light.) But no event having the property of being a turning on of the light exists until the light has been turned on. So it seems that the event which is his action must antedate the belief—the belief which, along with a pro-attitude, was the reason for his action and its cause. Davidson needed to think of the effect as existing ahead of its cause. This is just what Ducasse in his own way strove to avoid. Ducasse's method of avoidance, however, unlike Davidson, was not to introduce any events which agents' beliefs might be about, but to introduce beliefs in laws.

In Davidson's defence, it might be said that the belief playing the role of cause need not be taken to concern the very (singular) action which existed only once he had turned on the light. Indeed Davidson later said "When I wrote [1963], it had not yet occurred to me that a sentence like 'Eve ate the apple' should not be taken to contain a singular reference to an event" (2001, xiv). Thus Davidson might as well have said that *an* event having the property of being a turning-on-of-a-light was required for the truth of "I turned on the light", and need not have spoken of *the* event. But this is no solution to the problem. Davidson's belief must still be supposed to require the existence of something having the property "being a turning on of the light." And what makes for the problem is that the description of the effect makes use of the past-tense—"turned on"—where that of the putative cause requires the existence of something which present tensely "has" a certain property.

Davidson always reported actions using the simple past tense.[3] But Davidson used the present tense when illustrating his views about the causes of actions. Thus, for instance, "We desire it to be true that we learn the meaning of the word 'amygdala'; we believe that we will find out what 'amygdala' means by looking in the O.E.D.; we *may be prompted* to take the appropriate volume of the O.E.D down from the shelf" (2000, 53; my italics). In other of Davidson's examples, an agent who has reason enough do something *intends* to do it, or is *committed* to doing it, or *concludes* that she would do well to do it. But as the examples are presented, never does the agent *do* the thing in question.[4] Of course Davidson's reader is likely to imagine that the agent will carry on so as actually to do that which she may be prompted to, or intends to, or is committed to doing. Certainly Davidson never excludes such a possibility. Still, as the examples are described, an agent's desire and belief fall short of actually producing an action: a reader has to adopt two different temporal perspectives in order to put the occurrence of an action together with its causal origins. The existence of an action is a matter of the agent's actual deed, already done, but an action's occurrence is explained in terms of merely possible futures. Yet the explanation was supposed to discover a cause of the action.

III

I've taken aim against the event causal theory of action which Davidson got started. But I want now to take Davidson's side on one ontological question. Davidson defended a certain ontology of events in his paper "Events as Particulars." There he wrote:

> [W]e are committed to an ontology of unrepeatable particulars, ("concrete individuals").
> It is to such events that we refer, or purport to refer, when we use descriptions like "the
> death of Monteverdi", "his second interview after the trial", … . It is events of this kind
> one of which is said to be self-identical in "His first attempt on the North Face was his
> last." 1970, 25.

Davidson had given an argument for an ontology of events in an earlier paper, "The Logical Form of Action Sentences", which was concerned specifically the events that are actions. By an "action sentence", Davidson meant one containing an action verb in the simple past tense. (He didn't define an "action verb." Suffice here to say that he treated verbs in the category known as accomplishment verbs.) I shall come to the argument in due course. For now I want to look at Davidson's proposal about logical form as he illustrated it for a particular case.

Here is what he said:

> On my proposal, "Meyer climbed Kibo" is analysed as saying that
> [A] there exists an event that is a climbing of Kibo by Meyer:
> in symbols, "$(\exists x)$ (Climbed (Kibo, Meyer, x))." 1970, 28.

In order to consider the proposal, I have provided the sentence Davidson takes to be delivered by analysis with a name: I've called it [A]. Between [A] and his official, symbolic version,

Davidson had a colon. But it is difficult to see how the two of them could really be equivalent. The symbolic version makes use of a 3-place predicate finishing with the past tense morpheme "ed". It then seems that [A], if equivalent, must, despite its being present tense on the face of it, somehow be understood to speak of the past. One can experiment with amending [A] to have it speak of the past. One could put "exists" or "is" into the past-tense, trying either "There exists an event that **was** a climbing" or "There exist**ed** an event that is a climbing." But neither amendment will make things come out right. "There exists an event that **was** a climbing" apparently introduces a changeable thing, which an event presumably is not. As for "There exist**ed** an event that is a climbing", this might provoke the question whether that event still exists. But an event which exists in virtue of someone's having done something, is hardly going to go out of existence.

