Abstract

The paper defends a version of the view that agency is a causal power, the “causing view.” After sketching the view, and explaining how it differs from its rivals, various challenges are assessed. A family of objections says that causing change is neither necessary nor sufficient for acting. The second challenge centers on an Aristotelian thesis about the relation between an action (A’s opening a window) and the corresponding passion (the window’s being opened by A). The final objection concerns the dynamic nature of acting: the claim is that a causal view of agency cannot accommodate actions “in progress” or mere activity. I conclude that none of the objections examined presents unsurmountable problems for the causal view of agency which, at least in the version here defended, remains a highly plausible and attractive view.

1. Introduction. Concepts of Agency

The phenomenon of agency, broadly understood, raises questions in different areas of philosophy, including philosophy of mind, psychology and biology; metaphysics and epistemology; and moral, legal, social and political philosophy. Accordingly, each of these areas tends to operate more or less explicitly with different concepts of agency.

On the most general concept, agency is the capacity to cause change, to make things happen. Call this the ‘causal power’ concept of agency. That is a capacious concept as it allows for inanimate agency. Increasingly more restrictive concepts construe agency as the capacity to exercise volitional powers, or the capacity to exercise rational powers.

Human agency is mostly volitional and often guided by reasons. Even so, such agency typically consists in exercises of our causal powers, and many ontological questions about these can be assessed in isolation from complexities arising from the psychological or rational dimensions of our agency. In this paper I focus on agency as a causal power, specifically agency that is manifested in physical actions and activity. By this I mean instances of agency whose occurrence conceptually implies the occurrence of physical change, for example, walking or making a bed, which imply changes in my body and in some bedlinen, respectively. It may seem doubtful that all human agency consists in causing change. For example, sometimes our agency consists in refraining, intentionally or otherwise, from exercising our capacities to cause change, or in preventing change. Whatever the prospects for the more general claim, I shall restrict my discussion here to the weaker claim that ‘positive’ exercises of our agential powers consist in causing change. I shall also leave aside mental acts and activity, including exercises of the

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1 For this view of agency, see (von Wright, 1963), (Dretske, 1988), (Kenny 1963),(1975), (Alvarez and Hyman, 1998), (Lowe, 2007) (Mayr, 2011), (Steward, 2012a), (Alvarez, 2013), (Hyman, 2015). Some of these authors endorse a more restrictive concept of agency, e.g. (Steward, 2012a), who characterises agents as self-movers.

2 Many philosophers take intentional action, generally understood as action guided by reasons, as the paradigm of agency, for example (Brand, 1984), (Davidson, 1980), (Dennett, 1987), (Goldman, 1970), (Mele, 1992), (Hornsby, 1980), (List and Pettit, 2011), and (Sehon 2016).

3 On whether there is causation by omission, see (Alvarez and Hyman, 1998), (Alvarez, 2001), (McGrath, 2005) and (Clarke, 2014).
capacity to grasp, assess and respond to reasons which many hold to be an ‘active’ but not a causal power.4

This aim of the paper is to present and defend a version of the causal power view of agency against several objections. I first provide a general sketch of causal power views of agency, and then identify the version I endorse (and have defended in more detail elsewhere),5 distinguishing it from others in this family of views (§2). I then examine several challenges to the idea that acting is causing change. The first objection (§3) questions the connection between agency and causation. The second challenge (§4) says that all causal views of agency are inimical to an Aristotelian insight about the ‘unity’ of action and passion. Finally (§5), I turn to the relationship between acting and time, specifically focusing on the charge that a causal view of agency cannot account for actions ‘in progress’, or for mere activity. I conclude that none of these objections succeeds: the causal view of agency, at least in the version I defend here, remains a highly plausible and attractive view.

2. Causal Views of Agency and the Causing View

Any account on which to act is to exercise or manifest a causal power can be classified as a causal view of agency. But there are important differences among the family of views that come under that label. In particular, the various versions can be grouped under two main headings: ‘event-’ and ‘agent-causal’ accounts. The former are committed to the doctrine that the concept of agency can be given a reductive analysis in terms of events (and states), while the latter reject this doctrine.6

In contemporary philosophy of action, Donald Davidson is the most explicit and influential advocate of the event-causal view. Davidson characterises actions as events; more precisely an action is a bodily movement caused (in the right way) by mental events and states, which itself causes other events.7 Davidson’s events are particular, countable, unrepeatable changes that have multiple descriptions and can be given spatio-temporal location;8 and actions are a class of events.9

4 This capacity is sometimes said to make us active and in control of the related reasons-responsive phenomena, see e.g. (Raz, 2002) and (Boyle, 2009). This would fall within the scope of agency as here conceived, if it could be rightly regarded as a capacity to produce mental change.
5 (Alvarez & Hyman, 1998), and (Alvarez, 2013).
6 A reductive analysis, as understood here, explains a concept in terms of concepts that do not presuppose the analysandum. Traditional agent-causalist positions, as those in (Chisholm, 1976) and (Taylor, 1966) reject reduction only for human agency, on the basis that the distinctive human capacities for free will or self-determination cannot be reduced to event-causal relations; for recent agent-causalists views see (O’Connor, 2000) and (Lowe, 2007). Others repudiate reduction of powers generally; for discussion see, e.g. (Molnar, 2003) and (Mayr, 2011, esp. chs 6–8).
7 For Davidson all actions are intentional ‘under some description’ (1980). Al Mele (1992, 2003, et passim) is an influential exponent of a broadly Davidsonian approach.
8 There are other views of events, for example, Jaegwon Kim’s theory of events as exemplifications of properties (Kim 1966, 1976); or Jonathan Bennett’s view of events as complex tropes (Bennett, 1998) but here I shall adopt Davidson’s view.
9 Davidson writes: our language encourages us in the thought that there are [particular events], by supplying ... the full apparatus of definite and indefinite articles, sortal predicates, counting, quantification, and identity-statements (Davidson, 1980: 181).
It is true that Davidson, eventually ‘despaired’ of the prospects of providing a causal analysis of intentional action, primarily because of the problem of deviant causal chains (e.g. Davidson 1980: 79). Nonetheless, he retained the view that when we describe agents as causes of events ‘we understand this only when we can reduce it to the case of an event being a cause’:

