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Reply to 'attempts': a non-davidsonian account of trying sentences

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Abstract
In various of my writings, both in Philosophical Studies and elsewhere, I have argued that an account of trying sentences is available that does not require quantification over alleged attempts or tryings. In particular, adverbial modification in such sentences can be dealt with, without quantification over any such particulars. In 'Attempts', Jonathan D. Payton (Payton, 2021) has sought to dispute my claim. In this paper, I consider his claims and reply to them. I believe that my account withstands such scrutiny. In what follows, I refer to my book as 'MA', in giving page numbers to guide the reader. 'Payton' always refers to 'Payton 2021'.

In various writings, I have argued that there are no trying particulars, whether these are meant to be mental or physical items, and whether one categorises them as states (if these are particulars), events, or processes (Ruben, 2013, 2015, 2016, 2018). I think that the best construal of trying sentences does not force us to quantify over such things. I accepted, at least for the sake of argument, the plausibility of Davidsonian arguments for the existence of events: sentences with appropriate verbs which take an adverbial qualification are typically to be construed as sentences about events of which the adjective corresponding to the adverb is true. For example, 'he opened the door suddenly' can be understood as 'there was an opening of the door by him, and the opening was sudden'. There are all sorts of bells and whistles to this account, but there is no need to pursue any of those finer points here.

But I resist the idea that 'he tried to open the door suddenly' should be understood similarly. That is, I don't think that 'he tried to open the door suddenly' should be understood as 'there was a trying to open the door by him and the trying was sudden' or anything similar that involves a quantification over a trying. As an alternative, I have developed a (non-material) conditional theory of trying (the CTT): the truth of

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a trying sentence is to be understood as the truth of a certain subjunctive conditional statement. Again, disregarding some essential bells and whistles, 'he tried to open the door' is understood as 'if certain conditions C obtain, he will have succeeded in opening the door.' I have spilled much ink in arguing what is to be included in conditions C and what is not to be so included, but for brevity's sake, I'll follow Payton's practice in summing them all up simply as 'conditions C'. Sometimes, of course, trying sentences are themselves embedded in larger contexts, for example as the antecedent or as the consequent of another conditional statement. Other than the perceptual case which I discuss below, I don't consider the extension of my account to cover other such cases. Although the extension is non-trivial, I believe it can be done.

For the record, I also offer a very similar account for causal statements, which is much less controversial (Ruben, 2018, Chap. 7). That is, if the event c quickly causes the event e, I don't think that commits us to there being three events, c, e, and the causing of c by e which was quick. I find it odd that this last claim about causal sentences seems so obviously right, but the similar claim about trying sentences seems to generate much more dissent.

In his 'Attempts', Payton offers two principal arguments against the CTT, and thinks that the Davidsonian approach to trying sentences is the only candidate left standing. Payton's principal arguments against the CTT concern (A) the treatment of perceptual locutions and (B) the alleged inability of the CCT to deal with trying sentences taking (what he calls) narrow scope. Both of his two principal arguments concern the extent to which I can allow action to play any role in my account of trying. In this reply, I defend the CTT against his two arguments, (A) and (B), and also discuss a third issue, (C), that he raises in the course of his discussion, namely his understanding of the Causal Theory of Action, as his way in which to show the compatibility of the Davidsonian approach with the acceptance of naked trying. I conclude by raising a fourth problem, (D), with the CTT that Payton does not raise, and I try (no pun intended) to answer that problem as well. In (A) and (B), I defend my account from Payton's criticisms. In (C), I turn the tables and raise a problem for him. In (D), I reply to a criticism of my account made elsewhere by Helen Steward.

Naked trying is a topic that arises in several places in my work and in Payton's criticism. A naked trying occurs when someone tries to do something but no action whatsoever ensues. No doubt something goes on in the agent's brain, but those brain or other neurological events are not actions. That such going-on occurs is a deep empirical truth about humans; it is not a metaphysically necessary truth (although nothing I say in the book or in this reply depends on that last view).

William James described two such cases: Landry's patient and Professor Strumpell's 'wonderful anaesthetic boy'. If the agent's efferent nervous system is incapacitated, all that may happen is that certain brain activity occurs. Contemporary scientific literature confirms this possibility.[1] I have argued the case extensively elsewhere and in any event this is something about which Payton and I (and many others) agree: there are cases of naked trying and any plausible account of trying must make room for this phenomenon.

