

CHAPTER VI.

ACTIONS, OMISSIONS, AND MERE HAPPENINGS

Chapters III-V have delineated the concept of practical task-responsibility. The present chapter will discharge the main task of the dissertation and show how to distinguish between actions and non-actions (mere happenings). My main aim, in other words, is to answer Wittgenstein's question: What is the difference between my raising my arm and my arm rising?

I begin with a preview of the answer (section 1). In particular, I shall contrast my approach to the most popular, intentionalist, approach to the question. (In Appendix B, I explain why someone committed to giving an account of action as conduct should reject the intentionalist view.) Section 2 distinguishes two senses of the question "What has an agent done?". Section 3 gives an account of the answers to the first sense of the question. Section 4 gives an account of the answers to the second sense of the question, thereby grounding the distinction between actions and mere happenings. In section 5, I show how the account handles one type of wayward causal chains problems.

1. A Preview

It may help the reader to be given an introduction to the purpose of the present chapter in relation to one aspect of the Anscombe-Davidson intentionalist account.¹ I will focus on Davidson's view. One of the virtues of his account is that it sharply

¹ Though many philosophers hold the view, two deserve special mention: G.E.M. Anscombe, *Intention* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1957); Donald Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980). I should point out that what I mean by 'intentionalism' is captured by (I) below.

distinguishes between actions, understood as particular events, and action descriptions under which actions may be intentional or not. On Davidson's view, an action can be intentional only relative to a description. He follows Anscombe in thinking that actions are intentional under at least one description.

- (I) An event is an action if and only if it is intentional under some description.

But an action (intentional under some description) can be described in a multitude of other ways. As long as the descriptions are true of the action, they specify something the agent did. In a slogan, an action is intentional under some description and an action under all of them.

- (D) For any description d , if it is a description of an event that is an action, it specifies something the agent did (intentionally or unintentionally).

On this account, the notion of "doing something" is purely extensional, in contrast to the concepts of doing something intentionally or of doing something unintentionally, which are sensitive to descriptions.

(I) allows us to capture the distinction between actions and mere happenings. Mere happenings are events that are not intentional under any description. When a spasm makes an arm twist as a result of which a cup of tea falls, the event is not intentional under any description. There is nothing the agent was doing intentionally. By contrast, when the agent reaches for some sugar and knocks a cup of tea on the way, the agent did something. He did something because he did something intentionally: he intentionally reached for some sugar. But he also *did* knock a cup of tea, though not intentionally. And indeed there are countless many things the agent did. As Davidson notes, we frequently describe actions in terms of their consequences. If the falling cup of tea caused the carpet to be ruined, which caused the hostess to be upset, then we can describe

There are of course enormous differences in how the notion of being intentional under a description is understood. There are causal and non-causal interpretations of the concept.

the action as upsetting the hostess. Upsetting the hostess is also something the agent did. Indeed, any description of the action is a specification of something the agent did.

I will argue that there is a group of intuitions according to which we do not uniformly allow just any description of an action to be a specification of something the agent *did*. This is not tantamount to suggesting that actions are not particulars. Rather it can be taken to show that besides the intensional notions of “doing something intentionally” and “doing something unintentionally,” there is also the notion of “doing something” that is sensitive to description. I shall argue for the intuitive plausibility of this claim in section 2, where we will see, for instance, that when actions are described in terms of very long-term or accidental consequences, there is a sense of the judgment that the agent *did* it, that we are prepared to withhold. (I will not argue that it is illegitimate to say that the agent did it, but only that it is illegitimate in one sense of the notion.) I will distinguish what an agent *did* (the narrower sense of ‘do’) from what the agent *happened to do* (corresponding to the remainder of the wider sense of ‘do’).

In other words, I shall reject (D). Some descriptions of an action specify what the agent did, others specify what the agent merely happened to do. The object of section 3 is to argue that this distinction can be captured in terms of the concept of reasonableness_A.

- (a) If performance p pf-fulfills the expectation of α that $\alpha \varphi$, then $\alpha \varphi$ ed (i.e. φ ing is something he did, not something he happened to do) just in case it was reasonable_A to expect of α that $\alpha \varphi$.
- (h) If performance p pf-fulfills the expectation of α that $\alpha \varphi$, then α happened to φ (i.e. φ ing is something he happened to do, but not something he did) just in case it was unreasonable_A to expect of α that $\alpha \varphi$.

The distinction between what the agent did and what the agent happened to do is a distinction at the level of action descriptions, it is not a distinction between events that are actions and events that are mere happenings. In section 4, I will show how to use the narrower notion of doing something to give an account of the distinction. I shall argue that:

(H) A performance p is a mere happening if and only if for every ϕ such that p pf-fulfills the expectation of α that $\alpha \phi$, it was unreasonable_A to expect of the agent that she ϕ .

(A) A performance p is an action if and only if for some ϕ such that p pf-fulfills the expectation of α that $\alpha \phi$, it was reasonable_A to expect of the agent that she ϕ .

(A) bears a striking resemblance to (I), except that the notion of being intentional under a description is replaced by the notion of doing something (not merely happening to do something) under a description.

I should note that I do not undertake the task of explaining the notion of being intentional under a description. The concept has turned out to be very hard to capture. An approach to answering the Wittgensteinian challenge (what is the distinction between an action and a mere happening) that does not appeal to the idea of being intentional under a description might, for that reason, be welcome.

2. What Has Been Done: Two Senses of the Question

The question “What has been done?”, in contrast to the question “What has been done intentionally?”, has not been given too much attention in the literature. It is generally, though not universally, assumed that the question admits of a rather straightforward answer. The answer to the question is given by giving a true description of the agent’s action.² To give a true description of the event that is the agent’s action, is indeed to answer the question “What has the agent done?” in one sense. But there is a

² The adherents to this view include: Donald Davidson, “Agency,” in *Essays on Actions and Events*, *op. cit.*, pp. 43-61; Jennifer Hornsby, *Actions* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980). Dissenters fall into two categories: those who think that either there are limits on the descriptions that could be legitimately given in answer to the question or who think that there are two senses of the question. See e.g. John R. Searle, *Intentionality. An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Gilbert Harman, “Practical Reasoning,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 29 (1976), 431-463. And there are those who think that the only answer to the question what has been done is given by the stricter interpretation of the question. Nuel Belnap, Michael Perloff, “Seeing to It that: A Canonical Form for Agentives,” in (eds.) H.E. Kyburg, Jr., R.P. Loui, G.N. Carlson, *Knowledge Representation and Defeasible Reasoning* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1990), pp. 175-199. Nuel Belnap, “Before Refraining Concepts for

narrower sense of the question as well. We shall see that our intuitions indeed pull in two different directions using three kinds of examples: descriptions in terms of consequences, microscopic descriptions and negative descriptions of actions.

Suppose that a person has *won* a lottery. Should we say that this is something he *did*? On some of our intuitions winning a lottery is *not* the sort of thing we can do, it is more or less an accidental event, over which we have little control. Of course, if our control were to be increased (for instance, by rigging the lottery mechanism or buying all tickets), we could describe winning the lottery as an action of the agent, as something the agent has done in a stronger sense.³

And yet, there is a weaker sense in which it would be unobjectionable to say that what the agent did was win the lottery. One might want to argue that the agent did after all buy a ticket and that led to the unlikely consequence of his winning the lottery. But he bought the winning ticket; and to buy a winning ticket in this case is to win the lottery. To say that he won the lottery is to describe something he did, viz. his action of buying the ticket.

But the same bifurcation of intuitions arises in general for descriptions in terms of consequences provided they are long-term or accidental enough. While we may describe actions in terms of their effects (where the idea of an effect is rather liberal as it is in the case of winning a lottery⁴), we are rather picky about the sorts of effects in terms of which we choose to describe actions. There is a sense in which any one of our actions causally contributes to some distant or unlikely event. Suppose that you have swapped theater seats with some man. Unbeknownst to you the man was sitting just behind his wife. The seats turned out to be rather uncomfortable, you have very long legs and there is not much space for them anyway. As a result of your almost constant rearranging, you kick your neighbor's wife a lot. She happened to be on the verge of a breakdown, and

Agency," *Erkenntnis* 34 (1991), 137-169. Annette Baier, "The Search for Basic Actions," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 8 (1971), 161-170.

³ This example is Harman's, though he describes it in terms of the agent not having won the lottery intentionally (despite trying and succeeding). See G. Harman, "Practical Reasoning," *op. cit.*, p. 433.

⁴ To say that an event *c* is a cause of some event *e* is to say that it contributed to the occurrence of *e*, but it is not to say anything about how many other events must have contributed for *e* to occur or even whether *e* would have occurred without *c* (because of overdetermination).

your pounding of her seat was the last straw. When she and her husband go home she erupts. As a result of the fight, her husband does not get a wink of sleep, despite the fact that he has an important business meeting early in the morning. Tired and exhausted, he does a terrible job at the meeting and loses his job. If we ask for a list of things you did that evening, should we include among the things you did the fact that you cost him his job? (If the reader's intuitions are still positive, one can obviously go further in the chain of effects.)