Davidson has to have thought that any event said by [A] to exist is something that actually exists only when Meyer has already climbed Kibo. This certainly tallies with his remarks about events. "Concrete individual" appears to have no application to something which doesn't yet exist or which might cease to exist. And Davidson made a point of saying that events are things terms for which can flank the identity sign, so that if one of them could be referred to, it could be referred to *again*. Thus the concrete particulars, to whose existence Davidson claimed our commitment in saying that we are committed to an ontology of events, are things over and done with—are inherently past, so to speak.

Davidson's symbolic version of "Meyer climbed Kibo" provides the word "climb**ed**" with a role it can play in other English sentences, but it gives no role to the word "climb". Insofar as he failed to treat "climbed" as composed from "climb" + a past tense morpheme, Davidson could seem to have flouted his own principle of compositionality in semantics.[5] But however that may be, it is a question how "climbed", along with other transitive action verbs in the past tense, are to be understood as expressing 3-place relations. "Climbed" is 2-place on the face of it: when x has climbed y, x and y stand in the relation in which any pair of things stand if the first climbed the second. This two-place relation can be grasped by anyone who can use the word "climb". But we have no clue how to manufacture it out of Davidson's 3-place "Climbed". Indeed it seems that we really have no idea what *relations* might be expressed by such predicates as "Climbed(x,y,e)." Of course these predicates, with their extra places, would be understood if it were stipulated that they occur only in such quantified sentences as "$(\exists x)(\text{—— -ed }(a, b, e)$" and stipulated also that such a sentence simply *means* that a —— -ed b. But why make such stipulations? Why think that "Meyer climbed Kibo" and the like must be taken to *say* that an event of a certain sort exists?[6]

There is no need to make these stipulations in order to defend the ontology of events that Davidson said we are committed to. One can support the idea that such events as Meyer's climbing of Kibo exist by reference to the fact that a nominal such as "Meyer's climbing of Kibo" can denote something which Davidson would call a "concrete individual" but only actually does

denote something when the corresponding past-tense sentence is true. Thus so long as, but only so long as, it is alright to take it for granted that *a* ф-d, "*a*'s ф-ing" denotes an event. We saw that Davidson at one time thought that an action sentence contains a singular reference to an event, and only later came to think that it says that at least one event of a certain sort exists. Well, in any ordinary use, a sentence on the pattern of "*a* ф-d" is surely not understood as equivalent to "*a* ф-d at least once." Somehow or other, a reference to a time is ordinarily implicit in an actual use of "*a* ф-d". This ensures that "*a*'s ф-ing" is, often enough, taken to have a definite denotation. And it means that even if the sentence "*a* ф-d" contains neither quantification over events nor any reference to an event, still the truth the sentence, as it would ordinarily be used, can suffice for the existence of an event.[7]

If this is right, then Davidson's claim about events' existence can make a claim in metaphysics which is not reliant on his claim about the linguistic structure of his action sentences. Davidson spoke of events when he wrote in metaphysical vein. He said:

> [O]bject and event differ. One is an object which remains the same object through changes, the other a change in an object or objects. Spatiotemporal areas do not distinguish them, but our predicates, our basic grammar, our ways of sorting do. Given my interest in the metaphysics implicit in our language, this is a distinction I do not want to give up. 1985, 176.

