The Talk I was Supposed to Give…

Achille C. Varzi

Department of Philosophy, Columbia University (New York)

… I am not giving it. I am sorry. I changed my mind and I am giving this talk instead—if everything works out as planned. But you may wonder: What is that *it* that I am not giving? What am I referring to when I apologize for not giving the talk I was supposed to give? Never mind the content of that talk— I can always give you a summary of what I meant to say, if you wish. Indeed, I might even decide to give a talk with that content on a different occasion. The content, however, is not the talk, and if I gave a talk with that content on a different occasion I would not, on my reckoning, give the talk I was supposed to give. For the talk I was supposed to give is something that was supposed to take place today, and *that* is not going to happen. Hence the worry: How can we talk about it? How can we talk about events that fail to occur? Let us assume Davidson was right in urging that events form a genuine metaphysical category, on a par with material objects.[1] Shall we say that a good inventory of the world ought to include "negative" events—failures, omissions, things that didn't happen—along with positive ones?

Davidson himself was candid about this: "We often count among the things an agent does things he does not do",[2] he wrote. Yet this may offend our ontological scruples. If I am not actually giving that talk, why should we include it in an inventory of the *actual* world? What would it be like? For instance, what smaller events (such as bodily movements and speech acts) would be part of it, and how would it relate to the other events of my life? Indeed, how would it relate to the other things that I am failing to do? Surely in failing to give that talk I am also failing to please the organizers. One failure or two? And surely there are many more things I could have done at this very same time but I am not actually doing: I am not drinking coffee, I'm not watering your plants, I'm not singing *My Way*. Would all of these non-doings deserve a place in our inventory of the world?

Some might think so,[3] but I certainly don't. In a way, speaking of non-occurring events is like speaking of non-existing objects, and my inclination is not to take these manners of speaking at face value.[4] We often talk *as though* there were such things, but deep down we may want our words to be interpreted in such a way as to avoid serious ontological commitment. For example, we may say that reference to Sherlock Holmes or to the winged horse is to be understood within the context of a fictional story, a pretense, a game of make-believe, and we may likewise say that reference to the talk I was supposed to give is to be understood within the context of a suitable fictional scenario. It is true that Sherlock Holmes lived in Baker Street insofar as that is true *according to* Conan Doyle's narrative; similarly, it is true that the talk I was supposed to give was about mathematical fictionalism (say) insofar as that is true *according to* certain counterfactual speculations about how the world might or should have been.

Unfortunately, non-occurring events appear to be more resistant to Ockham's razor than the analogy with non-existing objects might suggest. Not only do we often speak as though there were such things. We often speak in such a way as to suggest that reference to or quantification over non-occurrences is to be taken strictly and literally. Typical examples include statements such as 'Beth saw Al not leave' and 'Al often doesn't go jogging', whose Davidsonian logical forms appear to require a straight commitment to actions that Al failed to perform. Or consider 'Al's failure to turn off the gas caused an explosion'. How can we deny that sometime we are causally responsible, not only for our actions but also for our omissions? And how can we provide a reasonable account of our talk about tryings and intendings without bringing in negative outcomes? I missed the deadline, even though I tried very hard not to. And Al didn't call Sue, not because he got stuck doing something else, but because he intended not to call her.

The aim of this talk (the one that I am giving) is to outline a way of resisting such difficulties on behalf of the view according to which the only events to be seriously countenanced are the positive ones—those that feature in the actual history of the world. This involves articulating two distinct ideas. First, there is the idea that, in many cases, a "negative" event (a non-leaving) just *is* an ordinary, positive event (a staying); it is a positive event under a negative description. Second, there is the idea that in some cases, when there *is* no positive event we could be talking about, what we say is strictly and literally false, albeit in a way that admits of true paraphrases. These two ideas are distinct, but they are closely related. I shall look at them in turn.

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Speaking of Events

Concerning the first point, my reasons for putting it in terms of Anscombe's controversial phrase ('under a description')[5] stem from a general consideration concerning the semantics of our event talk, which in turn reflects a certain conception of what events must be if we accept a broadly Davidsonian framework.