Once again, it seems, we could be convinced that such a description indeed specifies something you have done. But this involves weakening our intuitive standards significantly. To say this is not to say that answering the question in this weaker way is illegitimate. Such a weakening of our standards does get a grip on some of our intuitions. But it is also important to recognize that it violates some others. One explanation of what happens is that there are simply two senses of question "What has the agent *done*?"

Consider yet another group of examples which support this conclusion. Ordinarily, we would not include among the things you have done when you raised your arm the fact that you have thrashed some air molecules about. In fact, it may be that you thrashed some particular air molecule off its course by a certain distance. Is this something that we would include in our answer to the question what you have done? Again, the answer depends on how we interpret the question. There is a weaker sense of the question, in which it is something you have done. After all, you raised your arm and your raising your arm was, on this occasion, identical to your moving the air molecule off its course. But there is a stronger sense of the question, in which this cannot be said to be something *you* have *done*. And not just because the description was not available to you. If you were given sophisticated equipment to mark out the path of that particular molecule, still we would not count you as having *done* this. Our disposition would change, however, if somehow you acquired a skill of changing the path of the molecule, if changing the path of that molecule in a particular sort of way was "within your control." So, once again, it is reasonable to suppose that the question has two senses.

Another class of cases involves negative descriptions. We select the things the agent has not done (in the narrower sense) from among the things the agent has not done (in the wider sense). As Vermazen has warned:

Certainly we don't want to say that a person is not- ψ -ing⁵ just in case he is not ψ -ing. ...It won't help much to add the rider "if the agent is doing something" to this last, since the agent will then be doing far too many negative acts: Andy, as he sits twisting his buttons, would also be not-sweeping the table clear of canapés, not-preparing for a Channel swim, not-attempting to cross the Sino-Soviet border, and so on.⁶

With respect to negative descriptions, then, once again, it seems that we do exercise some discretion with respect to those descriptions that we would give in answer to the stricter sense of the question "What did the agent do?" and those that we would not.

Speaking of the narrower and the wider sense of 'do' is awkward. Let me stipulate a better way of putting the distinction. When an agent did something in the narrower sense of 'do' I shall simply say that that the agent did it. Occasionally, I will add disambiguating clauses like 'rather than happened to do it' or '(in the narrower sense)'. When an agent did something in the wider sense of 'do' but not in the narrower sense of 'do', I shall say that the agent happened to do it. Henceforth:

'The agent ϕ ed' stands for 'The agent ϕ ed (in the narrower sense)',

'The agent happened to ϕ ' stands for 'The agent ϕ ed (in the wider sense) but did not ϕ (in the narrower sense)'.

Although I do believe that the terminology is suggestive and has some intuitive base, it is quite sufficient if it is simply understood by the reader as a terminological convention. Thus, I will say that winning the lottery is something the agent happened to do rather than something he did; that dislocating some particular air molecule off its course by a certain distance is something the agent happened to do; that not preparing for a Channel swim is something Andy, twisting his buttons, only happened to do.

In sum, these examples suggest that two kinds of intuitions are available to us. First, in each case, it seems intuitively plausible to give a narrower list of actions in answer to the question, "What has the agent done?" Those intuitions support a narrower interpretation of the question. Second, in each case, however, the appeal to the simplicity

⁵ Vermazen adopts the convention of inserting a hyphen between 'not' and the action-verb in order to mark that the description specifies a negative action.

of something like a Davidsonian picture does seem to release another group of intuitions that support the wider interpretation of the question. I do not claim that the cases cited are the only kinds of cases where the divide becomes apparent. Nor do I believe that it is evident that our intuitions split uniformly. All that can be claimed at this point is that the examples and the intuitions they spark do not render implausible the hypothesis that there are two senses of ‘do’ or of ‘the agent did something’.

Before closing and going on to attempt to capture the narrower sense of ‘doing’, let us consider another possible understanding of the situation. One might claim that the suggestion that there are two senses of ‘do’ is mistaken. The only sense of ‘do’ we have is the wider one, the alleged narrower sense of ‘do’ is merely a result of various pragmatic restrictions to which we succumb. One argument that might support such a position is that we do not have a clear understanding of the alleged narrower sense of ‘do’ while we do have an understanding of the wider sense. In what follows, I shall show that we can obtain an understanding of what it is to do something in the narrower sense by appealing to what it would be reasonable_A to expect of an agent.

3. What Has Been Done?

One philosopher who has advanced a view based on similar intuitions is Annette Baier. I briefly discuss her view in section A. Section B shows how to cast these thoughts in terms of the concept of reasonable_A expectations. Section C considers an objection to the proposal, while D applies the apparatus to a problem.

A. Doings and Tasks

Annette Baier is concerned with specifying the things we do when we perform an action. She agrees with Anscombe and Davidson that whenever there is an action there is some description of it under which it is intentional. Given that this is so,

⁶ Bruce Vermazen, “Negative Acts,” in (eds.) Bruce Vermazen, Merrill B. Hintikka, *Essays on Davidson* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), p. 96.

the next problem comes when we attempt to decide which of the many things the agent does during the intentional action are also to count as actions, intentional or unintentional.⁷

It should be clear that Baier thereby attempts to give an answer to the narrower question. After all, the answer to the wider question is immediate: any description of the event that is the agent's action is something the agent does.

Baier proceeds to suggest that what actions the agent performs (what the agent does in the narrower sense) ought to be construed in terms of the tasks the agent could be thought to accomplish:

we [can] define action as anything we do ... and can be known to have done, which might be the correct response to an order, instruction, or task-specification, usually a self-imposed one.⁸

The crucial feature of the performance of a task in contrast to merely purposive behavior is the fact that in performing a task, one's performance is subject to "public standards of success or correctness."⁹

Tasks are subject to what Baier calls a double monitorability requirement. We do not set tasks whose performance we could not check. Nor do we set tasks whose performance cannot be checked by the agent. She argues that "what counts as an action will ... be relative to the normal capability for monitoring."¹⁰ If an agent's capacity for monitoring is larger than normal, she will be able to perform more tasks. For instance, if the agent is able to tell when she fired a particular neuron, then "it will be for [her] an action, but since this capability is not generally shared, it will not... be an action whoever does it."¹¹ However, if the agent's capacity for monitoring is smaller than normal, this will not mean that she performs only those tasks that she is able to monitor, though it may mean that it will narrow the tasks that the agent is able to perform intentionally.

While monitorability is indeed built into the concept of a task, more seems to be at work than just monitorability. It seems that something like the idea of it being "within

⁷ A. Baier, "The Search for Basic Actions," *op. cit.*, p. 163.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

the agent's power" to do something, or of it being reasonable_A to expect the agent to carry out the task, is at least as close to the idea of a task. After all, we would generally consider it to be inappropriate to assign someone a task that we know he cannot accomplish, the accomplishment of which he could nonetheless monitor.¹²

Baier's account already allows us to exclude the microscopic descriptions of an agent's action from specifying things the agent did. They will be excluded because we usually do not have ways of monitoring our activity at a microscopic level. But descriptions in terms of long-range and accidental consequences are no longer as easily excluded. The result of a lottery can surely be monitored by others and by oneself. The same applies to other consequences of one's actions.

This is not to suggest that the concept of a task as understood by Baier does not narrow down the truly wide concept of "doing" or that it does not capture some distinct intuitions pertaining to such a narrowing. All that I mean to suggest is that it does not quite suffice for the task at hand, to narrow the concept of action so as to at any rate exclude the cases mentioned in section 2.

We can extend Annette Baier's suggestion to understand the narrower sense of 'doing' in terms of the tasks that the agent accomplishes. We can do so by exploiting the connection between the idea of a task and the idea of normative expectations, which as I argued in Chapter III ground the notion of practical task-responsibility. More precisely, I will suggest that the narrower sense of 'doing' applies to those performances of an agent that it would be (at least) reasonable_A to expect of him.

B. What Would Be Reasonably_A Expected of the Agent?

The narrower sense of the concept of doing can be fruitfully captured in terms of what it would be reasonable_A to expect of the agent. If an expectation of an agent to perform an action under a description would be unreasonable_A (if it is not "within the

¹² The reason why for A. Baier the idea of monitorability stands out in the way in which the idea of it being within the agent's power does not is not only the fact that the latter is rather vague and ambiguous but also the fact that she asks the question "What has the agent done?" only after it is settled that there is something the agent has done intentionally. So, in general, it may seem that since what the agent has done intentionally will have been in the agent's power to do, any task that has been thus accomplished will have been in the agent's power to do also.

agent's power" to perform the expected action), the agent cannot be said to have performed the action under that description. If the expectation is nonetheless fulfilled, it is fulfilled but accidentally: the agent can only be said to have happened to do it. But as long as it is reasonable_A to expect of the agent that he perform the action under a description (as long as it is "within his power") then it is appropriate to say that he performed (rather than happened to perform) the action under that description.

