

# Are Abilities Dispositions?

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## 1 Introduction

Agents have abilities: the ability to walk and to talk, to sing and to jump, to reconsider one's decisions and to solve mathematical equations. Abilities are in many ways central to what being an agent means. When we act, we exercise abilities. When we refrain from an action, we must have possessed the ability to perform it; we merely choose not to exercise that ability. Knowledge of our own abilities is crucial to deliberating and planning our actions. If I do not have an ability to ride a bicycle, then taking the bicycle is not a salient option when I deliberate about how I am going to get to my office today. The more abilities we have, the more courses of action are typically open to us. What is more, our abilities – unlike the opportunities with which the world presents us – tend to be stable, robust features of ourselves that we can rely on in a large variety of different situations. The ability to play the piano or to speak French is there to be called upon, even when it is presently lying dormant, that is, unexercised.

But what is it to have an ability? A common starting point in response to this question has been the idea that abilities are a kind of dispositional property. Like abilities, dispositions are stable, robust features of individuals that are possessed, we may say 'dormant', even when unmanifested: a vase remains fragile even when there is no one close by to hit it, or when it is packed safely in bubblewrap. Of course, not every disposition is an ability. The vase's fragility certainly is not, but we human agents also possess a number of dispositions that will not easily qualify as abilities: I may be disposed to take on more departmental duties than fairness demands, or to get angry when provoked, or to be influenced in my judgement by implicit bias. None of these would ordinarily be considered an ability.

Which dispositions, then, are our abilities? This paper will consider the two answers to this more specific question that we can find in the current philosophical literature. One is from the debate on free will and goes back at least to Moore; in its present version it is part of a project that is often called the 'New Dispositionalism'<sup>1</sup>. Roughly, it says that abilities are dispositions to do what one intends to do. The other answer goes back at least to Ryle but can, in its present version, be

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<sup>1</sup>Vihvelin 2004, Vihvelin 2013, Fara 2008; for the terminology and some criticism, see Clarke 2009 and Whittle 2010. Clarke (2015) has a very useful summary and discussion of the New Dispositionalist view of abilities. His objections are quite different from mine.

found mostly in a branch of virtue epistemology often referred to as ‘virtue reliabilism’<sup>2</sup>. Roughly, it says that abilities are dispositions to succeed in doing what one does. There is regrettably little direct engagement between these different projects over their shared concern. Given their different dialectical contexts, they tend to have different paradigm examples of abilities in mind; but there is also significant overlap.

My aim in this paper is twofold. The first aim is of a more expository nature: I want to set out both views in as general a form as possible, independently of the particular concerns that their contemporary proponents pursue with them, and make the similarities and differences between them as clear as possible. The second aim is critical: I will subject both views to criticism and show that they fail to fully capture our intuitive notion of an ability.

Why does this matter?

First, I would like to claim that the question ‘what is it to have an ability?’ is a very interesting question in its own right, and no less worthy of philosophical reflection than the more widely discussed questions such as ‘what is it to have knowledge?’, ‘what is an action?’, ‘what are moral duties?’, and so forth.<sup>3</sup>

Second, my discussion in what follows will have some, although admittedly mediate, consequences for the dialectical contexts from which the discussed accounts are taken.

The New Dispositionalism is first and foremost a compatibilist theory about free will. The debate about free will is arguably the locus classicus for the discussion of my question: the question what it is to have an ability. A certain brand of compatibilists, among them the New Dispositionists, argue that determinism does not rob us of the ability to act otherwise because that ability is just a matter of what we *would have* done (or were disposed to do) had things been different. Incompatibilists disagree; they tend to reject the conditional/dispositionalist analysis both for the unexercised abilities to do otherwise (see the classic van Inwagen 1975) and for the abilities exercised in what we did do (recently and vocally, Steward 2012) and instead argue that abilities are *two-way* powers, powers to do or refrain from doing something. In this context, it is crucial for the New Dispositionists’ project that their account of abilities be independently motivated. My argument questions that independent motivation by attempting to show that the account is inadequate, for reasons unrelated to free will.

In virtue epistemology, the crucial point of the debate is not the nature of abilities but their use in epistemology. A key idea of virtue reliabilists is that there is a close connection between the realm of the epistemic, of knowledge and beliefs, on the one hand, and the practical realm, the realm of our agency, on the other; and that this connection is made, at least in part, through the role that abilities and their exercise play in both areas. (For example, it is argued by appeal to cases of practical skills that success is more valuable when it is owed to the agent’s abilities; and this is then used to show how the virtue reliabilist thesis, that knowledge is true belief owed to the subject’s abilities, explains the value of knowledge as compared with merely true belief.) In order for that transition to work, however, the underlying conception of abilities must be adequate in both the epistemic and the practical realm. My argument is intended to establish that it is not adequate in the practical realm.

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<sup>2</sup>Sosa 2007, Sosa 2010, Greco 2007, Greco 2010, Riggs 2007.

<sup>3</sup>One reason why my question has received less attention in the literature may be that its answer has been thought to follow easily from an answer to questions about agency. (Thanks to an anonymous referee for the suggestion.) If so, my argument in section 2.4 should show that it does not do so easily, and point to some reasons why.

Third, abilities are invoked all over the place in philosophical theorizing: in accounts of concepts and of the mind itself (Millikan 2000, Kenny 2010), of conceivability (e.g., Yablo 1993), of agency (Mayr 2011) and activity (Groff 2013), of weakness of the will (Smith 2003), of omnipotence (Hoffman and Rosenkrantz 2012), of qualia (Lewis 1990), of empathy (Stueber 2006), of affordances (Scarantino 2003), and in non-virtue-theoretic accounts of knowledge (Hyman 1999, Hyman 2010) and its characteristic value (Carter et al. 2013), to name but a few. Most, though not all, of these use abilities as unexplained explainers. Part of the appeal of ability-based accounts derives from the idea that we have a general grasp on what it is to have an ability, on which all of these different theories can rely – hence abilities are a kind of universal explanatory resource that they can draw on without incurring any further explanatory costs. A few of the authors I have mentioned (in particular, Kenny, Lewis, and Mayr) do say more about what abilities are, and do so without appeal to dispositions; others say nothing of the kind, or gesture towards a dispositional kind of some sort or other. What makes the two debates that I will discuss particularly interesting, for their own sake and for the sake of other philosophical projects, is that they attempt an explicit characterization of what kind of dispositional property an ability *is*.

