

HOW TO PERFORM A NONBASIC ACTION*

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Penultimate draft. Forthcoming in *Noûs*.

November 14th, 2022

Abstract

Some actions we perform “just like that” without taking a means, e.g., raising your arm or wiggling your finger. Other actions—the nonbasic actions—we perform by taking a means, e.g., voting by raising your arm or illuminating a room by flipping a switch. A nearly ubiquitous view about nonbasic action is that one’s means to a nonbasic action constitutes the nonbasic action, as raising your arm constitutes voting or flipping a switch constitutes illuminating a room. In this paper, I challenge this view. I argue that one’s means to a nonbasic action can cause rather than constitute it. In the process, we gain a clearer understanding of the scope of our agency—one that includes mental actions such as judgment and decision—and the pluralistic nature of basic features of action including control, purposefulness, and agent participation.

1. INTRODUCTION: THE NECESSITY OF CONSTITUTIVE MEANS

Some actions we perform “just like that” without performing another action as a means.¹ Think: raising your arm, wiggling your finger, or winking. These are called basic actions. Other actions—the nonbasic actions—are performed by performing another action as a means. Think: voting by raising your arm, illuminating a room by flipping a switch, or walking across the street by taking multiple steps in sequence.²

The topic here is the kinds of means we take to nonbasic action. Most are committed to something like the following picture:

(Necessity of Constitutive Means) Where ϕ is a nonbasic action, if an agent ϕ s by intentionally ψ -ing, then ψ —the agent’s means to ϕ -ing—constitutes ϕ .³

*I thank Michael Bratman, Wesley Holliday, and Antonia Peacocke for their invaluable feedback on multiple drafts. For helpful comments and discussion, I thank Dan Friedman, Kiran Luecke, Taylor Madigan, and Sven Neth. A special thanks to two anonymous referees for their incisive comments that greatly improved the paper.

¹Throughout, I use ‘action’ to refer to intentional action. I make the common assumption that an action is intentional under a description. Accordingly, when I use a Greek letter to refer to an action, the Greek letter itself refers to an action, and the Greek letter in Quine corners refers to a description under which the action referred to by the Greek letter is intentional.

²This is a standard distinction between basic and nonbasic action that focuses on *teleological* basicness and nonbasicness (for more details, see Hornsby, 1980, ch. VI; Lavin, 2013; and Lynch, 2019, p. 959-960).

³The precise form of this commitment depends on one’s view on action individuation (for a summary of the competing views, see Paul, 2020, pp. 47-48), but all sides of the debate ascribe to something like Necessity of Constitutive Means. I address this issue further in Footnote 10.

That is, the nearly ubiquitous view is that one's means to a nonbasic action always constitutes the nonbasic action, as raising your arm constitutes voting or flipping a switch constitutes illuminating a room.⁴ This, I argue, is a mistake, one which is symptomatic of an incorrect understanding of basic features of intentional action and has led to an underestimation of our agential capacities. In particular, I argue that we must make room for *productive* means to nonbasic action, where a productive means causes rather than constitutes that which it is a means to. Think: sneezing by looking up at the sun, kicking one's prosthetic leg by pressing a button, or laughing by bringing to mind a funny joke. I will argue that in all three cases one performs a nonbasic action—sneezing, kicking, or laughing—and one does so using productive means.⁵

One upshot of the general reflections on nonbasic action here is progress with regards to understanding the extent of our mental agency and, in particular, doxastic voluntarism.⁶ Indeed, we often take productive means to mental movements, and once we properly understand that doing so is a way to perform a nonbasic action, we see that we have more mental agency than some have thought. We intentionally judge by seeking out evidence, intentionally decide by weighing pros and cons, and intentionally recall a fact by mentally cycling through associations, even though in all three cases one takes a merely productive means to the relevant mental movement.

Additionally, in order to make room for productive means, we have to reflect on basic features of intentional action including control, purposefulness, and agent participation. I will show that it is only through an overly narrow understanding of each that we rule out productive means to nonbasic action. I defend instead the existence of what might be called a *pluralism of manifestations* of control, purposefulness, and agent participation: there are multiple ways to instantiate or realize each feature in action. Thus, a second upshot of our investigation into the means we can take to nonbasic action is an illumination of the nature of numerous building blocks of intentional action more broadly.

The plan for the rest of the paper is as follows. In Section 2, I present the principle of Causal Closure, which is a set of sufficient conditions for intentional action in terms of using a productive means. In Section 3, I describe the motivating example which will be the basis for my argument for Causal Closure and against Necessity of Constitutive Means. In Section 4, I attend to some less plausible strategies for analyzing the motivating example in a way that vindicates Necessity of Constitutive Means. The crux of my argument will take place in Section 5 where I confront what seems to be the biggest obstacle to Causal Closure: its being inconsistent with a conception of action that requires a sufficient level of control to be possessed at the time of action. A related worry about “disappearing agents” assuming Causal Closure is addressed in Section 6. After making room for productive means to nonbasic action, in Section 7 I show how doing so allows us to respond to skepticism about our capacity for robust mental agency.

⁴Setiya (2008) spells out this assumption explicitly: “It is a necessary truth about nonbasic action that if one does A by doing B, doing B is a constitutive not productive means to doing A: It is an instance of doing A or a part of the process of doing A, not just a prior cause that makes it happen. That is why, although I can cause myself to blush by dropping my trousers in public, I do not count as blushing intentionally, not even as a nonbasic action, when I do so” (p. 41). See also Lavin (2013, p. 279).

⁵One philosopher who notably makes room for productive means is the philosopher who coined the terms ‘basic action’ and ‘nonbasic action’: Danto (1963, 1965). While he eventually changed his mind on these matters (e.g., Danto, 1969), in his 1963 and 1965 papers Danto takes an action ϕ to be nonbasic if and only if ϕ is caused by some distinct action ψ . Thus, he fails to even recognize constitutive means to nonbasic action, let alone take them to be necessary for nonbasic action (see, e.g., Stoutland, 1968 for criticism of Danto’s view on this account). The picture of nonbasic action defended here is therefore a kind of pluralistic revival of Danto’s original insight about nonbasic action: sometimes nonbasic actions are caused by their means, but this is not the *only* way we perform nonbasic actions.

⁶For a representative account of skepticism about our capacity for robust mental agency, see Strawson (2003).