- (a) If performance p pf-fulfills the expectation of α that $\alpha \phi$, then $\alpha \phi$ ed (i.e. ϕ ing is something he did not just something he happened to do) just in case it was reasonable_A to expect of α that $\alpha \phi$.
- (h) If performance p pf-fulfills the expectation of α that $\alpha \phi$, then α happened to ϕ (i.e. ϕ ing is something he happened to do, but not something he did) just in case it was unreasonable_A to expect of α that $\alpha \phi$.

Let me remind the reader of two points. First, the characterizations use the construct of *it* being reasonable_A to expect something of the agent. To say that it would be reasonable_A to expect something of an agent α is not to imply that some person actually does hold α to this expectation. Rather it is to say that there is some person (possibly α herself) who is such that if she held α to the expectation, the expectation would be reasonable_A. In this way, our judgments as to what has been done are not contingent on others' (or the agent's) holding the agent to an expectation. This coincides with the intuition that what the agent does is not determined by a contingent fact about another person's (or the agent's own) attitude toward the agent. Second, to say that it is reasonable_A to expect something of an agent is to say either that no defeating condition occurred or that a defeating condition did occur but was either countered by a counterdefeating condition (special skill) or defeated because it was reasonable_A to expect of the agent that he prevent the defeating condition from occurring.

Let me now demonstrate that (a)-(h) do indeed narrow down the concept of doing so as to exclude the unwelcome descriptions: microscopic descriptions, descriptions in terms of long-term accidental consequences, and some negative descriptions.

An agent raises his arm to vote for a motion thereby changing the path of a particular water molecule. Is his changing the path of the water molecule something he did or something that he happened to do? In order to see that it is something that he happened to do, we need to ask the question whether it would be reasonable_A to expect of the agent that he change the path of the water molecule. It seems intuitively clear that such an expectation would be prima facie unreasonable_A. We generally lack the competence to change the paths of water molecules. Agents held to the expectation to change the path of the water molecule in a particular way would systematically frustrate it. Such an expectation is prima facie unreasonable_A and it is not countered by a counterdefeating condition.¹³ It would be countered by such a condition if the agent acquired a skill to reliably change the path of the water molecule. Then it would be reasonable_A to expect of him that he change the path of the water molecule in a particular way, and his doing so would be something he did rather than something he happened to do.

The same would apply if one expected of the agent that he perform the voting motion under its complete microscopic description. For since a voting motion can be realized under a multitude of different microscopic descriptions (as well as macroscopic ones), the expectation that the agent move his arm in such a way as to satisfy a particular microscopic description would be systematically frustrated. Suppose, however, that instead of the complete microscopic description of a particular voting motion we consider a disjunction of complete microscopic descriptions of all possible voting motions. It is arguable that such a description is more than science fiction, but let us grant that it is possible. In this case, it would be reasonable_A to expect of the agent that he perform the action under this extraordinary microscopic description. But this is not in any way objectionable. There is nothing about microscopic descriptions per se that makes them the unlikely candidates for the lists of things we do (in the narrower sense of 'do'). I have already noted that if the agent possessed a special (albeit peculiar) skill to change

¹³ For simplicity of the overall characterization of reasonableness_A, I have suggested that prima facie unreasonableness_A be construed in terms of the presence of a tautological defeating condition (see Chapter V, footnote 11, p. 105). In such a case, the expectation can also not be defeated: it is unreasonable_A to expect of the agent that he prevent *p* or not-*p* from occurring.

the path of the water molecule reliably, there should be no quarrel with our thinking that it is reasonable_A to expect this (under the microscopic description) of that particular agent. His special skill would counterdefeat the prima facie unreasonableness_A of such an expectation. What explains our intuitive unwillingness to include such descriptions among things done is our general unreliability with respect to most of them. It would be inappropriate, however, to insist that the scientist who by means of his sophisticated (and reliable) apparatus arranges a particular molecule in a particular way only happened to arrange it in this way.

In a similar fashion, we can exclude unwelcome descriptions in terms of long-term or accidental consequences from counting as things the agent did (in the narrower sense). The expectation to win the lottery is prima facie unreasonable_A. Agents held to such an expectation would systematically frustrate it. The same conclusion can be reached if we think of winning a lottery explicitly as a consequence of the action of buying a ticket. For our limited purposes, let me propose a plausible principle concerning the conditions under which it would be reasonable_A to expect of the agent that he ψ , where ψ ing is a consequence of his ϕ ing.¹⁴ Roughly, it is reasonable_A to expect of α that $\alpha \psi$, if it is reasonable_A to expect of α that $\alpha \phi$ and it is reasonable* to believe¹⁵ that α will ψ if $\alpha \phi$.¹⁶ So in the case of the lottery, given that it is reasonable_A to expect of the

¹⁴ I do not offer an account of consequences of action in the dissertation. This is not a trivial enterprise and I only want to signal one of many difficulties here. It may very well be that though by all counts it is within an agent's power to bring about a consequence, as a matter of fact she brings it about by an extremely unlikely chain of events. Suppose that John is a master golf-player. He is almost 100% reliable in striking the hole from 50 feet distance. (In view of his ability, it would be reasonable_A to expect of him that he strike the hole from the distance of 50 feet.) As it happens, he hits the ball, which bounces off three trees before it luckily lands in the hole. In view of the circumstances (in particular, the ball's hitting the trees), it would seem quite unreasonable_A to expect of John that he strike the hole. I think we are inclined to think that it is the second judgment that we should go by. And I think that there are good reasons for this, for the ball's hitting the trees functions here in a way that is similar to a defeating condition. However, it would take a more systematic consideration of consequences to assert the claim with any justification. I leave this as a post-dissertation endeavor.

¹⁵ What is involved here is a predictive expectation (I dispense with the terminology for simplicity). Note also that I have in no way characterized the sense of reasonableness* with respect to beliefs. I will simply rely on the reader's intuitions. It is clear, however, that it is a different notion than either reasonableness_A or reasonableness_N. The asterisk is a reminder that a completely different concept is in play here.

¹⁶ This reminds one of the appeal to the notion of foreseeability common in the literature. See, e.g. Gilbert Harman, *Change in View. Principles of Reasoning* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1986); Michael E. Bratman, *Intention, Plans, and Practical Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987).

agent that he buy a ticket, it will be reasonable_A to expect of him that he win the lottery only if it is reasonable* to believe that when he buys the ticket he will win the lottery. Given the probabilities involved, it would be quite unreasonable* to believe that the agent will win the lottery.

The same reasoning can be repeated for accidental or very long-term consequences of the agent's actions, as long as it is unreasonable* to believe that they will occur given that the agent performs the action. Thus, when one causes a person to lose his job (because one has been kicking the seat of that person's wife in the cinema, which turned out to be the final straw that caused her to break down, thus preventing her husband from preparing for an important meeting, as a result of which he lost his job), it is not something one has done but only something one has happened to do. It would be unreasonable_A to expect of one that one bring it about that he loses his job, for it would be unreasonable* to expect (believe) that one would cause him to lose a job if one kicks his wife's seat in the movies.

Finally, many unwelcome negative descriptions will be also excluded from counting as descriptions of what the agent did in the narrower sense. Consider Vermazen's example. Andy sits in the doctor's office twisting his buttons. He thereby does not sweep the table clear of canapés, does not prepare for a Channel swim, does not attempt to cross the Sino-Soviet border. Given that there are no canapés in the doctor's office, it would be unreasonable_A to expect of Andy that he not clear the table of them (the expectation would be systematically frustrated). Given that Andy is in the doctor's office, it would be unreasonable_A to expect of him that he prepare for a Channel swim (unless perhaps, the doctor's office was rather close to the Channel). For a similar reason, it would be unreasonable_A to expect of him that he not attempt to cross the Sino-Soviet border.

However, this will leave a lot of negative descriptions still eligible as descriptions of what the agent is doing. For example, there are a lot of things that it may be reasonable_A to expect of a president delivering a victory speech. It may be reasonable_A to expect him to repeat his electoral promises. But it may be equally reasonable_A to expect him to turn around every three minutes during the speech. To capture the sense in which more agency is involved in the president's *not* repeating his electoral promises in the

victory speech than in the president's not turning around every three minutes, we need to appeal to the concept of reasonableness_N. It is reasonable_N (as well as reasonable_A) to expect of the president that he repeat the electoral promise while it is not reasonable_N to expect of the president that he turn around every three minutes. In general, the concept of reasonableness_N may be helpful in arranging the descriptions of what the agent did in the order of their significance.