Their answers, as I have said above, differ (at least on one natural reading). Both are based on the idea that abilities are dispositions; but we find in them different construals of *which* dispositions they are.

The first version is that abilities are those dispositions that are under our *control* in a certain sense: they are dispositions whose exercise is a matter of our choice. When a fragile glass breaks or an irascible person gets angry, those manifestations are triggered by the glass’s being hit or the person’s being provoked; the glass or the person has no say in whether or not the disposition is manifested. Abilities, on the contrary, are dispositions to act *at will*: their manifestation or exercise is triggered not by some external circumstance but by the agent’s choosing, trying, or intending to exercise it. My ability to raise my arm, for instance, is my disposition to raise my arm if I so choose. This is the view defended by the New Dispositionalists.

A second version of the idea locates an *evaluative* dimension in abilities. An able piano player is a *good* piano player; your ability to play the piano manifests itself not just in your playing the piano (at will), but in your playing it *well*. That this idea is well entrenched in our ordinary thought about abilities is confirmed by the expressions we use to make comparative ability ascriptions: while one glass is simply *more* fragile, or more disposed to break, than another, one person can be said to be *better* able to play the piano than another. An ability, then, can be thought of as a disposition to do something *well* or to succeed in a performance, on the condition of one’s doing it at all. This is, at least on one natural interpretation, the view of virtue reliabilists such as Sosa and Greco.

The two ideas may not be entirely distinct: to fulfil my intentions is a kind of success, after all (Sosa 2009, 9). But as we shall see below, the corresponding analyses still look quite different. When analysing an ability to A, the New Dispositionalists ask under what conditions an agent would A: would she A, interferences aside, if she so chose? The virtue reliabilists, at least on the construal I am suggesting, ask what would happen under the condition of the agent’s A’ing: would she succeed, interferences aside, if she A’ed?<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Both views presuppose that dispositions are individuated by two factors: a characteristic stimulus (the condition under which the disposition would manifest) and manifestation. I have argued against this view of dispositions elsewhere (Vetter 2013, Vetter 2014). But it is the standard view, and I will accept it for present purposes; I do not think that my own preferred view of dispositions, which does without the stimulus condition, provides a better framework for a dispositional account of abilities.

Section 2 will discuss the view of the New Dispositionalists, and find it wanting on two accounts; section 3 will then turn to the success-based view extracted from virtue reliabilists, which seems tailor-made to avoid the pitfalls of the first view. However, it, too, will be seen to face serious counterexamples. Section 4 reflects on conclusions to draw from the failure of these two prominent dispositional accounts of abilities.

A final caveat before I start. Given their dialectical contexts, the two views that I am discussing differ somewhat over the scope of the term ‘ability’. Virtue reliabilists want to capture both agentic and cognitive abilities, such as the ability to see (and it is the very point of their proposal that those are importantly alike); the New Dispositionalists are interested only in agentic abilities. In what follows, I will concentrate on their shared concern: agentic abilities, including abilities for mental actions, but excluding such cases as the ability to perceive, to recognize something, and so forth. However, it should be kept in mind that such abilities are meant to be included by the account of abilities that we will discuss in section 3.

## 2 Dispositions to do what one chooses

### 2.1 The New Dispositionalism

The New Dispositionalism is put forward as an improvement on the influential but widely rejected Moorean account. G.E. Moore (1911) argued that determinism is compatible with the ability to do otherwise because that ability amounts, in effect, to the truth of a conditional, along the following lines:

**(Moorean account)**  $x$  has an ability to  $A$  iff, were  $x$  to choose/decide/intend/try to  $A$ ,  $x$  would  $A$ .<sup>5</sup>

The counterexamples to this analysis are well-known. Thus, as Austin (1961) pointed out, an able golfer may try to sink a putt yet fail to do so, if a sudden gush of wind carries the ball off in the wrong direction. Thus the golfer possesses the ability in question, but the alleged analysis, the conditional ‘If the golfer tried to sink the putt, he would sink the putt’ is false. Conversely, Lehrer (1968) has argued that the analysis may be true in the absence of a corresponding ability, if an agent is unable to try (or decide, or choose) to perform an action but would acquire the ability to perform the action along with the ability to try (a comatose patient who would move their arm if they tried, but is unable to try, is a familiar example).

The *New Dispositionalists* (Vihvelin 2004, Fara 2008) revive Moore’s analysis in a way that takes care of such counter-examples. As the New Dispositionalists point out, cases such as Austin’s golfer are parallel to dispositional *masks*: interfering factors that prevent the manifestation of a disposition while leaving the disposition itself intact, such as a fragile glass’s being packed in bubble wrap. Lehrer’s example corresponds to what Lewis (1997) has called the ‘finkish lack of a disposition’: cases where a disposition is lacking, but would be produced by the disposition’s own stimulus condition, as in a dead wire that would become live as soon as it was touched by a conductor, thus finkishly lacking the disposition to conduct electricity when touched by a conductor. So whatever takes care of such examples in the case of dispositions (Vihvelin uses Lewis’s ‘reformed conditional analysis’ of dispositions, while Fara (2005) favours an analysis in terms of habituels)

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<sup>5</sup>Moore makes a number of suggestions that are strictly speaking distinct, though he does not explicitly distinguish them. But this analysis is arguably the most influential of them, which has come to be associated with his name.

will do the same for abilities; all we need to do is replace the conditional in the original Moorean analysis with a disposition ascription.