An object here, which remains the same object through changes, is an enduring thing, a continuant.[8] With such objects in the picture, an event belonging to the ontology to which Davidson claimed our commitment will depend for its existence upon time's having passed—time during which one or more objects have changed.[9]

The existence of an object requires that it should have come into existence. And the answer to a question about how a concrete particular *came to* exist will need to advert to a past more distant than that at which it first existed.[10] Meyer was brought into existence by conception, and Kibo by the movements of tectonic plates. As for the climb of Kibo by Meyer, that particular came to exist when "Meyer climbed Kibo" was first true—when Meyer reached the summit of Kibo presumably. Before that, the climb, which is in Davidson's category of concrete particulars did not exist. The existence of an event, like the existence of an object, cannot be presupposed to its coming to exist.

This will explain why, as I argued, Davidson's belief that an event exists having the property of being a turning of a light could not have been a cause of any actual event having that property.

IV

I found fault with Davidson's event causal theory of action. And I've questioned the intelligibility of the predicates that Davidson introduced in his treatment of action sentences. But I've just

suggested that there need not be objections to the concrete particulars that Davidson takes events to be. I want now to bring the pieces together.

Davidson had things to say about causation as well as about action, and he spoke of events under both heads. But when he was concerned with causation, Davidson didn't confine himself to events in the ontology to which he asserted our commitment. Although he took causation to be a relation between particulars, they were not the particulars that can be said to exist by virtue of the truth of past tensed sentences. Davidson didn't seek an account of "c caus*ed e*" or of "*c was* a cause of *e*". When "cause" is taken to be a relation between events, it is simply not in question whether the events said to be related have *actually occurred*.

Evidently Davidson had no problem with the language of causation. Why then should he have spoken of our ontological commitment as extending only to events that are, as I put it, inherently past? Well, there might be a particular reason to speak of the past when the topic is human action. In doing so, one may register a commitment to the unalterability of the past; and a human agent takes an unalterable past quite for granted. Desiring an end, an agent looks forward—forward to a future in which she might come to have made a difference. The role of making a difference was not one that Davidson assigned to agents, however. Davidson assigned that role to events. In doing so I think that Davidson abjured the perspective of an agent. His treatment of the structure of action sentences stands in the way of an account in which the perspective of an agent can be accommodated.

I argued that Davidson fabricated predicates which are not intelligible as they stand. These are the predicates got by introducing an extra place into an ordinary verb usable in saying what someone did. Of course Davidson had his reasons for fabricating these predicates. He sought a treatment of *adverbs*, which he spelled out in his 1967a. Davidson wanted to explain why it should be that, for instance, "I flew my spaceship to the Morning Star" entails "I flew my spaceship." His idea was that if "flew" is given its own extra place, for events, and the "to" of "to the Morning Star" is taken to express a relation between an event and an object, then the inference from "I flew my spaceship to the Morning Star" to its adverb-free counterpart can be a matter of the elimination of a conjunct. With this idea in place, accounting for a range of adverb-dropping inferences appears to be plain sailing.[11] Notice, however, that "Flew(x,y,e)" could only treat "flew" (past tense); so that if a general treatment of adverbs on these lines were wanted, it would be necessary to introduce as many new three-place predicates as there are different tenses that a verb of action might take. In order to treat sentences containing "will fly", for instance, "Will fly (x,y,e)" would have to be introduced. And then there are progressives which differ from Davidson's simple past tenses in being imperfect—"is [was /will be] climbing *y*", "is [was /will be] flying", and so on. Although he was concerned to explain entailments, Davidson had nothing to say about why "I flew my spaceship" should entail "I was flying my spaceship."[12]

By making use of an ontology of events fitted for the treatment of sentences containing only past perfective verbs, Davidson allowed no sense to be given to an idea which can be conveyed with progressive uses of verbs—the idea of things in progress. Davidson's concrete events, all being past, participate in the same static character as the abstract events between which the relation of "cause" may obtain. That precludes an action verb from being used to speak of a dynamic situation. So Davidson managed to exclude the perspective of one who lives in time—of one who might be making progress toward some end, or witnessing something in the process of doing something. His apparatus of events provides for no way to understand such sentences as "He will be looking it up in the O.E.D.", "She is climbing the mountain", "He was buttering the toast."