[1] James (1950); Jesse Preston and Daniel Wegner (2008); Gandevia (1982); Jeannerod (1995).

(A) Perceptual locutions: First, Payton challenges me to explain how the CTT would deal with certain perceptual locutions. On his Davidsonian view, 'Charlie saw Alice kiss Beth' concerns two events: there occurred two events; e2 was a kissing of Beth by Alice and e1 was a seeing by Charlie of e1. Then, moving to the perceptual sentences about trying, he argues that 'Charlie saw Alice trying to kiss Beth' is best understood as 'There occurred two events, e2 was a trying by Alice to kiss Beth, and e1 was a seeing of e2 by Charlie.' On my theory, this account is unacceptable, because it quantifies over a trying. I haven't explicitly discussed perceptual trying sentences before, but I can't accept the use any quantification over tryings for those perceptual trying sentences either.

Consider: (1) Charlie saw (or, heard) Alice try to kiss Beth.

Payton imagines that I might try to deal with perceptual trying sentences like the one above by making a person the object of perception, since nothing else seems available. So, for (1) to be true, on that proposal, it must be true that Charlie saw Alice and that Alice was trying to kiss Beth.

Payton notes two problems that would arise from such an approach:

(First Problem)

Consider: (2) Charlie saw Alice try to kiss Beth and David saw it too.

If 'it' refers back to Alice, that is odd. It should be 'her' instead of 'it'. Payton thinks that 'it' refers back to Alice's trying. How would I explain the impersonal 'it'?

(Second Problem) Construing the perceptual trying sentence as one about Charlie seeing Alice would get the truth conditions wrong. Charlie can see Alice as she tried to kiss Beth without his actually seeing her trying to do so. Imagine that Charlie is under the table and sees only Alice's feet (so he sees Alice by seeing some part of her) but Charlie may fail to see Alice trying to kiss Beth, as that is entirely out of his line of sight. So Charlie's seeing Alice and Alice's trying to kiss Beth are jointly insufficient for Charlie's seeing Alice try to kiss Beth. (Payton makes another suggestion that I might try: Charlie sees neither a person nor an event, but a state of affairs or a fact. I won't discuss that as I'm not tempted in the slightest to go down that path).

But I think the solution is more straightforward. Payton doesn't consider the ways in which the CTT can also make use of actions other than as alleged tryings. I think that the right away to construe the perceptual trying sentences (1) and (2) is not as sentences about Charlie (and David) seeing a person, but Charlie (and David) seeing an action.

'See' has both an intensional and an extensional use.[2] Could Aristotle have seen a cyclotron? He might not have any clue about what he was seeing, even if in fact that is what was before him and was in his visual field. If 'P's seeing the F' requires that P knows or believes that what he is seeing is an F, then (3) below is the analysis that I am proposing. (This is often caught more explicitly by the 'sees that…' locution.) If 'P's seeing the F' does not entail that P has any understanding of what he is seeing,

[2] Anscombe (1965),'The Intentionality of Sensation: A Grammatical Feature', in R.J., Butler, Analytic Philosophy, second series, Blackwell, 1965, 158–180; Dretske, (1969).

then (3*) seems the right analysis. On (3*), Charlie might have seen Alice trying to kiss Beth, but remain unaware that that is what she was trying to do.[3]

(3) Charlie saw Alice trying to kiss Beth [or: and David saw it too] (LHS)[4] iff there is some action of Alice's that Charlie sees [or: both Charlie and David see] such that either (a) it is a kissing, which Charlie recognises [or: Charlie and David recognise] as a kissing or (b) it is an action that Alice believes is a means to the kissing, and that Alice does because of her belief and (c) Charlie believes [or: Charlie and David believe] that Alice believes this.

(3*) Charlie saw Alice trying to kiss Beth [or: and David saw it too] (LHS) iff there is some action of Alice's that Charlie sees [or both Charlie and David see], such that either (a) it is a kissing or (b) it is an action that Alice believes is a means to the kissing, and that Alice does because of her belief. (RHS).

If Charlie is under the table, perhaps he only sees Alice bending forward from the waist to give the kiss. But if Charlie, when under the table, sees no such action at all of Alice's, then he cannot be said to be seeing Alice trying to kiss Beth. He might see Alice all right, but not her trying to kiss Beth. So when Charlie is under the table, the missing ingredient for Charlie's seeing Alice trying to kiss Beth is one of Alice's actions, not Alice herself, and certainly not an alleged trying.