2. HOW TO USE A PRODUCTIVE MEANS TO ACT

In this section, I present conditions on a causal sequence involving an action ψ and a causal effect ϕ of ψ that, when satisfied by the sequence, suffice for ψ to be used as a productive means to ϕ and for ϕ to be a nonbasic action. I do so under the assumptions that actions are events and an event is an action (under a description) in virtue of its causal context. These assumptions are not uncontroversial, though they are the starting points in any event-causal theory of action.⁷ I also make use of a preliminary distinction between events, namely between events which do and do not consist of an agent's bodily and/or mental movements. I use the term *movement* to refer to either bodily or mental movement of an agent, and I assume that an agent's action is a movement of theirs (under a description).^{8,9} Thus, the question of action from this perspective is: what is action over and above mere movement? While my argument will be put forth within the fairly standard framework of an event-causal theory of action on which actions are movements under a description, the question of whether one can intentionally sneeze by looking at the sun or, more generally, whether we can take productive means to intentional action arises for any theory of action; how well the arguments here can be adapted within these alternative frameworks is an interesting question but one that I will not consider.¹⁰

Now, ϕ being a causal effect of some action ψ is not enough for ϕ to be an action (under any description)—it is not even enough for ψ to be a means to ϕ or for ϕ to be something an agent *does* in any sense of the word. For example, if Riley tells a joke while on the phone which inadvertently causes someone in the room to laugh, then the joke-telling was not done as a means to making the person laugh, and the person's laughter, despite being caused by Riley's intentional action, is clearly not something that Riley does in any sense of the word. Missing in this kind of case are the following conditions:

- I. ϕ is a (bodily or mental) movement of the agent's under the description $\ulcorner \phi \urcorner$;
- II. the agent's ψ -ing is guided by their intention to ϕ ;
- III. the agent, while ψ -ing, conceives of their ψ -ing as being for the purpose of and their method of executing their intention to ϕ .

When an agent intentionally ψ s while satisfying Conditions I, II, and III with respect to a causal effect ϕ , then we say

⁷For a discussion of event-causal theories of action, see Paul (2020, Sec. 4.6).

⁸Alternatively, perhaps I could have assumed that an agent's action is a *behavior* or *activity* of theirs (this is what Paul (2020) assumes). It is unclear whether there are important differences between an agent's movement, behavior, and activity.

⁹While the prevalence of nonbasic action performed via productive means will depend on what counts as a movement of an agent (e.g., we might wonder whether the movement of an unattached prosthetic limb counts as a movement of the agent), there is not space to adequately defend a theory of movement here. It should be noted, however, that movements of an agent are not merely events occurring *in* the body or mind of the agent, for this is far too broad a class of events. We should distinguish movements *of the agent*—movement events in which the agent is moving—from movements *of a subsystem of the agent*—movement events in which some proper part of the agent is moving.

¹⁰In the background of the discussion here is the large literature on the individuation of actions. While my setup is more friendly to a coarse-grained view of action individuation since I take actions to be movement events, all of those in the action individuation debate can be seen as rejecting (or at least not explicitly allowing for) productive means. Indeed, according to *coarse-grained* theorists like Anscombe (1957) and Davidson (1980), when an agent ϕ s by ψ -ing, the event which is one's ϕ -ing is identical to the event which is one's ψ -ing—that is, a means is identical to (not causally related to) that which it is a means to. Goldman (1970)—a prominent *fine-grained* theorist—also ascribes to something like Necessity of Constitutive Means: when one ϕ s by ψ -ing, ψ can “causally generate” ϕ , but he is quick to point out that causal generation is *not* causation (see ch. 2 of Goldman 1970, especially pp. 23-24). Finally, when one ϕ s by ψ -ing, *process* theorists like Thomson (1971) take one's ψ -ing and one's ϕ -ing to be components of a composite action; but Thomson says nothing about whether one's ϕ -ing could be an action in itself when one takes a productive means to it. Thus, for example, when one sneezes by looking up at the sun, a typical process theorist will not deem one's sneeze an action, only a part of a composite action that also includes one's looking up at the sun. Thus, none of the prominent views on action individuation explicitly make room for productive means to action, and so in this sense the issue here cross-cuts the issue of action individuation.

that they *use or take ψ as a productive means to ϕ* . Using a productive means to ϕ is not itself sufficient for intentionally ϕ -ing as a nonbasic intentional action, but the principle of Causal Closure—a set of sufficient conditions for nonbasic intentional action—will be given in terms of the phenomenon of using a productive means as just defined. Each of these three conditions for using a productive means is important for establishing the plausibility of this principle.

Regarding Condition I, requiring that the effect of a productive means be a movement of the agent—as opposed to a movement of someone else or something else—ensures that the effect is the *kind of thing* which could, in the right causal conditions, be an action of the agent. Indeed, it is a conceptual datum that an action of mine is something that involves me as the subject. It is for this reason that your laughing, the London Bridge’s falling, the hurricane’s destroying the town, and my dog’s barking cannot as a matter of conceptual fact be my actions, no matter the kind of control I have over them. On a prominent view, this restriction is cashed out more substantively as a restriction of an agent’s actions to their movements.¹¹ Thus, that an effect of an agent’s action is a movement of theirs is no irrelevant feature of the effect in fixing whether the effect is a further action of the agent’s. This feature is crucial in distinguishing between a further action and a mere causal effect of action.

Condition I requires moreover that the effect be the kind of thing which could, in the right causal conditions, be an intentional ϕ -ing in particular. To explain Condition I more precisely, I will need some terminology. Since actions are movements, for any action (resp. action type),¹² we can identify what I will call its *movement counterpart* (resp. *movement counterpart types*), namely the movement which fully constitutes it (resp. the set of movement types, each such that a token of that movement type would, if caused in the right way, fully constitute an intentional action of the action type).¹³ For ϕ be a movement of the agent’s *under the description* ‘ ϕ ’, ϕ must be a token of a movement counterpart type for the action type ‘ ϕ ’. Thus, movements under the description ‘ ϕ ’ are precisely the candidate intentional ϕ -ings. For example, in certain voting contexts, (the movement type of) your arm rising and (the movement type of) your uttering-out-loud of a certain sentence would be movement counterpart types to the action type of voting for your favorite job candidate. Thus, movement tokens of these types in these contexts would be movements under the description ‘voting for your favorite job candidate’. On the other hand, in these voting contexts, a shaking of your head token is a movement but not a movement under the description ‘voting for your favorite job candidate’.

Condition II requires that to use ψ as a productive means to ϕ , the agent’s ψ -ing must be, in some sense, guided by an intention to ϕ . Note that there are very good reasons to think that an intention to ϕ is not necessary to intentionally ϕ , but since I am setting out mere sufficient conditions for intentional action, the claims here are consistent with these arguments.¹⁴ Nonetheless, surely it is often the case that when we intentionally ϕ , we are executing an intention to ϕ and that this is a feature which is highly relevant to the ϕ -ing being intentional at all.¹⁵ This close connection between intentional action and intention motivates Condition II.

Condition III on using ψ as a productive means to ϕ requires that the agent think of or conceive of her ψ -ing in a

¹¹This view is sometimes called *Corporealism* (see Ford, 2018 and Paul, 2020).

¹²I identify notation for action types and action descriptions, so that a Greek letter in Quine corners can refer to an action type or an action description.

¹³If an action type ‘ ϕ ’ has multiple meanings, then each meaning corresponds to its own set of movement counterpart types.

¹⁴See Bratman (1984) for an influential challenge to the “Simple View”, which holds that to intentionally ϕ one must intend to ϕ .

