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The Divisibility of Basic Actions

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Abstract

The notion of basic action has recently come under attack based on the idea that any putative basic action can always be divided into more basic sub-actions. In this paper it is argued that this criticism ignores a key aspect of the idea of basic action, namely, the 'anything else' part of the idea that basic actions are not done by doing anything else. This aspect is clarified, and it is argued that doing the sub-actions of which a putative basic action consists does not amount to doing something different from doing that putative basic action.

1. A recent criticism of basic action

The concept of basic action is often thought to emerge from the observation that frequently when we do certain things, we do them by doing other things, for instance, we turn on a light by flipping a switch. It is then argued that not all actions can be like this. It cannot be that for everything we do, we do it through doing another thing, since then we would need to do an infinite number of things to get anything done. So, the argument goes, there must be things we do 'directly', not as an outcome of doing any other thing, and these 'basic actions' lie at the root of everything we do. Thus the concept was initially introduced to halt an apparently vicious regress (Danto 1965: 141-42; 1979: 471), and it has been used frequently in many philosophical theories and discussions since then. However, recently some have forcefully argued that basic actions do not exist at all, based on the idea that any putative basic action is divisible into more basic 'sub-actions'. This paper presents a response to this challenge that objects that it overlooks a key aspect of the definition of basic action. The challenge, however, does us a service by forcing us to clarify this aspect.

There are, of course, different conceptions and definitions of basic action in the literature, and the one under consideration here is what's often called the notion of a teleologically basic (token) action. This is the idea, as described in *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, of an (intentional) action 'which I just do, but not by doing anything else' (Blackburn 2005: 35. Also see Sandis 2010: 12; Stout 2005: 138), and the 'by' in this sentence can be understood as short for 'by means of'. Teleology, though, is perhaps associated more with expressions like 'in order to' or 'for the sake of'. So the sense of 'by (means of)' relevant here may be that which is the converse of '(in order) to' (see Lavin 2013: 275; 2016: 621), which is to say, those cases of '*S V*-ed by *U*-ing' where it is also true that '*S U*-ed to *V*' (e.g., 'She turned on the light by flipping the switch' / 'She flipped the switch to turn on the light'). To illustrate, I may get rid of a fly by (means of)

waving my hand / wave my hand (in order) to get rid of a fly, which would mean that getting rid of the fly was not a basic action of mine. But if waving my hand was not something I did by doing some other thing, it would be a basic action.¹

Incidentally, philosophers espousing a ‘course-grained’ theory of act individuation would regard my waving my hand and my getting rid of the fly as the same action differently described. They might prefer to speak of basic and non-basic *descriptions* of the one action, or basic and non-basic *things done* with the one action (see Hornsby 1980: 68-69). It is more common for philosophers, when discussing such cases, to speak of basic and non-basic actions however, and I will follow this practice here. I do not mean to be partisan in doing this, and everything here said in the one way could be said in the other.

The criticism of basic action we will examine has been expressed recently by both Douglas Lavin (2013) and Michael Thompson (2008), though it has been known about since at least 1970 (see Rescher 1970). It starts from the observation that any putative basic action will progress over time and will consist of parts or stages. Thompson considers the intentional action of himself pushing a stone from α to ω . In the process he pushes it to β , a point about halfway between α and ω . And how can we deny, he asks, that his pushing it to β was something he did intentionally, and in order to get it to ω ? From this he draws a general lesson: ‘But, now, every bodily movement that is intentional under what might be called a “bodily movement description” takes a limb from one kinaesthetically given position to another: why, then, shouldn’t we isolate some such initial segment in every such case?’ (2008: 107-8).

Similarly, Lavin expresses the objection (which is not the only criticism he makes of basic action, but is, I believe, the central one) in general terms like this:

The general challenge here is to take some actual intentional action A , an action performed on a particular occasion, and to point to one of its basic parts. The difficulty is to find a describable part of A , A^* , which is something the agent did intentionally in order to do A , but which does not itself resolve into further sub-actions that the agent did intentionally in order to do A^* (Lavin 2013: 276).

It does not seem difficult to find examples of actions that occur in an instant, such as many mental actions like imagining red, starting and stopping doing something, and more. These authors acknowledge this (so their denial of basic actions is qualified), but they regard these as secondary, dependent or non-paradigmatic cases of action (Lavin 2013: note 35; Thompson 2008: 106). Indeed, if only actions with no duration could be basic, the theoretical importance of the notion would be greatly diminished, if not nullified. It would be of no use, for instance, in halting the mentioned regress. (No doubt, Lavin and Thompson would not think that there is any vicious regress to worry about here. They would, presumably, regard the idea that every

¹ There has been some disagreement about which sorts of actions satisfy this definition and are the truly ‘basic’ ones, and readers may substitute their own favourite examples.

action with duration can be ‘resolved into sub-actions’ as no more problematic than the idea that every length of space can be resolved into ‘sub-lengths’.)