I said that Davidson had no need to rely on his claims about linguistic structure in order to defend his ontology of events as concrete particulars. What we can now see, I think, is that in introducing the structure he did into action sentence, Davidson puts paid to the metaphysics in which he gave a place to an event ontology. That metaphysics accords to objects a continuing identity over time; and it is only by thinking of objects as things that may in some respects be different at different times that we can understand the possibility of a change which happens over time—time during which an agent may be acting.[13] But Davidson extrudes any idea of an agent's acting—of her being in action—by taking causality of any sort to involve a relation between events. In treating predications of action verbs as if they always introduced events, the only conception of causality Davidson could allow to be in play is encapsulated in a relation that obtains between static things. Davidson's concrete particulars may make room for a kind of reality which attaches to the past; but his introduction of event-causation served to expunge the reality of the present—the present in which there exist agents and the objects on which or with which they may act.

Many of the verbs which belong in Davidson's action sentences (or at least belong there if they're put into the past tense) are so-called *causative*s. Such verbs when predicated of agents record their acting. Now inasmuch as "*a* sank *b*" might be glossed "*a* caused *b* to sink", one might very well think that *a* was acting on *b* so long as she was sinking *b*. Davidson, however, in keeping with his insistence that causality is everywhere a relation between events treated "*a* sank *b*" as recording the existence of a pair (of at least one par) of events, where in any such pair of events *a* participated in one, and *b* was involved in the other, and the one caused the other. I think that this will strike anyone who is not inured to accounts along these lines as far-fetched.

I have blamed Davidson's insistence that causality is everywhere a relation between events on his treating action sentences in such a way as to lose sight of the temporality of existing objects. But there may be another reason why Davidson and others should have found it easy to overlook the idea of causality that goes hand in hand with the idea of agents' acting. We grasp ideas of acting before we use the word "cause". In setting out to do something, or in knowing

what is going on, one has no need to bring to bear a prior, generic understanding of "cause" such as is introduced into glosses of causative verbs. As G.E.M. Anscombe said "in learning to speak we learned the linguistic representation and application of a host of causal concepts." (1971). But these causal concepts with their causal character may not be in view when a philosopher wields the word "cause".[14]

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V

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I hope that my exploration of some of Davidson's philosophy has equipped me with materials to consider what conception of causality belongs in a right-thinking philosophical naturalism.

 The project of banishing teleology from the study of nature began in the 17th-century. But it was not until a science of psychology came onto the scene that anyone felt any need to purge explanations of human behavior of the teleological.[15] So I began from Ducasse and his account of purposiveness. Ducasse, rightly assuming that "a fact that has not yet occurred could not be a cause of a fact that has already occurred" thought that teleology could be compatible with mechanism only insofar as beliefs and desires are "capable of descriptions as kinds of neural mechanisms" (1925, 154). I suspect that Ducasse thought this because, like Davidson, he failed to see that an agent might have *acted* in such a way as to have brought some fact about. Davidson for his part saw no need to assume, as Ducasse had, that human agents believe in causal laws. It can be an attractive feature of Davidson's teleological explanations that they at no point invoke laws such as are needed for explanations in the natural sciences. There is a kind of anti-reductionism in Davidson which many may find congenial.

 Both Ducasse and Davidson confined their attention to *human* agency. As far as they were concerned, the job of finding a place for the teleological in the causal world extended only to the doings of creatures with beliefs and desires. As far as I know, Davidson said nothing about the behavior of non-human animals. Ducasse, however, was quite explicit that the purposiveness he characterized was absent from the animal world, saying that squirrels could have no purpose in burying their nuts because they lack beliefs. But even if purposes cannot be attributed to animals, can ends not be?[16] Understanding animal behavior seems bound to require teleology. Still, it is not teleology *as such* which is allowed on the scene when one accepts the idea of causality which I've argued that Davidson excluded—the idea which belongs with the idea of acting. Although inanimate objects lack both purposes and ends, there are plenty of verbs that can be used in saying what an inanimate object will do/is doing/did, or what it will suffer/is suffering/suffered. There is a kind of causality in play in agency of any sort. Agential causal concepts are not used only in recording the observations of animate beings.