Here, then, are two official accounts of what it is to have an ability:

**The Dispositional Analysis:** An agent has the ability to A in circumstances C if and only if she has the disposition to A when, in circumstances C, she tries to A. (Fara 2008, 848)

*Revised Conditional Analysis of Ability:* S has the ability at time t to do X iff, for some intrinsic property or set of properties B that S has at t, for some time t' after t, if S chose (decided, intended, or tried) at t to do X, and S were to retain B until t', S's choosing (deciding, intending, or trying) to do X and S's having of B would jointly be an S-complete cause of S's doing X. (Vihvelin 2004, 438)

Vihvelin's account looks more complex than Fara's but it is merely the result of plugging in, for 'S is disposed to do X if S chooses (decides, intends, tries) to do X' Lewis's reformed conditional analysis of dispositions (Lewis 1997). Without the Lewisian analysis, Vihvelin's analysis is much like Fara's (without the extra qualification 'in C'):

(D1)  $x$  has an ability to A iff  $x$  has a disposition to A when she chooses/decides/intends/tries to A.<sup>6</sup>

The Moorean account and the New Dispositionalism concur in restricting the range of circumstances that we consider when ascribing an ability: it is only those circumstances in which the individual chooses, tries, or intends to exercise the ability in question. I will now argue that this restriction makes (D1) too narrow in two ways: first, by not counting all *bona fide* exercises of abilities *as* exercises of abilities (2.2); and second, by not counting all *bona fide* abilities *as* abilities (2.3). In formulating the cases at issue, I will leave the notion of trying, intending, or choosing, at an intuitive level; I hope that my cases are intuitively compelling. But there is too much work on trying, intending, etc. to leave one entirely satisfied with the intuitive notion. I will therefore go on to strengthen my argument by considering various precisifications of these notions in the philosophy of action, and arguing that none of them suffices to entirely evade the initial arguments (2.4).

## 2.2 Exercising Abilities

Let us start by considering what it is to exercise an ability as characterized by (D1).

If the New Disposalists are right, then an ability *just is* a disposition to do something if one chooses (decides, intends, tries) to do it. Such a disposition is not exercised whenever the thing is done; it is exercised only when the thing is done upon choosing (deciding, intending, trying) to do it. Compare: if fragility is the disposition to break if struck, it is exercised only in a thing's breaking

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<sup>6</sup>Strictly speaking, Vihvelin endorses (D1) only as an analysis of simple abilities, and thinks of the abilities that are relevant for compatibilist freedom as 'bundles' of such simpler abilities as captured in (D1) (Vihvelin 2004, 431). Her more recent views are even more cautious: in Vihvelin 2013, 180, she claims only that *some* of the abilities required for compatibilist freedom are roughly of the type characterized in (D1), with the relevant stimulus condition being *trying* to A. She does not, however, give a general account of the abilities that are required, or indeed of abilities in general.

upon being struck. An object that breaks upon being sung to by a soprano has not manifested its disposition to break if struck; it has manifested, if anything, the disposition to break if sung to by a soprano. Likewise, an agent doing X without intending to do so has not manifested her disposition to do X if she so intends, though she may have manifested some other disposition. If an ability is a disposition to do X if one so intends, then the exercise of an ability must always be preceded (or, at any rate, accompanied) by an intention (and the same goes for deciding, trying, or choosing). But this is not so; hence an ability is not a disposition to do something if one tries, intends, decides, or chooses to do it. That is the argument; let me now give some examples. My examples are structurally similar to counterexamples that have been used against the causal theory of action, in particular, by Helen Steward.<sup>7</sup>

A first group of examples is constituted by so-called sub-intentional actions:<sup>8</sup> ‘the scratchings, shufflings, twiddlings, and jiggings that together constitute quite a large sub-class of our bodily movings’ (Steward 2012, 66). I just scratched my nose while thinking about this sentence. I did not try or decide to scratch my nose, I did not form any relevant intentions; I just did it. My scratching my nose was none the less an exercise of my motor abilities – it involved, among other things, a coordination of movements in my arm and fingers that was clearly the manifestation of an ability.

A second class of examples, also used crucially by Steward, consists of the components of intentional action. While the abilities for sub-intentional actions may all belong to the class of simpler motor abilities, the second class includes more complex, acquired skills. In riding a bicycle, I perform a complex series of movements that are correlated with proprioception, perception of my surroundings, and so forth. I see a car coming; I slow down and keep to the right side of the road. I almost lose my balance on a wet road; I perform a number of movements that keep me from falling. I do not have the time or the need to choose, try, intend, or decide to do those things; I just do them. (Steward 2012, 66f. gives the example of typing the letter ‘v’ as part of typing a paragraph of her book.)<sup>9</sup>

Fara explicitly stipulates that ‘the schematic letter ‘A’ in the dispositional analysis is to be replaced by verb phrases that express actions that are voluntary, in the sense that they are actions that one can in principle try to perform’ (Fara 2008, 849). But this does nothing to exclude my examples. I can in principle try to scratch my nose, wiggle my foot, and play with my jewellery; I can in principle try to perform the sub-actions of a complex skill, such as my various movements in balancing on a bicycle. The point is merely that while I *can* try to perform these activities, I may, and often do, exercise my ability to perform them without trying.

The New Dispositionalists, then, fail to classify a range of important exercises *as* exercises of abilities. The natural response from their point of view is to say that, while their characterization does not fully capture the nature of an ability, it still provides a sufficient and necessary condition for its possession; and is that not good enough?

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<sup>7</sup>The New Dispositionalist view of abilities has certain structural similarities to the causal theory of action, although the two accounts are logically independent; see Vihvelin 2013, 211. I will examine the parallel between (D1) and the causal theory of action in more detail in section 2.4.

<sup>8</sup>The term is from O’Shaughnessy (1980).

<sup>9</sup>A third class of counterexamples, which I ignore here because I have chosen to focus on *agentive* abilities, is given in Löwenstein 2014 and stems from the realm of broadly cognitive abilities. Löwenstein notes that many of our cognitive abilities (my term) can be exercised not only without, but against, our intentions. His example is the ability to read written text. I may intend not to read the advertisements that line the street because I believe that they are manipulative. And yet when presented with advertisements, I will often competently interpret them, manifesting my ability to read them quite despite myself.

