

# Basic Action and Practical Knowledge

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## INTRODUCTION

The topic of skill or practical expertise—of course a central one in ancient philosophy—emerges in contemporary philosophy in several places. To mention a few: in the debate, deriving from Ryle (1946, 1949) via Stanley and Williamson (2001), about the form and content of ascriptions of “knowledge how” and the nature and grounds of what is thereby ascribed; in discussions of the nature of virtue both ethical (Annas 2011) and epistemic (Sosa 2015); in work that attends to the phenomenology of skillful activity, “embodied coping”, and performance “in flow” (Dreyfus 2014); and in the philosophy of action, where reflection on the “pattern”, “structure”, “order”, or “architecture” of practical reasoning (and the instrumentally complex courses of action it makes possible) suggests—to many, at least—that there must be “basic actions”, and that basic actions are exercises of skill.<sup>1</sup> In many of these discussions, a central role is played by the idea that there is a deep contrast between actions that are manifestations of skill and actions that are manifestations of practical reasoning or deliberation. In this essay, I am interested in a conception of skill and its exercises, and their relationship to practical reason and deliberation, that arises in the last of these contexts: basic action—more

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<sup>1</sup>See e.g. Hornsby (1980, 2005, 2013); Enç (2003); Setiya (2012); Lavin (2013).

specifically, “teleologically basic” action (Hornsby 1980, ch. VI).<sup>2</sup> Skill and basic action appear here as foundational elements in a widely accepted picture of the structure of rational agency: at a certain point practical reasoning stops and skill takes over, issuing in actions that constitute the fundamental means by which we execute more complex plans, but which themselves are performed, not by means of doing something else, but “just like that”. Drawing on work by Thompson (2008) and Lavin (2013), I will argue that the conceptions of skill and basic action that figure in this picture are in fact incapable of playing the foundational role for which they are required. Nevertheless, that requirement, to which Thompson and Lavin are insufficiently sensitive, is real: if we cannot make sense of basic action, we cannot make sense of intentional action at all. The dilemma is sharpened by the fact that the very features of the conceptions of skill and basic action that render them inadequate seem to flow directly from the sources of the requirement. We can negotiate the dilemma, and articulate an acceptable conception of basic action, but only by fundamentally rethinking the kind of contrast that obtains between skill and deliberation.

The relevant pattern of practical reasoning, which mandates the introduction of a concept of basic action, is that of means and ends. As Anscombe remarks, “[t]he mark of practical reasoning is that the thing wanted is *at a distance* from the immediate action, and the immediate action is calculated as the way of getting or doing or securing the thing wanted” (1963, §41). Most philosophers would agree with Anscombe that calculation—means-end reasoning, deliberation—needn’t *occur* for teleologically structured intentional action to take place; in talking of the pattern of practical reasoning we speak not of a mental *process* but of “an *order* which is there whenever actions are done with intentions” (§42, my emphasis). And most would agree with Bratman (1987) that the whole pattern needn’t be in place before action can begin: an action-plan may very often be “partial,” filled in along the way,

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<sup>2</sup>It is beyond the scope of this discussion to engage either with conceptions of skill or practical know-how that arise in other contexts or with non-teleological conceptions of basic action: henceforth, by “basic” I will mean *teleologically basic*. Two further terminological points are in order: (1) What is basic might be an *act-type*—something an agent “knows how to do, and knows how to do otherwise than on the basis of knowing how [it] is done by him” (Hornsby 1980, 84); or it might be a *token* action—an action the agent performed “just like that”, without doing it by means of doing anything else. Though these ideas are distinct, those who believe in practical “basicness” tend to think that they come on the scene together (if they distinguish them). The distinction will become salient in §4, though until then there is no need to be careful about it. (2) My use of expressions, in this footnote and throughout, such as “performance of an action” (etc.) is merely expository; they should not be read as suggesting that an agent stands in any active or performative *relation* to her actions—as if she had both to do A *and* to “do” or “perform” her A-ing.

when the time comes. Nevertheless, a moment's reflection on the pattern suggests that it is not self-standing: if deliberation is ever to issue in action, it must come to an end; if a plan is to be executed, it must specify means that can be taken without further planning; though we may do many things by means of doing other things, there must be some things we "can just do" (i.e. without doing them by means of doing other things). For without an "immediate action," the end must *remain* "at a distance." Thus, on pain of regress, the very idea of means-end practical reasoning—and therefore of the complex courses of intentional action that belong to rational human agency—seems to call for a foundation. And one seems to be supplied by a concept of skill and its exercise: more specifically, by a concept of a distinctive kind of practical knowledge how to do things (one that does *not* consist in knowing that one can do something by means of doing something else) and a concept of *teleologically basic action* (that is, of intentional action that lacks the inner *means-end* articulation that characterizes those teleologically complex—or *non-basic*—intentional actions that basic actions make possible).