 But more significant for my present purposes than our use of agential causal concepts in knowing what is observably happening is our use of them as the agents that we are. Where there is human action, there is an agent who knows how to get things done.[17] She may know, for instance, that she will achieve a particular result by acting in a certain way. If she deliberates

about what to do, then she must know how such objects as she might act upon or with will react in order to know how she herself might act. She may have no need to give any thought to the question which events cause which other events.

Now if the concepts that any agent uses when she says what she has done, or is doing, or will do, are those causal ones whose linguistic representation she learned in learning to speak, then presumably we are all *au fait* with the species of causality that goes hand in hand with the idea of acting. It is plausible that in order to have learnt which events cause which others, we have made use of a sort of abstraction, abstraction based in our implementation of the concepts we have of how we might act. So if it is allowed that a person's understanding of causation is acquired in the time bound perspective in which they live and act, then it won't be possible to treat event causal notions as the fundamental ones. It won't be possible to supplant the causality of agency with event causation. That, I have argued, is exactly what Davidson did when he introduced the causal theory of action.

The last fifty odd years have seen additions and refinements to the causal story as Davidson told it in 1963. When he introduced *intention*, Davidson had an agent who "intended to do with his body whatever is needed …", where the needed movement causes further events in turn, culminating in an event whose occurrence suffices for the agent to have done what he intended (1971). So a chain of events is required for an action. Still, when any such chain begins—before the agent does whatever is needed with his body—none of these events exists. The problem I made for Davidson in §II remains. (The "belief that the action described in a certain way has a certain property" is now a belief that can be true only insofar as *a bodily movement* of the agent exists.)

Writers who have followed in Davidson's footsteps, taking event causation to connect an agent's psychological states with the agent's doing what she intended, don't see fit to include any of the details of the sequences of events.[18] Perhaps they aren't much interested in the metaphysics: they can allude to Davidson's telling of an event causal story, without themselves expounding it, while welcoming the sort of anti-reductionism which Davidson seems to make possible. Their assumption then seems to be that in locating agency in the *event* causal order, they have located it in the *natural* causal order. At least I find it to be a view commonly held that naturalism commits one to thinking of human agency as belonging in the event-causal world. Well, I think that we must reject an event-causal naturalism if we are to allow continuant objects a place in the natural world. We need a naturalism which allows that it is only within time that there can be action on the part of anything.

Even while the last fifty years have seen event causal theorists offer more and more conceptually sophisticated philosophies of action, naturalism in some quarters has taken less moderate forms. Naturalism may be said to be "the philosophical theory that treats science as our most reliable source of knowledge and scientific method as the most effective route to

knowledge" (Rosenberg 2011). But could all human activity be the application of scientific method? Is there not human activity which requires knowledge, and cannot quite everyday human activity yield knowledge? Would the scientific method have availed humanity if the knowledge presupposed to its application were less reliable than the knowledge got when the method is applied?

My suggestion is that so far from moving towards naturalism in its more radical versions, a considered philosophy of action must lead in a direction opposite to that of the prevailing currents.[19] Certainly there is no need to postulate anything "unnatural" in order to introduce the dynamic character of agency. This is introduced as soon as it is appreciated that time is passing when someone is doing something, and will be passing if she will in the future be doing anything. If time didn't pass, nothing would ever have got to have been *done*. It would obviously be perfectly pointless ever to intend to do anything unless one could rely on the passage of time. And 'rely on' here puts it mildly of course: time is not given to us as that whose passage we can put our faith in. We live and think and act in time.