Although the concept of reasonableness_A of expectations does allow us to restrict many of the negative descriptions from counting as part of what the agent did, it still leaves a lot of negative descriptions. As I am typing these words, it would be reasonable_A to expect of me that I drink my tea, that I make some coffee, that I have a banana, that I knock at the table a couple of times, that I walk about the room, etc. Since I am not doing any of those things, my not doing them will count as something I *did* rather than happened to do. Yet, on most of our intuitions, my not drinking tea, not making coffee, not having a banana, not knocking at the table, not walking about the room, not taking a walk are simply insignificant. On the view proposed here, we can understand our hesitation by employing something like the concept of reasonableness_N. The reason why these negative descriptions seem unfit to be listed as among the things the agent has done is the fact that it would not be particularly reasonable_N to expect them of the agent on a particular occasion. If that were to change, however, our assessment concerning the value of their being included would change as well. Thus, if it was reasonable_N to expect of me that I drink the tea, perhaps because my mother made it and she takes great pride in her tea and not drinking it would be an offense to her, then my not drinking the tea would be a description that would be worth listing among the descriptions of things I did. Or, if it were reasonable_N to expect of me that I not walk about the room because it disturbs the neighbor downstairs who is very ill, then again my not walking about the room would be worth mentioning as among the things I did. The reason why we might shrink at the thought that I did (in the narrower sense) so many negative things does not have to do with the fact that I did *do* them, but rather with the

fact that although I did do them they were not significant enough to be listed in most circumstances.¹⁷

The fact that we impose additional criteria on descriptions of actions worth being listed is not limited to negative actions. As I am typing, I am trying to finish my dissertation, I am moving my fingers in a particular way, I am leaning forward, I am arching my back, I am looking at the computer screen, I am leaning my head a little, etc. These are some of the things that I am doing that it would be reasonable_A to expect of me that I do, and it would seem a waste to include any or most of them in the journal of my daily accomplishments. Once again, we seem to subject the descriptions to another normative standard (such as reasonableness_N), which allows us to single out the most important among the descriptions.

One might object at this point that the fact that the narrower concept of “doing” does not sufficiently narrow the descriptions jeopardizes the argument for drawing the distinction between the narrower and the wider concept of “do”. For our argument for drawing the distinction relied on the fact that we had two sets of intuitions. Some of our intuitions would dictate that we withdraw the judgment that the agent did something, while others would dictate that we uphold that judgment. I have then argued that we can capture those intuitions suggesting the narrower sense of ‘do’ by thinking about what it would be reasonable_A to expect of the agent. Now, however, I am claiming that although there exists a further set of intuitions that in certain circumstances would lead us to narrow the application of the concept of “doing” even further (than rendered by the concept of what it would be reasonable_A to expect), this does not speak against the construal of the narrower concept of “do” in terms of what it would be reasonable_A to expect. One might worry that this is just an ad hoc maneuver.

I offer two responses. First, even if there were no reasons for thinking that there is indeed a distinction to be drawn, the concept of doing in the sense of what it would be

¹⁷ I do not want to suggest that reasonableness_N would be the only additional (beside reasonableness_A) consideration for us to include an action description as worth mentioning. In fact, it would be rather implausible to think so. A lot will depend on the pragmatic and contextual factors. Sometimes the sheer unlikelihood of a certain event will merit it special mention. (As I raised my arm to vote, I knocked down a fly I have been trying to get rid of all morning.)

reasonable_A to expect of an agent would still be useful to the extent that it will allow us to capture the distinction between actions and mere happenings. Second, however, there are reasons for thinking that the distinction should be drawn in this way. I have suggested that there are additional reasons why we might refrain from listing certain descriptions of the action as worth mentioning (viz. when it is not reasonable_N to hold the agent to the appropriate expectations). And indeed when we manipulated the cases so that it would become reasonable_N to hold the agent to the expectation, it became appropriate to mention the relevant description in listing the things the agent did. Given the fact that the issue what the agent did is related to the issue whether the agent did anything (as we will see in the next section), it would be inadvisable to settle the question what the agent did in terms of reasonableness_N of expectations, unless one was also prepared to let the question *whether* the agent did anything also be decided in terms of the standard of reasonableness_N. In view of the possibly perspectival nature of the latter concept, I think it would be highly inadvisable, unless there were additional reasons for choosing this option.

C. “He did it though it was unreasonable_A to expect it of him”

One might object that it is possible for a person to do something despite the fact that it was unreasonable_A to expect it of him. Consider an action such as breaking a world record in some sport, for instance. It seems indisputable that the expectation to break the world record is *prima facie* unreasonable_A. Yet, if the agent does break the world record, it would appear hard to deny him or her the credit of having broken the world record.

It will be true in general that the breaking of a swimming world record, say, is not something one can reasonably_A expect of just anyone. Such an expectation would be systematically frustrated. But we have also suggested that on top of our understanding of general competence, we also allow for the agent’s special abilities. In view of a swimmer’s special talents, it may be reasonable_A to expect of her that she break the world record.

To humor the objection, however, let us suppose that it is unreasonable_A to expect it of her, that she just broke her ankle, or that her talent was not so great, and yet, in spite

of this she does break the world record. While these circumstances would make any reasonable person doubt the plausibility of such an event, let us grant it for the sake of the argument. Indeed, in such a case, (h) commits us to saying that the agent's breaking the world record was not a doing of hers in the narrower sense: it is something she happened to do, not something she did. But this is not an implausible result. In view of the *extreme* unlikeness of such an event, her breaking the world record begins to resemble her winning the lottery. It would be more appropriate to say that she only *happened* to break the world record, that this is not something she has done (in the narrower sense). This is not to say that there is no description under which it was a doing of hers in the narrower sense, e.g.: 'swimming' or 'taking part in a race'.

Perhaps a better case than breaking the world record in swimming would be shooting the bull's eye. The expectation to shoot a bull's eye is *prima facie* unreasonable_A. But if the person does hit the bull's eye, is it not something he did? That will depend on among other things, whether the person is a reliable shooter.

If the person is a good reliable shooter, it may be reasonable_A to expect of him that he shoot the bull's eye (in the absence of special circumstances: something happened to his eye, he broke his fingers, etc.). In such circumstances, when he shoots the bull's eye, it is something he did. However, if a person is a bad unreliable shooter, then it will be unreasonable_A to expect of him that he shoot the bull's eye. What if he does shoot one? Then it is reasonable to conclude that his successful shot was a matter of chance, an accident, it was something that *happened* as a result of what he did (aimed and fired toward the target) rather than something that he did (in the narrower sense of 'do').

This is an intuitive result except that it is possible that this successful shot was really a beginning of a series of successful shots. It may have been that he has been training hard, and with this first successful shot he became skilled in shooting bull's eyes. From then on it would be reasonable_A to expect of him that he shoot bull's eyes. So, is it right not to count this first successful shot as something he did?

There is no reason to suppose that we need to have an answer to this question. Our sense of the concept of agency is geared toward circumstances where people are by and large reliable in fulfilling the expectations to which they are held, and by and large it does not apply in circumstances where we do not exhibit such competence. It is not clear

that we need to have any clear intuitions on what happens when we undergo a transition from one phase to the other.¹⁸

D. Butler's Problem

Let us close the discussion by showing how the apparatus developed so far helps us to make sense of the following puzzle.

If Brown in an ordinary game of dice hopes to throw a six and does so, we do not say that he threw the six intentionally. On the other hand, if Brown puts one cartridge into a six-chambered revolver, spins the chamber as he aims it at Smith and pulls the trigger hoping to kill Smith, we would say if he succeeded that he had killed Smith intentionally. How can this be so, since the probability of the desired result is the same?¹⁹

The puzzle concerns the notion of a performance being intentional under a description rather than being a doing under a description, but I shall simply assume, as is plausible, that when someone does something intentionally, he does it in the narrower sense.

The reason why we would not say that Brown threw a six is that it would be unreasonable_A to expect of Brown that he throw a six. The expectation to throw a six is prima facie unreasonable_A (if the die is fair): it would be systematically frustrated.

