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Introduction

I intend to use this introduction as a vehicle for situating the topics discussed in this book within a wider philosophical context, and to describe the main ideas in each chapter. This introduction contains no arguments defending or justifying that context or the presuppositions of my discussion (there will be arguments aplenty about other matters in the following chapters). In theology, a distinction is sometimes drawn between apologetic and confessional theological literature. Apologetic literature seeks to defend a point of view to an audience that is outside the circle of believers; it attempts to convince them of something. Confessional theological literature accepts a point of view as given, but then explains and develops it for those inside the tradition, those who have already 'bought in' to the basic assumptions. This Introduction might be thought of as a piece of confessional philosophy, making explicit some of the doxological presuppositions of the book to the already-believers.

Here is that to which I confess: there is something called analytic metaphysics, a philosophical project of establishing both what exists and what it is like. Further, my confession includes the belief that there is a significant role for analytic metaphysics to play in its application to the theory of action (and to the philosophy of social science more generally). I have

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long held this belief about analytic metaphysics and its applications to other areas of philosophy, a belief evidenced by my first book, *Marxism and Materialism* (1977, 1979), by *The Metaphysics of the Social World* (1985) and finally by an earlier book in action theory, *Action and Its Explanation* (2003). Not all philosophers think that there is such a project. I think that there is such a philosophical project and that it is, in the main, an a priori exercise. I'm hardly alone in the belief that it can be applied in action theory. There are many examples of other philosophers who have worked similarly in a more metaphysical tradition in the philosophy of action.[1] Whether I agree with their views or not, I recognise that they are doing, in whole or in part, what I am also trying to do in this book. I admire much of their work.

I can identify at least two stands to the project of analytic metaphysics; the dividing line between them is not sharp. (I'm a big fan of both strands.) The first strand is 'ontological': are there objects independent of minds, simples, complex objects, mereological sums, tropes, universals, sense data, abstract objects, or four-dimensional objects? The main tool of this strand is what we might call 'ratiocination'. Typically, such items are shown to exist or not to exist by a priori argument. It makes no difference that The Man on the Clapham Omnibus has never heard of such things, and so doesn't talk or think thoughts about them. That bus-rider will have heard of tables, chairs, and the like, but a trope, or the mereological sum of two arbitrary objects, will come as news. By that, it might be meant that they do not accord with pre-analytic ontology. If so, the criticism does not move me much. I suppose that other things being equal, such accord would be desirable. But things are never equal, or anyway hardly ever. I believe that philosophy often comes to truths about what exists that are strange to the ears of the uninitiated.

A second strand (call it 'metaphysics proper') attempts to uncover what the entities that we admit into our ontology are like. The aforementioned bus-rider will certainly have heard of action, but he won't necessarily have a view about what an action *is*. He will also have heard that people try to do various things, and that agents cause things to happen, but he won't necessarily have a view about what is involved by what he hears. One reaction that I have encountered to the three main theses of the book,

one on trying, one on the nature of action, and one on causing, is that they are 'implausible'. Again, the criticism does not move me much, unless that charge can be supported by arguments that show that the views are either internally inconsistent or have consequences that are patently false. I can't help but think of Hamlet to Horatio: 'There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy' (Hamlet, 1.5.167–168). That may be true of poor Horatio's philosophy, but evidently not of Hamlet's, nor of mine.

I also intend my discussion in the book to be metaphysical in the following sense. I want to know about actions, causing, and trying, not about the concepts of action, causing, and trying, or about action-, causing-, and trying- sentences, although of course access to knowledge about them must commence with language, commence with thinking about those sentences and concepts, knowing what we say, when and why. I want to explain what I am doing in a somewhat minimalist way in this Introduction, since this question raises profound questions about philosophical method, analysis, logical form, and how analysis and logical form relate. That would be the subject of another book, one that I am not capable of writing.

