

Synchronous Events in By-Sentences *

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ABSTRACT: It has been suggested in the literature about actions than one can honour the philosophical intuition lying behind Davidson's argument for the Anscombe Thesis (the claim that by-sentences --sentences used to report actions of the general form: 'A X-ed by V-ing'-- involve two descriptions of the same action) without accepting the argument's conclusion. The suggestion in question is to interpret by-sentences as referring to two synchronous but different actions of the same agent. I argue that this suggestion, together with two plausible semantic principles about the naming of events and a reasonable metaphysical principle about the constitution of events, leads to certain ontological commitments which are hardly acceptable. My conclusion is then that in order to deny the Anscombe Thesis what must be done is to show that Davidson's intuition is wrong.

KEYWORDS: Metaphysics of action, ontology of events, Anscombe thesis.

In our ordinary talk about actions, when we refer to an action A performed by an agent S, very often we ask 'How did S manage to do A?'. As a response to such queries it is natural to employ what is called a "by-sentence". For example, an expression such as: 'Booth killed Lincoln by shooting him in Ford's Theatre', seems an appropriate response to the question: 'How did booth killed Lincoln?'; likewise, uttering 'Dirk repelled the floodwaters by building a wall' seems an appropriate response to a question such as: 'How did Dirk repel the floodwaters?'. Most philosophers of action analyse these by-sentences as implicitly containing two action-descriptions involving the same agent. Thus, in the first example we refer to Booth's killing of Lincoln and Booth's shooting of Lincoln in Ford's Theatre, and in the second we talk about Dirk's repelling of the waters and Dirk's construction of the wall. Following Jonathan Bennett I will call *the Anscombe Thesis* the claim that the two descriptions implicitly used in by-sentences are in fact of the same action, and not merely of actions done by the same agent¹.

Donald Davidson has given an influential argument for the Anscombe Thesis². Let us take for example the sentence about Booth. In essence Davidson's argument relies on the intuition that there is nothing done by Booth relevant to the action as described by 'Booth's killing of Lincoln' over and above what is done by him relevant to the action as described by 'Booth's shooting of Lincoln', presumably his pulling the trigger of his weapon. Once he has pulled the trigger, the intuition goes, there is nothing more that remains to be done by Booth which is relevant to the actions described. But then, if we insist that his action of killing Lincoln is not completed when his action of shooting Lincoln is completed, on the grounds that Lincoln's death occurs

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1 Bennett (1988). See p. 188 for a justification of this name.

2 Davidson (1971), pp. 57-58 and Davidson (1985), pp. 236-7. See also Anscombe (1979).

later than Booth's shot, it would turn out that some action of Booth has not finished during a time interval in which Booth himself does nothing relevant to it. Assuming that such a conclusion is absurd, Davidson concludes from it that what Booth does in doing what we describe as his shooting Lincoln is the same as what he does in doing what we describe as his killing Lincoln. There's nothing that Booth does under one description and not under the other, so it seems to follow that the two descriptions refer to the same single action of Booth. Of course the descriptions are different, but only because they pick out different consequences of Booth's action (which is nothing other than a bodily movement, according to Davidson): namely, a Lincoln-directed shot in one case and the death of Lincoln in the other.

It has been suggested by Lawrence Lombard and Jonathan Bennett³, however, that sharing the intuition underlying Davidson's argument does not lead one inescapably to the Anscombe Thesis. According to this suggestion, the intuition on which Davidson relies is that when the action described as 'Booth's shooting of Lincoln' is completed, there is nothing more to be done by Booth which is relevant to his action as described by 'Booth's killing of Lincoln'. So the intuition compels us to accept only that the two action-descriptions refer to actions which are synchronous (they both take place at the same time) but not necessarily that they refer to the very same action. This is a suggestive possibility since it blocks the serious problem that has to be faced by those who accept both Davidson's semantics for action sentences and the Anscombe Thesis. The problem concerns Davidson's treatment of adverb sentences. Consider the sentence 'Booth shot Lincoln with a gun'. According to Davidson this sentence should be analysed as saying that there was a shooting done by Booth, directed to Lincoln and done with a gun⁴. However, since Booth shot Lincoln with a gun by pulling its trigger, commitment to the Anscombe Thesis forces us to say that Booth's shooting was Booth's pulling and so to conclude that the pulling was done with a gun, which is clearly false⁵. What I want to argue in this paper is that the suggestion made by Lombard and Bennett is wrong and therefore cannot be maintained as an alternative to the Anscombe Thesis.