Would it be reasonable_A to expect of Brown that he kill Smith? The answer here depends on what exactly we take to be the content of this expectation. The expectation may be understood (a) widely, as suggested by the description of the action as a killing, and (b) narrowly, as suggested by the description of the method of killing. In case (a), the expectation will be fulfilled just in case Brown kills Smith (by any method). In case (b), the expectation will be fulfilled just in case Brown kills Smith from a randomly spun revolver with only one bullet in it with only one chance of a shot. Properly speaking, in

¹⁸ This is essentially Wittgenstein's sense of our intuitions on this matter: "Take the case of a pupil...: if he is shewn a written word, he will sometimes produce some sort of sound, and here and there it happens 'accidentally' to be roughly right. A third person hears this pupil on such an occasion and says: "He is reading." But the teacher says: "No, he isn't reading; that was just an accident." — But let us suppose that this pupil continues to react correctly to further words that are put before him. After a while the teacher says: "Now he can read!" — But what of the first word? Is the teacher to say: "I was wrong, and he *did* read it" — or: "He only began really to read later on"? — When did he begin to read? Which was the first word that he *read*? This question makes no sense here" (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (New York: Macmillan, 1958), §157).

case (b), the expectation is no longer the expectation of Brown that he kill Smith, but rather an expectation that he kill Smith in a particular way (from a particular revolver, etc.).

In asking whether it would be reasonable_A to expect of Brown that he kill Smith, we must really ask two questions. Would it be reasonable_A to hold Brown to the expectation to kill Smith by any method (case (a))? Would it be reasonable_A to hold Brown to the expectation to kill Smith by shooting the revolver with only one bullet in it, etc. (case (b))? The answer to the first question is positive (case (a)). Even if there is a low chance for Brown to kill Smith when he fires the gun once, there are a lot of other ways in which Brown can kill Smith. The answer to the second question, on the other hand, is negative. It would be unreasonable_A to expect of Brown that he kill Smith with a bullet from the gun in view of the fact that there is a one in six chance that he will do so, etc. We seem to reach the following conclusion: Brown killed Smith but he only happened to kill Smith with the revolver with one randomly located bullet with only one chance at a shot.²⁰

To the extent that the puzzle is generated in the first place, it would seem that we tend to interpret the case as case (a) rather than (b) as is suggested by the context. One reason for this might be the fact that in view of moral and legal considerations it would be inappropriate to restrict the description of the action to (b). After all, what matters for our moral and legal practices is not so much a particular esoteric way in which a person gets killed but rather the fact that a person is killed by another person. This is what distinguishes the structure of the killing from the structure of the throwing of a six. To see this, consider a similar move on the side of throwing a six. Just as there are many

¹⁹ Ronald Butler, "Report on Analysis Problem No. 16," *Analysis* 38 (1978), p. 113. The puzzle, together with a solution, first appeared in G. Harman, "Practical Reasoning," *op. cit.*

²⁰ The possibility of such bifurcation is envisaged by Harman who suggests that our judgment depends on the context in which we consider the action. "The reason why we say that the sniper intentionally kills the soldier but do not say that he intentionally shoots a bulls-eye is that we think that there is something wrong with killing and nothing wrong with shooting a bulls-eye. If the sniper is part of a group of snipers engaged in a sniping contest, they will look at things differently. From their point of view, the sniper simply makes a lucky shot when he kills the soldier and cannot be said to kill him intentionally" (Ibid., p. 434). I develop essentially this insight as a solution to the puzzle. For his own part, Harman suggests that what explains the puzzle is the moral value attached to the action of killing but not to the action of throwing dice.

more ways of killing Smith, so there are many more ways of throwing a six which would increase the chance of getting a six beyond the 1/6 chance. For instance, one can throw the die and then help it roll until it comes up six. In such a case, it would be reasonable_A to expect of a person that he throw-roll the die so that it comes up six. The problem is that such an action is not recognized as throwing the die in the game of dice. Only one kind of way of throwing dice is legal in the game of dice, viz. throwing a fair die without any help.

In other words, the puzzle arises because the game of dice and our moral-legal practice recognize the respective actions in different ways. While what counts as throwing a die in the game of dice is restricted in a way that fixes the low probability, what counts as a killing in our moral-legal practice is not restricted to the case that fixes the low probability. Accordingly, we judge that the die was thrown by chance (taking account of the low probability), but that the person was not killed by chance (not taking account of the low probability).

4. Actions and Mere Happenings

Thus far, I have suggested that there are reasons for developing a concept of doing that would be sensitive to the way an action is described. I have argued that we can find some support for postulating a distinction between what an agent happened to do and what she did. I have further argued that many of these intuitions are explained if we understand what the agent did in terms of what it would have been reasonable_A to expect of her. I will now suggest that we use the concept of doing something under a description in the way in which Anscombe and Davidson have used the concept of being intentional under a description, viz. to delimit the category of performances that are to count as actions. We can follow their recipe: an agent's performance is an action just in case there is a description under which it counts as the agent doing something (in the narrower sense). In a slogan, the agent did something (in the wider sense) if and only if he did something (in the narrower sense).

- (A) A performance p is an action if and only if for some ϕ such that p ϕ -fulfills the expectation of α that $\alpha \phi$, it was reasonable_A to expect of the agent that she ϕ .

Correlatively:

- (H) A performance p is a mere happening if and only if for every ϕ such that p pf-fulfills the expectation of α that $\alpha \phi$, it was unreasonable_A to expect of the agent that she ϕ .

I want now to show that (A)-(H) capture both unproblematic and more problematic cases of actions.

In what follows, I will assume, following Davidson, that the performances that qualify for the status of actions are bodily movements. This is a simplifying assumption on this account. I have already noted in Chapter III that a proper treatment of the concept of performance would require an account of the ontology of actions, as well as an account of the consequences of actions. Since I cannot undertake either of the tasks here, I will simply follow the trodden path.²¹

I demonstrate now that (A)-(H) cover all that is covered by the intentionalist criterion (in particular section A and part of section B). Section B then proceeds to discuss which omissions qualify as among the things the agent does. Finally, in section C, I consider defeating conditions that render performances non-agentive and those that do not. In the next section 5, I will show that the account straightforwardly excludes the cases of basic wayward causal chains from qualifying as actions.

A. Positive Actions

On the intentionalist criterion, a performance is an action just in case there is a description under which it was intentional. I show that the non-intentionalist criterion (A)-(H), allows us to capture all that is captured by the intentionalist criterion. (I consider cases of intentional omissions in section B).

²¹ The fact that the path is trodden does not mean that there are no disagreements in the vicinity. One particular debate concerns the question what exactly should count as a bodily movement. Davidson appears to think that ordinary bodily movements qualify as actions (“Agency,” *op. cit.*). His main challenger is Hornsby, who has denied that we should identify actions with bodily movements in the way we would be tempted to conceive of them (*Actions, op. cit.*). John McDowell develops a conception of agency under which Davidson’s intuitions can be defended from Hornsby’s arguments (presented during a seminar on Philosophy of Action, University of Pittsburgh, Fall 1994).

*When the Agent Acts Intentionally: Intended and Unintended (but Foreseen) Intentional Doings.*²² It is appropriate to begin with intentional performances where the agent acts on some prior intention since they have been paradigmatic to the intentionalist view. I will distinguish between intended and unintended (but merely foreseen) intentional actions.²³

Consider an example of Harman's. Albert intends to improve the appearance of his lawn by cutting the grass with a power lawn mower, realizing (though not intending) that he will thereby release some fumes into the air and irritate his neighbor who wants her lawn to look the best. Harman believes that when Albert performs the action it is appropriate to say that he intentionally improves his lawn, intentionally cuts the grass, just as he intends to do. Albert also intentionally releases fumes into the air and intentionally irritates his neighbor, albeit he does not intend to do either (he merely foresees that he will do so when he does what he intends to do).

I am not concerned to see whether the actions are indeed best construed as being intentional under all the descriptions. All I am concerned to show is that they indeed describe an action according to (A)-(H). The performance in question is Albert's walking to and fro cutting grass with the mower. Is it an action on our account? It will be as long as there is a description of the performance under which it would be reasonable_A to expect the agent to perform the action. Let us take the description 'cutting the grass with the lawn mower'. Is it reasonable_A to expect of Albert that he cut grass with the lawn mower? The answer is positive. It would be negative if Albert suffered from a temporary disability, if the lawn mower was damaged, etc. As things stand, it is reasonable_A to expect of Albert that he cut the grass. This is sufficient to show that the performance (however described) is an action of Albert's. Thus if we chose to describe

²² It should be clear that the category of intentional actions is a misnomer. On the most popular Anscombe-Davidson view, it does not single out a class of actions but rather a class of action descriptions. I employ the terms 'intentional action' and 'unintentional action' without implying thereby that we are dealing with separate classes of actions. My point is only to consider how examples of such actions would be categorized in terms of (A)-(H).