Events, on this view, are particulars.[6] They are unrepeatable entities located in space and time, and we can *describe* any such entity in various ways, just as we can describe any particular object in various ways. I say: Al is the right person for Beth. You say: Tell me more about him—and I elaborate: "He is smart, he likes traveling, and he is fond of jogging". You say: Al took a walk last night. I say: Tell me more about it—and you elaborate: "It was a long and leisurely stroll in Central Park, before dinner, with his friend Sue, and Beth got really angry about it". The pronoun 'it', here, just as the pronoun 'he' in the previous scenario, is all we need to carry the reference back to the entity we were talking about. Similarly, just as we can *designate* an object through a number of different descriptions, each of which relies on certain properties that the object possesses, so we can designate an event by means of descriptions that may vary depending on the context and the purpose of our discourse. We can refer to Al by his proper name or we can identify him by saying 'Beth's boyfriend', 'my smart colleague', or 'the president of the jogging club', and we can likewise identify what he did last night by saying 'Al's walk in Central Park', or 'Al's leisurely promenade with Sue', or 'the cause of Beth's anger'. These phrases do not pick out different entities; they pick out the same entity under different descriptions.

Admittedly, one may have different intuitions in this connection. Since Al could have walked alone, whereas he could not have gone for a promenade with Sue all by himself, some are inclined to say that 'Al's walk' and 'Al's promenade with Sue' must refer to distinct events by virtue of Leibniz's law: those terms are not substitutable *salva veritate*.[7] Likewise, if Beth got angry, not because Al went for a walk, but because he went with Sue, some are inclined to say that 'the cause of Beth's anger' does not refer to Al's walk but to his promenade with Sue, which should therefore be treated as a distinct event.[8] I disagree with such intuitions. Surely not every description of what Al did last night may be equally adequate in every context, but that is not to say that he did many things at once: different descriptions may have different senses and may therefore serve different purposes, yet their actual referent

may coincide. Thus, although it is true that in a possible world in which Al went for a lonely walk the description 'Al's promenade with Sue' would not apply, it doesn't follow that such a description fails to pick out Al's walk in this world. (Compare: although it is true that 'the number of planets' could pick out a number other than 9 in different worlds, it doesn't follow that it fails to pick out the number 9 in this world.) Likewise, although it would be silly to *explain* why Beth got angry by describing what Al did as a mere walk, it doesn't follow that the walk is not the cause of Beth's anger: causal explanations are language-sensitive but causal reports are semantically transparent.[9] (Compare 'Al's walk with Sue caused Beth's anger' with 'My colleague's walk with Sue caused Beth's anger': the former statement may be better suited as an explanatory report, especially if Al is known to be Beth's boyfriend, but this has no bearing on what 'Al' and 'my colleague' refer to.) In short, I think we should be careful not to assume that the expressions we use to identify actions and other events tell the whole truth about those actions and events: just as an object's description can be very partially informative, and even misleading for certain purposes, so an event's description can be partially informative and misleading. As Jonathan Bennett has put it, there is no way we can "read off" the nature of an object or the nature of an event from the words we use to refer to them.[10]

Positive versus Negative Descriptions

With this picture in place, it is obvious that among the many ways in which we can pick out an event, there are some that may be broadly classified as negative descriptions. Al took a walk in Central Park. Really, he was supposed to go jogging with his friend Tom, and he would have done so had Sue not joined him. That was the plan. So, depending on the context, you might want to refer to Al's walk, not as a walk but as a non-jogging. It was a walk, so it was not a jogging, and that may very well be the bit of information about Al's doing that you might want to convey in your description of it. His walk caused Beth's anger because of Sue's presence? Then we'd better refer to it explicitly as a promenade with Sue. Al's walk caused Tom's complaint because they were supposed to go jogging together? Then we might want to refer to it, not as a walk or a promenade with Sue, but as a non-jogging.

To be sure, there is linguistic noise here. When using negative descriptions, we might be inclined to go for expressions that do not qualify as perfect nominals: in English, the cause of Tom's complaint is best described, not as

Al's non-jogging, but as Al's not jogging, and this latter expression is a gerundial. It has a verb that is still "alive and kicking inside it", as Zeno Vendler famously put it.[11] And if Vendler is right, and Bennett with him, gerundial nominals do not strictly speaking pick out events: they typically pick out facts, or states of affairs. It is indeed unclear whether English admits of any grammatically decent examples of negative event descriptions that pass the Vendler-Bennett test.[12] But never mind that: to the extent that we *intend* to refer to an event, the point is clear enough: by speaking of Al's not jogging we are not referring to a negative action; we are referring to what Al actually did—his walk—by mentioning a salient property that it lacked. A negative description has a negative sense, not a negative referent.