³ Lombard (1978) and Bennett (1988), section 73. I hasten to add that, despite what might be implied by the main text, Bennett's analysis of by-sentences is not that they involve two action-descriptions referring to two synchronous events. In fact, Bennett belongs to a minority as he denies that by-sentences involve two action-descriptions. The bare bones of Bennett's analysis is that a sentence of the form 'S X-ed by V-ing' means that there is a behavioural fact about S that has a relational property, and that the fact in question is as specified by the clause following the expression 'by'. So, for example, according to the proposed analysis 'Booth killed Lincoln by shooting him in the Ford's Theatre' would mean something like that there is a behavioural fact about Booth that caused Lincoln's death, namely, that he shot Lincoln in the Ford's Theatre (for details of Bennett's analysis see his 1994). The reader should understand, therefore, that I'm not attacking Bennett's analysis of by-sentences, but attacking the claim, once suggested by Bennett among others, that one could honour the intuition lying behind Davidson's argument for the Anscombe Thesis without committing oneself to the Anscombe Thesis.

⁴ For the details of Davidson's analysis of adverb sentences see Davidson (1967).

⁵ For an exposition of this problem, see Annas (1976) p. 254; where she quotes as her source Cohen (1970). See also Pineda (1993) for a way of reconciling the Anscombe Thesis with Davidson's analysis of adverb sentences.

I'm not going to discuss Davidson's intuition lying behind his argument here. However I will mention one worry concerning it that might be connected with the issues at stake in this paper. It seems to me that there is a line of thought in Davidson's writings according to which the intuition underlying the foregoing argument also supports the famous davidsonian claim that actions are nothing but bodily movements brought about in the right way by mental states of the agent. If this line of thought were correct, then there would seem to be no room for Lombard and Bennett's suggestion, since it seems that in the case of our example there is just one bodily movement of Booth relevant to what is referred to by the two action-descriptions (and the same would apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to other instances of by-sentences). However, I will not pursue this matter here, and henceforth I will assume that Davidson's intuition does not commit us to his metaphysics of actions.

My argument will make use of one metaphysical principle which I find reasonable enough and it is widely held. The metaphysical principle says that an event (and, hence, an action too, because actions are kinds of events) involves the instantiation of a property at a certain time by some substances. As stated the principle is intended to be noncommittal between a fine-grained and a coarse-grained conception of events. According to the fine-grained conception, an event consists in the instantiation of a given property at a certain time by some substances. According to the coarse-grained conception, there could be events consisting in the instantiation of more than one property at a certain time by some substances. For example, 'Dirk's construction of the wall on Summer' will be taken to refer to an event (an action) involving the instantiation of the property of building a wall by Dirk on Summer (and we remain noncommittal as to whether the event in question consists only in the instantiation of that property or involves the instantiation of other properties as well).

I will also make two semantic assumptions which again I find reasonable enough and widely shared. One of these assumptions states that there are two different ways of referring to events: either by way of an intrinsic name or by way of an extrinsic or relational name. By an intrinsic name of an event it will be understood here a description that mentions explicitly at least part of one of the constituent properties of the event. This is opposed to a relational name, where the event is referred to by appealing to something to which it is related and not by mentioning part of one its constituent properties. If we assume a fine-grained conception of events, then the property mentioned by an intrinsic name of the event will be of course the only property constituting the event. Not so if we assume instead the coarse-grained conception. Moreover, I use the expression 'at least part of' in the definition of an intrinsic name to allow for the possibility of cases such as the following one. Suppose, for instance, that it is true that Dirk constructed the wall in record time, then 'Dirk's construction of the wall on Summer' is an intrinsic name of an event that does not consist in the property of constructing the wall, but rather in the property of constructing it in a record time. Thus, according to this first semantic assumption, there might be cases of semantic indeterminacy with respect to the instantiated property, since intrinsic names do not need to mention completely a constituent property of an event, but only part of it. On the other hand, on a coarse-grained conception of events, semantic indeterminacy will