For although we say that the agent caused the death of the victim, that is, that he killed him, this is an elliptical way of saying that some act of the agent – something he did, such as put poison in the grapefruit – caused the death of the victim (Davidson 1980: 49. My italics).

Many agent-causalists would agree with Davidson that the claim that an agent caused the death of the victim should be construed as the claim that an act of the agent – an event – caused the death of the victim. The difference between them concerns the causes of actions, which the latter say are other (mental) events while the former say is the agent herself. The causal view I shall defend differs from both these views. Like other agent-causalists, I reject Davidson’s claim that agent-causation can be analysed in terms event-causal relations. But, unlike many agent-causalists, I reject the view that actions are themselves events. In agreement with, e.g. Von Wright and others, I hold that an action is the causing of a change by an agent. I shall call this the ‘causing view’.

All these causal views allow that agents cause things other than events: they also cause processes to unfold, to continue, to change and to end; states to obtain and to cease to obtain; and objects to come into existence and to cease to exist. The difference is that, on the causing view, actions themselves are not events and so they are not events caused by either agents or events.

An example should bring out the difference between the various views just outlined. Consider my action of throwing a ball. Event-causalists hold that my action is an event, a motion of my body, which causes another event, the motion of the ball. Most agent-causalists agree with them on this but they hold that my action is caused (‘irreducibly’) by me and not, as event-causalists claim, by mental events (my reasons or intentions). On the causing view here defended, my action of throwing the ball is my causing the motion of the ball but it is not itself an event that causes the motion of the ball: the motion of the ball is caused by a motion of my arm, which I cause in moving my arm. (In section 5, this picture will be complicated by introducing processes as a category distinct from events.)

To say that actions are not events is not to deny that actions are occurrents in the sense that, unlike continuants, actions happen at particular times and in particular places. The point of the denial is to draw attention to this distinction: an event is a change in a substance, while an action is the causing of a change in one substance by another (where these could be the same substance). Are actions, understood as such causings, particular entities? To paraphrase

Davidson’s further claim that actions are events rests on his account of the logical form of action sentences. See, (Davidson, 1980b: 127ff.), where he replies to Chisholm’s criticisms. For further criticisms, see (Alvarez, 1999), (Stoecker, 1993); and, more radical, (Szabó, 2012).

Some agent-causalists hold a slightly different view: that an action is a mental act (volition, intention) that causes a bodily movement (O’Connor, 2000), or that free actions are agent-caused when agents cause their acting on some reasons (Clarke, 1993). Davidson objects, plausibly, that the claim that agents cause their actions generates a dilemma; for discussion see (Alvarez and Hyman, 1998).

Some contemporary agent-causalists find their inspiration in Thomas Reid, who held that ‘the notion of efficiency ... is a relation between the cause and the effect, similar to that which is between us and our voluntary actions’ (1788, pt. I.v.50: 6).


A referee presses the following question: When a substance causes a change, does it itself not thereby change, namely from not-causing that change to causing it? If so, an action would seem to be an event: a
Davidson on events, our language encourages us to think that they are, by supplying for them 'the full apparatus of definite and indefinite articles, sortal predicates, counting, quantification, and identity-statements'. But actions are best thought of as 'dependent particulars' – that is, particulars whose individuality, including spatio-temporal location, depends on other particulars, viz. continuants: the relevant agent and patient, and occurrences: the changes the latter undergoes in being acted upon by the former.

Let me introduce some terminology that will prove helpful in what follows. On the causing view, an action is the causing of an event, the event caused is the action’s ‘result’, and events cause by the result are the action’s ‘consequences’. The idea that actions have results and consequences is familiar from our everyday talk but here I use those terms in von Wright (1963: 39)’s semi-technical sense, in which there is a conceptual connection between an action and its result. For example, in von Wright’s sense, the result of my opening a window is the event of the window’s opening, and its consequences are effects of that event, such as a drop in the room’s temperature, someone’s consequently catching a cold, etc.. This terminology involves some regimentation of ordinary use, since we often use ‘the result’ of an action to describe states brought about – in our example, the window’s being open. But the regimentation is not a major departure from that use because the two notions of result are connected: causing the event of the window’s opening is causing a change in its state: from being closed to being open.

This brief overview of course leaves many questions unanswered – some of these will be addressed in what follows. For my purposes, it is important to note that, although all these causal views share the idea that agency is a causal notion because to act is (always or very often) to exercise a causal power, they differ in some of their ontological commitments. And these differences will prove to be important to some of the objections levelled against causal views of agency that I shall discuss.