I suggest that precisely this sort of account applies to the putatively problematic cases mentioned above, which involve hidden quantification rather than explicit event reference.[13] Suppose I say

(1)   Beth saw Al not leave.

According to a standard analysis, due to Jim Higginbotham,[14] naked infinitive perceptual reports require a Davidsonian analysis. In particular, a statement such as (1) would be analyzed as

(1') $\exists e$ (non-leaving (e, Al) & saw (Beth, e)).[15]

Does this mean that by uttering (1) I am committing myself to a negative event that Beth saw, i.e., a non-leaving, a leaving that Al did not perform? Some people think so,[16] but I surely don't. Surely Beth could only see what Al actually did, unless she was hallucinating. For instance, suppose Al rushed upstairs rather than leaving. Then that is what Beth saw: she saw him rush upstairs. And I could report this fact by uttering (2) instead of (1):

(2)   Beth saw Al rush upstairs.

In that case the correct analysis would be

(2') $\exists e$ (rushing-upstairs (e, Al) & saw (Beth, e)).

That I appeal to a negative characterization in (1) and a positive characterization in (2) doesn't mean that the variable e must pick out two distinct events in the two cases. It picks out the same event under two different descriptions, and which description is more appropriate is a pragmatic question. For instance, suppose everybody expected Al to leave. Then (1) is much more effective as a report of what happened than (2). It is more effective because the

negative attribute 'non-leaving' conveys a salient piece of information, whereas 'rushing-upstairs' does not. Sometimes we do exactly the same when it comes to speaking of objects. If I say

(3)   Beth saw a non-Meinongian,

then I am characterizing what Beth saw with the help of a negative attribute. Surely that doesn't mean that Beth saw a negative entity. In fact, if I knew more I could be more explicit, as in

(4)   Beth saw a 55 years old gentleman wearing glasses, a blue tie, and a hat.

Yet this need not be the best way of reporting what Beth saw. If, as we may suppose, Beth was attending a Meinong conference, then the negative attribute 'non-Meinongian', though less informative, picks out a feature of the person Beth saw that is much more salient than his age and look, so in that context (3) may well be more effective than (4). The case of (1) versus (2) is exactly parallel. And the parallel is confirmed by the fact that in both cases we can go on and ask: Tell me more. Tell me more about this non-Meinongian. "Well, he looked like a gentleman, about 55 years old, wearing glasses, a blue tie, and a hat". Tell me more about what Beth saw. "Well, she saw Al rush upstairs, on the sly, without saying a word, while nobody else was looking". Just as with the walk that was not a jogging, we can always switch from a negative characterization to a positive one, and vice versa: we choose our words depending on the message we wish to convey.

Indeed, one further reason to reject the thought that a negative attribute picks out a negative event is that often there is no clear-cut criterion for saying *whether* an attribute is negative. Consider

(5)   Al stayed whereas Tom left.

The connective 'whereas' suggests that staying and leaving are to be understood as opposite. But which is positive and which negative? If everybody else left with Tom, then what Al did could be described equally well (if not better) as a non-leaving. However, if everybody else stayed with Al, then it is what Tom did that could be described negatively as a non-staying. Obviously both options are equally plausible, so the opposition between staying and leaving cannot be construed ontologically, as a conflict between being and non-being. Nor can we choose between the two options on purely semantic grounds. The choice depends on the context, so it is a function of pragmatic factors at large.

At this point it should be clear how other problematic cases can be handled along similar lines. Consider:

(6)   What happened in the end is that Sue didn't kiss Al.

Henriette de Swart takes statements such as this to provide evidence for the existence of negative events—in this case, a non-kiss by Sue.[17] Presumably this is because, on a standard analysis, the logical form of (6) implies the existential statement

(7) $\exists e$ (non-kissing $(e,$ Beth, Al)).

But so what? On the face of it, what happened at the end, $e,$ must be something perfectly positive, ontologically speaking. It mist be something that did happen. Al didn't tell us, so we don't know. Perhaps Sue just said "Good night", or "Thanks for the pleasant walk". Perhaps she hopped into a taxi cab without saying a word. Who knows? What we know, based on what Al told us, is that whatever she did, it was not a kissing:

(7') $\exists e$ ($\sim$kissing $(e,$ Beth, Al)).