¹⁵There is a tradition of viewing intentional action as action for a reason (Anscombe, 1957; Davidson, 1980) which Causal Closure departs from. This departure is not at the heart of the plea for allowing productive means; one can rework the principle below to be in terms of a causally relevant reason in favor of ϕ -ing rather than an intention to ϕ .

particular way, namely as being for the purpose of and a method of ϕ -ing. Without a condition in this spirit, we fail to capture the teleological nature of taking a means to action, whether productive or constitutive. What makes something a means for the agent is that the agent sees it as serving a further purpose for her and, more precisely, as constituting a *method* by which she will do something else. One could say much more about what it is to conceive of something as a method, but I will rely on a commonsense understanding here.¹⁶ Returning to the example of Riley telling a joke, part of what makes this example not one of taking a productive means to action is that Riley does not tell a joke for the purpose of making the person in the room laugh, nor does she conceive of her telling the joke as a method of making the person in the room laugh.

We are now ready to describe in full how one can use a productive means to intentionally act.

(Principle of Causal Closure) Assume that:

- (1) an event M is a movement of an agent's under the description $\ulcorner \phi \urcorner$;
- (2) the agent intends to ϕ and this intention persists until the completion of M ;¹⁷
- (3) an event N is an intentional action of the agent's under the description $\ulcorner \psi \urcorner$;
- (4) the agent uses ψ as a productive means to ϕ ;
- (5) and N non-deviantly causes M .¹⁸

Then the event M is an intentional action of the agent's under the description $\ulcorner \phi \urcorner$.

When an agent satisfies Conditions (1)-(5) relative to her action ψ and her movement ϕ , the claim is that she does not merely intentionally *cause herself to ϕ* or *bring it about that she ϕ s* or *make herself ϕ* . She successfully executes her intention and intentionally ϕ s as a nonbasic action.

Before defending Causal Closure at length, I set aside a potential distraction. Many verbs are *causal verbs*, or verbs whose meanings are of the form 'doing something to cause an event of type X '. When $\ulcorner \phi \urcorner$ is a causal verb and one ϕ s, then one's ϕ -ing is constituted by the causing of an event of type X , *not* by an event of type X . So when an agent uses ψ as a means to ϕ and ψ (an event N) causes an event M of type X , then ψ -ing is *not* a productive means to ϕ -ing but rather a constitutive means, since ψ -ing constitutes ϕ -ing. Further, Condition I of the definition of using a productive means fails: N rather than the causal effect of N (that is, M) is a movement of the agent's under the description $\ulcorner \phi \urcorner$.

Let's take a concrete example. A case could be made for that 'raising one's arm' is a causal verb and means *doing something to cause one's arm to rise*.¹⁹ Consider Atika whose arm is paralyzed but who has a remote control that allows her to cause her arm to rise with a press of a button on the remote. Imagine she intentionally presses the button (event

¹⁶See Lynch (2019) for a thorough discussion of the relationship between means, ways, and methods.

¹⁷Assuming that the intention persists until the completion of M rules out cases where the agent dies, goes into a coma, etc., prior to M (though it is worth noting that the first condition might be enough to rule out these cases). It also implies that instances of intentional action in line with Causal Closure are of a standard kind, namely where one intends to ϕ *throughout* intentionally ϕ -ing.

¹⁸Non-deviance in the standard Davidsonian theory of action is used as a placeholder for a precisification of the kind of causal relation between the belief-desire pair and the movement that suffices for the movement to be an intentional action. Here, I use non-deviance as a placeholder for a precisification of the kind of causal relation between the productive means and the movement to which the productive means is aimed at that suffices for the movement to be an intentional action. It is beyond the scope of the paper to analyze how these two notions of non-deviance relate to one another and whether one account of non-deviance would suffice for both purposes. However, it is worth emphasizing that the extension of nonbasic action entailed by Causal Closure depends on how non-deviance is understood.

¹⁹Or perhaps this is one of its multiple meanings.

N), which causes her arm to rise from her side to above her shoulder (event *M*). Then Atika intentionally raises her arm as a nonbasic action. Further, insofar as ‘raising one’s arm’ really is a causal verb, her raising her arm consists entirely in the means she took—the button pressing—and so she took a constitutive rather than productive means to intentionally raising her arm.

So, where φ is a causal verb (relative to type *X*) and an agent performs some action ψ as a means to φ which causally results in an event of type *X*, the agent takes a constitutive means to φ -ing and Causal Closure does not apply. Thus, throughout we should have in mind verbs which are not causal verbs. There are many verbs which are not causal, such as sneezing, blushing, whistling, kicking, and sitting down. If one had a remote that could cause one to, say, whistle the ABCs, then the button pressing would not (even in part) constitute one’s whistling—the whistling that *results* from the button press would entirely constitute one’s whistling, and so the button press is a productive rather than constitutive means to whistling the ABCs. Moreover, many purported mental actions such as judging and deciding are not causal verbs, a point which is relevant to the application of Causal Closure to mental action in Section 7. When we cannot perform these behaviors that do not have causal analyses without doing something else intentionally and cannot perform these behaviors via a constitutive means (as in the case of sneezing and blushing), whether we can perform these behaviors as intentional actions at all depends entirely on whether we can take a productive means to intentional action. Thus, it is with respect to such non-causal verbs that the debate about Necessity of Constitutive Means has important consequences for the bounds of our agency.²⁰

3. THE MOTIVATING EXAMPLE

In this section, I describe an agent who I argue at length uses a productive means to intentionally kick; more precisely, she intentionally kicks by satisfying the conditions of Causal Closure. This motivating example is meant both to be a counterexample to Necessity of Constitutive Means and to offer a concrete case with which to argue for the positive proposal of Causal Closure.

Consider Ananya who lost normal use of her leg due to a stroke. She has a special remote that she now uses to control her leg movements. The remote allows her to initiate a kicking, with a relatively fine-grained level of precision. She can choose the speed, direction, and path of her kick. But once she chooses certain parameters and presses the relevant buttons, she can no longer adjust her kick. Thus, there will be situations where Ananya satisfies all the conditions of Causal Closure with respect to her kick. Indeed, there will be cases where Ananya’s leg movement that results from the button press is a movement of hers under the description ‘kick’ and is non-deviantly caused by her intentional button presses; there also seems no issue in assuming that she intends to kick—an intention which persists until the completion of the kick—and that this intention guides her button pressing; finally, in intentionally pressing the buttons, we may assume that Ananya conceives of her doing so as for the purpose of and as a method of kicking.

I make two claims about this sort of case:

- Ananya’s kick is a nonbasic intentional action;
- Pressing buttons on the remote is a productive means by which Ananya intentionally kicks.

²⁰For more on causal verbs, see discussions of the “accordion effect” (Feinberg, 1965; Davidson, 1980; Bratman, 2006).

One might object to the second claim assuming the first by suggesting that for Ananya, pressing buttons is a constitutive means to kicking—her pressing buttons, at least in part, constitutes her kicking. As discussed in Section 2, it is plausible to describe Atika’s pressing buttons as a constitutive means to raising her arm because a case can be made for ‘raising one’s arm’ being a causal verb. However, it is *not* plausible to describe Ananya’s pressing buttons as a constitutive means to her kicking because ‘kicking’ is quite clearly not a causal verb; that is, ‘kicking’ does not have a meaning of the form ‘doing something to cause an event of type *X*’. For example, ‘kicking’ does not mean *doing something to cause one’s leg to move in a kick-like motion*. Indeed, if it did, then if you tapped your knee with a reflex hammer, your tapping your knee would just *be* your kicking in virtue of the meaning of the words involved. This seems to blatantly confuse cause and effect. Your tapping your knee is not your kicking—it *causes* your kicking and causes are not parts of their effects. The stronger objection is, I take it, to claim that Ananya can intentionally cause herself to kick or intentionally cause a kick-like leg movement, but she cannot intentionally kick.