If one looks at earlier examples of metaphysical analysis-say, what a physical object is or what a social whole is-it is true that philosophers, especially those writing in the middle of the last century, often wrote as if the object of interest is language or concepts. Two striking examples of this are the Appendix to Roderick Chisholm's 1957 *Perceiving*, in which he undertakes to refute phenomenalism, and a well-known article on the relation between the social and the individual by Maurice Mandelbaum (1955). Chisholm's discussion is framed in terms of the logical relations between appearance statements on the one hand and our 'ordinary statements about physical things' on the other (190). Mandelbaum's discussion is framed as being about the reducibility of societal concepts to individual concepts 'without remainder' (223). Mandelbaum speaks interchangeably about concepts and facts. It may be that such writers were influenced by the doctrine of semantic ascent, and that this is reflected by their choice of method and the terms in which they set their metaphysical discussion, but it certainly should not have changed their objectives. After all, there could be two sets of statements, S1 and S2,

such that, although there were no 'translations' of any statement from one set into statements solely from the other set, S1 and S2 were still about the same things. And there can surely be two distinct concepts, C1 and C2, with the same extension or even necessarily with the same extension (the concepts of trilaterality and triangularity are such an example). So irreducibility of concepts and untranslatability of discourses do not tell us all that we want to know about the metaphysical nature of the world.

But what was really of interest to these and other philosophers who discussed ontological issues, rightly or wrongly, in terms of statements or sentences or concepts, was the question of whether there are such things as, e.g., mind-independent physical objects or social wholes, in addition to appearances or individual entities, and their choice of terminology, in terms of statements and concepts, was only the vehicle with which they thought best to get at those ontological issues. It was perhaps part of the philosophical method of that era to pose such questions in the formal rather than in the material mode, as an accompaniment to the idea of semantic ascent. That is speculation on my part. But whether my speculation is sound or not, I have posed the questions as far as I could in the material mode.

So, since this book is about the METAPHYSICS of action (and NOT about the SEMANTICS of action sentences or the CONCEPT of action), I intend that what I am doing to be about trying, acting, and causing, not about the concepts of trying, acting, and causing, nor about any discourse about them. My goal is to reach results about trying and causing (the phenomena) and about acting (the real-life occurrences), about what these 'things' really are.

It is important to stress this, because the extent to which I do discuss issues about sentences, language, grammar, and so on might strike the reader as somehow at odds with what I have just said. It is part of the tradition in which I work to approach metaphysical and ontological questions often by looking at language, but the goal is not the analysis of the assertions or sentences or concepts, but an understanding of the metaphysics and ontology of the human world to which such discourse commits us. In spite of his talking about 'definitions' of knowledge, Gettier (1963) wasn't interested in knowledge-talk or even the concept

of knowledge; he wanted to describe what has to be the case in order for someone to know some proposition p. The objective of the analyses in the book (in Chaps. 4, 5 and 6, for example) are not sentences or statements or discourse or concepts, but what these things are about or true of, even though such discovery typically comes through a careful consideration of the ontic commitments embedded in the sentence. For instance, in Chap. 4, I argue that P tries to F iff (if a certain set of conditions are fulfilled, P acts). (Note that one can say this without switching away from the material to the formal mode.) I have certainly adopted the method of looking at language as a way to uncovering metaphysical truths; two good examples are the attention I have paid to questions about imperfective aspect and to the topic of causative alternation. But method is one thing, but goal is another. I spend a fair amount of space and energy thinking about imperfectivity, but my interests are not narrowly linguistic insofar as I do this. Behind the contrast of perfective and imperfective verb aspect lies a distinction between actions-in-progress and actions-as-completed, and that latter contrast is a metaphysical one.

The metaphysics or ontology of action (including trying and agent causing) is a very large area. There are many issues with which I do not deal, so I make no claim about the book's completeness and comprehensiveness. For example, I have only a little to say about intentions, and nothing to say about beliefs, desires, and reasons, topics that are mainstays in theories of action. Instead I have selected three ideas on which to focus: trying, doing, and causing, and the metaphysics needed to explain them. Why these three? The three ideas seem to me to form a natural trinity. One might think: first, one tries to do something, then, if lucky, one does that thing, and finally as a result of what one did, the doer causes some things to happen.