I say *a* concept of skill for two reasons. On the one hand, the concept of a distinctive kind of practical know-how that answers the philosophical demand expressed by such regresses diverges both from concepts of skill (*technê*, etc.) found in other areas of philosophy and from the ordinary concept of skill (which overlaps yet contrasts with concepts like *know-how*, *art*, *habit*, *craft*, *trade*, *knack*, *profession*, *ability*, etc.). For instance, carpentry would, I imagine, ordinarily be thought of as a skill, and it is the sort of thing Plato or Aristotle would have deemed a *technê*. But a skilled carpenter will have lots of carpentry knowledge of the form "One can do B by doing A", and may put such knowledge into practice when she exercises her skills. On the other hand, the features indicated by these regresses—the ideas that there is a kind of practical know-how that *cannot* be (completely) articulated in sentences of the form "One can do B by doing A", that such knowledge can be "directly" (i.e. without deliberation) put into practice, and that in exercising it an agent is not organizing the details of her movements as means to ends—nevertheless seem to reflect central aspects of both ordinary and philosophical invocations of *skill*. Indeed, it appears that arguments for basic action seek to establish the *necessity* of something the *actuality* of which is already manifest in everyday practical experience: I can raise my arm, sign my name, tie my shoelace, or play a C major scale on the piano "just like that", without having to think about how to do these things; and these are things I know how to do, even if I cannot articulate a general plan, procedure, or recipe for doing them.

Here is how a representative selection of philosophers of action—with otherwise strikingly different commitments—describe the exercise of skill in basic action:

Once the intention to tie one's shoe lace is formed, no subsequent practical reasoning is required to figure out how to satisfy the intention. If the content of the intention matches an item in one's repertoire of basic acts, and if the conditions are right, the formation of the intention becomes sufficient for its execution by the lower subsystems. ...[K]nowing how to do something, B, without needing to use one's knowledge of how to do something, A, in order to do B boils down to a capacity rational agents have of getting B done without needing to cognitively control how it is done. (Enç 2003, 71)

[A]ll intentional bodily agency involves the interweaving of conscious systems of bodily control with more basic, effectively automated or non-intentional systems. When I type, for instance, although I may decide consciously which words I shall use, I do not need to engage in any conscious supervision of my fingers—they just get on with the job by themselves, as it were, now that I have learned to type. (Steward 2009, 301)

As habit takes over, the movements of my fingers become automatic: they are actions I perform, though not intentionally. This may sound odd, but not if we cancel the implication that they are *unintentional* or involuntary; they are merely “sub-intentional.” As my skills develop, what used to be non-basic action—playing C sharp by moving my fingers thus and so—becomes basic, something that I can simply do. I no longer have any idea how my fingers are moving, except perhaps through memory, as I play the notes. Many of the actions we perform have “sub-intentional” components, some of which have never been intentional. (Setiya 2007, 55)

There are differences between these characterizations of the exercise of skill. Where Setiya attributes the movements made in the course of performing a basic action to the agent proper (“they are actions I perform”), Enç seems happy to suggest that they are produced by “lower subsystems”; Steward takes an apparently intermediate position, ascribing them to the fingers “themselves, as it were.” I am interested, however, in their considerable similarities—and in those similarities' source. The exercises of skill described here are not immediate: they unfold in time. And this unfolding is not homogenous, but consists in the occurrence of movements of different sorts. However, the articulation within the basic action is not the work of the agent's intention or practical reasoning: the lowest level her intention reaches is to tie her shoelace, type the words she has settled on, or play C sharp. The movements

through which a basic action transpires are not themselves intentional actions—if they are actions at all, they are (not *un-*, but) non- or sub-intentional.<sup>3</sup> And the agent does not consciously engage with them: she does not “cognitively control” or “conscious[ly] supervis[e]” them; indeed, she may “no longer have any idea” what is going on at this level of description, which has become “automatic”. To summarize the common picture (in a way that no doubt oversimplifies these philosophers’ views), the capacities exercised in higher-order, complex, fully intentional, rational agency are quite different from those that constitute the skills responsible for the execution and details of basic actions: the rational superstructure of intentional agency is set upon a non- or sub-rational base of skill. I will call this the **default view**—and argue that it cannot be maintained.<sup>4</sup>