Consider now Jonny whose leg is not paralyzed and kicks the usual way, namely as a basic action. I propose the following question as a challenge to the defender of Necessity of Constitutive Means: *what is it about Jonny’s leg movement which enables it to count as Jonny intentionally kicking and which Ananya’s leg movement lacks?* Throughout the rest of the paper, I consider a variety of possible difference makers that the defender of Necessity of Constitutive Means might propose, arguing that none of them are satisfactory. I conclude that, absent some relevant difference maker, Ananya (like Jonny) can intentionally kick, and so we have a counterexample to Necessity of Constitutive Means. Along the way, using Ananya as the motivating example of how to perform a nonbasic action via productive means, I show why we should also accept Causal Closure.

4. SOME LESS PROMISING WAYS TO DIFFERENTIATE ANANYA AND JONNY

I now address some proposals for what is it about Jonny’s leg movement which enables it to count as Jonny intentionally kicking and which Ananya’s leg movement lacks. These proposals are less promising than those I consider in subsequent sections but bring forth some important considerations.

First, the relevant difference between Ananya and Jonny is not that Jonny voluntarily kicks while Ananya does not. Indeed, assuming we take ‘voluntary’ to mean either done at will or done for whatever reason one takes to be a good one,²¹ then Ananya’s kick is voluntary. Of course, there could always be a short in the circuit connecting the remote to Ananya’s leg such that she will fail to succeed in kicking at will or for whatever reason she takes to be a good one. But there could also be a problem with the muscles in Jonny’s leg preventing him from kicking voluntarily as well, so there is no difference here.²² One might instead point out that while Ananya can voluntarily start a kick, she (unlike Jonny) cannot voluntarily stop her kick midway through. But being able to voluntarily stop one’s ϕ -ing midway through is not necessary to intentionally ϕ . Indeed, quickly blink, snap your fingers, or flick a crumb away. You will find it very tough, if not impossible, to stop once you have started any of these actions. This shows that momentum is largely

²¹See McHugh (2011) for a discussion of these two notions of voluntariness. For an action to be done voluntarily on the “at will” reading means one is able to perform the action because one desires, decides, or wills to do so.

²²According to Hyman (2015), “we do something voluntarily if and only if we do not do it out of ignorance or compulsion” (p. 75). Clearly, Ananya’s kick is voluntary on this understanding of voluntariness, as well.

responsible for the progression of some of our actions; with such actions, we are not in a position to voluntarily stop them midway through.

With regards to attributability, absent the addition of any further considerations differentiating the two, I see no reason to think that Jonny's kick is any more attributable to him as a whole agent than Ananya's kick is attributable to her as a whole agent. If anything, the additional instrumental thought that Ananya engages in to plan and execute a means to her kick might imply that she—as a whole agent—is more the “owner” of her kick than Jonny.²³

One might be tempted to point to the phenomenological differences for Ananya and Jonny; certainly it must feel different “from the inside” when Ananya kicks compared to when Jonny kicks; perhaps Jonny's kick alone has a special “actish phenomenal quality” (Ginet, 1990). First, it is unclear that there really is a distinctive phenomenology that is necessary for intentional action.²⁴ Second, even if there is, there are a number of ways one might understand this purported distinctive and necessary sense of agency, and I cannot consider all of them here. Thus, I will use this as an opportunity to point out something important, namely that Causal Closure can be viewed as a proof of concept. While the principle might not be exactly right, the more important claim I am trying to advance is that it is possible to take a productive means to acting intentionally, where a productive means is minimally *not* a constitutive means and the relation between the productive means and the intentional action it is a means to is causation. Thus, perhaps Causal Closure would have to be adjusted to ensure that whatever sense of agency is essential to intentional action is implied by taking a productive means in line with Causal Closure. For example, perhaps the causal connection between ψ and ϕ has to be of a certain sort—beyond merely non-deviant—for there to be the essential sense of agency. But there seems to be no reason to think that such adjustments to the principle are not available or that there is some deep tension between a distinctive sense of agency and taking a productive means to action. In particular, there is presumably *some* way to set up the conditions so that Ananya has the same sense of agency that Jonny has when she kicks her leg using a button press as a productive means, even if these conditions go beyond those ensured by Causal Closure.

Some have thought that an essential feature of intentional action is a distinctive kind of knowledge of what one is doing that comes with it, an insight often attributed to Anscombe (1957) but that goes back to Aristotle and has since been developed by many others. According to Anscombe, when one is intentionally ϕ -ing, one knows without observation that one is ϕ -ing. So, one might think that a difference in the knowledge Jonny and Ananya have of their respective kicks is what explains why Jonny's but not Ananya's kick is intentional. First, while we may *sometimes* or even *often* have a distinctive non-observational knowledge of what we are doing intentionally, many have challenged Anscombe's bold claim, both that knowledge is necessary for action and that such knowledge is always non-observational.²⁵ So I admit that to some it might be a conclusive reason to reject the ability to take productive means to action if it is inconsistent with knowing what one is doing without observation; but given the controversy over the necessity of non-observational knowledge for intentional action and, I think, very good arguments against it, it is not an ideal way to settle whether Necessity of Constitutive Means is true. Second, and I make this point tentatively, it looks like Ananya

²³See, e.g., Lavin (2013) and Small (2019) for difficulties in establishing that basic action in particular is properly connected to the agent as a whole.

²⁴See, e.g., Paglieri (2013) and Chadha (2017) for arguments that there is no sense of agency at all.

²⁵This challenge goes back to at least Davidson's ten carbon copy counterexample (Davidson, 1980). See Piñeros Glasscock (2019) for a recent challenge that does not rely on counterexamples.

does non-observationally know that she is kicking while she is doing so when the conditions of Causal Closure hold.²⁶ There have been many explanations proposed for how agents have non-observational knowledge of their actions, and Ananya looks like she has many of the key ingredients for such explanations. She intends to be kicking while kicking, she knows without observation that she intends to be kicking, she knows how to kick (using the remote control), etc. So even if a distinctive kind of non-observational knowledge is necessary to action, I conjecture that a compelling case could be made for that Ananya has it.

Finally, someone who subscribes to Necessity of Constitutive Means might argue that the difference maker is i) that Ananya cannot take a constitutive means to her kicking or ii) that if Ananya's kick constitutes her performing any action at all, it will be a nonbasic action yet she has no constitutive means to the purported nonbasic action, while Jonny performs a basic action. Pointing to either of these properties as the difference maker presupposes that the existence of constitutive means is in some way essential to our capacity for nonbasic action—it is in effect to just repeat Necessity of Constitutive Means. It would be only slightly more helpful to suggest that Ananya cannot perform a kick as an action because her intention to kick is not directly connected to her leg movement; one might point out that there are odd intermediaries in the way. But merely pointing out the indirectness of the connection between mind and body in the case of taking a productive means fails to advance an explanation of what about this indirectness negates action; it is really just to describe what is involved in taking a productive means. Further, in any case of nonbasic action there will be some kind of indirect connection between the intention and the action, so it is far from clear that the indirectness of the connection in the case of taking a productive means is in itself a problem.