And since we are starting to feel judgmental about this whole story, we are happy to accept this negative characterization as an adequate characterization of what happened at the end, uninformative as it may be in all sorts of respects.

Here is another typical case where we seem to be quantifying over negative events:

(8)   Al often doesn't go jogging.

Stockwell, Schachter, and Partee[18] take statements such as (8) to provide counterexamples against Lakoff's claim that "one cannot assert the frequency of an event that does not occur".[19] I see why one might be tempted to view it that way, but I disagree. That is, I agree with Lakoff. For one thing, it seems to me that statements such as (8) should not to be construed as quantifying over events at all, whether positive or negative. Consider first

(9)   Al often goes jogging.

On the face of it, in (9) we are quantifying over certain *times*—over evenings, say—and we are saying that there are many such times during which Al goes jogging. In other words, we are quantifying over the open formula:

(9')   Evening (t) & $\exists e$ (jogging $(e,$ Al) & during (e, t)).

But then (8) should be handled similarly. In (8) we are again quantifying over certain times—evenings—and we are saying that there are many such times during which Al does *not* go jogging: we are quantifying over the formula

(8')   Evening (t) & $\sim\exists e$ (jogging $(e,$ Al) & during $(e, t))$.

There is nothing here that should suggest the repeated occurrence of a negative event. On the other hand, if we took such statements to be truly quantifying over events, then again I see no reason to suppose that the quantification in (8) ranges over *negative* events. What did Al do yesterday evening? He went for a walk with Sue. What did he do the evening before? He went to the bookstore with Beth. And on Tuesday he went to see the Yankees play. All of those things are things that Al actually did, and they all took place in the evening. We may describe them directly, as I have just done, or we may describe them indirectly as doings that are not joggings—as non-joggings. That is not very informative. But for someone like Tom, who loves jogging, it may be enough. And it may be perfectly all right for Tom to summarize the picture by saying that Al often doesn't go jogging. Al is the president of the jogging club, so in the evening he shouldn't engage in all those non-joggings—whatever they are.

Causation and Causal Explanations

What about putative cases of causation by omission? "Every causal situation develops as it does as a result of the presence of positive factors alone", says David Armstrong,[20] and I agree. Yet our ordinary way of speaking—and much philosophical talk, too—suggests that the driving forces of nature also include omissions, failures, things that did not happen. Can we resist that suggestion by exploiting the idea that *prima facie* negative causes are just positive causes under a negative description?

To some extent, the answer is straightforward. I have already hinted at the idea above, but let me spell it out more explicitly. On a Davidsonian semantics, singular causal statements are best construed as statements involving a causal relation between events, not as statements involving a causal connective or other propositional devices (on pain of absurdity).[21] For example, the statement

(10)   Al's walk with Sue caused Beth's anger

is to be construed as having the following form (modulo uniqueness):

(10') $\exists e\,\exists e'$ (walk $(e,\,Al,\,Sue)$ & anger $(e',\,Beth)$ & caused $(e,\,e')$).

Accordingly, consider now a statement that appears to elicit a negative cause, such as

(11)   Al's non-jogging caused Tom's complaint.

The corresponding logical form would be

(11') $\exists e\,\exists e'$ (non-jogging $(e,\,Al)$ & complaint $(e',\,Tom)$ & caused $(e,\,e')$).

One might be inclined to maintain that e, the cause, must be a negative event insofar as it must answer to a negative predicate, but we have seen that that is a non-sequitur. We know what Al did last night: he took a walk with Sue. So that is what triggered Tom's complaint—a perfectly positive cause. The reason why we may not want to put it that way is that the statement

(12)   Al's walk with Sue caused Tom's complaint

is likely to convey the wrong message. The statement would be true, because Al's walk with Sue and Al's non-jogging with Tom are one and the same event under two different descriptions, and causal reports are semantically transparent. So the logical form of (12),

(12') $\exists e\,\exists e'$ (walk $(e,\,Al,\,Sue)$ & complaint $(e',\,Tom)$ & caused $(e,\,e')$),

would be materially equivalent to that of (11). But as Bennett pointed out, "in general, truths about causes will be assertible only if they report causes that are salient—that is, stand out as notably significant, surprising, or the like".[22] In general, when we offer a causal report we are not just trying to say something true; we are trying to *explain* why something happened. And the adequacy of an explanation does not depend exclusively on the truth of what is said: as with every speech act, it depends also, and to a great extent, on the relevant background of shared knowledge and presuppositions. (Grice's Cooperative Principle: "Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged".[23]) Thus, if the only non-Meinongian at the conference was a gentleman wearing glasses, the statement

(13)   Seeing a non-Meinongian surprised Beth.

is true if and only if the statement

(14)   Seeing a gentleman wearing glasses surprised Beth.