My case against the default view develops arguments made by Thompson (2008) and Lavin (2013). Reflection on the spatio-temporal structure of action leads Thompson to conjecture that every intentional action has an initial segment that is itself an intentional action, performed by the agent in order to perform the whole (2008, 106–12);<sup>5</sup> if this is right, there cannot be basic actions, because every intentional action will be performed by means of performing another. Developing this line of thought, Lavin argues that the idea of an intentional action without internal means-end structure ultimately collapses: “[b]asic action is not action at all and has no place in an account of [intentional action]” (2013, 295). Thompson and Lavin deploy these arguments against particular conceptions—causal theories, broadly speaking—of intentional action. But it seems that their arguments prove too much: though the views they target surely depend on the concept of basic action, it seems that so does *any* account of intentional action. Therefore everyone, whether they endorse a causal theory of action or not, has reason to try to rehabilitate some conception of basic action. Those who have responded to Thompson and Lavin have tried to find fault with their arguments.<sup>6</sup> But this defensive strategy is, I think, misguided. It leaves the real moral of their arguments untouched: thinking through what it means for some happening to be a case of “action at all” reveals that the most fundamental

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<sup>3</sup>Some (e.g. Wolfson 2016, 52) deny that they are actions; for reasons to reject this claim, see Steward (2009).

<sup>4</sup>Though I reject the default view of basic action, I do not think an agent’s control of her basic action in progress depends on her *supervising* or *monitoring* it.

<sup>5</sup>Thompson states his conjecture in apparently weaker terms—“Acts of moving something somewhere intentionally always have an initial segment that is also an act of moving something somewhere intentionally” (2008, 111)—but his discussion warrants the stronger formulation in the text (if it warrants either): see §2 below.

<sup>6</sup>See e.g. Bishop (2011); Setiya (2012); Hornsby (2013); Frost (2016); Wolfson (2016).

and minimal requirements on an account of action—that the agent is its source or originator, and that she relates to it *as* an agent, not an observer—cannot be met by basic action unless some fundamental assumptions about the nature of skill and its relationship to practical reason are given up.

It is, of course, a traditional thought that there is no deliberation about how to exercise a skill,<sup>7</sup> and thus that deliberation and skill exclude each other or are otherwise opposed. But contemporary theorists overstate the difference between acting from deliberation and acting from skill. This yields an inadequate conception of basic action as alien to the conceptual order of which it is supposed to be the fundamental member: if acting from deliberation and acting from skill have as little in common as the default view contends, then it is unclear how both kinds of action could be intentional, and consequently mysterious how one could do something intentionally by means of performing a basic action. This inadequacy is the other horn of the dilemma any account of basic action must negotiate, the regress being the first. My goals in this essay are to make a case that the dilemma is significant, and then to articulate a conception of basic action—and thus of the nature of skill and its relation to deliberation—that navigates it. My central thesis is that skill and basic action are distinguished from deliberation and non-basic action *not* by virtue of the fact that the former pair *lack* the means-end structure that essentially characterizes the latter pair, but rather insofar as they exhibit that structure in a *specifically different form*. Skill contrasts with deliberation—not because it is *not* a manifestation of practical reason, but—because the two are specifically different manifestations of practical reason.

I begin by making more precise the argument for why there must be basic action, and explaining why this argument stops short of establishing the default view (§1). In §§2–3 I explain why Thompson’s and Lavin’s arguments put real pressure on the intelligibility of basic action. In §4 I develop my alternative.

## 1. PRACTICABLE KNOW-HOW AND BASIC ACTION

The view that “the pattern of practical reasoning...is the real source for the need to introduce basic acts” (Enç 2003, 52) is widely held, though different philosophers have formulated different regresses on its basis. Here is my preferred version. I engage in practical reasoning, in the familiar sense at issue here, in order to figure out

<sup>7</sup>Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1112b1ff.

how to do what I want to do—and to figure it out with a view to *doing* it, not simply to knowing how I *could* do it. Such reasoning implicates, at a minimum, beliefs—and when all goes well, knowledge—about how things can be done.<sup>8</sup> To be reasoning that is genuinely practical—for it to issue in action (or an intention I can execute)—this must be knowledge I can *put into practice*. But for my knowledge that (e.g.) *one can make a Gibson by mixing a Martini and then garnishing it with a cocktail onion* to be, as I’ll put it, *practicable know-how*, I must know how to mix a Martini—and the latter know-how must be practicable, too. My knowledge that I can do C by doing B can constitute *practicable knowledge how to do C* only if I also have *practicable knowledge of how to do B*: knowledge of the form *I can do C by doing B* is, I’ll say, practicable only *derivatively*. Of course, the practicability of my knowledge how to do C might derive from practicable knowledge how to do B that has the same form—knowledge that I can do B by doing A. But this too is knowledge that is practicable only derivatively. The practicability of derivatively practicable know-how thus depends on *directly*—i.e. non-derivatively—practicable know-how. The point is not that it would be absurd to suppose that an agent needed (to possess, formulate, or act on) *infinitely many* pieces of derivatively practicable know-how in order to do anything (Hornsby 1980, 88). Whether or not that would be absurd, it wouldn’t help: directly practicable know-how would still be needed. Without understanding knowledge that can be put into practice directly (and what it is to do so), we have no idea of what it is to put knowledge into practice at all. The conclusion of the argument is therefore that there must be *basic* (i.e. directly practicable) *know-how*; basic action is understood in turn as the exercise or realization of basic know-how.<sup>9</sup>