Perhaps that is good enough for the compatibilist purposes of the New Dispositionalists, who are, after all, concerned only with the possession, not the exercise, of certain abilities (viz., those abilities that constitute our being able to do otherwise). However, the envisaged response means that (D1) does not give us an answer to the question what abilities *are*; it does not provide us with a metaphysics of abilities. All it does is provide criteria for the presence or absence of an ability. That is much better than nothing; but surely it would be better still to have more. This general desideratum becomes more pressing if an account like (D1) were to be appropriated by other theories which, like virtue reliabilism, do make appeal to the exercise and not merely the possession of abilities.

In any case, we can strengthen the argument to show that the present account gets even the answer to the first question wrong, i.e., that it fails to classify all the right cases as *possessions* of an ability.

### 2.3 Having Abilities

So far, we have seen that abilities are sometimes exercised without the individual choosing or intending to do so. But some abilities are never exercised *with* the individual choosing or intending to do so. Indeed, certain abilities are best, or only, exercised without trying, deciding, or choosing to exercise them.

In the simplest cases, this may be so because the ability's exercise is characterized so as to exclude intentions, tryings, etc. Consider the ability to absent-mindedly play with my jewellery: as soon as I tried or intended to do so, it would no longer be absent-minded. Or take the ability to be spontaneous: any attempt, choice, or intention to exercise such an ability is surely self-defeating.

But other abilities may exhibit the same structure for different reasons. Consider, again, the components of more complex intentional actions. I am able to perform various movements in the course of maneuvering my bicycle on the street, in the course of a complex series of dance movements, or in the course of playing a difficult piece on the piano; and yet I am not able to perform *that very movement* by intending to do so. I don't even know how to start it; I can perform it only as part of a more complex movement, upon intending (perhaps) to perform that complex movement. In order to perform this particular movement, I have to start the cycling, the dance, or the piano piece afresh. Or consider the phenomenon of grace: someone may move, speak, or sing with effortless grace and be applauded for their beautiful performance, but as soon as they intend and try to replicate their movements, words, or song, the performance becomes stilted. They are able to move, speak, or sing with grace, but not when intending to do so.

A final example stems from the realm of creative abilities.<sup>10</sup> A brilliant poet may sit down for days trying to compose a poem, but not succeed; and then, once she does the dishes or goes for a walk, the poem may just 'come to her'. Many creative processes seem to function in that way; many of us have experienced the same in writing philosophy. It is not the case that we would come up with an argument, or the poet would write a poem, if we and she tried hard enough; and yet, we do seem to be able to come up with arguments, and the poet was stipulated (not implausibly) to be a highly able one. Do we therefore lack the ability to formulate an argument, and does the poet lack the ability to compose a poem? Hardly: the scenario described may apply to the very

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<sup>10</sup>I owe this example, as well as that of grace, to Ralf Busse.

best of poets and philosophers. If they lack the relevant abilities, then no one has them – an absurd result.<sup>11</sup>

## 2.4 Objections and Replies

What might a defender of (D1) – a *dispositionalist*, for short – say in response to my argument thus far? In this section, I will anticipate what I take to be the most natural responses, and argue that they are not successful.<sup>12</sup>

(D1) bears close resemblance to the causal theory of action, which characterizes actions as behaviour that is caused by the right kind of mental state – typically intending or trying. My objections to (D1) were, accordingly, partly inspired by the debate surrounding that theory. But the action-theoretic literature is rich, and the causal theory is by no means short of responses to objections. The dispositionalist may, accordingly, borrow from this debate as well. In fact, she might claim that I have not identified a problem about abilities at all, but one about agency: once we get our philosophy of action in order, an account of abilities will follow suit. In what follows, I will address both the specific and the general worry.

I will outline and discuss what I take to be the most plausible responses, each of which corresponds to a well known position in the philosophy of action. I will argue that none of these responses succeeds in both rebutting my arguments and formulating a plausible account of abilities. Moreover, I will point out in each case that my argument does not carry over to their action-theoretic counterparts but is quite specific to abilities. This should help quell any suspicions that the issue is really one about actions and not about abilities.

Here, then, are what I take to be the relevant choices for a dispositionalist in responding to my arguments.

*First*, the dispositionalist may complain that my counterexamples are based on a faulty conception of the relevant dispositions’ stimulus condition: trying, intending, or choosing. (In what follows I will focus on trying and intending; the arguments are easily generalized to other candidates.) There is a great deal of work on both trying and intending in the philosophy of action. In choosing a suitable conception of either trying or intending, the dispositionalist may go in one of two opposite directions. First, she may want to tie trying or intending to A *more closely* to A’ing, so that every action of A’ing is guaranteed to come with an attempt or intention (or even be identical with it). I will refer to this as *option (A)*. Second, she may tie trying or intending to A *less closely* to A’ing, so that they need not correspond to a mental state that has A’ing as its content. I will label this option *(B)*. Both options (A) and (B) result in a less demanding view of trying or intending and may therefore be hoped to help with my objections.

An alternative *second* overall strategy for the dispositionalist is to argue that (D1) proposes too simple a correlation between A’ing and the intention that brings it about, akin to what is known as the ‘Simple View’ in the philosophy of action, the view that ‘for me intentionally to A I must intend to A’ (Bratman 1984, 179). The dispositionalist may then revise (D1) in analogy to the

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<sup>11</sup>To refute (D1), we need not suppose that the agents in the examples would *never* A if they tried or intended to A, but only that it is not the case that they would A in sufficiently many cases where they so tried or intended (and nothing interferes). To avoid disputes over which proportion of cases would be sufficient, I have made the examples stronger than may be logically required: I am imagining that agents in question never or nearly never A upon trying or intending to A.

<sup>12</sup>Many thanks to Erasmus Mayr and Carolina Sartorio for helpful discussion on the material of this section.



Not-So-Simple Views in the philosophy of action, and argue that my counterexamples do not refute the revised account, which is still true to the spirit of (D1). I will refer to this as *option (C)*.

Let us now go through options (A)-(C) in turn.