Most responses to this criticism have taken the form of arguing that the identified ‘sub-actions’ lack some characteristic that is necessary for them to be genuine actions. Kieran Setiya (2012: 288-89), for instance, argues that Thompson pushing the stone to β was not an intentional action because he did not *care* that it go through β ; his desire was that it be at ω . And since ‘intention is desiderative or motivating’ (289), that is, if something is done intentionally, the subject must have desired to do it, moving the stone to β was not an intentional action. It was only a ‘foreseen consequence’ of it, and not the ‘means to an end’ (ibid.). Nicholas Rescher (1970) would argue that his pushing it to β was not an action because it was (probably) not on his mind, his mind being on the end goal of reaching ω , and similarly, Jane Martin would argue that this was not an action if the agent was not attending to it (1972: 65. See also the contributions by Santiago Amaya and Kim Frost in Altshuler and Sigrist 2016). These responses depend on what we take the criteria of action to be, and no more will be said about them here. Instead, I will present a different kind of response, one that can grant that the identified parts of which a putative basic action consists are genuine actions. This response charges that the criticism overlooks a key aspect of the definition of basic action, though this aspect will first need to be clarified.

2. Doing Anything Else

According to the standard definition, basic actions are not done by doing *anything else*.² How can we understand this ‘doing anything else’ condition, and know when it is satisfied? I propose the following test. Where S does V by doing U , doing U counts as doing something else to doing V if and only if ‘ S did U ’ does not entail ‘ S did V ’. For if U -ing entailed V -ing, it would hardly be distinct from V -ing. It would not amount to doing anything different from V -ing.

To see the consequences of this, consider some paradigm cases of non-basic action, such as where I get rid of a fly by waving my hand. Since waving a hand does not entail getting rid of a fly, it counts, on this proposal, as a distinct ‘doing’ from the latter. Similarly, in the case of turning on a light by flipping a switch, since flipping a switch does not entail turning on a light, turning on the light was done by doing something else. This confirms our expectations that these are both non-basic actions. On the other side, consider an action that we would be inclined to regard as basic: imagining red. Suppose that when I imagined red, the shade of red I imagined was crimson. In that case, I imagined red *by* imagining crimson. So was this non-basic then? Not according to our test: imagining crimson entails imagining red, so although I imagined red by doing something here, this ‘something’ was not a ‘something else’. Thus the claim that imagining red is a

² We cannot, one might argue, simply define a non-basic action as an action done by doing something. For this might make all actions non-basic, since for any action, V , V is done by doing V . It’s unclear, however, whether the ‘by’ relation is reflexive (Richards 1976: 192).

basic action is accommodated by our test. That the test gives us the expected results in these cases suggests, I believe, that it provides a reasonable elucidation of ‘doing anything else’.

Turning now to the sorts of cases at the centre of recent criticisms of basic action (which are bodily movement cases, those supposed paradigms of basic action), let W be my act of waving my hand to $L2$ where the fly was, and divide W into sub-acts X (moving to midpoint $L1$) and Y (continuing to $L2$). Here we might say that I did W by doing X . And certainly, doing X does not entail doing W . But it’s false that I did W just by doing X , since that only got me to $L1$. I did W by doing X and then Y . This is the full explanation. However, doing X and then Y entails doing W ; together they constituted that action. There is no possible world where I do X and Y , but not W . So although it’s true that I did W by doing X and Y , on a natural understanding of ‘doing anything else’ this was not doing anything else. That an action is divisible into teleologically structured parts does not mean that it cannot be basic in the defined sense.³

We see here a case where someone does V by doing U , where ‘ U ’ seems to entail ‘ V ’ because it simply describes the parts that together composed or constituted V . Note that we are looking at a specific type of part-whole relation here: that of the *temporal* parts (stages) of an *event*, and we are saying that the occurrence of all the stages of an event entails the occurrence of the event. Thus, to give another relevant case, we can divide a journey into a first and second half, and then we are saying that the occurrence of the first and second half of the journey entails the occurrence of the journey (indeed, bodily movements might be classed as a kind of journey through space). In another case mentioned, the imagining red by imagining crimson case, U entailed V for a different reason: the U was a determinate of the determinable V . Given that the U fails to be logically distinct from the V in these cases, it seems incorrect to call them cases of doing one thing by doing a *different* thing.