The conceptions of basic know-how and of basic action (and thus of doing something directly or “just like that”) that this reflection yields are wholly negative and schematic—basic actions “are, as it were, specified by logical erasure” (Danto 1979, 472). A basic action is one done *without doing something else as a means to doing it*.<sup>10</sup> One knows how to do such a thing *otherwise than on the basis of knowing that one can do it by means of doing something else*. The relevant conception of basic action is, as Hornsby puts it, “elicited by reference to the *lack* of a certain sort of knowledge” (viz., knowledge of the form *I can do B by doing A*); nevertheless, “basic things would

<sup>8</sup>I will abstract from various interesting questions about non-fundamental cases that would distract from our purposes (e.g., whether one might do B intentionally by means of doing A if one merely believes that doing A is a way of doing B, etc.).

<sup>9</sup>For this form of argument (though with different terminology) see Hornsby (2005).

<sup>10</sup>Indeed, this characterization goes beyond what the regress establishes: though there must be basic know-how, its exercises might nevertheless be teleologically complex. See §4 below.

seem to be things that agents *do* know how to do” (2007, 174, first emphasis mine).<sup>11</sup> Call this, then, the **schematic view** of basic know-how and basic action.

The schematic view clearly does not explain how intentional action is possible: we cannot block the regress simply by introducing *regress-stopping know-how* and *regress-stopping action*. Positive characterizations of basic know-how and its exercise are needed. It is widely agreed that a plausible determinate view will acknowledge that I may have both basic *and* non-basic knowledge how to do A, so that whether my doing A on some occasion is a basic action or not depends on which knowledge I exercised in doing A (e.g. I might raise my right arm “directly”, or I might raise it “indirectly”—by lifting it with my left). It is also widely agreed that different agents may have different basic know-how from each other, and that their “basic repertoires” may change over time. However, there is disagreement about the objects of basic know-how—what kinds of action may be performed “directly”, “just like that”. Some (e.g. Danto 1965; Davidson 1971; Smith 2012) hold that basic actions are restricted to bodily movements—that what I have basic knowledge how to do is *raise my right arm, turn my head, clench my fist*, etc.<sup>12</sup> Others (e.g. Hornsby 1980, 2005; Enç 2003; Setiya 2007, 2008) hold that basic actions also include the exercises of skills—that in addition to having basic knowledge how to raise my arm or clench my fist, I (might) have basic knowledge how to *tie my shoelaces, sign my name, type the word ‘action’, play a C major scale on the piano, hit a top-spin tennis forehand*, etc. The default view evidently adopts the latter, more generous construal; I will, too.<sup>13</sup>

The regress of practicable know-how shows that the schematic view must be true, and therefore that we cannot understand the possibility of intentional action without a determinate account of basic know-how and basic action that adequately realizes the schema. But is that possible?

<sup>11</sup>Hornsby takes great pains to tell us what basic know-how and its exercise are *not*: someone with basic knowledge how to  $\phi$  “is able to simply  $\phi$  (at least so long as it is actually possible for her to  $\phi$ )” (2005, 115), but (1) this “does not assimilate [basic know-how] to abilities” (2005, 116 n.16); (2) the *things* of which basic know-how is knowledge how to do “are not to be equated with the simple things one is able to do” (2007, 173); (3) the *abilities* to do the things one is able to simply do are not by that very fact simple abilities (2005, 126); and (4) we should not “confuse the idea that we are able to [e.g.] simply voice our thoughts with the idea that voicing our thoughts is something that we *simply do*” (2005, 126).

<sup>12</sup>Davidson (1971, 50–51) would say that a basic *description* of an action (e.g. a tying of my shoelaces) would be a bodily movement description (i.e. *a moving of my body in just the way required to tie my shoelaces*).

<sup>13</sup>Though see §4.2 below for discussion of the relation between skill and bodily movement.