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is also true. But if we want to explain *why* Beth was surprised, given that she was attending a Meinong conference, then (13) is likely to be more effective. Likewise, then, if we want to explain why Tom complained, we should better describe what Al did in a way that brings out the fact that it didn't measure up to Tom's expectations. Tom expected Al to go jogging, and it is the fact that Al's action turned out to be something *else* than a jog that explains the complaint. That is why (11) is better than (12). In fact, that is why (11), but not (12), translates naturally into the familiar jargon of causal explanations:

> (11") Tom complained *because* Al did not go jogging.
> (12") Tom complained *because* Al went for a walk with Sue.

That Al's action was a walk with Sue—or that it took place in Central Park, before dinner, and so on—may be more informative than its not being a jog, but that information explains nothing when it comes to Tom's complaint.

So here is how the account would go in a nutshell. We sometimes construe a causal report as a causal explanation, but in order for the explanation to be successful we must use a description of the cause that conveys the right sort of information. Exactly what counts as the right sort of information depends on the context. And in certain contexts, negative descriptions are just more informative, causally, than positive descriptions.[24] They are in the negative, but they nonetheless pick out a perfectly "positive" cause.

There are, however, cases in which this straightforward account does not apply. Consider the example mentioned at the beginning:

> (15) Al's failure to turn off the gas caused an explosion.

If Al *tried* to turn off the gas—for example, if he tinkered with the gas knob with the intention of turning off the gas, and the knob broke off—then (15) is no different from the cases discussed above: 'Al's failure to turn off the gas' is just a negative description of his unsuccessful fiddling with the knob. But suppose Al didn't try. Suppose he just forgot that the gas was on. Then there is no good candidate for the analysis offered above. As Higginbotham emphasized,[25] there would be no point is claiming that we have a negative description of a positive cause, for we have no clue as to what that cause might be. We are not told what Al actually did. Yes, he left the gas on, but that's just another way of saying that he failed to turn it off; for all we know, no truly positive action of Al (reading a book, going for a walk, talking to Beth on the phone) may be directly involved in the causal history of the explosion. Any Davidsonian analysis of (15) along the lines of

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(15') $\exists e \exists e'$ (non-turning-off (e, Al, the gas) & explosion (e') & caused (e, e'))

would therefore seem to commit us to the existence of a cause e that is strictly and literally negative: a failure, an omission, a non-doing by Al.

Here is where the second idea advertised at the beginning enters the picture. Granted, in cases such as (15) we cannot just call upon straightforward pragmatic considerations. The problem is not that we tend to construe such causal reports as causal explanations, with the additional constraints that this involves; the problem arises with their being causal reports in the first place. However, precisely this may be questioned. For what grounds do we have to say that (15) is *genuinely* a causal report? Of course its surface grammar is akin to that of (11), (12), and the like: it features the word 'caused' explicitly. But we know that the surface grammar of a statement may be misleading. What reasons are there to suppose that every statement of the form '*a* caused *b*' should be taken strictly and literally, and subjected to Davidson's analysis?

In a companion paper,[26] I contend that we have no good reasons. There is a natural disposition to think that whenever we engage in causal talk, we do so by speaking of causes and effects, but this is wrong. As we have just seen, often we are interested in providing a causal *explanation* of why something happened; and although typically a causal explanation is a certain way of reporting the existence of a causal nexus—a contextually salient way of citing a cause of what happened—it need not be so. As Helen Beebee convincingly argued, "the explanans of a causal explanation need not stand to the explanandum as cause to effect".[27] Indeed, a causal explanation need not even mention a cause in order to fit the bill. If we know what triggered a certain event, and we know it under a suitable description, then it is natural to formulate an explanation on such grounds, as with (11") (and unlike (12")). But the converse need not hold. If I say