In short, the defender of Necessity of Constitutive Means owes us a genuinely explanatory reason for why an agent must take a constitutive means to nonbasic action and thus why Ananya cannot take a productive means to intentionally kicking, for these claims are not obviously true.²⁷ Such a reason would reference an independent, essential feature of intentional action that a movement has when one takes a constitutive means to it but not when one takes a productive means to it. In putting forth such a property, we would see why Necessity of Constitutive Means is true and thus why Ananya cannot intentionally kick, saving the defender's position from appearing a mere prejudice against productive means.²⁸

²⁶Though perhaps we must also assume that Ananya knows that her remote works properly and that her kick follows immediately from her button pressing. But the same proof of concept point applies here as it did in the case of purported phenomenological features of intentional action.

²⁷Imagine I could cause you to sneeze in the same exact way that I could cause myself to sneeze, say by pressing a button. Say my sneezing and button pressing satisfy the conditions of Causal Closure. Then according to the defender of Causal Closure, my sneeze is an action of mine and your sneeze is not an action of mine; I merely bring about your sneeze. But why *isn't* your sneeze my action? It looks like the only justification that the defender of Causal Closure has for this differential categorization is the assumption underlying Condition (1) of Causal Closure: actions of mine are movements of mine not yours. Is this a problem for the defender of Causal Closure? Does this response somehow beg the question against the defender of Necessity of Constitutive Means? I do not see why that would be so, since the defender of Necessity of Constitutive Means could offer the same justification for why your sneeze is not my action. The view that actions of an agent are movements of that agent is perfectly consistent with Necessity of Constitutive Means. Moreover, instead of justifying the differential categorization by appealing to that actions of mine are movements of mine, one could appeal to the weaker thesis that actions of mine, whatever they are, are *not* movements of someone or something else. This weaker thesis seems uncontroversial—no matter one's views on the means we take to nonbasic action—and thus offers an acceptable, non-question-begging justification for why your sneeze is not my action. Thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this challenge.

²⁸Rather than arguing for Necessity of Constitutive Means by offering a difference maker between Ananya and Jonny, one might argue against productive means by showing that allowing for productive means implies a contradiction of sorts. Here is one such argument: if Causal Closure is true, then some actions are both basic and nonbasic. Here is an example: you think that without setting an alarm you will forget to raise your finger, so you set an alarm as a means to raising your finger. It looks like your raising your finger is both a nonbasic action done via a productive means (setting the alarm) and a basic action. There are at least three responses available. First, a given event can be a basic action under one description and a nonbasic action under another. In the example offered, one might argue that your finger raise is a basic action under the description 'raise my finger', and it is a nonbasic action under the description 'raise my finger at time *t*'. Second, one might deny that there is a causal connection between the productive means and the action, so Condition (5) of Causal Closure fails. In the example proposed, we might wonder whether in virtue of the

In the next two sections, I consider a family of features that I take to be most promising for vindicating Necessity of Constitutive Means and rejecting Causal Closure. I argue that once properly understood, these features also fail to vindicate Necessity of Constitutive Means.

5. THE (UN)NECESSITY OF CONCURRENT CONTROL

One striking and at least seemingly relevant difference between Jonny and Ananya is that while Jonny possesses and exerts control over his kicking during the kick, Ananya only possesses and exerts control over her kicking prior to the kick. Ananya's kick is ballistic. She can set up ahead of time the conditions required so that her leg will move in the particular way she wants, including its direction, speed, height, and so on, so in this sense she possesses and exerts control over her kick. However, she cannot "be there" to make sure things happen as planned.²⁹ That is, Ananya but not Jonny lacks *concurrent control*. In the rest of this section, I argue that concurrent control is not necessary for intentional action and so this difference fails to explain why Ananya is incapable of intentionally kicking; in so arguing, I reflect on the pluralistic nature of the control criterion on intentional action.

In order to state the present objection more precisely, let us say that to *exert control* at time t over event E having property P is to deploy behavior at time t to successfully further one's intention to promote E 's having property P . Note that I assume that E 's very occurrence is a property of E . Let us further say that to *possess control* at time t over E having P is to be in a position at time t to exert control at time t over E having P . I will follow Frankfurt (1978) in assuming that a key feature of being in a position at time t to exert control over E having P is to be in a position to intervene more or less effectively if something were to get in the way at time t of E having P .³⁰ There is of course much more to be said here, but this level of specificity will do for our purposes.

Now, assume M is a movement of an agent's under the description $\lceil \varphi \rceil$ and takes place from time t_1 to time t_2 . Then for the agent to *possess (resp. exert) concurrent control over her φ -ing*, she possesses (resp. exerts) control at sufficiently many times t in the time interval t_1 to t_2 over M having the property of occurring and of constituting a φ -ing. I take commitment to the following principle to be a compelling reason to hesitate to admit that Ananya succeeds in intentionally kicking:

(Concurrent Control) If an agent intentionally φ s, then they possess concurrent control over their φ -ing.

Note that I do not build in that the agent must *exert* concurrent control to intentionally φ . What is important is that the agent is in a *position* to exert control if necessary while the action is occurring, not that they actually do, just as an agent may possess control throughout the entire arc of their trampoline jump without exerting control through large parts of it.

Appealing to the necessity of concurrent control in giving a theory of action goes back to at least Frankfurt (1978). He criticizes causal theories of action like Davidson's because "they direct attention exclusively away from the events

intervention of your will into the causal chain upon raising your finger, any causal connection between the setting of the alarm and the rising of one's finger is broken. This follows from something like the voluntary intervention principle of Hart and Honoré (1959). Third, one might allow that there is a causal connection between the productive means and the action but argue that it is deviant in a way ruled out by the qualification to non-deviant causation in Condition (5) of Causal Closure (see also Footnote 18). Thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this challenge.

²⁹Or at least her capacity to be there to make sure things happen as planned is limited. She can still do things like push someone away if they try to stop her leg from moving.

³⁰"What counts is that [the agent] was prepared to intervene, if necessary, and that [the agent] was in a position to do so more or less effectively" (Frankfurt, 1978, p. 160).

whose natures are at issue, and away from the times at which they occur” (p. 157). Here is [Buckareff \(2005\)](#) defending a commitment to Concurrent Control in the spirit of Frankfurt, where I assume that an intention guiding is something like possessing concurrent control as defined above:

The causation of the action by the intention must play a guiding role, with the agent controlling his behaviour via the intention, remaining responsive to feedback in the execution of the action. I will take it that if an intention causally initiates and sustains some actional activity, then it plays such a guiding role in the control of the action. (p. 85)

Similarly, [Clarke \(2010\)](#) points out the importance of a guiding present-directed intention for “getting [the agent] into the picture”, a point to which we return in Section 6. While Frankfurt, Buckareff, and Clarke point out an important feature of many actions, I argue by way of counterexample that possession of concurrent control is not necessary for action.