(A) Several philosophers of action have argued for a conception either of trying or of intending where any performance of an (intentional) act A includes or is identical with the agent's trying or intending to A. Thus we might say that every action A is identical with the agent's trying to A (Hornsby 1980, O'Shaughnessy 1980), or that an intentional (bodily) action consists of an 'intention in action' together with a bodily movement, though it need not be preceded by a 'prior intention' (Searle 1983). On such a view, my counterexamples from section 2.3 will seem to fall apart. If my steering my bicycle just so, or my playing with my jewellery, is an action, then on O'Shaughnessy's and Hornsby's view it follows that I have tried to perform them. If these actions are, moreover, intentional actions, then on Searle's view it will follow that I intended to perform them (though I may not have had a 'prior intention' to do so). We may argue, with O'Shaughnessy and Steward (2012), that these are precisely not intentional but *sub-intentional* actions, and therefore need involve no intention of any sort; but this kind of argument is not easily applied to trying.<sup>13</sup>

But however we spell out the details, none of these views will help with the problems of section 2.3. For while the authors that I have cited claim that whenever an agent acts, she is also trying or intending, none of them would claim the converse: that there can be no trying or intending without the action in question. Such a claim would be obviously false: any view of intention or trying must leave room for failure. But it is such failure that characterizes the cases I have appealed to in section 2.3. So whatever the action-theoretic credentials of the views I have outlined, they will do nothing to alleviate the argument of section 2.3.

(B) Another way of making the notion of trying less demanding (though this is not, so far as I can see, plausibly applied to intending) is to tie an agent's trying to A less closely to her A'ing, by rejecting the idea that trying to A is a specific mental state with A'ing as part of its content, and instead embracing the idea that '[a]ll one does in trying is to act' (Cleveland 1997, vii).

Michael Fara endorses a version of this view, where trying to do something can consist in trying something else that would be 'conducive' to it:

Typically, if one tries to go to sleep by some kind of direct mental attempt, 'willing oneself to sleep', one will fail. But there are better ways to try to go to sleep: for me, closing my eyes and doing long divisions in my head often works. It is this second way of trying – where one tries to perform an action by placing oneself, as best one can, in circumstances appropriate to or conducive to performing the action – that is at work in the dispositional analysis of abilities. (Fara 2008, 849)

So, Fara maintains, we can retain (D1) as it stands (with trying to A as the stimulus condition) once we realize that there are indirect ways of trying to do something.

This view seems better suited than option (A) to deal with my counterexamples from section 2.3. Perhaps our romantic poet *can* write poems by trying to do so; it is just that her trying needs to take a more roundabout route. She may try to get herself in the mood for writing a poem by taking a walk, turning on music, doing the dishes, or whatever has turned out to be conducive to

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<sup>13</sup>Vihvelin (2013) ties trying to intending, claiming that we 'try to do X whenever we acquire an intention or desire to do X, here and now, and that intention or desire causes at least the beginning of the process of doing something that we believe, perhaps mistakenly, will move us closer towards our goal of doing X.' (Vihvelin 2013, 176) On this view, it is not clear that sub-intentional actions and our abilities for them always involve trying.

inspiration. (Many readers will have similar experiences in writing philosophy.) Likewise, I can get myself to perform the sub-movements of steering my bicycle by trying or intending to cycle to work, to play absent-mindedly with my jewellery by trying or intending to listen to a talk, and (perhaps) to walk gracefully simply by intending to walk. As the latter two cases show, trying to A should not even be a matter of having A ‘in mind’ as a goal, for that is precisely what would prevent absent-mindedness or grace of movement. Trying to A, on this conception, is not a distinctive psychological occurrence; it is characterized rather in its functional role as facilitating the agent’s A’ing.

Fara’s conception of trying may also help with the examples of section 2.2: perhaps the exercise of an ability is always preceded by the agent’s doing something that is conducive to her doing the thing she does. But even if this were so, it would not help us much. For it is true only because we have weakened the notion of trying so much as to make it useless in a dispositional account of abilities.

An entirely deaf person lacks the ability to hear, but there is something that he can do to place himself in circumstances conducive to hearing: namely, undergoing an operation. Likewise, someone who lacks the ability to swim can place herself in circumstances conducive to her swimming: she can take swimming lessons; and so forth. I do not have an ability to jump 3 meters high, but there is something I can do that is conducive to my jumping 3 meters high: I just need to get on a trampoline. In general, being disposed to do something upon trying to do it, in Fara’s weakened sense of ‘try’, is not *sufficient* for having an ability. At best, it is sufficient for possibly having an ability.

Nor is it clear that Fara even provides *necessary* conditions for having an ability. Is our romantic poet disposed to write a poem when she tries? No: Fara has identified *one* way of trying that might trigger her writing a poem, but there are still plenty of other, more direct, ways of trying that would fail to trigger her writing a poem. The same holds for the other examples. The fact that there is *one* way of trying that would trigger the agent’s A’ing does not suffice to establish the more general claim that the agent is disposed to A upon trying to A (in some way or another). Compare: the fact that there is one way of stressing a bridge that would break it – say, dropping a helicopter on it – does not suffice to establish the more general claim that the bridge is disposed to break when stressed; there are far too many ways of stressing that would not break it.

Note that the argument does not threaten appeal to a Fara-type view of trying in the philosophy of action quite generally. The philosophy of action is concerned with actual token events and their causal relations; the dispositionalist is concerned with possibly uninstantiated types of events and their modal (i.e., dispositional) relation between them. A proponent of the causal theory of action, in particular, need not worry about failed attempts, such as the romantic poet’s attempt to write a poem: the theory is concerned only with cases where action *does* occur. Nor need the causal theorist worry about the fact that there are many different ways of trying to A. She is dealing with actual tokens of trying, which are perfectly specific. Her claim may be that every action comes with a trying of this kind, and that it was causally responsible for the action occurring. She need not claim that there is a *general* connection between trying, in any way, to A, and A’ing. But that is precisely what the dispositionalist needs to say.