(16)　Tom complained because nobody went jogging with him,

I am offering a perfectly good explanation of Tom's complaint—indeed a *causal* explanation. Nonetheless (16) is silent about the actual cause of the complaint: there is no mention, direct or indirect, of the particular event that brought it about, which is to say Al's walk. To put it differently, (16) does not inform us about the causal history of Tom's complaint by telling us what event(s) belong to it. Rather, it informs us about that causal history by telling us that it does not include any event of a certain type—any event of someone jogging with Tom—and that suffices for (16) to qualify as a good causal explanation. Sometimes we produce a causal explanation of a certain effect e

by mentioning *e*'s cause(s). Sometimes we do not: we just point out that one sort of event that was supposed to occur, and whose occurrence would have prevented a certain effect, did not actually occur. In such cases, we have a causal explanation that cannot be matched by a genuine causal report. In the case of (16), we *just* have a causal explanation. Well, then: I think this is exactly what we should say about (15), too. Our statement reads like a causal report, to be analyzed as in (15'), but it isn't. It is just a causal explanation in disguise:

> (15") There was an explosion because Al didn't turn off the gas.

In some cases 'because' goes proxy for 'cause' and Davidson's analysis applies. Such is the case of (11) and (11"), or (12) and (12"), and we could say the same with respect to statements such as:

> (17)   Beth's turning on the light caused an explosion.
> (17") There was an explosion because Beth turned on the light.

In other cases, like (15) and (15"), it's exactly the other way around. And although we can always switch from the 'cause' language to its 'because' counterpart, the converse does not hold. Every causal report translates directly into a causal explanation, but not vice versa.

So what should we say about (15) *as it stands*? I think we should just say that strictly speaking this statement is false, or at least not true. It is not true because the subject term, 'Al's failure to turn off the gas' (unlike the term 'Beth's turning on the light'), has no referent. So why are we inclined to assert (15) if this statement is not true? The answer, I think, lies once again in a fact about our conversational practices, though a general fact that goes beyond Gricean considerations and takes us back to our starting point. When we say, for example,

> (18)   Holmes lived in Baker Street.

we say something which, strictly speaking, is not true (or so I would argue). Strictly speaking, what is true is a contextualized claim of the form:

> (18') According to Conan Doyle's narrative, Holmes lived in Baker Street.

When we say

> (19)   The average star has 2.4 planets.

again we say something which, strictly speaking, is not true. There are no

such things as average stars. Strictly speaking, what is true is a statement along the following lines:

(19')　There are 12 planets and 5 stars, or 24 planets and 10 stars, or . . .[28]

When speaking with the vulgar, we often say things that, strictly speaking, are not true, and we do so because we count on a charitable reading of our statements, or simply because we don't care about their ontological underpinnings. When we do care, however, we must pay attention and, if necessary, clarify what we mean by producing an ontologically adequate paraphrase. Likewise with (15), I submit. When speaking with the vulgar we may be inclined to assert that the explosion was caused (among other things) by Al's failure to turn off the gas. But this is only speaking with the vulgar. If pressed, we should speak differently. If pressed, we should either revert to a genuine causal report, as in (17), or else we should abandon the 'cause' language in favor of the 'because' language and assert (15") instead. As Davidson himself put it, the 'caused' of a sentence such as (15) (unlike that of a sentence such as (17)), "is not the 'caused' of straightforward singular causal statements, but is best expressed by the words 'causally explains'".[29]

Trying Not To

So much for the complications arising from familiar cases of alleged "causation by omission". Let me conclude with some brief remarks concerning the last worry mentioned in the introduction, which is more intimately related to the philosophy of action broadly understood. We have seen that sometimes the use of a negative description goes hand in hand with the outcome of a certain action. If Al actually *tried* to turn off the gas (he tinkered with the gas knob), and if his trying did not yield the desired result (the knob broke off), then speaking of his failure is just speaking of his unsuccessful trying, i.e., of his tinkering with the gas knob. The notion of trying, however, is itself troublesome. For we can try to do something just as we can try *not* to do something. In the first case, the something we are trying to do is an action of some sort (turning off the gas, for instance). But what about the second case? Shall we say that when we try not to do something, our trying is directed towards a *negative* action of some sort?[30]

To be sure, the first example I mentioned at the beginning is easy enough: I tried hard not to miss the deadline if and only if I tried hard to meet it—one goal under two different descriptions. Or consider

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(20)   Al tried not to move.

There is no pressure to posit Al's goal as a negative event: a non-moving is just a staying put (under a negative description), i.e., we can rephrase (20) as

(21)   Al tried to stay put.