Payton must think that this obvious reply is not available to me, because he doesn't even mention it as a possible rejoinder on my behalf. Why? Since I have rejected the physical action theory of trying (the view that trying can be identified with some physical action the agent does when he tries), Payton might claim that I am not entitled to the right-hand side of (3) or (3*) as an analysis of the perceptual trying sentence. But does (3) or (3*) presuppose the physical action theory of trying? No. The requirement for there to be some action that Charlie sees when he sees Alice trying to kiss Beth is dictated by the perceptual verb, 'to see', not by the verb, 'to try'. When one sees someone trying to do something, there must be an action to be seen, not because all trying involves action (it doesn't, because of naked trying) but because if there were no action, seeing someone try in such circumstances would be impossible, as there would be nothing to be seen.[5]

In the case of naked trying (no action whatever), the RHS of (3) and (3*) are of course false (there is no such action, etc.), but then so is the LHS of (3) and (3*) (it is false that someone saw someone try to do something). Charlie might still see Alice of course, but not her trying to do anything, whether kiss Beth or anything else. It isn't true in all cases of trying that there will be an action, but those are the very cases in

[3] I accept the Ubiquity of Trying Thesis, so if someone sees A kissing B, it follows that that person sees A trying to kiss B. See my MA, 155–157, and passim.

[4] Hereafter, 'LHS' and 'RHS' stands for left-hand side and right-hand side, respectively.

[5] One might see that someone is trying by observing certain non-actional clues (for instance, knowing that the person is the subject of an experiment, that he has been told to try, and that he is wrinkling his face in a way which is typical of someone expending effort) and from those clues infer that he is trying. Seeing that someone is trying seems different from seeing someone trying. But still the point remains: there must be something to be seen, and if all of those non-actional clues, as well as any action, are missing in a case of naked trying, it is simply false that one can see the person trying. I have not emended (3) or (3*) to cover this possibility, in order to keep them relatively simple, but such an emendation should be straightforward.

which we also can't see anyone try to act in any way either (but see fn. 5). Giving (3) and (3*) this account does not force us to offer an account of 'Alice tried to kiss Beth' (no perceptual verb) that mentions the occurrence of any action.

This reply to the Second Problem also deals with the First Problem. 'it' refers to the action that Charlie sees, if there is one, when Alice tries to kiss Beth, and not to Alice.

(B) Adverbs taking Narrow Scope. Payton says that the second problem the CTT encounters, (and this is his main complaint against the theory), is its inability to deal fully with mode adverbs: 'Ruben has a problem accounting for the occurrence of adverbs outside the scope of 'try',' (Payton, 374) i.e., problems with (what Payton calls) narrow scope readings.

Some mode adverbs are part of the content of what someone tries to do: Alice may try to open the door noisily, so that if she opens it quietly, she has failed in what she tried to do. This use of the adverb qualifies the verb inside the context governed by 'trying'. In this case, she is aiming for a noisy opening. Payton calls it 'the wide scope reading', because 'try' takes scope over both the verb (what the agent tried to do) and the adverb (what that which she tried to do was like). Other mode adverbs are narrow scope, because 'try' takes scope over the verb (what the agent tried to do) but not over the adverb. In that case, the 'noisily' is telling us something about what she actually did, not something about the type of opening at which she was aiming (and indeed may have never done).

Consider:

(4) Alice tried to open the door noisily.

How do I account for the narrow scope reading of (4)? '….she actually made noise while trying to open the door' (Payton, 375), even when she did not succeed in opening it? She wasn't aiming at trying to open the door noisily; she was just trying to open the door. and it was her attempt, so to speak, that made the noise. But how can I explain this, since the noun, 'attempt', is not available to me, any more than 'a trying' is?

Sometimes an adverb like 'noisily' may genuinely modify the subject, Alice. It may be that she was noisy when or as she tried to open the door. Suppose she was singing a song loudly while she was trying to open the door. Payton says that this would get the truth conditions of (4) wrong, because 'it's possible for Alice to be noisy when she opens the door, even though she doesn't open the door noisily.' I agree. So, Payton thinks that the following is false:

(5) Alice tried to open the door noisily (LHS) iff Alice was noisy when she tried to open the door (RHS).