²³ There is considerable debate whether the bringing about of what the agent merely foresees but does not intend ought to be considered as something he does intentionally. For an affirmative answer, see G. Harman, *Change in View*, *op. cit.* M.E. Bratman, *Intention, Plans, and Practical Reason*, *op. cit.* For challenge, see e.g. Carlos J. Moya, *The Philosophy of Action* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990).

the performance in terms of one of the consequences, as “improving the lawn,” we could say that Albert’s improving the lawn is in this case also an action of his. For the same reason, Albert’s releasing the fumes into the air, his irritating his neighbor, but also his moving about a particular water molecule in a certain fashion, his not flying to the moon on this occasion, all describe Albert’s action.²⁴

In other words, the descriptions under which the agent intended to perform the intentional action he did perform settle it that it is reasonable_A to expect of the agent that he perform the action under those descriptions, thereby settling it that the intentional doing is indeed an action according to (A)-(H). What if we considered some of the descriptions under which the agent did not intend but merely foresaw that he will act? In other words, would it be reasonable_A to expect of Albert that he release the fumes into the air or that he irritate his neighbor? We might think that there is a defeating condition rendering such expectation unreasonable_A. Given that Albert started the (reliable) motor, the expectation to release the fumes into the air would be systematically fulfilled (and its contrary systematically frustrated). Indeed, intuitively we would think that once he started the motor, there is nothing he can do about the release of the fumes. But in this case, it is of course reasonable_A to expect of Albert that he not start the motor, so the defeating condition is defeated. A similar reasoning applies to the description ‘irritating the neighbor’. This means that in the case as it is described, even the descriptions under which the intentional action was not intended by the agent would suffice to render the performance an action according to (A)-(H).

When the Agent Acts Unintentionally. Alongside things we do intentionally, there are many things we do unintentionally. When Oedipus married Jocasta, he did not know she was his mother: he unintentionally married his mother. These cases can be handled in a

²⁴ I am simply following Davidson here in thinking that the action is a particular event, and it can be described in many however irrelevant ways. I should note that not all of the descriptions of the action count as action descriptions in the narrower sense, i.e. as specifying something Albert did rather than happened to do. It is clear that Albert’s cutting the grass and his improving the lawn is something he did (in the narrower sense) on this occasion. It is also clear given the arguments in section 3 that Albert’s moving about a particular water molecule or his not flying to the moon on this occasion do not qualify as things Albert did (in the narrower sense) even though they qualify as Albert’s doings (in the wider sense), and even if they could be foreseen.

way suggested by Davidson. Davidson's account of what it means to ϕ unintentionally is simple. It means that the agent performed an action, which can be described as ϕ ing, but that it is not intentional under that description. Since Davidson believes that an event is an action if and only if it is intentional under some description, it follows that when an agent ϕ s unintentionally, her ϕ ing is intentional under some description different from ' ϕ ing'.

In our terms, when an agent ϕ s unintentionally, there is a description of the action under which it would be reasonable_A to expect the action of the agent. In Oedipus' case, it would be reasonable_A to expect of Oedipus that he marry Jocasta, even though given Oedipus' ignorance of the identity of his mother, it would be unreasonable_A to expect him to marry his mother.²⁵ Because there is a description of Oedipus' performance under which it would be reasonable_A to expect of him that he do it (viz. that he marry Jocasta), the performance described as his unintentionally marrying his mother is an action.

Consider another example of Davidson's. He imagines someone entering a room, switching on the light, thereby unintentionally frightening a burglar who, unbeknownst to the agent, is plundering one of his rooms. Here once again, given the agent's ignorance, it would be unreasonable_A to expect of him that he frighten the burglar. However, it is still reasonable_A to expect of him that he switch on the light. Hence, the performance described as his unintentionally frightening the burglar is an action.

Spontaneous Actions. One of the virtues of the account proposed thus far is that it makes a clear division between two questions, the question of what actions are and the question of how they are explained (I address it in Chapter VII). While similar categories (normative expectations) are employed in both accounts, the account of the nature of action does not require that the agent act because of any particular normative expectation to which she holds herself or to which she is held by another. Rather our criterion is

²⁵ Ordinarily, it would be reasonable_A to expect of Oedipus that he marry his mother (we should remember that we are talking about reasonableness_A, what is within the agent's power, not about reasonableness_N, what is appropriate). Prima facie, it would be reasonable_A (though not reasonable_N) to expect of any man whose mother was alive that he marry his mother. If, however, Oedipus does not know who his mother is, it would no longer be reasonable_A to expect of him that he marry his mother. Given such an ignorance, the expectation to marry one's mother would be systematically frustrated.

counterfactual: were someone to hold the agent to an expectation, it would be reasonable_A. It is this separation that allows us to capture another category of actions, spontaneous actions, that have caused some tensions on the intentionalist accounts.

G.E.M. Anscombe has suggested that we delimit the sphere of our agency to those events to which a special sense of the question “Why?” applies. The special sense of the question is understood by the special answer that is appropriate to it, viz. an answer that gives the reason for the action. There is a class of actions to which the question applies but a special case of the typical answer is appropriate. Rather than giving a reason for an action, the answer can be “For no reason.”²⁶ For want of better terminology, let us call the actions done with no reason “spontaneous” actions. They include walking down the meadow and picking up daisies for no apparent reason, pacing the room to and fro, and so on.

Such actions are included in our characterization. When I am walking down the meadow picking up daisies for no apparent reason, it would surely be reasonable_A to expect of me that I do so. What would make it unreasonable_A to expect of me that I pick up daisies, for example, is the fact that I have a bad back-ache and cannot bend down to pick them up. But in absence of such and other debilitating circumstances, it would be reasonable_A to expect of me that I do as I do in this case.

I have already emphasized that what allows us to capture spontaneous actions is the fact that for it to be reasonable_A to expect something of an agent, the agent need not be actually held to a reasonable_A normative expectation by any one. As we said, it is quite sufficient to require only that were the agent held to the expectation, it would be reasonable_A to hold her to it. In this way, the agent can act quite spontaneously, not responding to any expectations, and her performance will count as her action. In order to capture such actions, the intentionalist needs to appeal to the notion of intention-in-

²⁶ Anscombe originally characterizes such actions as done “for no reason.” One has to be careful, however, to distinguish the force that the reason occupies. An action may be done for no reason while the agent has some reason. In such a case to say that it is done for no reason is to imply that the reason is not efficacious. On the other hand, an action may not only be done for no reason, but the agent not even have a reason to do it. And many of the cases of spontaneous actions seem to belong to the latter category. In any case, we cannot account for actions done for no reasons strictly speaking until we know what the explanatory

action. I have argued in Appendix B that there are conditions under which such an appeal is questionable.²⁷

B. Omissions

One of the virtues of the account is that it qualifies omissions, including some unintentional omissions, as actions. An omission involves a breach of an expectation to which the agent is or would be reasonably held.²⁸ The agent can breach the expectation intentionally or unintentionally, thus be committing either an intentional or an unintentional omission. I will argue that intentional omissions and many unintentional omissions qualify as actions on our account. First, however, we need to be clear about the special status of the expectation that is being breached.

Both standards of reasonableness will be involved in judging a performance to be an omission. In taking an omission to be something the agent has done rather than something that happened to her, we will take an omission to ϕ as a performance that it would have been reasonable_A to expect of the agent under the description ‘not ϕ ing’. So when Jane intentionally omits to pay the taxes, it is something she does, because it is reasonable_A to expect of her that she not pay the taxes. When Tim intentionally omits to meet a friend in the library, it is reasonable_A to expect of him that he not go to the library. In taking an omission to be an omission, in turn, we will take the performance (the not- ϕ ing) to frustrate a reasonable_N expectation. Jane’s action of not paying taxes breaches a reasonable_N expectation to pay the taxes, to which she is held by the state. Tim’s action of not going to meet his friend breaches a reasonable_N expectation on his friend’s part.

relation between actions and reasons amounts to. And this will be explained only in Chapter VII. For now, we will speak of actions done with no reasons.

²⁷ One might speculate that what distinguishes spontaneous actions from other actions is the fact that they are actions that it would be neither reasonable_N nor unreasonable_N to expect of the agent. For this is the most natural rendition in our terms of what it means to say that they are done with no apparent reason.

²⁸ This general account of omissions is presented in Steven Lee, “Omissions,” *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 16 (1978), 339-354 and in a series of articles by Patricia Smith: “Allowing, Refraining, and Failing. The Structure of Omissions,” *Philosophical Studies* 45 (1984), 57-67; “Ethics and Action Theory on Refraining: A Familiar Refrain in Two Parts,” *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 20 (1986), 3-17; “Contemplating Failure: The Importance of Unconscious Omission,” *Philosophical Studies* 59 (1990), 159-176.

Suppose John is committed to being at a meeting at 9am, but that he does not feel like going and does not go, merely watching the minutes slide by. In such a case, we would say that John intentionally omitted to go to the meeting. John's failure to go is an action. There are no special circumstances that would make it unreasonable_A to expect of him that he not go to the meeting or that he go to the meeting. It is because it is reasonable_A to expect of John that he not go to the meeting that his not going to the meeting is something he does, and hence that it is an action. It is because it is reasonable_N to expect of John that he go to the meeting, since he is committed to being there, that his not going to the meeting is an omission.