(C) It is well known that the ‘Simple View’, which takes each intentional action of A’ing to be caused by an intention *to A*, faces counterexamples. One kind of counterexample consists in the automatic components of skilled action, such as taking a particular step on one’s way to work (Mele 1997), swivelling just so in the course of dancing (Clarke 2010), or stopping on one’s left foot

in the course of shooting a jump-shot (Bratman 1984). These cases are clearly analogous to my own example of the various movements I perform while riding my bicycle. The standard solution in the philosophy of action is to allow that an intentional action of A'ing need not be caused or even accompanied by an intention to A, but rather by some intention to B, where (the intention to) B is suitably related to A (see, for instance, Bratman 1984, Mele 1997). The corresponding adjustment to our simple dispositionalist view (D1) would look as follows:

**(D1\*)**  $x$  has an ability to A iff  $x$  has a disposition to A when she intends to B and (the intention to) B is suitably related to A.

What would a suitable relation consist in? Bratman offers a helpful gloss: we can say that an action A is 'in the motivational potential of my intention to B, given my desires and beliefs, just in case it is possible for me intentionally to A in the course of executing my intention to B' (Bratman 1984, 195). In the examples I have given, A is (in the circumstances) a constitutive part of B'ing; in other cases it may be a means to the end of B'ing, or even a foreseen but not specifically intended consequence of B'ing (Bratman gives the example of wearing down one's sneakers in the course of executing one's intention to run a marathon). For our purposes, the precise extent of the relation will not matter too much. I will focus on the case where A'ing is in the circumstances a constitutive part of the agent's B'ing.

Now, the problem with (D1\*) so understood is that it does not formulate a necessary condition for an agent's having the ability to A. I may be perfectly able to take such-and-such a step and yet lack the disposition to take such a step upon having a suitably related intention, such as the intention to walk to work. The problem is, again, one of specificity, but this time it is the specificity of the disposition's manifestation: there are a myriad of ever so slightly different steps that I could take in the course of executing my intention – there are very many different ways of walking to work, even if I have settled on a particular route. And generally, there are almost always a myriad of different ways in which we might execute our intentions. Given this variety of options, we are not typically disposed to take any one of the various ways in which we might execute a given intention.

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Again, the problem does not apply to the analogous view in the theory of action. Taking such-and-such a step is one way of walking to work, and in the actual instance it is caused by my intention to walk to work. Causation holds between two actual, token events, and it happens against a rich background of very specific conditions that hold at a specific time and place. The causal theorist need not say that taking this particular step was the only way for me to execute the relevant intention. It was the step that I actually took; it was caused by my intention to get to work, perhaps in tandem with other factors; and it was properly related to that intention because it contributed, in the right way, to its execution. Because it is concerned with actual, token events, the causal theory of action need not specify the relation between them in such a way that the intention itself uniquely determines the action in question.

The general diagnosis, then, is this. A causal account of action is concerned with actual token events of intention and (in the case of physical action) movement. A dispositional account of

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<sup>14</sup>Of course, dispositions need not be surefire: their stimulus need not *guarantee* the occurrence of their manifestation. But they should at least incline their bearers to exhibit the manifestation upon being subject to the stimulus, in the sense that the manifestation is (*ceteris paribus*) more likely than its absence. In the cases that we have seen, this does not appear to be the case: if there are thousands of equally good ways of executing a given intention, I am no more likely to take one of them than not to take it upon forming the intention.

abilities, on the contrary, does not relate actual events to each other. It must formulate a *modal* connection between possibly uninstantiated *types* of action and intention. It is for this reason, as we have seen, that it requires a much tighter relation between the intention and the behaviour in question. And this tighter relation, it seems, is not to be had.

This concludes my discussion of possible responses to my argument. There may be other ways of responding, but I take these to be the most natural, and I have shown that they fail for reasons which point to general disanalogies between actions on the one hand, and abilities on the other. The burden of proof is on the defender of (D1).

In the next section, I will look at a different approach. We can think of that approach as arising from the problems of the approach discussed in this section. We have seen that whatever our conception of intention or trying is, there always remains a gap between them and the action that is the exercise of a given ability. We have also seen that an agent need not always be very reliable in exercising an ability upon trying or intending to do so – think of the romantic poet. What makes her an able poet seems, rather, to be the fact that her poems are excellent. These two observations may prompt us to do the following: don't look at the conditions under which an ability is exercised, for it may always fail; look instead at the occasions where the ability *is* exercised, and see if they are good or successful. This, in a nutshell, is what our second approach does.

### 3 Dispositions to succeed

According to Ernest Sosa, we can understand '[c]ompetences (and abilities) as dispositions to succeed' (Sosa 2015, 95). Of course, not everyone who has an ability to A has a disposition to succeed in A'ing. I may be able to steal something, but I am not disposed to do so, successfully or otherwise; I am no kleptomaniac. Rather, my ability must be seen as an ability to succeed *under certain conditions*. What are those conditions? Most recently, Sosa has spelled them out in a way that is closely aligned to the New Dispositionalist view that we have just discussed: a competence (or ability), he says, 'is a certain sort of disposition to succeed when you try' (Sosa 2015, 96). This version, it will readily be seen, is subject to the very criticism that I have spelled out in section 2. For this reason, I want to concentrate on a different version of the disposition-to-succeed idea, one which can be traced back to Ryle's discussion of knowing how:

What is involved in our descriptions of people as knowing how to make and appreciate jokes, to talk grammatically, to play chess, to fish, or to argue? Part of what is meant is that, when they perform these operations, they tend to perform them well, i.e. correctly or efficiently or successfully. Their performances come up to certain standards, or satisfy certain criteria. (Ryle 1949, 28)

Accordingly, Sosa's earlier (and Greco's) characterizations of abilities or competences as 'dispositions to succeed' might be fleshed out as follows:

**(D2)**  $x$  has the ability to A iff  $x$  is disposed to A successfully when A'ing at all, i.e. iff, if  $x$  were to A at all, then (interferences aside)  $x$  would (probably) A successfully.<sup>15</sup>

Unlike (D1), (D2) imposes no undue restriction on the conditions under which abilities may be exercised. (This is not to say that there may not be such restrictions; but they are not written

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<sup>15</sup>Here are some of the statements that I interpret along the lines of (D2):

into (D2) as they were written into (D1).) Thus, it appears, there are no problems about sub-intentional actions, automated sub-actions, or the creative abilities of the romantic poet and many a philosopher. In all of these cases, what matters is not that we would do the deed if we intended to do it, but that we would do it well or properly, would succeed with it, if we did it at all. More generally, (D2) does not tie the agent's exercise of the ability to a preceding event, be it attempt, intention, or choice, and hence is not faced with counterexamples where that preceding event is lacking.