Everything Alice needed to do in order to open the door, she might have done quietly (false LHS), but as she did those things she also sang loudly to herself (true RHS).

I don't think that this is the best way of making Payton's point. I don't think it can be false that Alice tried to open the door nosily when it was only Alice herself who was noisy when she tried to open the door. But that isn't the main point. I accept the intuition behind Payton's criticism, but I'd prefer to make it differently. I think that there are two different ways in which to read (4): 'Alice tried to open the door noisily' (both narrow scope):

(4a) Alice was noisy (e.g., singing loudly) at the same time as she tried to open the door.

(4b) Something that Alice needed to do in order to open the door was noisy (maybe turning the key in the lock).

I think 'Alice tried to open the door noisily' is or can be true in either case. But we need to distinguish the two cases. Payton says that on the narrow scope reading of (5) 'Beth heard Alice try to open the door noisily', (5*) does not follow:

(5*) Beth heard Alice try to open the door.

It depends on whether a construal of (5) as in (4a) or in (4b) is in play. If 'Alice tried to open the door noisily' is construed as (4a), (5*) does not follow from (5). Beth may have heard loudmouth Alice alright, but not heard her trying to open the door. But given the interpretation of (4b), (5*) does follow from (5).

(4a) Take this interpretation of (4) first. Payton suggests that noisily' can't be a phrase adverb, as 'it was noisy of Alice' is of dubious coherence. That seems right, but whether or not 'noisily' can be a phrase adverb, (4a) can be captured in a more straightforward way, using an adjective attributable directly to Alice: There is some time t such that Alice was trying to open the door at t and Alice was being noisy at t. (Even if 'noisily' isn't a phrase adverb, many other adverbs can be: it was cruel of Alice, it was brave of Alice, it was foolish of Alice, and so on.) So if that is what (4) means, I can capture the meaning in this way, either as a phrase adverb or as an adjective, both attaching directly to Alice.

(4b) The significant question is whether I have the resources to really disambiguate the two narrow scope cases I have distinguished and to capture the meaning of (4b). Payton mentions that I have another possibility, and indeed I do: something Alice did in trying to open the door was noisy (Payton, 377). He proposes on my behalf: 'Alice did something which, had she been in condition C, would have resulted in an intentional door-opening, and the event of her doing this was noisy.'

I would propose a slight modification of what Payton offers me:

(6) Alice tried to open the door noisily [narrow scope, understood as (4b)] iff Alice G-ed, which, had she been in condition C, would have either have resulted in, or been identical to, her intentional opening of the door, and her G-ing was noisy.

The adverbial qualification attaches to that action, Alice's G-ing, which either is identical to, or is a means to, what she intends to do. So this narrow scope reading, (4b), covers the case of both basic and non-basic action.

It is important to note that (6) is only meant to cover cases in which a mode adverb is qualifying 'trying'. It is NOT meant to be relevant to: 'Alice tried to open the door' [no adverb modifying her action]. The CTT's analysis of that was already given by (roughly):

(7) Alice tried to G iff if Alice were in circumstances C, she would have G-ed intentionally.

(7) is an instance of the (CTT) as originally formulated. Call it 'the basic analysis'. The proposed analysis for (6), which contains the mode adverb on the LHS and which explicitly introduces some by-action on the RHS, does not also force the introduction of some action into the RHS of (7), the basic analysis, so (7) remains compatible with naked trying.

How can we explain why adding a mode adverb to a sentence changes the account given to it in this way? Why does the insertion of a mode adverb change the analysis? Adverbial modifications that 'distribute' in sentences often do so in more complicated ways than any simple extension of the basic analysis would allow. One cannot just add an adverb in both sides of (7). Here is an example:

(8) a football team wins a match iff it scores more goals than does the other side.

Now add 'elegantly' in the LHS: 'a football team wins a match elegantly'. We cannot plug 'elegantly' in any simple way on the RHS and still get a true biconditional. Winning elegantly is not the same as scoring goals elegantly, or scoring more elegant goals than the other side. For 'winning elegantly', we need a much more complex sentence on the RHS. The point is that the CTT allows for a different account of (6) (with the adverbial qualification), which can't necessarily be obtained by simply sticking the adverb as an 'extra' into both sides of (7).

Payton considers such a proposal but thinks there are two problems for me, were I to accept something like (6):

Problem 1 'It's no longer clear why the CTT avoids a commitment to attempts.' On this view, 'Why don't these [by-acts] count as attempts?'