And the trying itself may be described as an action, or a complex of actions, that are perfectly standard: Al worked hard to master urges to move his body, possibly with the help of mental self-control techniques. But consider the following:

(22)   Al tried not to call Sue.

In this case, there is no obvious way of describing what Al was trying to do in positive terms. As with (15), no good candidate seems available for a simple analysis in terms of negative re-descriptions of positive events. For what could the positive goal of Al's trying be? Writing a letter instead? Crawling into bed and falling asleep? Leaving for Cuba? We have no clue. And even if it turns out that he did one of those things, and that he did it as a result of his trying to do it, it would be hard to maintain that this is what (22) is all about. It is one thing to try to fall asleep, quite another to try not to call someone, even if one thing implies the other.

I think this is another case where our intuitions and linguistic practices are seriously misleading. On the one hand, the difficulty is compounded by the fact that the language of trying, unlike the language of perceptual reports or the language of singular causation, admits of no obvious logical analysis. Surely it is not just a matter of implicit quantification. Just like the statement

(23)   Al sought a lion.

cannot be analyzed as

(23') $\exists x(\text{lion}(x) \,\&\, \text{sought}(Al, x))$

(as Quine famously argued[31]), likewise a statement such as (21) cannot be analyzed along the lines of

(21') $\exists e\,(\text{staying-put}(e, Al) \,\&\, \text{tried-for}(Al, e))$,

for (21) may be true even if no event of staying put (with Al as an agent) took place.[32] At least this is obvious on the generic, or *de dicto*, understanding of such statements, which in the case of (21) is the only reasonable reading;

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what would it mean to say that Al was aiming at (i.e., trying to realize) a particular action of staying put, as opposed to an action of that sort?[33] Accordingly, when we say that a trying is directed towards a putatively negative action, as in (22), we should not automatically construe our statement as involving a compromising hidden quantifier. For such a statement may be true even if Al's trying did not succeed, i.e., even if he did end up calling Sue.

Indeed, the analogy with seeking is telling: on a *de dicto* reading, there is no significant difference between (23) and

(24)   Al sought a unicorn,

so one could hardly take the truth of the latter to provide evidence in favor of an ontology of Meinongian non-existents.[34] On the other hand, one could rejoinder that the analogy between seeking and trying fires back. On a standard analysis,[35] the correct logical form of such statements as (23) and (24) (on their *de dicto* reading) is given by:

(23*)   Al strove that $\exists x$(lion (x) & finds (Al, x)).
(24*)   Al strove that $\exists x$(unicorn (x) & finds (Al, x)).

This is somewhat controversial, because it leaves it open whether 'Al strove that' should in turn be subjected to a Davidsonian, event-based analysis, but never mind: there is a clear sense in which (23*) and (24*) are on the right track. The trouble is that a corresponding analysis of (21) and (22), along the lines of

(21*)   Al strove that $\exists e$ (staying-put (e) & agent $(e,$ Al))
(22*)   Al strove that $\exists e$ (non-calling $(e,$ Sue) & agent $(e,$ Al)),

would seem to require that we treat Al's non-calling Sue on a par with his his staying put—and this is bad news. We have seen that there is no plausible way of treating 'non-calling' as a negative description of something positive Al was trying to do. Thus, if (22*) is correct, we seem to be stuck with a negative event after all. Nor can we avoid this conclusion by reading the negative particle 'non' as a propositional 'not', as in

(22**)   Al strove that $\exists e$ ($\sim$ calling $(e,$ Sue) & agent $(e,$ Al)).

Surely (22) does not merely say that Al tried to do something else than calling Sue. For it goes without saying that Al tried to do very many such things in the relevant interval of time: he tried (and managed) to put on his pants; he tried (and failed) to turn off the gas, and so on.

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Perhaps here is where the analogy between 'seeking' and 'trying' breaks down, on pain of countenancing negative events, and surely the literature offers a variety of alternatives.[36] Perhaps so. But I would rather say that it is the analogy between *trying to do* something and *trying not to do* something that breaks down. For when we try to do something, we are striving for there to be some event of a certain kind. When we try not to do something, however, our endeavors admit of two different construals: one can push the analogy and say that we are again striving for there to be *some* event of a certain (negative) kind; but one can also say that we are striving for there to be *no* event of a certain (positive) kind. The first option is reflected in (22*). But I see no good reason to favor that option over its alternative. On the contrary, the second option strikes me as much more plausible, regardless of any ontological considerations. If so, then, the analogy between the two sorts of tryings breaks down: (21*) gets the quantifier right, but (22*) does not. The correct way of representing the logical form of (22) is this:

(22***)   Al strove that $\sim\exists e$ (calling (e, Sue) & agent (e, Al)).