In some quarters, an unwillingness to commit even to what is taken to be the most moderate naturalism is supposed to require a kind of quietism which repudiates all metaphysical questions. But I have not repudiated them all. I have not disagreed with what Davidson said when he spoke of the metaphysics implicit in our language. I have suggested only that he failed to allow for the time-bound perspective of the speakers of any language. He failed in this, I have claimed, because in treating action sentences as he did, he obliterated a category of predication, and thus treated causation in a manner which obliterated a kind of causality.[20]

Notes

1. He read Ducasse 1925 as reprinted in Feigl and Sellars (Davidson, 2001, 260). Both in Feigl and Sellars (*Readings in Philosophical Analysis*) and as it is referred to by Davidson, the article is mistakenly cited as in *The Journal of Philosophy* 1926, where there is another article by Ducasse.

2. In (C1) Davidson defined what he called "a primary reason"—a notion of which he made no use after (1963). It is easily seen why the notion should have dropped out of account. Take Davidson's light-switching-on example. One would give different explanations—cite different reasons—according as one was asked why Davidson flipped the switch, why he moved his finger, why he illuminated the room. Different reasons, each of them, turn out then to be "primary".

3. This is a feature of Davidson's writings on action to which Michael Thompson drew attention (e.g. Thompson 2008, 136n17.) Thompson has considerably more to say in positive vein about time and action than I can even start on here. Perhaps I should make it clear that it is not my aim in this lecture to make any contribution to philosophy of action as such.)

4. The "amygdala" example is in "The Objectivity of Values", Essay 3 of Davidson 2004. The other examples I allude to are in other Essays in that volume.

5. Davidson explained the idea of semantic compositionality when he said "The work of a theory [of meaning] is in relating the known truth-conditions of each sentence to those aspects of the sentence that recur in other sentences, and can be assigned identical roles in other sentences." 1967b, 311. As Davidson conceived a theory of meaning for a language, its inputs must have a syntax revealed in the logical form of the sentences of the language.

6. Davidson's idea that verbal predications introduce existential quantification over underlying events has inspired a research program in linguistics. The events quantified over in that program are not the concrete particulars to which Davidson said we are committed; and the doubts I express here about Davidson's treatment of events are bound to rebound on that programme. Myself, I think that the programme's aims must be redefined when it's allowed that one cannot step outside of time in order to record what's said in speakers' time-bound perspective. Obviously I cannot argue this here.

7. My point about there being an implicit time reference in ordinary use would explain why Davidson should originally have thought that an action sentence contains a *singular* reference to an event.

    There is no need, however, to disagree with the point which Davidson later appreciated—sc. that it doesn't count against the literal truth of "a ɸ-d" that a should have ɸ-d more than once. "a's ɸ-ing" may have more than one denotation (in the category of events). Still I think that someone who wanted to convey that a had ɸ-d more than once would ordinarily find a different way of saying so than by using simply "a ɸ-d".

8. A question about the persistence of objects is sometimes put by asking: "Is O_1 which exists at time t_1 the same object as O_2 which exists at t_2?". The perdurantist (anti-endurantist) answers "*No*: O_1 and O_2 are parts of a temporally perduring thing." But if O_1 and O_2 exist by virtue of O's having remained the same (through change as it might be), then the question cannot be understood as the perdurantist takes it—as if there could be a question about O's atemporal existence.

9. We wouldn't ordinarily describe Meyer's climbing of Kibo as a *change*. But I take it that when Davidson spoke of "a change in an object or objects", he would have allowed it to suffice for a change's having occurred that something had acquired or lost a property. On a more usual understanding of a change, a change take place in an object on which an agent acts. This more usual understanding belongs with a conception of causality which is different from Davidson's, a conception which in §V I shall suggest is fundamental.

10. Thus particulars in neither category are simply future. Of course in both cases, it may be that in the future there will exist a particular which meets such-and-such specification. Examples: If Mary will call

her first child "Sam", then in the future there will exist a child of Mary's called Sam. If you haven't yet, eaten dinner today, then, so long as you will eat dinner today, in the future there will exist an event of your eating of dinner on today's date.