(D2) does, of course, tie the agent's exercise of the ability to something: to success. The succeeding in question ought to be inherent in or constitutive of the activity of A'ing: what matters is whether the agent is disposed to succeed *in her A'ing*, not whether she succeeds in whatever further goals she pursues with her A'ing.

And here an immediate worry arises: what about actions that do not have standards of success? Sosa and Greco tend to spell out success in terms of an aim or target that is hit or reached: a shot is successful when it hits its target. Of course, not every activity has such an aim. What is the constitutive aim of dancing, or playing the piano, or of talking to oneself in Russian? We may, however, include such cases by pointing out that success in an activity need not take the form of hitting a distinct target; it may consist in doing the activity *well*.

A trickier kind of case is constituted by activities that appear not to have success standards even in this adverbial sense. Sosa (2007, 23) mentions 'aimless ambling'; another example might be doodling. These are performances which, by their very nature, are without any aim, and presumably without any evaluative standard. (There are, it may be said, no better or worse ways of ambling or doodling; that's the very point of them.) But perhaps these cases, too, could be integrated into the framework that comes with (D2), by providing them with trivial success conditions. The end of aimless ambling may be just that: aimless ambling. Certainly if my ambling ceases to be aimless and turns into a hike to the top of a hill, I have not succeeded in ambling aimlessly. Likewise, if my random doodling turns into a drawing of a tree then I have not succeeded in doodling randomly. In such cases as ambling or doodling, then, successfully doing the deed may be equated with doing the deed at all.

Construed in this way, ambling and doodling are not at all unusual cases. Many ordinary verbs are 'success verbs': they describe a performance only insofar as it is successful. 'Hit', 'reach', 'prove' and 'move' are such verbs: one simply has not hit, reached, proved, or moved something unless the performance was successful in that the thing in question really has been hit, reached, proved, or moved. Where A is a success verb, to A *is* to A successfully: there is nothing more to success in A'ing than the A'ing itself.

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Competences are dispositions of an agent to perform well ... Dispositions, and competences in particular, are associated with trigger-manifestation conditionals. ... Your archery competence corresponds to: *if you were to shoot at a target you would likely hit it*. (Sosa 2010, 465f.)

A competence is a disposition, with a basis resident in the competent agent, one that would in appropriately normal conditions ensure (or make highly likely) the success of any relevant performance issued by it. (Sosa 2007, 29)

S has an ability A(R/C) relative to environment E = Across the set of relevantly close worlds W where S is in C and in E, S has a high rate of success in achieving R. (Greco 2010, 77)

Some of the complications in these formulations (the reference to normal conditions, to likelihood and rates of success) I take to play the role of excluding such things as finks and masks, and therefore to be irrelevant to my purposes. My counterexamples do not rely on finks, masks or other interfering factors to which dispositions are subject.

But – and now we come to the worry – if we substitute any such verb, be it a success verb or a verb for an aimless activity, into (D2), the right-hand side becomes trivial: it merely says that one is disposed to A if A, or that one would A if one were to A. Are there such dispositions? If so, they will be trivial like the corresponding counterfactual, and everything should have them; hence everything should have the ability to hit a board, move something, or amble aimlessly; but that is absurd. Or if there are no such trivial dispositions, then it follows that nothing has such dispositions; and so nothing will have the corresponding abilities. But that, too, is absurd.

A sympathizer of (D2) may complain at this point that the point about success verbs is merely verbal, and that (D2) does not do justice to the idea we have extrapolated from Sosa. We should not use (D2) in such a way as to stick in random verbs and see what comes out. Rather, we need to think about performances and their success conditions, whatever our linguistic means for describing them. It is only apt that Sosa tends to use the term ‘competence’ rather than ‘ability’. We would not say of someone that they are competent *to do* something; rather, we describe the agent as a competent (or able) A’er. Sosa speaks of the competent archer or of someone having ‘archery competence’ (Sosa 2010, 466), not of an agent having the ability to hit the bull’s eye.

Let us, then, think of (D2) along those lines: what we plug in for ‘A’ is not this verb or that, but any kind of performance; and we say that an agent is able with regard to the performance just in case she is disposed, were she to engage in the performance at all, to meet its success standards.<sup>16</sup> The performances of doodling and ambling will still give rise to the dilemma that I have outlined. But so will a number of other performances that should count as the exercises of our simple motor abilities.

Take, for instance, the performance of raising one’s arm. This performance clearly has an aim or end: one’s arm being up. But there is no such thing as raising one’s arm without reaching that aim: if I’ve raised my arm, then my arm must be up. Of course it can be higher up or less high up; but up it must be. (Note, again, that we are not talking about any ends that we pursue with a given performance, but those which constitute the standards of success for a given performance: my raising my arm may have the end of reaching the cookie jar and fail to do so because the jar is out of reach; nevertheless it is successful *qua* raising of my arm, because my arm went up.) Thus my relevant ability – my being a competent arm-raiser, if you like – would have to be understood as a disposition to have my arm up if I raise it, i.e., to be such that if I were to raise my arm, my arm would (probably, interferences aside) be up. But *that* is true of everyone – indeed, of everything! (Or at least of everything with an arm.) Again, we face the dilemma of either attributing the relevant disposition, and hence the ability to raise one’s arm, to everything; or else of arguing that there are no dispositions corresponding to such trivial conditionals, and hence no abilities to be had by anything. Both horns of the dilemma are clearly absurd.