3. Agency and Causation

The first objection questions the causing view’s claim that actions are causings of events - on various grounds. David Charles (2018), for example, argues that the causal view distorts the distinctive power we have to move our bodies. For, Charles says, I could cause my arm to rise by, say, giving myself an electric shock but that would not be raising my arm – the latter requires 'that I bring this event [my arm’s rising] about by exercising my power to raise my arm' (Charles 2018: 38).

The objection can be construed as a version of the more general claim that causing a change of type F is not sufficient for performing an action of the corresponding type – that causing something to, say, die, break, or melt in indirect or unusual ways may not amount to killing, breaking, or melting it. The issue is controversial, but also tangential to my claim that acting is... change in the substance that acts. But the change just mentioned is not the same as the substance’s causing a change – it is rather its logical concomitant. There is no reason to assume that causing a change involves the acting substance being (at some point(s)) in different states: the concept of God is of an immutable being who acts. And even if finite beings must change when they act, it seems doubtful that any change they thereby undergo is their action. I discuss this further in my ‘Active and Passive Powers’ (ms).

14 (Davidson, 1980: 181).
15 See (Alvarez and Hyman, 1998) and (Hyman, 2015, Chapter 3) for further development of these ideas.
16 For discussion and references see (Parsons, 1990: 112ff.) and (Hyman, 2015: 36ff.). (Wolff, 2003) contains evidence that speakers tend to resist using lexical causatives (‘break’) in favour of their periphrastic variants (‘cause x to break’) when causal interaction is mediated by an intervening cause.
causing change and that, consequently, for example, killing something is causing it to die. For, even if causing my arm to rise in an unusual or indirect way is not raising it, it is still acting by causing change—which is what the causing view claims.

One may complain that my response misses Charles’s point, which is the converse of the general claim—namely, that raising my arm is acting but not causing my arm to rise. Conceiving of our power to move our bodies as a causal power, the complaint goes, implies or suggests that we act on our bodies as we act on other things, i.e. as we act on ‘patients’, or that we stand to our bodies as ‘other’ and are, thus, ‘alienated’ from them. The issue merits more space than I can give it here but the nub of the matter is whether a causal view of our capacity to move our bodies is in tension with the truth that, as self-movers, we can move our bodies in a way that we cannot move anything else. I think the tension is only apparent. The capacity to move our bodies is indeed distinctive: we move everything other than our bodies by moving something else—namely our bodies; but we do not move our bodies by moving something else: we just move them. But that fact about our capacities does not imply that moving one’s body is not causing it to move—unless causing something to move requires doing something else (other than moving it) by doing which one causes its motion. And it is not obvious that it does. It is true that I would not normally describe what I do when I ‘just’ raise my arm as ‘causing it to rise’. But first, the same is true of changing other things: I wouldn’t normally describe what I do when I open a door in the usual way as ‘causing the door to open’. And second, the preference for a lexical causative, e.g. ‘raise’, ‘open’, over the periphrastic ‘cause x to’ rise or to open when describing what we do in ordinary cases can generally be explained by the associated pragmatic implicatures: using the latter would suggest that I did it in an unusual or indirect way.

A different objection says that there are instances of ‘physical’ agency where it is unclear what change, if any, is caused by the agent. For example, if Lou walks in a circle, does she cause a change? This example can be addressed by noting that if Lou walks in a circle, she causes the event of the circular motion of her body across space, as well as all the motions of her legs required for her to walk in a circle. And this strategy can be generalised. But doubts may remain: What changes, precisely, do I cause when I tie my shoelaces, eat a banana, or build a sandcastle? We don’t seem to have nominals to describe the changes I allegedly cause in each case. Again, the question is important and complex but for our purposes it should suffice to note that each case exemplifies a different ‘category of causation’, involving a change in shape, and instances of destroying and of creating something, respectively. Thus, they all involve causing changes in something: the shoelaces, the banana and the building materials, and the absence of ready-made nominals to describe them does not impugn the reality of the change I cause, and which, for example, my shoelaces undergo, when I tie them.

I shall now turn to a different objection to the causing view, which claims that the relation between action and passion implied by any causal view is problematic.

4. Action and Passion, Doings and Happenings

The concept of agency as a causal power has application wherever the concepts of substance or stuffs with causal powers have application. And different kinds of substances and stuffs are, at

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17 Versions of the objection are found in (Haddock 2005), (Hacker, 2007), (Ford, 2014) and (Charles, 2018).
18 For discussion see (Davidson, 1980b) and (Ruben, 2018: Chs 5 and 7).
19 I borrow the phrase from (Schwenkler, 2024) which contains a systematic discussion of these categories.
least partly, characterised by their causal powers: both active powers, that is, powers to cause or make certain things happen; and passive powers, that is, powers to have certain kinds of change caused by something else. It is on account of their having those powers that substances and stuffs are thought of as agents and patients, and of what they do and undergo as action and passion, respectively. This is the thought underlying the causal power view of human agency. But what exactly is the relationship between an action and the corresponding passion, when one thing, the agent changes another, the patient?

Contemporary philosophers have given different answers. As we saw in §2, a popular view is that an action is a change (a volition, a trying, a bodily movement, a combination of these) that causes a change in the patient. The causing view denies that actions cause the relevant changes in the patient, holding instead that they are causings of those changes.

But it has been argued that all causal views of agency are at odds with an important insight of Aristotle’s, namely that action and passion are ‘one and the same change’. The objection is found in different forms in Coope (2007), Ford (2014), and Charles (2018). Ford adds that this Aristotelian thesis is implicit in our ordinary thought and talk and is found in modern action theory in Elizabeth Anscombe’s formula ‘I do what happens’ (1957: 52).