First, I make a preliminary point about using Concurrent Control as a way to explain why Ananya does not intentionally kick, though she intentionally causes herself to kick. The point will naturally lead to the first set of counterexamples to Concurrent Control. Let’s assume that Ananya presses a button on her remote, and she kicks as intended in line with Causal Closure. Arguably, Ananya’s button pressing constitutes her causing herself to kick. As discussed, a key feature of possession of concurrent control over her causing herself to kick involves her being in a position while she is pressing the button to intervene more or less effectively if something were to get in the way of her pressing the button or of her pressing the button having the property of constituting a causing of a kick. Let us further assume that while she could intervene if someone got in the way of her pressing the button while she is pressing the button, Ananya is completely informationally cut off from the causal process from button to leg while she is pressing the button. For instance, she cannot receive testimony while she is pressing the button about a particular way she needs to press the button for it to successfully cause her kick, and if anything were to malfunction while she was pressing the button, she would have no ability to know that it did and thus no ability to intervene to ensure she nonetheless ended up causing herself to kick. Under such conditions, Ananya possesses concurrent control over her button pressing, but this is *all* that she possesses concurrent control over. She does not possess concurrent control over her causing herself to kick. So she does not intentionally kick *nor* does she intentionally cause herself to kick assuming Concurrent Control. This, I would think, is an unwelcome result. The prominent “error theory” on which one describes situations in which the conditions of Causal Closure hold as instances of intentionally causing oneself to ϕ would fail in a potentially large class of cases, namely cases where one lacks any ability to affect while ψ -ing whether one’s ψ -ing constitutes a ϕ -ing. This, I claim, is a substantial drawback to appealing to Concurrent Control in defense of Necessity of Constitutive Means.

This discussion also highlights that often we possess control over causing a temporally distant event not in virtue of possessing concurrent control over causing the event but in virtue of initiating a movement and *preemptively* setting up conditions so that, if all goes well, that kind of movement will constitute a causing of the temporally distant event. If I build a contraption such that when I press a button, a bomb will explode in the distance (if all goes well), then even if I am not in a position to exert control while pressing the button over my pressing the button having the property of constituting a causing of the bomb to explode, I have exerted enough of the right kind of control to intentionally cause

the bomb to explode. I see no reason to insist that *in addition* I need to possess control over my causing of the bomb to explode while causing the bomb to explode. So we see that causings of temporally distant events—what I will call *causal actions*—in which one only possesses control over the causing prior to the causing are a class of counterexamples to Concurrent Control.

One might object at this point that I incorrectly stated Concurrent Control: while one need not possess concurrent control over one's ϕ -ing to intentionally ϕ , one must possess concurrent control over one's ψ -ing for some description $\ulcorner \psi \urcorner$ of ϕ . In the case of my causing a bomb to go off, I possessed concurrent control over causing the bomb to go off under the description 'pressing the button'. However, imagine now that as soon as I initiate my triggering the bomb, I lose any ability to adjust the trajectory of my finger (say, because my finger spasms); I continue to press down the button as planned—maintaining my intention to set off the bomb—but with no ability to adjust the trajectory of my finger if necessary. In this case, I fail to have concurrent control over my causing the bomb to go off under any description whatsoever. Yet it seems that I still intentionally cause the bomb to go off. My preemptive exertion of control over my causing the bomb to go off and my setting my pressing down of the button in motion—followed by my successfully doing so, in the presence of an intention to cause the bomb to go off—seem to suffice for my pressing down the button to constitute my intentionally causing the bomb to go off. Thus, I take this to be a counterexample to the proposed weaker version of Concurrent Control.³¹

The second class of counterexamples to Concurrent Control is the class of actions that take up too little time to involve concurrent control. Very quick movements—for example, punctate movements which happen in just a moment—are of this nature and some are clearly actions. We saw three examples in the previous section: quickly blinking, snapping your fingers, and flicking a crumb away. Such actions, in their nature, go by too quickly for agents like us to exert concurrent control over them.³² That is not to say that no agent could control their, say, crossing a finish line (at a high speed) while doing so. Rather, such control would require far quicker reflexes and more fine-grained awareness than we humans have. Instead, I exert control over my crossing the finish line and how I cross the finish line (e.g., crossing at the middle of the line as opposed to at an end) by way of what I do before crossing the finish line. But, given the speed at which it occurs, I cannot exert (nor do I possess) control over my crossing a finish line *while* I do it. Yet clearly I can intentionally cross a finish line.³³ Dramatizing the point, compare the following two scenarios: in one case, I cross the finish line normally and in the second scenario, at exactly and only the moments I cross the finish line, my limbs freeze up (though I still cross the finish line). It seems that the difference in what happens at the very moments of crossing the finish line in these two cases is irrelevant. In both cases, I intentionally cross the finish line. This is because in both cases I intentionally sprint up to the finish line in order to cross the finish line, guided by an intention to cross the finish line, and then consequently—despite what happens to my body at the moment of crossing—I cross the finish line as intended.³⁴

³¹The next class of counterexamples to Concurrent Control second as counterexamples to this weaker version of Concurrent Control as well.

³²Note that one will not possess concurrent control over very quick movements under any description in virtue of how quickly they occur, and so intentional very quick actions constitute counterexamples to the alternative proposal for Concurrent Control discussed in the previous paragraph.

³³One might object that Concurrent Control does not apply until the action is of a certain temporal length. Even so, this entails only that productive means cannot be taken to actions that take up a sufficient amount of time; we could still take productive means to sufficiently short actions. So while this response would, if right, imply that Causal Closure needs adjusting, it does not vindicate Necessity of Constitutive Means.

³⁴One might suggest yet another version of Concurrent Control: one need not possess concurrent control over one's ϕ -ing but rather some ϕ' of which ϕ is a (possibly proper) part. For example, crossing the finish line is a part of my running a marathon, and I possessed concurrent control over

I think the most important takeaway from these counterexamples to Concurrent Control is that concurrent control is not the only kind of control we possess over intentional actions. In the case of causal actions and very fast actions, we possess a different kind of control. But then there seems little reason to think that when an action type is non-causal and takes up more time such that the “average” human becomes physically able to possess concurrent control over an action of that type, a human *must* possess such control to count as intentionally acting.