And surely enough, (22***) does not commit us to any dubious ontological creatures.

As I said, this may not be the end of the story insofar as the phrase 'Al strove that' may call for further analysis. After all, it is this phrase that now gives expression to Al's trying, and we may want to say that the latter is itself an action or a complex of actions that Al performed. But this is now a matter of detail and we need not worry: if this is what tryings are, they have a perfectly positive make-up. So, however we continue from here, I think we are now on the right track. The thought that tryings may involve negative outcomes rests on a false analogy.

Notes

[1] Davidson (1980).

[2] Davidson (1985), p. 217.

[3] See e.g. Vermazen (1985).

[4] The "ontological scruples" mentioned above parallel Russell's (1905) scruples concerning the reality of Meinongian *possibilia*, and the worries about ontological proliferation parallel Quine's (1948) worries about their "identity conditions".

[5] See Anscombe (1957), esp. § 23. For elaborations and clarifications, see her (1979).

[6] See Davidson (1970).

[7] This line of reasoning goes back to Goldman (1971) and Thomson (1971).

[8] See e.g. Kim (1976).

[9] See Davidson (1967b).

[10] See Bennett (1988). For a more detailed formulation of my views on these issues, I refer to Varzi (2002).

[11] Vendler (1967), Ch. 5.

[12] See Bennett (1988), p. 148.

[13] Here I elaborate on Tovena and Varzi (1999).

[14] See Higginbotham (1983) and the discussion in Neale (1988).

[15] Strictly speaking, since Beth's seeing is itself an event, the fully spelled out logical form of (1) should involve two bound variables: $\exists e \exists e'$(non-leaving (e, Al) & seeing (e', Beth, e)). For simplicity, here and below I will ignore such details if they are not relevant.

[16] Here I disagree with Przepiórkowski (1999), for instance.

[17] See de Swart (1996), p. 229.

[18] Stockwell *et al.* (1973), ex. (49b). Compare Horn (1989), p. 54, de Swart (1996), p. 230, and Przepiórkowski (1999), p. 241.

[19] Lakoff (1965), p. 172.

[20] Armstrong (1999), p. 177.

[21] See Davidson (1967b).

[22] Bennett (1995), p. 133.

[23] Grice (1975), p. 45. This is not to say that the value of a causal explanation is always a matter of pragmatics. For instance, as Hempel (1965) famously emphasized, scientific explanations are meant to be as objective and non-pragmatic as the laws and theories on which they rest. But our concern here is with ordinary explanations, hence the usual Gricean standards apply.

[24] If you like facts, you may want to say that whereas causation is a relation among events, causal explanations relate facts. And when it comes to fact descriptions, differences in logical power create differences of referent. But one does not need an ontology of facts to cash out the distinction: one can just say that causal explanations relate statements, or sets of statements. And when it comes to statements, what you see is what you get.

[25] See Higginbotham (2000), p. 74.

[26] Varzi (2006).

[27] See Beebee (2003) (the quote is from p. 301). Beebee's argument, in turn, rests on the theory of explanation of Lewis (1986), esp. section III.

[28] The example is from Melia (1995), p. 224.

[29] See Davidson (1967b), pp. 161f.

[30] Apart from the ontological scruples that motivate the present work, this sort

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of worry arises naturally in the philosophy of action—for instance, it afflicts those theories according to which one who is not trying to do anything at all is not sentiently directing one bodily motions at anything. See e.g. Mele (2003), sec. 6.4.

[31] Quine (1956).

[32] For simplicity, I ignore the fact that the predicates 'sought' and 'tried-for' may in turn be analyzed in Davidsonian fashion (see note 15).

[33] Of course, staying put would be a pretty boring action (perhaps not even an *action*), but it would still qualify as an occurrence of some sort. Following Bennett (1988), § 60, and *contra* Lombard (1986), I don't see any interesting structural difference between "dynamic" occurrences (i.e., events that involve change) and "static" property instances.

[34] This is acknowledged, for instance, by Parsons (1980), § 2.4.

[35] I am thinking of Quine's own analysis in (1956). The recent literature has been influenced greatly by the work of Montague (1969).

[36] See for instance Ginet (2004).

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