be expected to be a more pervasive phenomenon, since typically event names will mention only one of the properties whose instantiation constitutes the event, but not all of them. As a non contentious example of a relational name of the same event suppose that Dirk's construction of the wall was something that impressed Dorothy. So we could frame a relational name referring to Dirk's construction of the wall in which this relational fact is mentioned. Thus consider the description 'the action of Dirk which impressed Dorothy'.

The second semantic assumption concerns only relational names of events. According to the first semantic assumption a relational name of an event is one in which the event is referred to by mentioning a further event with which it is related. However, in the vast majority of cases the relational name will also implicitly or explicitly mention the sort of relation that the event referred to holds with the event alluded to in the relational name. For example, the name 'the action of Dirk which impressed Dorothy' not only relates Dirk's referred action to an state of bewilderment by Dorothy, but it also implicitly says that Dirk's action caused Dorothy's bewilderment (so it says what sort of relation holds between the event referred to and the event appealed to by the name). Therefore, we should assume that in many cases relational names explicitly or implicitly mention not just an event related to their referent but also the sort of relation that holds between the two. In cases like this to understand a description as a relational name of an event will involve understanding that the referent of the name holds a particular sort of relation with the event mentioned by the name⁶.

Now I'm in a position to state the argument. Consider again the sentence 'Booth killed Lincoln by shooting him in Ford's Theatre' and suppose that Lombard and Bennett's suggestion is right. Therefore, this sentence is referring to two synchronous actions described by 'Booth's killing of Lincoln' and 'Booth's shooting of Lincoln in Ford's Theatre'. As Lincoln's death takes place after Booth's shooting of him it is natural to regard 'Booth's killing of Lincoln' as a relational name, if the two actions must be synchronous. Being a relational name, it must then, according to our first semantic assumption, involve mention of something related to its referent and possibly also of the sort of relation that holds between this something and the referent. Given that in the case at hand the relational name is 'Booth's killing of Lincoln' it seems safe to conclude that the something related to the referent of the name is another event, namely, Lincoln's death, and the sort of relation implicitly mentioned by the name is the causal relation. Therefore, on the assumption that 'Booth's killing of Lincoln' is a relational name (an assumption that derives from the claim that 'Booth's killing of Lincoln' and 'Booth's shooting of Lincoln' refer to synchronous events plus the claim, reasonable enough, that Lincoln's death takes place after Booth's shooting), we reach the conclusion that this relational name refers to an event causally related to Lincoln's

⁶ I'm indebted to an anonymous referee of *THEORIA* for suggesting to me the necessity of this further semantic assumption for my argument. Of course, this anonymous referee should not be found responsible for the particular way in which I have articulated her suggestion.

death (in fact, to an event that causes Lincoln's death)⁷⁷. On the other hand, it is pretty clear, given the story about Booth and Lincoln, that the event referred to by 'Booth's shooting of Lincoln' also has Lincoln's death as consequence. So far, then, we have two synchronous actions with a shared causal effect: Lincoln's death.

Suppose now that 'Booth's shooting of Lincoln' is an intrinsic name of the event it denotes. Thus, 'Booth's shooting of Lincoln' refers to an action of Booth consisting of the instantiation (at least in part) of the property of shooting, according to our first semantic assumption. Now, given Lombard and Bennett's suggestion and the conclusions reached in the last paragraph, it turns out that the event referred to by 'Booth's killing of Lincoln' is synchronous to an event involving the same substance, Booth, and the same power of causing Lincoln's death, and which is at least constituted by the instantiation of the property of shooting. Now given these facts and the story about Booth and Lincoln it seems necessary that Booth's killing of Lincoln also is at least partially constituted by the instantiation of the property of shooting. All these coincidences between events make reasonable the thought that we have in fact just one event, simply by invoking reasons of simplicity and ontological parsimony. The facts of semantic indeterminacy alluded to earlier give us even more grounds to sustain this conclusion. One could object to this reasoning that its conclusion is more reasonable under a fine-grained conception of events than under a coarse-grained conception. But on second thought it does not seem to be so. Still in the case that we embrace a coarse-grained conception of events we would have two allegedly different events which are equal in time, substance and which share at least one property and at least one causal power. Here again, considerations of simplicity and ontological parsimony together with the acknowledged phenomenon of semantic indeterminacy in the naming of events, admittedly more widespread under a coarse-grained conception of events, recommend thinking of just one event, and not two.