In the main, Chaps. 2, 3 and 4 (on trying) are well integrated as a unit, and Chaps. 5, 6 and 7 (on acting and causing) are well integrated as another unit, with Chap. 8 serving as a further bridge by dealing with themes that are treated in both sections. All of the chapters state the main ideas of that chapter and how those ideas relate within one or the other of the two units. But what of the integration between these two units?

Many philosophers think that one of these ideas can be explained in terms of the other. The most salient example is the explanation of the second member of the trinity, doing, in terms of the third, agent causing; it has been argued that to act is for the agent to cause something to happen. Even the first member, trying, has not escaped the same type of explanation, but this time in terms of the second member, doing. No one of course disputes that you can try to do something and fail, so the explanation of the one in terms of the other must be qualified: '...an action (very nearly always) *is* [H's italics] an event of the agent's trying to do something...' (Hornsby 1997, 85). One of the central features of my own account of trying is the way in which I explain trying by a subjunctive conditional whose consequence is about acting.

One of the threads that unite the book's two units is an anti-clutter message: 'don't clutter one's ontology with a kind of thing unless it is really necessary to do so'. Causings and tryings as particulars are clutter. The one-particular view of action, developed in Chaps. 5, 6 and 8, in its own way, also has an anti-clutter message ('one is better than two'). I count myself a great friend of the mind. I think there are such things as token sensations, pains, tickles, itches, afterimages, dreams, and hallucinations. These may or may not be identical to physical particulars (for the record, I do not think that they are but I do not rely on that view anywhere in this book). Still, whatever the metaphysical category into which one places those things, there are such things. However, I have argued elsewhere that even friends of the mind should practice some form of limited birth control (Ruben 1995). Being a friend of the mind does not require complicity in population explosion. In this way, I am a semi-Rylean of sorts. A Rylean approach is justified in some cases but most certainly not in others, not for example in the ones listed in the fifth sentence of this paragraph. But I do doubt whether there are such things as tryings or volitions or causings, for example. Of course I think that it is true that agents want certain things and try to do certain things and cause certain things to happen. So the trick is to give an account of sentences with those verbs that do not require quantifying over tryings or acts of the will or events of causing something to occur. I offer such an account for trying-sentences in Chap. 4, and for causing-sentences in

Chap. 7. (I leave volitions, if they differ from trying, as another project, not to be dealt with here.) But in the end of the day, the book does have these two different foci: trying to act and acting. I think it is fair to say that the two topics are visibly and clearly related.

I have in all cases let the argument take me wherever it seemed to me to go. I feel somewhat diffident, because both the theory of trying and the theory of action that I develop are so non-standard and question so many orthodoxies all at once. I confess to finding this a little strange. But there it is: I believe they are in the main correct (after all, otherwise I would not publish the book). The truth is, as I explained above, sometimes strange, especially in philosophy. But for those readers who cannot quite swallow it whole, perhaps the arguments will at least get them to see things in a different light, and will raise legitimate issues that were not salient on other theories.

One reader of the draft manuscript commented that the text seems to meander. That may be true, but if it does, it arises, I think, from the way in which philosophy of action, on my conception, is so closely intertwined with metaphysics and epistemology (epistemology comes into play in the final chapter). In many cases, I felt I had to say something about the metaphysical and epistemological issues that my views presuppose or entail: supervenience, multiple realisability, existential dependence, and certain issues that arise on Davidson's analysis of action sentences, are cases of this. I can only defend myself by saying that the meandering could have been worse; there are times when I felt that I should have had more to say about something but managed to restrain myself. Examples of this would include my use of Moore's open question argument, the distinction between mass nouns and count nouns, the issue of whether properties are abundant, and the nature of observability, about all of which there is more that I could have said but have not said.

No book in philosophy can do everything. I use, in an absolutely essential way, the idea of a particular, without elaborating on it further. I set out some 'marks' of particularity: countability, pluralisation, individuation, identity, and quantification. Other than that, I rely on the idea of a particular that I think is fairly standard in contemporary philosophy. (Does it help if I say that I was trained at Harvard when Quine was

there?) Of course, everything in philosophy is controversial, including the claim that everything in philosophy is controversial. There are unclear cases of particularity: states of affairs and facts, to name but two. Alvarez has spoken (to me, anyway) of semi-particulars, and the idea is certainly an intriguing one. But, all things considered, I guess that the otherwise unexamined idea of a particular offers as a good place as any at which to start this book.