In the case of objects, one can distinguish between their being present and their remaining in existence (i.e. continuing to be possible objects of reference). Objects are present only so long as they endure; when they have perished, they remain in existence but no longer change.

11. Taking it to be obvious that an account of adverbial modification is inadequate if it has application only to sentences in the simple past tense, I note that Davidson's account may strike us as implausible even when restricted to such sentences. As Helen Steward has said "It is most unnatural to think of most of the adjectives which can be obtained by grammatical modification (in English, usually deletion of the terminating 'ly') from qualifying adverbs of manner as adjectives which are straightforwardly applicable to events." Steward asks: "Are there really events which are angry or naughty or careful?" (Steward 2012, 375). Perhaps I should say that although I agree with Steward that the answer is a clear *No*, I don't myself agree with Steward's way out, which is to think of actions as individual processes.

12. Nor of course did he have anything to say about why it should be that "I was flying my spaceship to the Morning Star" does *not* entail "I flew my spaceship to the Morning Star." Failures of entailment such as this count against thinking that an understanding of "*a* was/will be ɸ-ing" might be simply derived from "*a* ɸ-d/will have ɸ-d." Myself I think that they put in question the very idea of an "individual process".

13. I say "may be acting." I assume however that so long as someone is awake, there is something that might be said about what she is doing even if her body is at rest. One effect of treating actions as events, each of them as if it were an isolable thing, is that it gives the impression that someone's doing something always started from a state of abeyance she was in.

14. I write here as if any idea of causality could be subsumed under one of exactly two heads—one event causal, the other pertaining to agency. The truth is much more complicated than this allows. See e.g. Cartwright 2004.

15. For an instructive review of the history of the attempt to cast teleology out of science, see Milgram et al 2013.

16. I was taught as a child that squirrels bury their nuts in order that they should have food in the winter. I've since learnt that there's a complicated story to be told about the habits of squirrels. But even when ethologists try to make of sense of squirrels' burying and re-burying the same nuts, and of squirrels' faking false caches of nuts, the assumption stays in place that squirrels sometimes avoid starvation by unearthing nuts that they had earlier buried. The questions that arise concern what other ends a squirrel in the environment in which it finds itself might have.

17. And an agent who can say what she is doing.This is all but forgotten when the explanation of action is made the issue; for explanation proceeds from the standpoint of one who would know why the agent has done something, not from the standpoint of the agent herself.For more on this, and the consequent distortions to which philosophy of action has been prone, see Ford 2017.

18. Michael Smith, being perhaps the most resolute defender of an event causal theory in Davidson's style, may be an exception to this generalization. Evidently, I shall want to criticize any spelled out version of an event causal theory. In the case of Smith, I might start by pointing out that the desire he attributes to agents, which, along with a belief, causes an action of theirs, is a desire "that things be a certain way" (Smith 2012, 387). Well, if things *are* a certain way, I may be happy about that but I won't need to do anything about it. It is only when I desire things to *come to be* a certain way (a way I take them not already to be) that my having a desire will explain my doing something about it. (The "be" of Smith's "things be" may be subjunctive, but it cannot be a simple present indicative.) So I find Smith's story objectionable in part because, like Davidson, he fails to keep proper track of tense. Failure to keep track of tense is something that I think Smith has in common with all of those I'd label event causal theorists, and which I'd attribute to fast and loose use of the notion of a proposition.

19. I think here of metaphysics as conceived by those who take the important enquiries to be metametaphysical. And I think of Ross et al. 2013, a chapter of which is called "A Defense of Scientism." I had thought that "scientistic" was used pejoratively, and hadn't known it could be a badge of honour.
    I allow that there can be hosts of metaphysical questions beyond any that I've begun to broach. Science, in any of its various branches, can throw up questions in metaphysics. But should we really think that science's questions can displace those that pre-scientifically we think to ask?

20. I have been helped by conversations, about matters relating to verb tense and aspect, with Will Small, Robert Craven and Jan Zhou. I'm aware that they won't all of them think that I've *learned* anything from them.

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