The argument of the last paragraph was that if 'Booth's shooting of Lincoln' is an intrinsic name of the event to which it refers, then Lombard and Bennett's suggestion doesn't look reasonable. So maybe the adherent to their suggestion should assume that 'Booth's shooting of Lincoln' is also a relational name of the event denoted by it. However this alternative will not work either. For, suppose that the description 'Booth's shooting of Lincoln' is in fact a relational name of the action performed by Booth. Well, when does it take place, then? Note that we cannot identify the action with the bodily movement because in this case there are no (relevant) synchronous bodily movements of Booth. So, the two synchronous actions have to be dated between the bodily movement and the shot. But then again we would have two events sharing time, substance, and the powers of causing a shot and the power of causing Lincoln's death. This is so because, according to our first semantic assumption, if

⁷⁷ To many readers the sentence 'Booth's killing of Lincoln caused Lincoln's death' will sound odd. However the admitted oddity of this sentence can be accounted for appealing to pragmatic reasons in a way consistent with the truth of the sentence. One could say, for example, that the oddity originates because we refer to an event as a cause of another event E in the context of a sentence in which precisely this causal relation is asserted. The oddity in question is of the same type as the one that arises in the sentence: 'the widow killed her husband with a knife'. Here again I'm indebted to an anonymous referee of THEORIA for calling my attention upon this point.

'Booth's shooting of Lincoln' is relational given its meaning we should conclude that it refers to an event causing Booth's shot. And given that Booth's shot caused Lincoln's death by transitivity of causation the event in question also causes Lincoln's death. On the other hand if the event referred to by 'Booth's killing of Lincoln' caused Lincoln's death and occurred at the same time of an event (the one referred to by 'Booth's shooting Lincoln') that caused another event, Booth's shot, that caused Lincoln's death, it better be that the event referred to by 'Booth's killing of Lincoln' also caused Booth's shot. Again so many coincidences between events would recommend identification for reasons of simplicity and ontological parsimony. It rests open to us the possibility of dating the actions before the bodily movement, but this would probably lead to the problem of volitional acts, and that would be the worst of the options envisaged.

This completes my argument against Lombard and Bennett's suggestion. What the argument shows is that the claim that in by-sentences we refer to two synchronous actions of the same agent, which is supposed to honour the intuition lying behind Davidson's argument for the Anscombe Thesis, together with a metaphysical principle about the constitution of events and two semantic principles about the naming of events, commits us to an ontology of events which is unreasonable on account of reasons of simplicity and ontological parsimony. Thus, we are forced to accept the existence of different events sharing substances, times, some of the constituting properties and some of the causal powers, remarkably enough, those causal powers which are implicitly mentioned in the names appearing in the by-locution. Barring an independent argument for such a populated ontology it seems fairly more reasonable to stick to the Anscombe Thesis. Barring also the possibility of another suggestion in the same spirit of the one proposed by Lombard and Bennett, the argument I have offered in this paper provides good reasons to think that acceptance of the intuition lying behind Davidson's argument commits us to the Anscombe Thesis. Therefore, if one wants to show that the Anscombe Thesis is wrong it would seem that the only way to do so is to show that Davidson's intuition is wrong⁸.

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⁸ I'm deeply indebted to two anonymous referees of THEORIA for their comments on an earlier version of this article. Their criticisms and suggestions have helped me to clarify and sharpen the argument contained in it.

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