In Chap. 2, I examine what one might consider the most plausible account of trying, at least most plausible from a naturalistic perspective. That account is the Physical Action Theory of Trying, according to which trying is to be identified with a physical action. In Chap. 2 I argue against that account of trying. I put a lot of weight on the cases of so-called naked trying, cases in which an agent tries but there is no physical action as a result. I stress that I think that the existence of naked trying is an empirically established fact, not based on 'intuitions' about such cases that philosophers might dispute.

I identify an assumption that I think underlies not only the Physical Action Theory of Trying but also its main competitors: that the expression 'person P's trying to do such-and-such' refers to some particular, viz., an act of trying or to *a* trying (I don't distinguish these last two), something that can be quantified over, pluralised, and that can be preceded by a definite or indefinite article. I call any account that makes this assumption 'a particularist theory of trying'. In Chap. 3 as a preliminary to offering my own account, I examine the way in which adverbial modification works in sentences about trying, as a way of undercutting that assumption.

In Chap. 4 I present a general argument against any particularist account of trying, and most importantly, I offer my own account of trying, a conditional theory of trying, which does not make that same particularist assumption. I think a novel account of trying is needed, that describes in a new way the relation between trying and doing. In sum, I motivate my account of trying: (1) by arguing that its most promising competitor account is faulty (Chap. 2); (2) by arguing that one argument that might be thought to offer support for a particularist account of trying fails (Chap. 3); (3) by producing a general argument against any particularist account of trying (the first part of Chap. 4); and (4) by offering

and developing an alternative, which I defend from various objections (the second and longer part of Chap. 4).

The identification of doing with causing is widespread and I describe in some detail and argue against that misidentification in Chaps. 5 and 6. I discuss two views: first, in Chap. 5, whether if one causes something to happen, it follows that one acts, and second, in Chap. 6, whether, if one acts, it follows that the agent has caused something to happen. Chapter 6 develops what I think is a novel account of action, which builds on, but substantially changes, one I have previously defended (Ruben 2003). I call the view of action that I develop 'one-particularism'. Another name for the view could be 'the actions-in-the-world view'. But that is rather a mouthful. Chapter 5 has an appendix, in which I describe the 'derivation thesis' (DT). The DT is not a philosophical thesis at all and it is easy (it was for me, at any rate) to confuse it with the substantive philosophical analysis that is the subject matter of Chaps. 5 and 6; hence, my justification for including something about it.

In Chap. 7, I ask the question: are there any causing particulars? I am sceptical of there being any, and some of my arguments I use in Chap. 7 parallel the ones I made in Chap. 3 about trying particulars. In the course of Chap. 7, I examine a view of Maria Alvarez'. I describe and amplify some criticisms of her view made by Erasmus Mayr. I claim little originality in this section of Chap. 7.

Chapter 8 is composed of two, only loosely connected, sections. Each section spells out a further consequence of one-particularism. In the first section, I raise the question of whether the conjunction of one-particularism and the thought that if an agent act, he causes an event intrinsic to his action, generates a regress. One might think that some regress is brought about by that conjunction. I show why that is not so, in light of my argument in Chap. 7. In the second section, I discuss some epistemological issues about one's knowledge of the actions of others. I ask whether one can raise a sceptical question about one's knowledge of the actions of others, in the sense of Cartesian hyperbolic doubt. I think one can. I also suggest, very briefly, two philosophical moves that might be made, in order to reply to that sceptical position, and (regrettably) conclude that no compelling reply is forthcoming. But I think we will have learned something about the epistemology of action along the way.