Similar reasoning applies to cases of unintentional omissions, though not all unintentional omissions will qualify as actions. Suppose Jane is committed to being at that same meeting but that she simply oversleeps. Jane's failure to come to the meeting qualifies as an omission since her performance frustrates a reasonable_N expectation that she be at the meeting. Whether Jane's not coming to the meeting will qualify as something she has done will depend on whether it was reasonable_A to expect of her that she not come. I have already argued in Chapter V that despite the fact that Jane is asleep, it would be in this case reasonable_A to expect of her that she not come to the meeting. This is because although being asleep is systematically correlated with the fulfillment of the expectation not to go the meeting and with the frustration of the expectation to go to the meeting, in a normal case it is also reasonable_A to expect of the agent that she prevent herself from oversleeping. Thus Jane's failure to come to the meeting is something she has done rather than something that she happened to do and so it is an action.

There are circumstances, where it would be unreasonable_A to expect of the agent that she prevent herself from oversleeping. This will be the case when she oversleeps as a result of being drugged or as a result of serious illness, for example. These conditions defeat the reasonableness_A of the expectation that she not oversleep. Being drugged is systematically correlated with the frustration of the expectation that the agent prevent herself from oversleeping. At the same time, it will be normally unreasonable_A to expect of the agent that she prevent herself from being drugged. Similarly, being seriously ill might be systematically correlated with the frustration of the expectation that the agent not oversleep, and it would be unreasonable_A to expect of the agent that she not fall ill.

The fact that the apparatus does not allow all unintentional omissions to qualify as actions is a virtue of the account. One of the reasons one might be wary of admitting the most straightforward cases, which we recognize as actions in holding the agents responsible for them, is that once the door is open to them, nothing can stop the others. And indeed, the intentionalist criterion of agency does not allow for such a discrimination. But using the criterion of reasonableness_A of expectations allows us to distinguish problematic from unproblematic cases.

C. Mere Happenings

Consider now examples of cases where defeating conditions occur. In some cases, the occurrence of the defeating condition results in the performance not counting as an action, in other cases it does not. Some defeating conditions render all expectations fulfilled by the performance unreasonable_A, in which case the performance is a mere happening (we may call them “global defeating conditions”). But other defeating conditions render only some expectations fulfilled by the performance unreasonable_A, in which case the performance thus described would not count as something the agent did (in the narrower sense), but it would nonetheless be an action. I briefly discuss cases where spasms and physical compulsion function as global defeating conditions. (I also show how physical compulsion differs from coercion: the former is a defeating condition, while the latter is not.) Other common global defeating conditions include: coma, various forms of handicap, physical force, hypnosis, etc. I also briefly discuss a case with a local defeating condition, which does not render the performance nonagentive.

Spasms. When a spasm causes my arm to rise, which hits the lamp causing it to break, it may appear as if I am raising my arm, as if I am breaking the lamp. My performance does not qualify as action, for none of these descriptions of the performance qualify as something I have done. In view of the fact that the spasm occurred, it was unreasonable_A to expect me to raise my arm (or indeed, not to raise it). For the same reason, it would be unreasonable_A to expect of me that I hit the lamp (or indeed, not hit it). In general, the occurrence of the spasm, makes expectations having to do with the temporary control over my arm unreasonable_A. This is why when my arm rises and breaks the lamp, the performance is not an action, but a mere happening.

Physical Compulsion. Suppose that a person is physically forced to sign a document by another. As long as the force applied is overwhelming, it would be unreasonable_A to expect of the person that she sign the document (the expectation would be systematically fulfilled and its contrary systematically frustrated). With the force in play, it is no longer “within her power” to sign the document. For the same reason, it would be unreasonable_A to expect of her that her arm move in the way involved in the signing, or that she put a dot over ‘i’. Thus her signing the document (led by another’s hand), her arm moving in a certain way, her putting a dot over ‘i’ are all specifications of what happened to her rather than of what she did. Her performance is accordingly a mere happening, not an action.

Coercion. Aside from physically forcing a person to sign a document, one might coerce her to do so. One might threaten her life if she does not sign the document. In fact, a superficial application of our account could present this as an objection. For when a coerced person does sign the document, her signing the document is an action (albeit coerced, it is something she does intentionally). And yet, it might be objected, in such a case, it would be unreasonable to expect of her that she not sign the document.²⁹

That this is a superficial application of the account becomes clear when we ask what sense of reasonableness is at stake. It seems clear that in view of the extreme danger the agent finds herself in it would be inappropriate to hold her to the expectation that might endanger her life. In other words, it is unreasonable_N (in the normative sense) to expect of her that she not comply. But the specifically normative standard of reasonableness_N does not enter into the judgment that an action has been performed. And when we ask whether it is reasonable_A to expect of her that she sign (or not sign) the document, the threat regarding the consequences of her actions does not make it

²⁹ Indeed, such an account of coercion is presented in Robert Nozick, “Coercion,” in (eds.) Sidney Morgenbesser, Patrick Suppes, Morton White, *Philosophy, Science, and Method* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1969), pp. 440-472. See also Bernard Gert, “Coercion and Freedom,” *Nomos* 14 (1972), 30-48; Patricia Greenspan, “Behavior Control and Freedom of Action,” *Philosophical Review* 87 (1978), 225-240; “Unfreedom and Responsibility,” in (ed.) Ferdinand Schoeman, *Responsibility, Character, and the Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 63-80.

unreasonable_A to expect of her that she sign the document, or indeed that she not sign it. Her performance is thus an action.

When Nature Does Not Cooperate. Finally, let us consider some examples of defeating conditions that do make it unreasonable_A to expect a performance of the agent under some description, but not under sufficiently many descriptions (i.e. all those true of the performance) to render the performance a mere happening.

Suppose that Jane is angry with Tamara and intends to finally tell her about it. When they meet, Jane begins her well-rehearsed sermon. Suddenly Tamara faints and is rushed to a doctor, making it impossible (not to mention inappropriate) for Jane to continue. As a result Jane does not tell Tamara off. Jane's failure to tell Tamara off is an action of hers but it is not something she has done under the description "not telling Tamara off." Given that Tamara faints in midway, it would be unreasonable_A to expect of Jane that she tell Tamara off (for the expectation would be systematically frustrated) as it would be unreasonable_A to expect of Jane that she not tell her off (for the expectation would be systematically fulfilled while its contrary systematically frustrated). Jane's failure to complete her sermon is something she happened to do, not something she did. But there are other descriptions of Jane's performance that qualify it as an action rather than a mere happening. The defeating condition, Tamara's fainting, does not render it unreasonable_A to expect Jane to begin her telling Tamara off, for example. Nor does it render it unreasonable_A to expect of Jane that she gesticulate as she is uttering the words. The defeating condition is in this case of a local rather than of a global nature.

5. Wayward Causal Chains

The causal theorist conjectures that only those events that are caused by mental states count as actions. What stands in the way of claiming that all events caused by mental states are actions are the cases involving so-called wayward causation. It is then incumbent upon the causalist to restrict the events caused by mental events to include only those that are actions. And various ways of doing so have been suggested.³⁰ By

³⁰ Davidson suggested that the causation has to be of the right sort and argued that we cannot explicate it more in view of the nature of the anomalous relation between the physical and the mental ("Freedom to

contrast, wayward causal chain cases do not present any additional problems for the responsibility-based accounts. Our requirements are quite sufficient to sort out the wayward cases from the normal ones. They are simply cases where otherwise reasonable_A expectations cease to be reasonable_A in view of the occurrence of a (global) defeating condition.

Before going on, let us make a distinction between two kinds of cases of wayward causal chains. First, there are cases of consequential waywardness,³¹ where although the waywardness of the causal chain interferes with a given event's being an intentional doing, it does not interfere with its being an action. The classic example is due to R. Chisholm.³² He imagines a nephew who plans to murder his uncle in order to inherit his fortune. His intention causes him to drive so recklessly on the way to carry out his plan that he runs over a pedestrian, who, unknown to him, is his uncle. This is a case where the nephew does perform an action of killing his uncle but unintentionally (the action is intentional under the description "driving the car as fast as possible" but not under the description "killing the uncle").