Ford introduces the thesis by adverting to Aristotle’s remark that ‘the definition of action is “relative to” (ἐπί τὸ) that of passion, and visa versa, so that neither of them is intelligible except in connection with the other’ (Ford 2014: 14), examples of which are burning and cutting (action); and being burned and being cut (passion). The thought, Ford says, is also captured by Frege’s assertion that an active sentence and the corresponding passive one are logically equivalent: ‘It is the very same thing that is here capable of being true or false’.20

The quoted remarks about action and passion seem fairly uncontroversial, as does the claim that active/passive-voice sentences like ‘Smith is burning the leaves’ and ‘The leaves are being burned by Smith’ are equivalent. And it is difficult to see why a causal view of agency, whether in event- or agent-causal versions, should be incompatible with, or otherwise antithetical to these ideas.

In fact, the alleged difficulty for causal views stems from the construal of the Aristotelian-Fregean insight implicit in the objection, according to which in any ‘transaction’ (i.e. where one thing changes another), the action is itself (a) a change, and (b) the very same change that the patient undergoes. In our example above, the construal involves the claim that Smith’s action of burning the leaves is itself a change and the very same change as the leaves are undergoing while Smith is burning them, reported by the sentence ‘The leaves are burning’.

One may think that putting it this way misses the point, which is that ‘Smith is burning the leaves’ and ‘The leaves are being burned by Smith’ refer to the same process of change. But in fact, neither sentence refers to a process; rather, they both report an action and both imply the occurrence of some change that the leaves (passively) undergo when they are burned by Smith.21

This helps to see that the objection involves commitment to two quite distinct claims:

(1) The active/passive equivalence claim: that an active-voice sentence (‘A killed B’) and the corresponding passive-voice one (‘B was killed by A’) are logically equivalent; and

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21 Ford notes that one must ‘be careful not to assume that the linguistic voice of a sentence reveals the metaphysical character of what the sentence describes’ (2014: 26). I agree. ‘The leaves are being burned by Smith’ is in the passive voice but it reports an action: what Smith is actively doing to the leaves. By contrast, ‘The leaves are burning’ is in the active voice but it reports a change that the leaves are undergoing.
(2) The transitive/intransitive identity claim: that in a ‘transaction’, the action, which may be reported using a transitive verb (‘burn\textsubscript{T}’, ‘kill’), is the same change as the change the patient undergoes, which may be reported using its intransitive counterpart (‘burn\textsubscript{I}’, ‘die’).

Now, many philosophers who hold causal views of agency would accept (1) but reject, implicitly or explicitly, (2). Some do so on the grounds that an action is the cause of, and hence different from, the change the patient undergoes.\textsuperscript{22} Others would reject it, as I suggest we should, because they deny that an action is itself a change and so, a fortiori, they deny that it is the change the patient undergoes.

But, contra the objection, (2) (the transitive/intransitive identity claim) is not obviously right; nor is it clear that it follows from (1), the active/passive equivalence. Thus, more needs to be said why we may not accept (1) but reject (2). Ford gives three main considerations to vindicate (2), some of which have been endorsed by other philosophers. I examine each of these in turn and will conclude that none is convincing.

4.1 Our pre-theoretical thought about transactions

Ford says that in our pre-theoretically thought and talk about transactions we make no distinction between what is done and what happens (Ford, 2014: 17). I think this is at best doubtful. In a section entitled ‘“Act” in ordinary language’ Alan White writes:

One important distinction drawn in everyday thinking, and hence in everyday language is that between what somebody or something does and what happens. Thus, we distinguish between […] raising our arm and our arm’s rising. Similarly […] between the sun’s melting the snow and the snow’s melting or between the acid’s turning the litmus paper red and the litmus paper’s turning red. (White 1985: 25).

One may object that White is just adverting to the distinction between actions and ‘mere happenings’. But he goes on to say that ‘my act in raising my arm is to cause my arm to rise, and similarly, that ‘when the sun melts the snow, it causes the snow to melt’ (Ibid). This suggests he is also adverting to the distinction between an action and the happenings caused by the agent.

Perhaps, it may be said, White is misconstruing our pre-theoretical thought and talk. A proper assessment of the issue about transactions would require discussion beyond the scope of this paper. But I want to suggest that considerations about the semantics of many of the verbs we use to describe transactions support White’s position, and indeed the causal view. For it is arguable that a way in which we draw the distinction between what we do and what happens (what we effect) is precisely by introducing the notion of causation, by saying that, for example what I do when I melt the butter, is to cause what happens, to cause the butter to melt, i.e. to cause the event of its melting.

Many transactions are reported using ‘causative’ verbs, such as ‘break’, ‘bend’, ‘twist’, ‘melt’, ‘move’, ‘kill’, ‘teach’, ‘raise’, ‘cut’, ‘straighten’, ‘poison’, ‘cure’, ‘shorten’, ‘dry’, ‘dissolve’ etc.. Most of these verbs have transitive and intransitive uses, and are characterised by what linguists call the ‘causative-anticausative alternation’, illustrated by the following pairs of sentences:

(a) ‘Constanza broke the vase’ (causative)
(b) ‘The vase broke’ (anticausative)

\textsuperscript{22}Ironically, Davidson accepts (2), although restricted to basic actions: things we do not by doing something else.
The alternation is exemplified by ‘verbs with transitive and intransitive uses, where the transitive use of a verb V can be paraphrased as roughly “cause to V-intransitive”’. That is, the statement ‘Constanza broke the vase’, which contains the transitive ‘break’, can be roughly paraphrased as ‘Constanza caused the vase to break’, which contains its intransitive counterpart.