I don't accept that these by-acts count as attempts and nothing in (6) so commits me. I don't accept that these acts can be identified as attempts, because I hold that there are naked tryings, i.e., people try to do things in spite of there being no actions whatever that they do. Like Payton, I want the same account of trying to work both for naked and dressed cases of trying.

Problem 2 Which takes us to Payton 's main argument against my acceptance of a solution like (6). Payton says that (6) is incompatible with the possibility of naked trying. Payton thinks that I might reply by holding that 'trying sentences are ambiguous: on one reading….they don't report the occurrence of by-acts; on another reading….they do. In cases of naked trying 'x tried to P' is to be evaluated on the first reading, and so it isn't falsified by the absence of a by-act' (Payton, 378).

Payton can easily dismiss this imagined reply. The same unambiguous sentence (e.g., 'x tried to raise his arm') cannot sometimes be given one account and sometimes another, depending on whether the case is one of naked trying or not. I can say, unambiguously, that 'x tried to A' without knowing whether the trying was accompanied or not by any action, whether the trying was naked or not.

His suggestion would not be the reply I want to offer. My reply is similar to the one I offered about perception, and follows on from my remarks immediately above. On the CTT, x tried to G iff if x were in circumstances C, x would have G-ed intentionally. No by-action is required, so the (CTT) is consistent with naked trying. But if the analysis is of 'x tried to G F-ly' (modulo conditions to be specified), then it is the introduction of that adverb, 'F-ly' that introduces the requirement for an action in the analysis. This is in line with my solution to the last problem. However, a case in which someone tries to do something F-ly (e.g., noisily) can't be a case of naked trying. There must be some action to which 'F' ('noisy') attaches. It is the insertion of

'F-ly' (when it meets certain further requirements) that introduces the action requirement, in a way not dissimilar to the way in which 'perceive' did in 'x perceived y's trying to G.'[6]

A counterexample to (6) could only arise in the following circumstances: (a) some trying sentence with 'F-ly' is true; (b) the adverb is a mode adverb with narrow scope; (c) the mode adverb can only be construed as ascribing a property to an action; (d) the case is a case of naked trying (so 'F-ly' cannot be explained as attaching to some action). Nothing in what I have proposed commits me to such a case. Here's why.

Consider 'noisily'. If Alice herself isn't noisy, and nothing she does is noisy, either because she does nothing at all (the naked case) or because nothing that she does makes a noise, I cannot imagine how it could be true that Alice noisily opened the door (under either narrow-scope interpretation (4a) or (4b)). So in a case of naked trying, (6) is true, at least for the case of 'noisily', because both the LHS and the RHS are both false. It's not true that she tried to open the door nosily and it's not true that there was some action which she tried to do or by which she tried to do it which was noisy. I'm not presuming that any single trying sentence receives a different analysis, as Payton suggests, depending on whether the trying is naked or not. I'm assuming that certain mode adverbs introduce a further action requirement that is not there in the case in which there is no adverbial modification.

So much for 'noisily. But there are other mode adverbs which can also take narrow scope. If any of them could be true of what Alice tried to do, and the case be one of naked trying, then (6) could be false. It would have a true LHS and a false RHS.

In the book, I speculate that the only adverbial qualifications of various naked tryings will be: at a place, at a time, and manner, speed, frequency, and degree (MA, 82–85). All of them can be understood as not ascribing a property to a trying. I proposed that adverbs of time and place be dealt with in the following way. Consider 'Alice tried to butter the toast in the bathroom at noon' (I confess never having understood why anyone would go to the bathroom to butter their toast). Adverbial qualifications of place can be understood as really assigning a place to the agent, not to a trying. Alice was in the bathroom when she tried to butter the toast.

Adverbial qualifications of time are trickier; in the book, I suggest four ways in which they might be handled. Each of the ways is accompanied by some serious metaphysical baggage, so to that extent my proposal for trying sentences has a cost. Essentially, the idea is that 'at time t' should be construed, not as an adverbial qualification of a trying, but either as a relation, '…tries…at…', with one of its relata ranging over times, or as part of the designation of a time slice of the agent, or as a sentence operator, or as part of the adjective applied to sentences, 'true at t'. I'm agnostic about which commitment to take on, but the point is that there are some options here.