Many philosophers have rejected the austere theory of act individuation as I do in Chap. 6; I am not very original in that regard. I think a natural progression of thought runs like this (I am not claiming that these are entailments): if non-basic actions are not just basic actions under non-basic descriptions, but actions in their own right, then where and when do they occur? If they do not occur when and where the basic actions on which they depend occur (a view for which I argue at some length), then there are reasons to place them where and when the events intrinsic to them occur (a lot more on intrinsic events in the book). For example, a person's opening a door occurs where and when the door opens. So let readers be forewarned: my view is that many actions are out in the world, far removed from an agent's body. I think that the idea that all actions occur at or within the surface of the agent's body is a presumption that does not sustain close scrutiny.

Now, it is possible to hold that, in this case for instance, even though both the person's opening of the door and the door's opening occur at the same time and same place, perhaps far removed from the agent's body and long after his body has moved, the person's opening of the door≠the door's opening. However, such a view does seem rather ontologically extravagant even by my liberal standards. Better to identify them, letting actions be identical to their so-called intrinsic events. This identification will have many implications, and so, in order not to spoil your fun, I won't spell them out here. But what I think unites Chaps. 5, 6, 7, and 8 is just that: drawing the conclusions, both logical ones and plausible ones, from that identification.

I use throughout the book the subscripts 't' and 'i' to mark the transitive and intransitive use of the same verb respectively. I am not wholly consistent in this. The subscripts are ugly and clutter the text, so I have used them only when I thought that they were necessary to achieve clarity (perhaps my own clarity). When that wasn't the case, I omitted them, although I suspect I have erred on the side of overuse. Unless I am using another author's formulations, I often use 'b' as the direct object of the transitive verb and the subject of the corresponding intransitive verb. 'P' is, as I said in the Preface, my nameless and genderless agent. Throughout the book, I use 'LHS' and 'RHS' to refer to the left hand side and the right hand side respectively of an entailment or biconditional.

A caveat: often, when I produce a sentence on which to reflect, I refer to P as an agent. I mean by that 'at least a potential or alleged actor with regard to some specific action'. Perhaps 'participant in an action' would have been a better choice, but since I hold that there are more ways in which to participate in an action than by being the actor who is the agent of that action, that choice was not really available to me. On some occasions, 'P' is the subject of a sentence that might not show him expressing or demonstrating any activity or agency relative to that particular action at all. ('The agent P tried to F but was so constrained that he did nothing', might count as an extreme example of this usage.) So designating P as an agent in a discussion of some action of type F is not intended to beg any questions about whether P is actually expressing his agency with regard to any token action of that type.

Finally, many who have read the manuscript of the book, or various portions thereof, have commented on my neglect of the neo-Anscombian, neo-Aristotelian, and other similar, contributions to action theory in the past decade or so. Names like Michael Thompson, Doug Lavin, Eric Marcus, Rowland Stout, Sebastian Roedl, and, of course, John McDowell, come to mind. I have no particular criticisms to make of these authors, but I simply don't find the traditions within which they are working sufficiently illuminating. That's how it is with philosophy: one has a methodology and chooses philosophical interlocutors as important reference points in order to enter into the dialect of argumentation. I have chosen what I think is most worthwhile and interesting. Even if you don't think that my approach in the theory of action is the *most* worthwhile, I hope you will think it worthwhile enough to justify my having written this book and your having read at least some part of it.

I was trained in philosophy to strive for the highest degree of precision, rigour, and clarity. That is always my aim; it is not for me to say, of course, to what I extent I have been able to achieve that standard. I don't think that precision, rigour, and clarity are by themselves sufficient for success in philosophy; they are, after all, only method, not content. There is also a need for imagination, insight, and creative thought. But those first three goals are certainly a necessary way to begin doing any philosophy that is worthwhile and that is able to make any real progress. They are certainly three goals at which I have aimed throughout.

Notes

1. Much of Donald Davidson's work, and the extensive comment on it, are in this tradition. John Bishop's *Natural Agency* (1989), Helen Steward's *The Ontology of Mind* (1997), Anton Ford's splendid 'Action and Generality' (2011) and 'Action and Passion' (2014), Maria Alvarez' 'Actions and Events: Some Semantical Considerations' (1999), and E.J. Lowe's *Personal Agency: The Metaphysics of Mind and Action* (2010), are six further excellent examples that spring to mind. There are, of course, many, many others.

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