Some causative verbs are, as the example above, ‘lexical’ causatives, where the transitive and intransitive verbs take the same form. But the alternation may be exemplified with verbs with different forms, such as ‘raise’ and ‘rise’, or ‘fell’ and ‘fall’, or with verbs that are not morphologically related, such as ‘kill’ and ‘die’. I take it that whether the causative alternation concerns lexical or non-lexical causatives, and if the latter, how the causative or anticausative meaning is marked, varies from language to language and is part of the contingent historical development of each natural language. For example, Terence Parsons notes that Old English had a causative-anticausative pair ‘cwell’ (kill) and ‘cwel’ (die); the latter was eventually replaced by the Scandinavian ‘die’, ‘thus destroying the etymological connection between our terms for dying and causing to die, but preserving that meaning’ (Parsons 1990: 111).

These brief remarks inevitably paper over complex issues raised by this phenomenon, which have been discussed in detail by both linguists and philosophers. The point here is simply to illustrate the way in which the causal power view of agency is reflected in our conceptual scheme, and to note that causative verbs used to described transactions exemplify the causative entailment:

\[(CE) \, A \, \phi_T \, B \, \text{ entails } B \, \phi_I \, s.\]

where \(\phi_T\) stands for the transitive (causative) verb and \(\phi_I\) for its intransitive (anticausative) counterpart, that is, for a verb that signifies the type of change that B must undergo for it to be true that A has \(\phi_T\)-ed B. What explains this entailment?

A natural answer is that the entailment is precisely explained by the meaning of those verbs: the entailment from ‘A breaks B’ to ‘B breaks’ is explained by the fact that ‘break-T’ means ‘cause to break-T’; breaking something is causing it to undergo a type of change which in English is called ‘breaking’. And the same is true for causative verbs generally.

Ford objects that this cannot explain the thought captured by the causative entailment because the word ‘cause’ ‘does not explain but is explained by a prior understanding of causative verbs’ (Ford 2014: 30). This is Anscombe’s point in her remark that ‘cause’ is a word representing a highly general concept of which concepts such as ‘scrape, push, wet, carry, eat, burn, knock over, keep off, squash, make (e.g. noises, paper boats), hurt’ are specific instances (See Anscombe 1971: 137).

Perhaps the word ‘cause’ can indeed only be grasped through a prior understanding of causative verbs. That claim about how we acquire the concept of causation and mastery of the word ‘cause’ is consistent with the suggestion that the causative entailment is explained by reference to that concept. What we are trying to explain is why all causative verbs have a logical feature; that is, why ‘A \(\phi_T\)-s B’ entails ‘B \(\phi_I\)-s’ whenever \(\phi\) takes a causative verb as its value. That feature can be explained by the fact that causative verbs express causal concepts. This is not a reductive explanation, for the reason Anscombe gives; nonetheless reference to the meaning of those verbs as involving the highly general concept of causation allows us to articulate this logical feature characteristic of causative verbs.

Admittedly, the causative entailment could also be explained by the transitive/intransitive identity claim: if ‘A breaks B’ and ‘B breaks’ are descriptions of the same change, which would explain

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23 (Levin 1993: 26–27, my italics). Anticausatives are also called ‘inchoatives’.

24 Similar claims in terms of substance causation are made by Steward (2012: 202) and Lowe (2008: 144).
why the first statement implies the second.25 But on the face of it these statements describe an action of A on B and a change in B, respectively and we need an independent argument why they should be thought to describe the same change. It is uncontroversial that they both imply the occurrence of an event of B’s breaking. But, while the semantics of causative verbs explain the logical link between the two statements, the identity claim is not equally supported by semantics. And no argument has been given why we should adopt the ‘identity’ claim and associated explanation instead.

These considerations about the meaning of the verbs we use to think and talk about transactions, then, seem to support the idea that our pre-theoretical thought and talk embody a commitment to a causal view of transactions, a view that seems inconsistent with the transitive/intransitive identity thesis. And, if that is right, (2) remains a questionable philosophical claim in need of an argument. I now turn to Anscombe’s slogan ‘I do what happens’.

4.2 Anscombe’s ‘I do what happens’

The remark ‘I do what happens’ occurs in the context of a discussion in Intention of the special knowledge Anscombe claims we have of what we do intentionally, which she calls ‘practical knowledge’ and which, notoriously, she describes as ‘non-observational’. Anscombe says that the difficulty of understanding this special knowledge has led some to say that

what one knows as intentional action is only the intention, or possibly also the bodily movement; and that the rest is known by observation to be the result, which was also willed in the intention (Anscombe 1957: 51-2).

She dismisses this as ‘a mad account’ of intentional action and considers another option, which says that

I really ‘do’ in the intentional sense whatever I think I am doing. E.g, if I think I am moving my toe, but it is not actually moving, then I am ‘moving my toe’ in a certain sense, and as for what happens, of course I haven’t any control over that except in an accidental sense (Ibid).

But this, she says, ‘is nonsense too’, adding that, in the past, she used the formula ‘I do what happens’ in order to express a view whose import is diametrically opposed to these accounts. But, she adds, ‘everyone who heard this formula found it extremely paradoxical and obscure’ (Ibid).