[6] Suppose the patient is hooked up to a noisy scanner. Doesn't a noisy event thereby occur when the patient tries to lift his arm? So has the noisy event, but no action, made it true that the patient tried to lift his arm noisily? It seems to me that if the scanner is noisy when the patient tries to lift his arm, it is not true that the patient tried to lift his arm noisily. That situation would be best described as 'there was a noise when the patient tried to lift his arm'. If it is true that the patient lifted or tried to lift his arm noisily, that tells us something about either the patient or what the patient did, but not about any ambient noise.

What of 'quick', which Payton also discusses? If quick is a phrase adverb, it does genuinely apply to a person, say P, when that person quickly does something: It was quick of P…. But, if it is a mode adverb, and so does not apply directly to P, it should be construed in what I called the temporal relational sense; it must measure the time between two occurrences. As I claimed, 'x tried to G quickly' sometimes reports that the duration between a contextually salient triggering event and some other contextually salient concluding event was relatively short. In the tricky case of naked trying, say, Landry's patient, I claimed that 'quickly' might describe the duration between the triggering event (e.g., the patient's being asked to raise his arm) and the concluding event, the onset of the patient's false token belief that he has raised or is raising his arm. Payton correctly argues that this reply does not generalise, in the sense that even if it worked for this one case, there will be cases for which it won't work. If the concluding event is, in this case, the onset of the patient's false token belief, Payton is correct that there will be cases in which the concluding event can't be the onset of the patient's false token belief. There must be other candidates for the concluding event.

However, I did not intend that my suggestion for this case should generalise. I am only committed to finding some salient triggering and some concluding event in each such case. Payton offers me another option: x's forming the belief that she is trying to raise her arm. I accept Payton 's offer for the example he introduces, but, although Payton agrees that such a proposal is not subject to counterexample, he claims that, assuming that a belief that one is trying always accompanies trying to f, we should expect that if the temporal relational reading of 'quickly' is ever used to report that the onset of this belief was the concluding event, then it should always be used as the concluding event in all cases of trying.

But that does not follow from its use in only one, or a limited number of, cases. Since my proposal for 'quickly', when it is used in this way, was that there would always be some salient concluding event such that the duration between the triggering event and it was short, that allows for different concluding events, just as it allows for different triggering events. It isn't true that if it is ever used, then we should expect that it is always used in that same way. Context will determine which events play these triggering and concluding roles in each case, case-by-case.

(C) The Causal Theory of Action: Payton thinks that his process view of trying (tryings are a process), which he prefers, is compatible with naked trying. I'm not so sure. Payton thinks that tryings are processes that begin in the brain and typically extend outwards, to include muscle contractions, bodily movements, and some of the consequences of those bodily movements when there are some. But, on this view, what does 'x's trying to P' denote in the naked case?

Presumably, it only denotes that part of the process which began in the brain, there being no other part. Payton does say that his view is compatible with, but does not require, that all tryings are actions. He wants to remain neutral on this point. I confess to not really grasping the thought that some tryings could fail to be actions if some other tryings are actions, given the apparent unambiguity of 'try' in both types of context. But what for him is important is that an attempt occurs, not whether an action does.

Payton proposes an interesting alternative: 'The process view is also compatible with the view that naked attempts are actions: you might think that the patient's …

[brain state] is an action [i.e., is an attempt to raise her arm], because it is caused and sustained by the right sort of mental states and events' (Payton, 366, fn.11)). Thus, the trying process which does not continue past the brain might also be an action. This is, as Payton acknowledges, an appeal to the Causal Theory of Action (the CTA). Put aside any doubts you may have about the CTA (I have many; see Ruben 2003). Will appeal to the CTA work in the way in which Payton wants? I don't think so.

Let's call the brain state in question brain state b. The CTA does not just say, in this case for instance, that, in order to count as an action, brain state b must be caused in the right sort of way by the right sorts of mental states and events. That by itself would be insufficient. Here is a standard statement of the CTA.

(Bishop, 1989, 117, somewhat altered and shortened);

x performs an intentional action, a, iff.

1. x is in a complex mental state r;

&2. x's being in r makes it reasonable for x to do a;

&3. x's being in r causes some outcome b;

&4. b instantiates the type of state or event intrinsic to the action a.

There must be a rationality condition, like 2, as well as a causal condition.