Act," in *Essays on Actions and Events*, *op. cit.*, pp. 63-81; C.J. Moya, *The Philosophy of Action*, *op. cit.*). Frankfurt suggested that it involves the notion of agent guidance ("The Problem of Action," in *The Importance of What We Care About* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988], pp. 69-79.). Others claimed that it involves the idea that among the causal antecedents of action are intentions that represent themselves as causing the action in question and such self-referring intentions are then not realized in the wayward cases (G. Harman, "Practical Reasoning," *op. cit.*; J.R. Searle, *Intentionality*, *op. cit.*; J. David Velleman, *Practical Reflection* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989]). On the other hand, there were attempts to give at least some account of the conditions under which the causation involved would be of the right sort. One of the most promising ways of handling deviance cases is due to Adam Morton ("Because He Thought He Had Insulted Him," *Journal of Philosophy* 72, 1975, 5-15). Morton observed that what is characteristic of intentional behavior is that it is sensitive to relevant information in appropriate ways. The deviant cases are deviant because the behavior involved in them is not appropriately responsive. So, for instance, had the nervous mountaineer realized that there was a high probability that if he loosened his hold on the rope he would be likely to fall (due to a complicated safety system), if his behavior were intentional he would not loosen his hold. However, this realization would not inhibit his losing control over his fingers. This sensitivity strategy seems to work rather well (though see John Bishop, *Natural Agency. An Essay on the Causal Theory of Action* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989]; Christopher Peacocke, *Holistic Explanation. Action, Space, Interpretation* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979]). However, its focus is on intentional action. Accordingly, the concept of action thus singled out is quite different from the one developed here. For instance, many omissions are actions that are hardly responsive to the relevant information in the required fashion. To the extent that the sensitivity strategy will work then it will work too well from our point of view.

³¹ The terminology (consequential vs. antecedential waywardness) is due to Myles Brand, *Intending and Action. Toward a Naturalized Action Theory* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1984).

Second, there are cases of basic (antecedential) waywardness where the waywardness of the chain interferes not only with the event's being intentional under an appropriate description but also with that event's being an action. Paradigmatic here is Davidson's example of a nervous mountaineer:

A climber might want to rid himself of the weight and danger of holding another man on a rope, and he might know that by loosening his hold on the rope he could rid himself of the weight and danger. This belief and want might so unnerve him as to cause him to loosen his hold, and yet it might be the case that he never *chose* to loosen his hold, nor did he do it intentionally.³³

In such a case, where the nervousness is severe enough, the agent does not perform an action. The agent's intention causes him to lose control as a result of which the intended effect happens.

We are committed here to being able to accommodate the latter cases of basic waywardness, for it is only if we are able to accommodate them that I will be able to claim that the account adequately captures the distinction between mere happenings and actions.³⁴

In general, what happens in the cases of wayward causal chains is that the intention to ϕ that normally causes ϕ ing causes some state ξ which in turn causes ϕ ing, except that because ϕ ing is mediated by ξ it is not an action. This would be easily understandable if the event ξ were a defeating condition. And indeed this is the case.

Let us recast a Davidson-like case in our terms. A mountaineer forms an expectation of himself that he rid himself of a piece of equipment. He then becomes very nervous at the thought that he might have trouble making a safe return without some of the equipment.³⁵ We know that when a person is really nervous, he might temporarily lose control over some bodily movements. His palms might sweat and objects might slide out of them. Such a person is not reliable in holding objects, making precise

³² Roderick M. Chisholm, "Freedom and Action," in (ed.) Keith Lehrer, *Freedom and Determinism* (New York: Random House, 1966), pp. 11-44.

³³ D. Davidson, "Freedom to Act," *op. cit.*, p. 79, original emphasis.

³⁴ I do not show that the account can be extended to cover the cases of consequential waywardness. Such an extension would require a systematic account of the consequences of actions.

movements, holding onto ropes. A person in this state would systematically frustrate the pair of expectations to let go and to hold on to the rope. In other words, it would be unreasonable_A to hold a very nervous person to an expectation to hold on (or let go of) the rope. At the same time, it does not seem particularly reasonable_A to expect of the agent that he not become nervous. If so then given the state the mountaineer found himself in (or caused himself to be in), his dropping the rope would not count as an action of his.

It should be noted here that the state of nervousness must have been really severe. It could not have been ordinary stage-fright for it to count as a defeating condition. It must have been severe enough to reach a state which interferes with an ordinary reliability in responding to the expectation of dropping a rope with rope dropping.

It may be worthwhile to stress why it is so easy to accommodate wayward causal chain cases on our account. This can be best seen by considering why wayward causal chains constitute a problem for the causal theory of action. The simplest (and abandoned) version of a causal theory holds that a performance is an action just in case it has been caused by a preceding mental state that justifies the action under some description. One way of diagnosing the problem with this thought is that it leaves the causal process largely out of the agent's purview: once the agent's reason or intention sparks off the causal process, it is out of her hands.³⁶ It is as if once the agent puts the process in motion, the action just happens, but the agent does not "actively" perform it. A general way to aid the problem has been to stipulate that the agent guide the process³⁷ or that the process be sensitive to the agent's reasons or to relevant information.³⁸

³⁵ Note that it is significant from the point of view of a causal theory of action that it is the very beliefs and desires that justify the mountaineer's forming the intention that cause the state of nervousness. It is but a curious feature from the present point of view.

³⁶ This is essentially Frankfurt's objection to causal theories of action developed in his "The Problem of Action," *op. cit.* Frankfurt's response is to require that the process remain under what he calls "agent guidance."

³⁷ Frankfurt, *Ibid.*

³⁸ A. Morton, "Because He Thought He Had Insulted Him," *op. cit.*; David Lewis, "Veridical Hallucination and Prosthetic Vision," in *Philosophical Papers, vol. II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 273-290.

No such additional amendments are required on our account. The demand that it would be reasonable_A to expect of the agent that he perform an action pertains to the time at which the agent performs the action. The judgment whether or not it would be reasonable_A to hold the agent to a particular expectation is sensitive to any untoward circumstances that happen up until the time when the action takes place. And it is precisely this feature that allows us to disqualify cases of wayward causal chains from counting as actions. One might try to turn this virtue into a vice, however. Here is how.

When the Agent Can No Longer Stop the Course of the Action... Consider the action of taking a step down (but any action would do). No untoward circumstances make the expectation that the agent take a step down unreasonable_A. However, just before the agent completes the action and takes the step down, it will be true that there will be a point (a stage in the performance of the action, we might call it “the point of no return”) which once it occurs makes it physiologically impossible for the agent not to take the step down. In the case of taking the step down, such a state may even be felt if one takes the step very slowly. One may feel in control of taking the step and then suddenly feel oneself leap forward. Given the occurrence of the point of no return, the expectation that the agent take a step down will be systematically fulfilled (and its contrary systematically frustrated). Hence, it would seem, the expectation would be rendered unreasonable_A. Insofar as such a point of no return will occur for all actions, the objection shows that nothing qualifies as an action on our account.

The objection fails, however. Even if in the case of every action, there is such a point of no return, which is systematically correlated with the fulfillment of a relevant expectation, it does not yet follow that it would be unreasonable_A to expect the agent to perform the action. It would be unreasonable_A to expect the agent to perform the action if it were also unreasonable_A to expect of the agent that he bring it about that the point of no return occurs. In the example just given, it is not clear that it would be unreasonable_A to expect of the agent that he bring it about that the point of no return occurs.



So, what is the difference between my raising my arm and my arm rising? I have suggested that the difference amounts to it being reasonable_A to expect of me that I raise

my arm under some description in the former case, and it being unreasonable_A to expect of me that I raise my arm under any description in the latter case.

The structure of this answer resembles the structure of the intentionalist solution of the problem of action. On that view, a performance is an action just in case there is some description under which it is intentional. On the view defended in this chapter, a performance is an action just in case there is some description under which it is something the agent has done (in the narrower sense discussed in sections 2-3). Despite this resemblance and the fact that our account captures all the cases captured by the intentionalist view, the account allows us to understand the broader notion of conduct. I have shown how even some unintentional omissions, omissions that occur while the agent is sleeping e.g., can qualify as the agent's doings. But the account is sensitive enough not to qualify all unintentional omissions as actions (if an agent's oversleeping was caused by his being drugged, his omission would not count as his action). It is also one of the virtues of the account that it excludes cases of wayward causal chains without the need for amendments (section 5). The wayward causal chain cases are simply special cases where it would be unreasonable_A to expect of an agent that she perform an action. Finally, our account appeals to normative expectations only counterfactually. It is only required that if the agent were held to a given normative expectation, such an expectation be reasonable_A. This allows us to divorce the notion of action from the arbitrary facts concerning whether someone is actually being held to the expectation by another (or indeed by himself). This is also ultimately responsible for the ease with which the account applies to spontaneous actions, actions done with no reason.

I have now completed all but one task. I have given a nonintentionalist answer to the problem of action by appealing to the concept of practical responsibility (Chapters III-V). I have shown the concept of practical responsibility to be immune to the fundamental problem (Chapters III-V). The proposed account shows how it is possible to develop a concept of action in terms of the concept of practical task-responsibility. In Chapter V, I have offered an unified account of defeating conditions, all the conditions in the presence of which we are inclined to withhold attributions of agency. One final task that remains is to try to understand the relation between reasons and actions. I proceed to do so in the final chapter.