It is undeniable that the formula is obscure and, thus, open to different interpretations. On one interpretation it means just what (2) says, namely that an action is identical to the change brought about, i.e. that when, say, I open a window, what I do, open the window, is one and the same change as what happens, that the window opens.26 But I think a different interpretation is suggested by the context of Anscombe’s discussion.

25 A thank a referee for this journal for pressing me on this point.
26 Ford (2014: 30). For a related interpretation, see Charles, who says:

Anscombe’s remark about ‘what happens’ is more charitably understood as referring to processes. So interpreted, she is pointing out (correctly) that, in this case, there is no distinction between our acting and the process that unfolds. They are, as she suggests, the very same thing (Charles 2018: 38).

It is not clear why Charles thinks that taking the remark to refer to processes rather than events (as the context of Anscombe’s passage might suggest) should be a more charitable interpretation: someone who denies that I can know without observation that I have opened a window will also deny that I can know without observation that I am opening the window, and so that the corresponding process is unfolding: i.e. that the window is opening.
On the views Anscombe is opposing, what I do when, say, I am opening a window intentionally is only ‘what has gone on in me’ (1957: 52) an act of willing or an intention to open the window; or at most a movement of my body. If the window gets opened, that is ‘a grace of fate’ but not something I really do and of which I can, therefore, have any practical (i.e. non-observational) knowledge. Against this, Anscombe says that what I do reaches all the way to the world beyond my skin and, therefore, so does what I know I am doing. What I am doing is not merely will the window to open (i.e. opening the window ‘in intention’). Nor is what I am doing willing my body to move. Rather, what I am doing is opening the window, which is also what happens.

This interpretation is supported by Anscombe’s own gloss on her formula for, immediately after introducing it, she adds:

That is to say, when the description of what happens is the very thing which I should say I was doing, then there is no distinction between my doing and the thing’s happening (1957: 53).

Now, surely, what I should say I was doing is not ‘the window is opening’ but ‘opening the window’; and that is the answer that, a couple of paragraphs earlier, Anscombe says she would give if someone asked her what she was doing if she goes ‘over to the window and opens it’. And since Anscombe says that the description of what happens ‘is the very thing which I should say I was doing’, the description of what happens at issue here must be ‘I am opening the window’. To be sure, we do sometimes talk about ‘one’s doing’ to refer to an event (e.g. the window’s opening) or to the corresponding state (its being open); but we talk so meaning, arguably, not that we literally do those things but rather to assert our causal responsibility for them.27

I suggest, then, that Anscombe’s remark ‘I do what happens’ here is intended to highlight the identity between what I should say I was doing and what is happening; in the sense of what a third party witnessing the scene would say was happening, namely that I was opening the window. Moreover, part of the reason why people found the formula paradoxical is, arguably, that Anscombe is using ‘what happens’ not, as it is often used (and as White uses it in the quotation above) to refer to the change one brings about but instead to refer to a description of what one is doing.

To sum up. We needn’t accept the transitive/intransitive identity claim in order to take on board Anscombe’s (very plausible) contentions, for example, that there is no such as thing as opening a window ‘in intention’ and that a description of what someone is doing, such as ‘I am opening a window’, can also be a description of what is happening and is something that is there for all to see.

4.3 Aristotle and the Unity of Transactions

The theses ascribed to Aristotle about active- and passive-voice reports of actions, and about the occurrence of which kind of change makes such reports true, seem highly plausible. But, I shall argue, even if other causal views are incompatible with them, the causing view is not. And, besides, these ideas are not equivalent to (2), the transitive/intransitive identity claim. (I shall not comment on whether Aristotle held (2)).

Now, it may be right that all event-causal and many agent-causal analyses of transactions assume that ‘transaction-forms, like “. . . opened . . .” or “. . . melted . . .”, cloak a pair of monadic ‘events” Ford (2014: 20), for on those views every transaction involves two causally related

27 I thank and anonymous referee of this journal for reminding me of this usage.
events: what an agent does (the action) and what the patient suffers (the passion) — the difference between those views concerns merely the cause of the action.

The causing view, by contrast, does not decompose transactions into two events. And although this view does not identify the action with the change in the patient, neither does it make ‘what happens’, i.e. the change the patient undergoes, a ‘mere effect’ of what I do, since what I do is not something that causes what happens. On the causing view action and passion form a unity: the truth of both ‘Margaret is scattering the seeds’ and ‘The seeds are being scattered by Margaret’ requires the occurrence of some change that is happening to the seeds and is the very same change that Margaret is causing.

In order to motivate (2), Ford says that ‘when an agent acts on something else, what it does includes, as a necessary part of itself, what happens “in” or “with” or “to” the object of its action’ (Ford 2014: 32). But to be ‘a necessary part’ of an action is not the same as being identical to it, while (2) is an identity claim. Besides, thinking of an action as the causing of a change by an agent makes that change —what happens to the patient— a necessary part of the action: without a change of that kind, there is no action of the corresponding kind. And the change brought by the agent about is no more detachable from the action than it is detachable from the patient, since the action is the causing of that change in the patient by the agent. For instance, what happens to the seeds can no more be separated from Margaret’s action of scattering them than it can be separated from the seeds, since Margaret’s action just is her causing the change that the seeds undergo. We cannot separate the action and that change ‘in thought’, since acting and being acted upon are not the same thing. But we cannot peel the change the causing of which is the action apart from the action, any more than we can peel the change itself apart from the patient.