Notice that, as in Bishop's formulation above, there is both the action a and the event b, intrinsic to a, such that b is caused and a is rationalised. The event picked out by the intransitive alternate is said to be necessary but not sufficient for the occurrence of the action. The CTA was always formulated, as far as I know, using examples of transitive verbs which have intransitive (note: not just passive voice) forms of the same verb (e.g., 'he moved his finger,' 'his finger moved'). Verbs that have both this transitive and intransitive form are called 'ergative verbs'. The intransitive form is called the intransitive alternate of the transitive form of the action verb. The event denotated by the intransitive alternate is said to be the event intrinsic to the action; his finger's moving is the event intrinsic to his moving of his finger. The mental states both rationalise his moving of his finger and cause the event (the moving of his finger) that is intrinsic to his moving of it.

As far as I am aware, almost no one has discussed the question of how to formulate the CTA in the case of action verbs ('he pushed the cart', 'he pulled the rope') which have no intransitive alternate ('the cart was pushed by him' is just the passive mood formulation of 'he pushed the cart').[7] The CTA is committed to the idea that the mental states cause the event intrinsic to the action, but the idea of an intrinsic event is only well defined for the case of verbs which do have intransitive alternates. The CTA was formulated and is routinely discussed using only action verb examples for which there are obvious intransitive alternates.

Certainly, there are events associated with actions referred to by non-ergative verbs (MA, 178–179). For example, necessarily, if someone runs, or swims, there are some characteristic leg or arm movements. Of course, those leg and arm movements may be necessary but are insufficient for running or swimming (that follows from the idea of an intrinsic event). But could a token action of running or swimming be identified with the event of those leg or arm movements, when caused non-deviantly by rationalising mental states? Here is why not.

[7] An exception is Hornsby 2011, 263–264.

Imagine a person suspended by a crane or in a zero-gravity environment, but entirely unaware of the strange context in which he is. His leg and arm movements might be caused non-deviantly by the right sort of beliefs and desires or intentions. In such a context, those leg movements don't add up to a swimming or a running (but they will add up to his basic action of his moving of his legs or arm). What a genuine intransitive alternate does is to ensure that this problem of context can't arise. What the window's being opened guarantees for his opening of the window (and his legs moving does not guarantee for swimming or running) is that whatever movements of the agent are involved, they will be pertinent to the window's actually being opened, and not just part of some facsimile movements that don't really add up to the opening of a window.

How would the CTA deal with an event like being in brain state b? To revert to Bishop's formulation, x's being in mental state r could certainly cause some outcome brain state b. If trying were an action, it would not have any event intrinsic to it, since 'to try' isn't an ergative verb. Moreover, being in brain state b is not an event intrinsic to any action, in the sense that the CTA needs. Even 'putting oneself into brain state b' won't work, because being in brain state b is not an event intrinsic to putting oneself in brain state b, because 'to put' is also not a verb with an intransitive alternate (Levin, 1993, 111–112).

Putting oneself into brain state b is of course already an action, a mental action, and it could be that certain mental states of an agent, r, cause him to put himself into that state. But they aren't the mental events in virtue of which the event, being in brain state b, could count as the action of putting oneself into brain state b. So I just don't see how appealing to the CTA could be any help at all in showing how those process-like brain goings-on could count as actions or as tryings.

(D) Finally, I want to discuss very briefly a criticism of the CTT that others, but not Payton, have raised.[8] It is this: suppose that the CTT is extensionally adequate. But how could a subjunctive conditional statement offer a credible account of trying?[9] Indeed, isn't the contrary order of explanation more plausible: that an act of trying accounts for and explains why the subjunctive conditional is true? As Helen Steward, in a review of MA, comments, 'one might worry that this way of doing things puts the cart before the horse' (Steward 2018).

I'm not sure exactly what the problem with the CTT is that Steward wishes to identify by her remark. There is a superficial similarity between my account of trying

[8] Steward, 2018.