To be sure, it is certainly right that for ϕ to be an intentional action, the agent must possess and exert control over their ϕ -ing. This constraint seems to be a conceptual datum about intentional action. But, in light of these two classes of examples, what I see little argument for is that control must be possessed or exerted *during* the ϕ -ing. Instead, it seems that there is a pluralism of manifestations of the control feature of intentional action. In recognizing and exploiting our relatively accurate beliefs about our place in the causal order, we bring about certain movements. This causal influence we purposefully exert on our minds and bodies in using a productive means to move them is a kind of control over the occurrence of these movements. Further, we can thoughtfully take one means rather than all others thereby causally influencing a movement to have certain properties rather than others. For example, I might inquire because I correctly believe this will causally lead to my executing my intention to judge, and I might inquire *attentively* because I correctly believe this will causally lead to a more accurate judgment. I could have chosen to distractedly inquire and have failed to use my agency to structure the resulting judgment to be more accurate. In other words, in using a productive means in future-minded ways, I can make use of my knowledge about how my actions now will fit into the causal order so that when the causal route occurs as I expect it to, I can be said to have exerted a kind of control over my future movements. Call this kind of control *future-oriented* control. Why does the possession and exertion of future-oriented control not meet the control criterion on intentional action in the case of longer, non-causal actions when it must be enough for very quick and (at least some) causal actions? Why are those who choose to or, for whatever reason, are forced to exert control over their ϕ -ing by “planning ahead” in this way—by shaping their (future) movement to be a ϕ -ing ahead of time by using a productive means—acting any less intentionally when they successfully ϕ ? Absent good answers to these questions, I conclude that possession of future-oriented control meets the control criterion on intentional action. Future-oriented control is one of a pluralism of ways that control is manifested in intentional action.

Perhaps the point in this section can be put in another related way. Instead of objecting that Causal Closure conflicts with Concurrent Control, one might argue that intentional action is minimally *purposeful* behavior; but if Causal Closure puts almost no constraints on the agent’s ϕ -ing at the time of ϕ -ing, then it cannot ensure that the agent ϕ s purposefully. However, the purposefulness of movement need not supervene on the properties of the agent at the time of the movement. There is a pluralism of manifestations of the purposefulness feature of intentional action. Purpose can be imbued in movement in virtue of the manner in which the movement came about—in virtue of properties of the agent prior to the movement in question. Ananya’s kick is purposeful because of how it came to be that Ananya kicked, not the intrinsic qualities of Ananya’s kick. Jonny’s kick, on the other hand, is purposeful at least in part because of the manner in which the kick unfolded, that is, in virtue of his kick’s intrinsic qualities throughout the kicking. This difference

my running a marathon. But this condition does not pose a problem for Causal Closure or at least using a productive means to intentionally act more generally. Indeed, where ψ is used as a productive means to ϕ , consider ϕ as part of the combination movement consisting of ψ and ϕ and assume that the agent possesses concurrent control over the ψ part of the combination movement. This will, at least in many cases, suffice for possessing concurrent control over the combination movement, and thus the proposed version of Concurrent Control will be met.

in how the kicks of Ananya and Jonny are imbued with purpose is certainly an interesting difference, but my claim is that it is not a difference that makes Ananya any less capable of intentionally kicking. This discussion of purpose mirrors the discussion of control above: just as there is a pluralism of ways to possess control over movement in the way necessary for intentional action, there is a pluralism of ways to imbue movement with purpose in the way necessary for intentional action. To avoid carving up our movements with unmotivated biases toward certain manifestations of control or purposefulness, we ought to take on a more permissive conception of intentional action, whereby actions can be performed in at least three ways (without doing anything else intentionally, via a constitutive means, or via a productive means) and none of the three ways is more degenerate or less robust than any other.

6. THE PLURALISTIC NATURE OF AGENT PARTICIPATION

A final objection to Causal Closure—and the last potential difference maker that I will consider—is that in allowing future-oriented control to suffice for intentional action, an agent might be alienated from their own action. In other words, if Causal Closure is true, an agent might be “nowhere to be found” at the time of her action since Causal Closure puts no constraints on how an action unfolds beyond there being a persisting intention.³⁵ In particular, Ananya is alienated from her kicking in a way that Jonny is not, and this is why her kick is not an intentional action.

The first thing to note here is that the standard Davidsonian causal theory of action takes an event to be an action in light of its causal history, in particular, its being non-deviantly caused by a reason or rationalizing belief-desire pair. In fact, this failure to identify constraints on the behavior at the time of action is precisely what Frankfurt (1978) objected to on Davidson’s account of intentional action. Thus, coming from an interlocutor sympathetic to the standard causal theory of action, the alienation objection fails: an agent is no more alienated from their action in taking a productive means than is consistent with the standard theory.³⁶ However, a reaction to the standard theory and the disappearing agent problem is to require something like concurrent control by the agent.³⁷ For instance, Bratman (1987),³⁸ Mele and Moser (1994), and Buckareff, as well as many others, have suggested that intentional action requires continual causal guidance by an intention. It is the *active* presence of the present-directed intention throughout an action which, as Clarke (2010) puts it, “[gets the agent] into the picture.”

In response to this objection, I offer a challenge. Even if guidance by an intention is enough to incorporate the agent into their action, as seems plausible, the claim that this is the *only* way for an agent to participate in their action looks far more difficult to defend. There is a genuine essential property of intentional action being pointed to in this objection: agents participate in their actions. This I agree with. I disagree—or at least I see no reason to agree—that an agent can only participate in their action through a present-directed intention guiding the action. Why are there not, instead, a pluralism of ways that agent participation manifests in intentional action?

³⁵See Velleman (1992) for a further discussion of this idea of an agent “disappearing” from their action.

³⁶This further means that much of what has been said in response to the disappearing agent objection by proponents of theories in the spirit of the standard theory can likely be co-opted here. For example, Velleman (1992) thinks that the standard theory fails as an account of action *par excellence* but satisfies the more minimal agent participation criterion on intentional action (see his footnote 5).

³⁷There are also objections from the agent-causalists who think that no event-causal theory of action will solve the disappearing agent worry (e.g., Chisholm, 1978). However, as discussed in Section 2, I am assuming that some event-causal theory of action is correct, and so I will put these objections aside.

³⁸Though see his Section 8.7 where Bratman hesitates to commit to the strict necessity of a guiding intention for intentional action.

When the conditions of Causal Closure hold, the ϕ -ing in question is brought about and its features are shaped by the agent's intention to ϕ continuously issuing in a productive means fit for such a ϕ -ing. Granted, this shaping of their ϕ -ing is not happening "in real-time" as the ϕ -ing unfolds—the agent shapes their (future) movement at a temporal distance from the movement—but it is not clear if or why real-time influence is required for the agent to participate in their movement. For example, we can locate Ananya's role in the unfolding of her kick-like leg movement by pointing to the ways in which the features of the kick are the causal results of Ananya's intention to kick issuing in certain button pressings rather than others. Of course, there will be wide variation in how "involved" an agent is in their ϕ -ing. An agent might craft their productive means with the only goal being that it issues in a ϕ -ing, leaving all other details to be filled in by automatic, subpersonal processes. For example, if an agent takes a sleeping pill as a productive means to fall asleep, then the agent participates in her falling asleep only in the sense that the very occurrence of the falling asleep is generated by the agent's intention to fall asleep (by way of taking a sleeping pill). On the other hand, we could imagine that Ananya had access to a very complicated remote that would allow her to pre-program every detail of her kick. But this variation in the degree to which an agent participates in their action is commonplace: compare carefully raising your arm, picking out each detail of your arm raise as you go and dancing wildly to your favorite song, letting the music organically guide your body movements.