I conclude that none of the considerations about action and passion examined undermines the plausibility of the causing view, and that the latter is in fact not incompatible with any plausible sense in which a transaction is a ‘unity’. And, although the causing view is incompatible with the transitive-intransitive identity claim, that is not an objection in itself, since the identity claim needs independent motivation and defence. I now turn to the last objection I’ll consider.

5. Causing a Change and Causing Change

If A causes B, then A and B stand to each other in some type of causal relation. imply that action sentences that report transactions entail the obtaining of certain relations: specifically, they imply that the agent is the cause of the change in the patient.

It doesn’t follow from this that the logical structure of such sentences is best represented by means of a two-place ‘causal relational’ predicate. Nonetheless, if ‘is the causer of’ is a relational predicate then, the causing view implies that, whenever an agent is involved in a transaction, the agent stands in the relation ‘is the causer of’ to some change the patient undergoes.

It has been claimed that this implication lands a causal view of agency in serious trouble because such views cannot account for sentences with imperfective aspect, such as ‘Isabelle was closing the door’. The problem allegedly arises because ‘as long as someone is closing a door . . . there is, as yet, no event of the door’s closing’ (Ford 2014: 32ff.) for the agent to be related to in the implied relation. But relations require the (current or past) existence of their relata.

A partial answer is that the implication that agents stand in a causal relation to events is confined to sentences that report actions. The sentence ‘Brutus killed Caesar’ reports an action, Brutus’s killing of Caesar and it implies that Brutus is the killer of Caesar, i.e. the causer of his death. The
sentence ‘Isabelle was closing the door’ by contrast does not a report an action: it merely says that Isabelle was engaged in some door-closing activity. Because of this, that sentence doesn’t, strictly speaking, imply the occurrence of any event caused by Isabelle. Therefore, the absence of an event of the door’s closing that could be the second relatum of the relevant causal relation here is not an objection to the agent-causal view, since they view doesn’t say that these activity sentences have that implication.

This is only a partial answer because, even if ‘Isabelle was closing the door’ doesn’t imply the occurrence of any event, it does say that Isabelle was acting. And if acting is causing change, the causing view implies she was causing change. And the question arises: what change was she causing?

The question raises many complex issues, some of them now well-trodden. To articulate my response, I need to introduce the ontological category of processual change and its relation to events. In 1978 Alexander Mourelatos (1978) emphasised the importance of the process category for accounts of agency, thereby opposing a common assumption that processes are simply extended, or concatenations of, events. (To forestall confusion: the term ‘a process’ may be used refer to a type of event (count quantified), made up of a concatenation of events or phases, such as ‘the process of maturation of an embryo’; or, as Mourelatos intended it, to the category of mass-quantified (telic or atelic) types of change, such as maturation or oxidation.) Expanding on work by Anthony Kenny and Zeno Vendler, Mourelatos elaborated the distinction between these two categories and between their agential correlates: actions and activity, arguing that they are also necessary to understand human agency because, among other things, they are needed to describe and understand what someone was, is, or will be doing.28

Accordingly, we need to distinguish between an action, which is the causing of an event, both of which are count-quantified, and activity, which is causing processual change, which are mass-quantified, something of which there can be more or less.29 And the fuller response to the objection is that, while she is acting, an agent will be engaged in activity that consist in the causing of processual change.30 When she stops acting, she will have performed an action, i.e. caused a change, an event – that may or may not be of the kind she intended, if she intended any. This follows von Wright’s suggestion that ‘As acts are related to events so are activities related to processes’ (von Wright, 1963: Chapter II. §6) which, together with the ‘composition’ claim, can be represented as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occurrences</th>
<th>Changing (of one substance/stuff by another)</th>
<th>Change (in substances or stuffs)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mass-quantified</td>
<td>Activity</td>
<td>Processual change</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

28 (Vendler, 1957) and (Kenny, 1963).
29 I am here relying on the distinction between events and processual change as outlined in, for example, (Mourelatos, 1978); (Steward, 1997, 2012b) except that Steward says actions are ‘particular processes’, (Galton and Mizoguchi, 2009), (Crowther, 2011, 2018); and (Hornsby, 2012).
30 In some cases, while still acting, the agent will have also caused particular changes, the causing of which may be parts of the larger action in which she’s engaged. For example, brushing one’s teeth normally requires putting toothpaste on one’s toothbrush (i.e. causing the paste to be on the brush); meanwhile, brushing itself is an activity that consists in causing the processual change of the brush rubbing against one’s teeth.
Here, the items in the lower row (actions and events) are comprised of the stuff in the upper row (processual change and activity), respectively; and acting in each case is causing change of the type specified in the r-h-s column.

Let us now return to our example. ‘Isabelle was closing the door’ implies that some (mass-quantified) change was going on, namely some closing, motion of the door. And while she was closing the door, Isabelle was causing that mass-quantified change. If Isabelle closes the door all the way, then, while she was closing it, she was also causing the event of the door’s closing, (coming to be closed), since her causing that event consists in her causing the stretch of processual change of which that event is comprised.

This is a two-pronged response to the objection. The first prong identifies mass-quantified processual change as something the agent is causing while she is acting and so is something to which she stands in the relation ‘_ is the causer of _’. The second rejects the thought that, if events can be said to exist, they exist only once they are ‘over’, i.e. no longer occurring.

The second point in the response allows that an agent may not do what she intended to do. For example, Isabelle may have intended to close the door fully but in fact only half closes it before desisting. If so, she will have caused an event of a different kind to what she intended, namely the event of the door’s half-closing, i.e. coming to be half-closed. Either way, she will be causing an event of the relevant kind while she is acting and the particular event she is causing already ‘exists’ (if that is the right term) over that period, albeit not in its complete form.