The same kind of consideration would seem to apply quite generally to simple motor abilities: the ability to move my eyes, bend my leg, wiggle my foot, and so on. All of these performances are such that to perform them at all is already to perform them successfully. I simply have not bent my leg if my leg is not (at least a little) bent. Thus the ability to bend my leg, by (D2), should be the disposition to bend my leg well enough if I bend it at all, which is nothing but the disposition to bend my leg if I bend my leg; and so forth. In all of these cases, (D2) will yield the verdict that the ability is trivially possessed by everything, or else that there is no such ability.

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<sup>16</sup>Compare Sosa: ‘Your archery competence corresponds to: *if you were to shoot at a target you would likely hit it.*’ (Sosa 2010, 466).

## 4 Diagnosis

A shared characteristic of the two conceptions of abilities that I have discussed is that they understand abilities in terms of a modal structure that has two ‘slots’ for content to be filled in. The modal structure itself is that of a disposition, perhaps equivalent to or at least approximated by a sufficiently qualified counterfactual conditional. The two slots are filled differently by the two views; in each case, one is filled with the performance that is the exercise of the ability in question. For the new dispositionalists, that exercise is also the manifestation of the corresponding disposition, with the stimulus condition being an attempt, or intention, to do it. For the virtue reliabilists (as interpreted in section 3), the ability’s exercise is the stimulus of the corresponding disposition, and its manifestation is success in performing it.

I have argued that both accounts are severely limited. The first was too restrictive about what precedes the exercises of our abilities. It therefore fails to capture creative abilities, abilities whose exercise is incompatible with trying (etc.), and abilities for the components of complex actions that we are able to perform, as well as misclassifying many exercises of our abilities. The second account failed to ensure that the manifestation for the correlated disposition is always sufficiently distinct from the performance itself and thereby fails to capture at least a great deal of our simple motor abilities. Both result in a rather gerrymandered extension of the class of dispositions that count as abilities. On the first account, we are to include abilities for complex actions but not those for their components; we are to include my ability to write this paper, but not my romantic poet’s ability to write a beautiful poem; and we are to include the ability to dance, but not the ability to dance absent-mindedly. It is hard to argue about intuitions of gerrymanderedness, but I find this result unacceptable. On the second account, we are to include skills, such as the ability to hit the bull’s eye or play the piano, as well as simple cognitive abilities, such as the ability to perceive, but we are to exclude many of our simple motor abilities. This seems a rather strange mixture of some very basic and some very sophisticated abilities, to the exclusion of some other very basic abilities.

There is, of course, some wiggle room; there almost always is. But I want to suggest that my arguments point to the conclusion that there is something not quite right with the shared structure of these characterizations: the idea of understanding abilities in terms of some dispositional or counterfactual tie with something else, be it attempt or success. We may not have exhausted the logical space available in filling this structure. But it is reasonable to expect that a dispositional account of the ability to A will involve A’ing, and there are only two places where it could feature: as the disposition’s manifestation (as in (D1)) or as its stimulus (as in (D2)). There are, moreover, few natural options for filling in the stimulus of the relevant disposition if we take A’ing as its manifestation except those that we have discussed in connection with (D1): intending, trying, and so forth. And it is hard to see what the manifestation of the relevant disposition should be if A’ing is its stimulus, other than the agent’s succeeding in her A’ing. So while I cannot strictly claim comprehensiveness, it is difficult to see what other options might be available given the dispositional structure that is shared by both (D1) and (D2).

There are alternative proposals in the literature, with different modal structures for abilities and different ways of filling in the content. Some say that abilities differ from (other) dispositions by being particularly *multi-track*: if you have an ability to do A, then you will also have abilities to do A in various ways, and to do a number of things similar to A. Some say that abilities differ from (all) dispositions by being *two-way*: if you have an ability to do A, then you also have an ability not to do it, or at least to do it differently (Steward 2012; note that the last qualification

moves the two-way thesis close to the multi-track claim). And according to Maier (2015), to have an ability to A is to have the *option* of A'ing in a sufficient proportion of possible worlds.<sup>17</sup>

To be sure, these views – at least as I have briefly presented them – need some fleshing out, in particular if we are to either avoid or make palatable the apparent circularity of my formulations. But they promise a less limiting view of abilities, in that they do not require a modal tie between the ability's exercise and something else, where that 'something else', as we have seen above, may well be lacking in some abilities or trivially present in others.

I do not deny that there are options available to the proponent of the particular kind of modal structure that I have pointed out as common between the new dispositionalism and the virtue reliabilists. They may say that our notion of an ability is not susceptible to a single unified analysis; that, rather, what we need is a disjunction of the *definienda* in (D1) and (D2) (and maybe some others to throw in for good measure); or, similarly, that terms such as 'ability' are polysemous between a number of largely overlapping meanings, of which (D1) and (D2) specify two. I have no argument against such a view. But I would like to point out its consequences. When appealing to abilities, philosophers tend to start with some everyday example such as the ability to play the piano or to hit the bull's eye with an arrow. They then point out some general points about those abilities, and go on to transfer those general points onto the more difficult but philosophically more interesting cases that they are interested in: the ability to make choices for reasons (Vihvelin 2004) or to act otherwise than one did (Fara 2008), or the cognitive abilities relevant for virtue epistemology. But this direct projection is illicit if there is no one characterization that covers all abilities. We must have some independent reason for thinking that our preferred characterization of, say, the ability to play the piano applies to the cases that are of interest in the respective philosophical debate. But often that is precisely what is at issue. Thus an incompatibilist might accept the New Dispositionalist's analysis of the ability to play the piano but point out that, since the characterization does not apply to all abilities alike, she still has no reason to believe that it applies to the abilities at issue in the debate about free will. And likewise for other uses of one or another of the dispositional accounts of abilities: it will not do to accept one characterization based on some cases and then just apply it to others. The inductive basis is skewed if the disjunctive view or the polysemy claim is correct.

I said in section 1 that the question 'what is it to have an ability?' is philosophically interesting in its own right. I have argued that two prevalent answers to it fail. I have not made any recommendation as to how that question is to be answered. But I hope to have shown that it is not a question that should be presumed answered by a hand-waving sentence or two. It is a difficult question that deserves serious attention and our best efforts at answering it.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Jaster (2016) develops a view that combines features of both (D1) and (D2) but is not clearly dispositional.

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