## 2. THE INITIAL SEGMENT ARGUMENT

Thompson's argument suggests not. Though philosophers of action often focus on cases in which one might say, of a case in which I did B by doing A, that I performed one action that can be described in two ways (e.g., my action can be described both as a *turning on of the light* and as a *flipping of the switch*), Thompson draws attention to cases in which doing A (e.g. breaking an egg) is a proper part of doing B (making an omelette)—and thus couldn't be identical with it. Thompson acknowledges that, intuitively, the articulation of a complex course of intentional activity into "sub-actions that are themselves clearly intentional...will come to a limit" (there are, intuitively, no intentional sub-actions that stand as parts to writing the letter 'a' as writing the letter 'a' stands to writing 'action'); nevertheless, he argues that "[e]ven actions that, like arm-raising, do not divide in this way need not ... be viewed as pointlike" (2008, 106–7):

Let it be...that I have pushed a stone along a certain path from  $\alpha$  to  $\omega$ , and that this is a completed intentional action of mine. It must also, of course, be that I have pushed the stone from  $\alpha$  to  $\beta$ , if  $\beta$  is a place about halfway along the path from  $\alpha$  to  $\omega$ . And as I began to push off from  $\alpha$  it would have been as much *true* for me to say, "I am pushing it to  $\beta$ " as "I am pushing it to  $\omega$ ." How, though, can we deny the further claim that I was pushing the stone to  $\beta$ , the midpoint, *intentionally*—just as, by hypothesis, I was pushing it to  $\omega$  intentionally, and along that path? ... [I]t is hard to see why we shouldn't say not *just* that I was pushing the stone to  $\beta$  *intentionally*, but also that I was pushing, and pushed, the stone to  $\beta$  *because* I was pushing it to  $\omega$ . Why not? The push from  $\alpha$  to  $\beta$  might not be "salient", of course, so it might be a bit odd, conversationally, to point it out. But if it were as much of my operation as you could see, the rest having been occluded by a curtain, you might legitimately attach the question "Why?" to that description, and I, in turn, might legitimately offer a naive rationalization using the other [i.e. "I'm pushing it to  $\beta$  because I'm pushing it to  $\omega$ "]. 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? (Thompson 2008, 107–8; cf. Lavin 2013, 276)

Consequently, Thompson claims, "[a]cts of moving something somewhere intentionally always have an initial segment that is also an act of moving something somewhere intentionally" (2008, 111). In fact, his argument has wider application: assum-

ing that waiting for a bus is something that may be done intentionally, if I waited for the bus from noon until its scheduled arrival at 12:07, then at each point in time between noon and 12:07 I had waited from noon until *then*—and, by parity of Thompson’s reasoning, waited until *then* intentionally, and because I was waiting for the bus. In this case, the “continuousness” of my deed—the homogeneity of the descriptions of my actions and the homoiomerity of those actions (Thompson 2008, 111)—derives from that of time rather than local motion.<sup>14</sup> Thompson’s argument would thus establish that the spatio-temporal “density” of intentional actions is in fact teleological: every part, in the relevant sense, of an intentional action is itself an intentional action performed for the sake of the whole, and every intentional action has proper parts in the relevant sense. If this is right, then there cannot be basic actions—“only *more* basic ones” (Frost 2016, 39).

But because the very intelligibility of intentional action seems to depend on the legitimacy of some conception of basic action, many have sought to resist the initial segment argument. Setiya objects that the agent didn’t push the stone to  $\beta$  intentionally because he didn’t *care* whether he went through  $\beta$  or not: he goes through  $\beta$  “only as a foreseen consequence” of what he intends to do, “not as the means to an end” (2012, 289; cf. Bishop 2011, 215–6; Hornsby 2013, 11; Frost 2016, 42–43; Wolfson 2016, 57–58). Hornsby objects that the initial segment argument exploits “an untenable conception of agential processes” (2013, 2); on her preferred conception, “unbounded stretches of activity of arbitrary length”—such as Thompson’s *pushing the stone from  $\alpha$  to  $\beta$  while pushing it to  $\omega$*  or my *waiting for the bus from noon to 12:02 while waiting until 12:07*—“are not particulars, and thus not actions” (11; cf. Wolfson 2016, 57). Clearly an adequate understanding of intentional action must include a proper account of the distinction between what is done intentionally and what is brought about merely as a consequence, side-effect, or by-product;<sup>15</sup> it must also involve thinking through the distinctions and relations between the categories *event*, *process*, *action*, and *activity*.<sup>16</sup> Treating these topics, and thus properly evaluating these responses to the initial segment argument, unfortunately lies beyond the

<sup>14</sup>Rödl (2002, §2); Small (2012, §6); and Lavin (2013, §5) note that temporality is the fundamental ground of the initial segment argument. If this is right, then Setiya’s contention that the argument “will not apply to intentional actions that do not involve movement, like staying still, or to most instances of mental action” (2012, 288) misfires—it will apply to all those expressions of agency descriptions of which “admit the ‘continuous tenses’ or the progressive” (Thompson 2008, 106).