[9] In the book, I cited two examples of not wholly dissimilar analyses, where a philosophical account of something is offered in terms of subjunctive conditionals: (1) the phenomenalist reduction of physical object sentences to sets of sentences about actual and possible sense data; (2) the compatibilist account of x's choosing to f freely as x's doing something other than f if x had chosen to do something other than f (MA, 121–123). There are other such examples as well: the behaviourist account of mental states, and the counterfactual account of causation, both in terms of subjunctive conditionals. I am assuming that these analyses are intended to be metaphysical and not just making an epistemological point. The intention behind these analyses is to say what the phenomenon in question is. I don't suggest that all of these examples are equally compelling; the idea was only to draw attention to other philosophical analyses of what appear to be categorical claims, in terms of subjunctive conditionals. I mention these other examples only in the spirit of making connections with other metaphysical issues that may help the reader; of course, one could still argue that all of these examples have put the cart before the horse.

sentences and some philosophical treatments of dispositional sentences, for example. The subjunctive trying conditional on the RHS of the CTT seems similar to a canonical description of a disposition (if, in conditions C, x were placed in water, it would dissolve); the LHS of the CTT ('P tries') seems to be similar to a conventional description of a disposition (x is water-soluble). One might be moved by the thought that dispositions do not free-float and require a categorical (micro)basis. If the similarity between dispositions and trying were deep, that might move one to look for the categorical basis for the subjunctive conditional for trying (the RHS). But then the thought suggests itself that x's trying (the LHS) IS the categorical basis for the subjunctive conditional, so that indeed the CTT does put the cart before the horse. It is the LHS of the CTT that illuminates the RHS, and not vice versa, as my account would have it. Perhaps this was Steward's thought.

First, by tying trying to subjunctive conditionals, have I made trying a dispositional concept? I don't think so. The similarity between the tie between conventional and canonical disposition statements on the one hand, and the LHS and RHS of the CTT on the other, is merely superficial. It may be that dispositions are tied to subjunctive conditionals (although this is controversial), but even if they are, not everything tied to a subjunctive conditional is a disposition. Certainly, there are no typical stimulus conditions or manifestations attached to trying as there are for dispositions. Trying is not a disposition, any more than causation or laws of nature are dispositional, based only on their connections with subjunctive conditionals.

Perhaps Steward's thought was that the subjunctive conditional needs a truth-maker, and the obvious candidate is an act of trying. But I think that will lead us up a blind alley. Many truths don't seem to have a truth-maker at all.[10] General truths seem to be one such case; if so, it would not be surprising if subjunctive conditionals were another.

But truth-making aside, there is, to be sure, an issue about what evidence there could be in general for subjunctive conditionals, but this is an epistemological problem for all subjunctive conditionals and presents no special problems for the CTT. I don't understand Steward when she says: '…if Landry would have raised his arm if his arm hadn't been held down, that must be because all the conditions for raising his arm…were already satisfied? And how could those have been satisfied, exactly, in the absence of an event….which we (perhaps) might as well call a trying….?' But trying, on anyone's theory, can't be that which makes conditions C true. On my view, satisfaction of these disparate conditions is part of what must be true if the agent tries. What Steward must mean, I think, is that the evidence for the whole of the subjunctive conditional, the CTT itself, must be an act of trying. That's why she thinks that I've put the cart before the horse.

The evidence for an agent's trying is found in what the agent will or would do in circumstances C, however that is to be obtained. Remember that the subjunctive conditionals that I require for the CTT are not metaphysically necessary truths. They can be false and we could in principle test for this; their antecedents can be true but their consequents false. When that is so, the subject simply has not tried. So I conclude that unless some more specific problem can be identified when the CTT's RHS is taken to

[10] See Milne 2005, 2013.

be an account of its LHS, and not vice versa, I think it's fair to conclude that I've got the horse and the cart in exactly the right order.

As least as far as the dialectic between us goes, since I raise no objections to his alternative Davidsonian account, and assuming that my replies to Payton are successful, we appear to have two accounts of trying, each acceptable: a Davidsonian account and the subjunctive conditional theory (the CTT). Which to choose? I think it would be reasonable to choose the one that is more parsimonious ontologically, all else being equal, and that thought should encourage us to adopt the CTT rather than the Davidsonian alternative. Ontological simplicity is not always easy to assess; for example, we may have to trade off numbers of entities with kinds of entities. But I think it is pretty clear that, by avoiding any trying particulars, the CTT is more ontologically parsimonious to that extent than the Davidsonian theory.

The benefits of the CTT go beyond ontological parsimony. Insofar as the CTT avoids adding trying particulars to our ontology, that is a real gain. We needn't worry about whether such particulars are mental or physical, what causal powers they have, what their mereological properties might be, their spatial and temporal properties, their identity conditions, issues about their reidentification, and so on, because there are no such particulars about which to raise these difficult problems.

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