So I ask: for an agent to participate in their ϕ -ing, why does an intention to ϕ need to issue in the ϕ -ing continuously until the entirety of the ϕ -ing has occurred? Why can't, instead, the agent participate in their ϕ -ing in virtue of their intention to ϕ continuously issuing in a means fit to causally produce a ϕ -ing of the agent's liking, which then, as predicted, generates a ϕ -ing in one fell swoop? What is special about continuously exerting control that implicates the agent in the movement in a way that control "exerted in bulk" beforehand cannot? Again, absent good answers to these questions, I conclude that both Jonny and Ananya participate in, can "be found" in, and are not (problematically) alienated from their ϕ -ing as required, though they participate in their actions in different ways. On grounds of maintaining motivated boundaries, a theory of action should not arbitrarily require one manner of participating in one's action any more than it should arbitrarily require one manner of control or one manner of imbuing purpose. A theory of action should instead recognize the pluralism of manifestations of the agent participation feature of intentional action.

A final comment: this challenge, as well as the challenge to Concurrent Control in the previous section, might seem at odds with Condition (2) of Causal Closure, in particular, with the assumption that the intention to ϕ persist through the movement. Indeed, if an agent can participate in and control their movement in a way that suffices for intentional action solely in virtue of what they do prior to the movement, what motivation is there to require that the intention persist through the movement? The straightforward response is that Causal Closure spells out mere sufficient conditions for intentional action. Thus, perhaps a persisting intention is not strictly required for one to use a productive means to intentional action—perhaps one might even be able to intentionally act while dead or in a coma (see Footnote 17). However, I would rather not settle these issues here, and I do not have to given my strategy of sufficiency. The more substantive response is that though I think the properties of the agent while the movement is occurring are not as crucial as some think to fixing whether the movement is an action, I am not committed to there being *no* requirements on the agent at the time of the movement. Perhaps that the movement is accompanied by an intention—or at least some

representational state—is one such minimal requirement.

This concludes the present defense of Causal Closure. I finish by showing how the progress we have made in identifying the means we can take to nonbasic action allows us to see more clearly the extent of our capacity for intentional mental action.

7. MENTAL ACTION VIA PRODUCTIVE MEANS

There is much disagreement about the extent to which we can perform intentional mental actions. This debate itself is of foundational importance to a number of topics, including the ethics of belief, epistemic normativity, and epistemic responsibility. Indeed, asking ethical questions about our mental lives, placing normative requirements on mental states like beliefs, decisions, and intentions, and holding people responsible for their mental behaviors are all extremely natural once we recognize that much of mental life falls squarely within the realm of intentional action.

On one side of the debate are those who ascribe to what I take to be the commonsense thought that we act intentionally with our minds all the time. One might intentionally calculate a large sum, intentionally decide where to go for dinner, or intentionally recall one's friend's birthday. On the other side are the mental action skeptics who question the extent to which we can do things with our minds in the way we can do things with our bodies.³⁹ A source of the challenge is that when we go to do something with our minds like judge whether a proposition is true, decide on a best course of action, or recall the last song we heard, all we seem to be able to do is get our minds into a particular state and hope that doing so results in the desired outcome. As Strawson (2003) puts it:

No doubt there are other such preparatory, ground-setting, tuning, retuning, shepherding, active moves or intentional initiations. But action, in thinking, really goes no further than this. The rest is waiting, seeing if anything happens, waiting for content to come to mind, for the 'natural causality of reason' to operate in one. (p. 232)

Those like Strawson who are skeptical of vast mental agency presuppose that there is an important distinction between intentionally doing something and intentionally bringing it about that one do that thing. With this presupposition in the background, the skeptic claims that it is because we are only capable of intentionally bringing about mental movements like judgments and decisions that we have limited mental agency. And the argument that we are only capable of intentionally bringing about mental movements like judgments and decisions rests squarely on Necessity of Constitutive Means.

Indeed, suppose that you intend to judge whether it is raining outside. How would you execute your intention? Well, it seems like you cannot judge as a basic action like you can raise your arm or wiggle your finger. Instead, one judges *by* doing other things intentionally, e.g., seeking out reasons that bear on the question at hand. But if judging is a nonbasic action, then what would be your means to judging whether it is raining outside? Here is a thought: you would walk over to the window and look outside with the intention of making a judgment regarding the weather. The problem with this

³⁹Strawson (2003) ascribes to a wide-reaching skepticism about mental action. But there are more local forms of skepticism, e.g., about reasoning (e.g., Owens, 2000; Kornblith, 2012; Richard, 2019), judging (see the large literature on doxastic involuntarism), remembering (e.g., Mele, 2009), and deciding (e.g., Wu, 2013).

reply, it is said, is that you have failed to offer steps that constitute a judgment. While it is controversial exactly what a judgment is, surely a walking and a looking do not together constitute one. Thus, it seems as if all you have done is offer a way to *cause yourself* to judge or *produce in yourself* a judgment; you have yet to say how you will *judge*. And if there is in fact no means you can intentionally take that would constitute your judging—so it is not just a lack of creativity on your part—then, according to Necessity of Constitutive Means, you cannot intentionally judge whether it is raining outside as a nonbasic action either.⁴⁰ All you can do as an intentional action is *bring it about* that you judge whether it is raining outside; you cannot intentionally judge whether it is raining outside.⁴¹

The relevance of Causal Closure should now be clear. Even mental action skeptics tend to admit that we can take productive means to mental movements like judging, deciding, and remembering and that we can do so in line with Causal Closure.⁴² When we do, the mental movement that results—the judgment, the decision, or the remembering—is an intentional action for all the reasons that Ananya’s kick is an intentional action: it is attributable to the agent, intended,⁴³ voluntary, controlled, purposeful, and includes the agent as a participant. A detailed discussion of this application of Causal Closure to mental action will have to wait, but at this point we have enough to appreciate the promise that Causal Closure shows in undermining mental action skepticism. The principle establishes that the way we often judge, decide, remember, and so on—that is, via productive means—is in fact a way to perform a (nonbasic) intentional action.

8. CONCLUSION

The defender of Necessity of Constitutive Means is at this point left with a challenge: find a feature that is essential to intentional action and rules out taking a productive means to intentional action. Until this challenge is met, it looks as if we have very good reason to make room for productive means and thus recognize more fully the pluralism of ways that we exercise our capacity for nonbasic intentional action.

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⁴⁰Peacocke (ms) argues that, in fact, there are constitutive means one can intentionally take to judging. My discussion of the dilemma here owes much to her discussion of it.

⁴¹As another example, it is one thing to intentionally deliberate toward a decision and another to intentionally decide (indeed, the latter is a causal result of the former). The worry is that one cannot decide without doing anything else, and there seems to be no means one can intentionally take that would constitute a decision. Thus, we have the same “problem of means” as in the judgment case. For reasons to doubt that decisions are intentional actions as well as a response to such doubts, see Shepherd (2015). Shepherd argues that decision is a kind of basic action, thereby taking a different direction in tackling the problem of means than I do here.

⁴²E.g., Strawson, 2003; Setiya, 2008; Mele, 2009; Hieronymi, 2011 (though Hieronymi denies that we can intend to form a belief that *p*). See also Vermaire (2021) for discussion of how widespread this assumption is in the case of forming a belief.

⁴³That we can intend purported mental actions requires argument, of course.

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