<sup>15</sup>For discussion, see Hanser (1998, 2000).

<sup>16</sup>For discussion, see e.g. Stout (1997); Thompson (2008 ch. 8); Crowther (2011); Hornsby (2012, 2013); Steward (2012); and the essays in Stout (2018).

scope of this paper.<sup>17</sup> What we can evaluate, however, are the conceptions of basic action that are supposedly made available by these responses to the initial segment argument—for even if the responses are cogent (something I take no stand on here), the conceptions may not be.

As we have seen, Setiya holds the default view. Hornsby does not. She aims to show that Lavin’s and Thompson’s “animadversions against the whole idea of *basicness* are misplaced” by articulating a picture on which basic know-how consists in “knowing how to be engaged in a certain activity, rather than how to participate in or to bring about an event of a certain sort [i.e. an *action*]” (2013, 17):

Someone who lacked any interest in what Jones was intentionally doing [viz. buttering toast], and was concerned only with the question how toast may be buttered, [...] might see [the episode] as one in which the knife in Jones’s hand repeats movements in a certain series—first along the toast, then towards the block of butter, .... They would discern a means–end structure which is not articulated in any intention of Jones, and is absent from the ongoing activity of Jones. Jones for his part was buttering toast for a bit, to do which he didn’t have to do first one thing (intentionally), then another thing (intentionally), then another. One might say that he exercised his *skills* in buttering the toast. That would be a way to register the idea that someone who has the skill of  $\phi$ -ing, though she may  $\phi$  thoughtfully, has no means–end knowledge how to  $\phi$ . (Hornsby 2013, 16–17)<sup>18</sup>

Like Hornsby, Frost suggests that what is basic is ultimately not an action (e.g. my walking from A to B) but the activity (i.e. walking) that constitutes it. Basic activity is not intentional but rather “thoughtful”; and he too holds that such activities should “be thought of as exercises of skills or capacities” (2016, 49). The explanation of the details of the movements that transpire as the agent engages in basic activity will, he says, “appeal to her skills and habitual ways of moving rather than to her particular

<sup>17</sup>But see §4.1 below on the idea that pushing the stone to  $\beta$  is merely a foreseen consequence of pushing it to  $\omega$ .

<sup>18</sup>Hornsby (2012, 2013) holds that an *action* (an event) is ascribed to an agent in a sentence that has past tense and perfective aspect (“N.N. walked to the store”), whereas *activity* (process) is ascribed to an agent in sentences with progressive aspect (“N.N. is/was walking to the store”). While N.N. was walking to the store, he had not yet walked to the store, so there was not yet *an* action that was his walking to the store (on that occasion); there was instead only *some* (then) “ongoing activity” in which he was engaged—some walking store-wards. Thus for Hornsby, “action” and “event” are count nouns, whereas “activity” and “process” are mass nouns. (Frost (2016, 47) draws the contrast between action and activity slightly differently.)

intentions” (2016, 44). Though he doesn’t exploit a distinction between *action* and *activity*, Wolfson makes an otherwise similar proposal: basic actions are exercises of an agent’s “second-natural capacities,” which are “products of our rational nature” despite not being structured by means-end rationality. The exercises of these capacities therefore “will not have the complexity characteristic of taking means” (2016, 56): “there *is* no articulation in the *action*” (61).

By insisting that exercises of basic agential capacities are *thoughtful* and *rational*—and thus, presumably, not mindless, automatic, or beyond the agent’s control—Hornsby, Frost, and Wolfson presumably mean to distinguish their conceptions of basic action (or activity) from the default view, even though the means-end structure that articulates the thoughtfulness and rationality of non-basic action is absent from it. I am unconvinced that these conceptions constitute progress: either by “skill,” “second-natural capacity,” etc. these authors ultimately mean nothing more than the schematic view does by “basic know-how” (i.e. *regress-stopping know-how*), or the absence of any rational structure *for the agent* in the unfolding of the basic action (in her being engaged in ongoing basic activity) means that these are but variations on the default view. But what is the problem with the default view?