Cases of non-basic action, on the other hand, seem to differ in this respect. When one turns on a light (V) by flipping a switch (U), one succeeds because of a causal relation holding between the switch being flipped and the light turning on. Moreover, causality, on the standard view, is a relation between distinct events, which is why U does not entail V here. Not all cases of non-basic action are based on causality however (Goldman 1970: chap. 2). Expressing agreement by nodding, for instance, is not based on a causal but on a *conventional* association between agreeing and nodding (nodding *signifies* agreement). And yet these causal and conventional associations are similar in that they are both relations between logically/conceptually distinct items, cause and effect, or signifier and signified. Each item can be conceived to exist without the other and can be described independently of the other. So where one does V by doing U ,

³ A reviewer pointed out that I could have decided to just move my hand to $L1$, and then could have decided afresh to move it on to $L2$. In that case there wouldn’t have been an intention to move it from $L0$ to $L2$, so there wouldn’t have been an action of moving it from $L0$ to $L2$. X and Y wouldn’t then entail an act, W , of which they were parts. But then it would have been a different case, since I stipulated that there was a bona fide action, W , of moving my hand from $L0$ to $L2$, of which X and Y were the stages (‘Let W be my act ...’). We should note that the dividing we do here is just an exercise in thought, and doesn’t somehow change the thing that’s divided, unlike the dividing one does with a knife.

U can entail or fail to entail V for a number of different reasons, based on different relations, the composition and determinate-determinable relations on the one side, and the cause-effect and signifier-signified relations on the other (this list might not be exhaustive).

One worry that might arise here is this: with a *non*-basic action such as turning on a light by flipping a switch, isn't flipping the switch also a *part* of turning on the light, just as X was a part of W ? If so, couldn't we construct a parallel argument for this, thus invalidating this way of distinguishing basic from non-basic actions? But we can reasonably deny that flipping a switch is a part (or stage) of the action of turning on a light. For it is not like we need to do something further besides flipping the switch to turn on the light, the way I needed to do something further besides X to do W . Further things had to occur of course, in the electrical circuit specifically, but these were not actions. At any rate, according to our entailment criterion, even if we assume that flipping the switch is a part of turning on the light, to make a parallel argument it would have to combine with the other parts so as to entail turning on a light. It's unclear how we could get it to do that.

Another reply now emerges. According to coarse-grained theories, flipping the switch and turning on the light are the same action. So on this view, doing the former cannot be doing something different to the latter. Recall, however, that for convenience we adopted the fine-grained alternative, according to which these are different actions. If we adopt the coarse-grained view, we should talk about more or less basic descriptions of the one action, or more or less basic things done with it (Hornsby 1980: 68-69). Using the former, we can then distinguish between the cases as follows: 'flipping the switch' and 'turning on the light' are distinct descriptions, with the former not entailing the latter, but ' X and Y ' describes W .

3. A Difficulty

Although the above clarification of 'doing anything else' helps us to counter Lavin's and Thompson's criticism, it might also expose a problem with this definition of basic action. Consider the action of doing a tai chi kata, or any other martial arts kata, which consists of a series of simple physical motions that seem like basic actions in themselves. It is correct to say that one does the kata *by* doing those motions. But does doing those motions count as doing something else? Is it doing something different from doing the kata? Certainly, each step or motion considered individually is different from the kata. The individual motions are not the kata but are parts of it. But one has not done the kata until one has done *all* those motions together, and doing them all *entails* doing the kata; the kata is defined in terms of doing those motions. Thus doing the motions is not 'doing something else'. So doing the kata seems to be, by our assumptions, a basic action (see Brand 1968: 188, who makes a similar point).

But is it acceptable to regard an action as complex and difficult as a kata performance as a basic action? The trouble is that this seems to go against the spirit of the notion, since basic actions were supposed to be simple (Danto 1965: 147), not in the sense of not being comprised of any component events, but in the

sense of having no components that are individual actions themselves (Martin 1972: 66-67; Weil and Thalberg 1974: 111).

In fact, there seems to be at least two kinds of complexity with actions. The first kind we see in the example of turning on a light, which one does by flipping a switch, which one does by pushing one's finger forward. Call this 'vertical complexity'. The other is the complexity we see in actions involving sequential steps, as with a kata performance. Call this 'horizontal complexity'. The 'not by doing anything else' phrase was intended to rule out vertical complexity, but it allows horizontal complexity.⁴ If a definition of basic action is desired which ensures both horizontal and vertical simplicity, it might have to differ from the standard one. Perhaps it would need to be conjunctive, as with: an action is basic iff it is not done by doing something else and does not have individual actions as parts (for another proposal that might work see Ruben 2003: 65).

In conclusion, recent criticism of basic action has exploited the 'by' part of its definition while neglecting the 'anything else' part. Paying proper attention to the latter can show us how the notion can survive this attack, though it also reveals some possible defects with that definition⁵, defects that, I believe, are not beyond repair.⁶

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⁴ There is another, separate problem with the standard definition. One can undress in order to have a shower / shower by undressing, then ..., but the relation between undressing and showering is very different from the relation between flipping a switch and turning on a light, or doing a kata and doing a motion within the kata. Undressing is a preparatory action for the later, distinct action of showering. The 'by' or 'in order to' locutions do not seem to distinguish these cases.

⁵ Whether the mentioned feature is a defect will depend on what one wants the concept of basic action to do. If one simply wants it to rule out vertical complexity, this feature will not be seen as a defect.

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