It is true that, for all the sentence ‘Isabelle is closing the door’ says, there may never be any particular event that Isabelle causes, since the concept of everlasting activity seems cogent, and Isabelle could be an eternal being that has been closing a celestial door from all eternity and will continue to do so for all eternity. The first prong of the response allows for this conceptual possibility, although, as a matter of fact, the activities of humans have a beginning and an end.

Ford objects to the idea in the first prong on the grounds that, if an agent who acts causes things of different kinds, namely processual change and an event, then (a) she stands in two different relations because, Ford says, ‘relations that have different restrictions on their arguments are simply different relations’ (2014: 34), and (b) we have no explanation of how these relations are related to each other.

Neither part of the objection is convincing. First, more needs to be said to justify (a). Someone can own land (mass-quantified) and two cars (count-quantified) and yet ‘_ is the owner of _’ stands surely for the same relation in both cases. Similarly, someone may cause an event and also

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(imperfective/ongoing)</th>
<th>Count-quantified</th>
<th>Actions</th>
<th>Events</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(perfective/completed)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

31 Because ‘The door’s closing’ are nominalisations of both ‘The door is closing’ and ‘The door closed’, they involve the intransitive form of ‘close’. I mark this with the subscript I: ‘The door’s closing’. But note that the nominal ‘The closing of the door’ may be used to refer to Isabelle’s door-closing activity, or to her action of having closed the door. But these are formed from the transitive form in ‘Isabelle closed the door’ and ‘Isabelle was closing the door’ and I mark their transitivitiy with the subscript T: ‘Isabelle’s closing of the door’.

32 This way of putting the point and some of what follows is indebted to the excellent discussion of these issues about events in (Bacharach 2021) – which is not to say he’d accept the view of actions I develop here.

33 For details and defence of these ideas see (Szabó, 2008) and (Bacharach 2021).
processual change, a state, etc., and it is doubtful that, ‘is the causer of’ expresses a different relation for each of those relata.

As for (b), the claim that the response postulates ‘an unexplained relation between these two [causal] relations’ would be a problem if there was indeed something ad-hoc about this solution. But the solution is in fact principled, as illustrated in the table and the examples above. It is consistent with the causing view of transactions to hold that, for example, Isabelle’s action of closing the door is comprised of door-closing activity. The latter is her causing door-closing mass-quantified change. When she has closed the door, she will have caused an event of the door’s closing. These, the event and the mass-quantified processual change she causes, belong in different ontological categories. Nonetheless, though different, they are intrinsically related: the event is comprised of the processual change, a relationship that is analogous to that between particular substances and the stuff of which they are comprised, say, a table and wood, a statue and bronze, and a human being and what we might call its ‘flesh and blood’.

Accordingly, the event of the door’s closing, which Isabelle brought about when she closed the door, is comprised of the ongoing closing motion of the door, which Isabelle was causing while she was closing it. And the same, mutatis mutandis, is the case if Isabelle only half-closes the door: the event she would then cause, the door’s half-closing, will be comprised of (less) closing motion of the door.

In general, when an action of type V is in progress, there is corresponding ongoing change, which the agent is causing and of which she is, therefore, the causer. And when the agent has V-ed, there is an event which the agent has brought about.

This picture of the connection between causing processual change and causing events may raise a slightly differ-ent worry. Consider the case of William, who this morning was writing his new play. This may have been true even when William was just sitting there and thinking. At those times there was no change going on, and yet, William was then writing his play—which is definitely an activity, and not just a mental activity; and definitely a process that is “a causing of change in one substance by another.” The worry raises important issues, for example about the connection between atelic activity (writing) and telic—that is end-directed—activity (writing a play), and I cannot address all of them here even sketchily. But the worry should be assuaged if one considers that a telic activity such as writing a play is composed of atelic activity, writing, interspersed with periods when there is no corresponding activity. And it is thus not an objection to the causing view that, during those breaks from writing, no play-related change is being caused by the agent. The example is a little more complex because “sitting there and thinking” may very well be thought as part of writing a play. But then it is less clear that, while he was doing that, William was not causing any “play-related” change, since he was presumably bringing (play-related) ideas into existence—if only in his head and so, he was causing change.

I conclude therefore that, like the other objections considered, the phenomenon of ‘imperfective agency’ does not present insurmountable difficulties for the causing view of agency.

§5. Conclusion

I have argued that acting is (very often) causing change and that actions are causings of events; and I have tried to show that the problems that I have considered against this way of thinking about agency and actions do not present serious difficulties against this view.

My discussion leaves many issues open, for instance, whether there are instances of agency that cannot be accommodated by the causing view (e.g. omissions), or how we should understand

34 Analogous but not exactly the same, since the way that processual change occupies time is different from the way in which stuff occupies space.
some aspects of the relationship between actions, activities, events and processes in each of the various possible instances of agency. Discussion of those problems must be left for another occasion. Here, I have tried to show that a causal view of agency is plausible and that, specifically, the causing view is an attractive account that combines many of the advantages of its rivals, causal and otherwise, while avoiding their pitfalls.\footnote{Work on this paper was possible thanks to a Leverhulme Major Research Fellowship. I thank the Leverhulme Trust for their generosity. I thank also many colleagues and philosophical friends, as well as the two anonymous referees for the journals, and Alex Geddes for the many comments and suggestions that helped to improve this paper.}
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