### 3. AGENCY AND PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE

As I explained above, whether the initial segment argument is probative depends on how we resolve difficult questions concerning the distinction(s) between intentional actions and their (foreseen, foreseeable) consequences, side-effects, and by-products, and the distinctions and relations between *event*, *process*, *action*, and *activity*. In my view, however, the argument is significant regardless: not, indeed, as a proof of the impossibility of basic action, but insofar as it draws attention to the teleological articulation of intentional action and its centrality to our understanding of rational agency. Reflection on this articulation and its significance should lead us to reject the default view—regardless of whether the initial segment argument itself can be blocked.

The fundamental idea of action is the idea of some change (broadly construed) of which the agent is the *source* or *originator*; and it is the idea of a change that the subject relates to not as an observer or spectator but—*as agent*. As a useful shorthand for these two ideas, I will say that the primary manifestations of rational and intentional human agency are, as such, *from* and *for* their agents. It may seem to

some that there could be nothing more to “relating to an event/process as its agent” than being its originator: nothing more to an action’s being *for* the agent than its being *from* her. But consider a case in which by slamming your hand down on the table, you cause the first domino to fall—and watch in horror as the whole rally takes place. You knocked down the dominos (albeit unintentionally). And you stood in the same observational or spectatorial relation to the domino rally as did your (dismayed) friend who had spent all morning setting it up. But attributions of agency in cases like this depend on more fundamental ones—the reason we say *you knocked* the dominos down is that you *did something* (slammed your hand down on the table) that caused, in a reasonably direct way, a series of events that can thereby be imputed to you as agent (Davidson 1971). However, you didn’t stand in the spectatorial relation to the precipitous slam. Different theories draw the line between *what I really do* and *what happens as an effect of what I really do but which can nevertheless be imputed to me as my deed* in different places—perhaps all I “really” do is intend or try to do something (Hornsby 1980); perhaps I “really” move my body but the rest is up to nature (Davidson 1971); or perhaps I “really” do whatever I do intentionally (Ford 2018b)—but all hold that I relate to “what I really do” *as agent*, not as spectator. The claims that agents are sources of their actions and that they relate to what they are “really” doing not as observers but as agents—that actions are *from* and *for* their agents—belong to no theory of action; they outline the topic of which any such theory is a theory.<sup>19</sup> The problem is that the way the default view represents a basic action’s being *from* the agent precludes its being *for* the agent—hence Lavin’s complaint that “‘basic action’ seems not to be action at all” (2013, 293).

I will show this by first sketching an account of what is involved in an agent’s relating to an action as agent, or her action’s being *for her*, in the unproblematic case of ordinary non-basic intentional action. Once we have drawn out the ways in which this fundamental mark of agency depends on action’s being inscribed with the pattern of practical reasoning, it will be comparatively easy to see that basic action—as construed by the default view—cannot be intentional action. Of course, if a basic action is not an intentional action, it cannot be that *by means of which* an agent does something non-basic—in which case the default view doesn’t instantiate the schematic view or speak to the regress.

Consider, then, a case of non-basic intentional action. My goal is to do D, and I’m doing it, right now, by doing C, having already done A and B. The end for the sake

<sup>19</sup>As Velleman (2007, xii) notes, the idea that “being a spectator is the diametrical opposite of being an agent...is almost universal in the philosophical literature about action and the will”; cf. the extensive list of quotations in his fn.3.

of which I'm currently doing C (namely, D) determines, at least in part, what counts as doing C on this occasion—what counts as doing it badly or well (enough), what counts as having finished. I'm keeping track of, or at least am sensitive to, how well things are going with my C-ing in the light of my end: depending on how things are going, I may modify the way in which I'm doing C, or try C-ing again, or do something else as well or instead (so long as I still think my end worth pursuing). This is so even if my C-ing is going perfectly well considered “in itself”—qua *walking to the department* it's going just fine (I'm not stumbling erratically, or walking in the wrong direction), but qua *walking to the department in order to get to the meeting* it's not (I need stop walking and start running if I'm to get there on time). We might say, to use some popular terminology, that my intention to do D *guides* my doing C—but what that means is just that I am aware that and how doing C contributes to doing D, and I am adjusting what I'm doing to that end.<sup>20</sup>

That everything that has gone on and is going on amounts to my being in the process of doing D intentionally depends on my practical thought: my plan to do D by means of doing A and B and then doing C.<sup>21</sup> If I had done A and B and were now doing C but had never thought of doing all of them in order to do D, then I wouldn't be doing D intentionally. So my practical thought is responsible for the reality and specific shape of my doing D intentionally: I am its source or originator. And the same practical thought provides for my awareness that I am doing D intentionally: I know that I did A and B, and am now doing C, because I'm doing D. My practical thought about how to do D is at once the source of the reality of my doing D inten-

<sup>20</sup>This should not be understood as requiring the agent to *monitor* her ongoing action or *consciously oversee* her intention's guidance of it. That would over-intellectualize the account. However, what guides *action* must be identified with the agent herself, and not merely a system located within her (Frankfurt 1978, 73–75). It is therefore plausible to ascribe to the agent the awareness of how the means are contributing to the end that is internal to the guidance, by the intention to perform the end by taking the means, of the execution of those means. Thanks to an anonymous referee for encouraging this clarification.

<sup>21</sup>I use the generic expression “practical *thought*” to remain neutral on questions concerning exactly what sort of mental states, attitudes, episodes, and activities it comprises. In my sense, “practical thought” covers those thoughts, and thinkings of them, that are directed at doing things. Thus intention and practical reasoning would be paradigm cases of practical thought. Some may think that a means-end belief (e.g. that I can do D by doing C) on “active duty” is a case of practical thought, whereas others may deem it theoretical thought in the service of practice—in which case its content may be taken up by practical thought in the intention to do C in order to do D; similar questions may arise concerning the status of desire. Practical thought needn't take the form of occurrent reasoning or deliberation: it may take the form of a standing policy that is in play. But the means-end “pattern” (“order”, etc.) will be the same.

tionally and my knowledge that I am doing D—it is not as if my practical thought provides merely for the reality of my doing D intentionally, leaving me in the dark as to whether I am doing it (so that I would have to observe or infer that I’m doing what I intend to be doing). My knowledge that I am doing D is thus *practical knowledge* in Anscombe’s sense: it is “non-observational” knowledge that is “the cause of what it understands” (1963, §48), and its source is means-end practical reasoning (§33). (Anscombe claims that practical knowledge, in this sense, is a *necessary* condition of intentional action, but this controversial claim is not needed here. Many think the necessity claim must be rejected because of examples like Davidson’s carbon copier (1971, 50), who was trying—successfully, as it happened—to make ten carbon copies at once by writing firmly on the top sheet, despite lacking any confidence—and thus not even believing, let alone knowing—that he was doing so in fact. But Davidson’s carbon copier was trying—and, though he didn’t believe it, succeeding—to do one thing [make ten copies] by means of doing another [writing firmly on the top sheet]. The sceptical doubt applies to the [more] complex action, rather than the [more] basic one: the copier may have doubted that he was making all ten copies in one go, but he was aware that he was pressing firmly on the top sheet. Such examples lend no support to the idea that agents could be *systematically* unaware that that they were performing the intentional actions they intend to be performing. In fact, they might show instead that one may do B intentionally while lacking Anscombean practical knowledge that one is doing B only if one is doing B by doing A, where one has Anscombean practical knowledge that one is doing A.<sup>22</sup> For this reason, I say that Anscombean practical knowledge is a necessary condition—not of intentional action *tout court*, but—of *core cases* of intentional action: those on which the non-core cases depend. Basic actions will evidently be paradigm core cases of intentional action.<sup>23</sup>)

<sup>22</sup>Some (e.g. Harman 1976) hold that ethical considerations may determine that an agent did A intentionally, even if she lacked practical knowledge that she was doing A, because doing A was a foreseen or foreseeable consequence of something else she did intentionally (and of which we have no reason to doubt that she had practical knowledge). Non-core cases of intentional action may be done *by means of* or simply *by* performing core cases of intentional action.

<sup>23</sup>Setiya (2008, 389–90) claims that practical knowledge is not a necessary condition of basic action—and thus, in my terms, that not every case of basic action is a core case of intentional action. His reason is an example of a recently paralyzed subject who tries, successfully, to clench his fist “just like that” (a basic action) despite lacking any confidence (or justification for it) in success. We might doubt that the subject clenched his fist intentionally. But even if we accept the example, it provides no reason for thinking that agents could be *systematically* unaware that they are performing the basic actions they intend to be performing—that lack of awareness could be the rule, rather than the exception. For the case is precisely described as exceptional: Setiya’s subject has suffered an *interruption*

The teleological unity of a non-basic action (just discussed) is the source of the action's *temporal unity*. If I did D intentionally, then there was a time, after I'd begun but before I'd finished, at which I *was doing* D. That I *was* doing D doesn't entail that I *did* (or would or will) do D: someone can have been crossing the street even though she never crossed the street. Accidents happen. But accidents are accidents—they are accidental to what was anyway happening. A special explanation is required if, in a particular case, someone was doing something but didn't end up having done it. By contrast, no special explanation is required if an agent ends up having done what she was in fact doing.<sup>24</sup> Thus any account of agency must explain these two aspects of the temporal unity of action:

- (1) What makes it the case that it will be no accident if I end up having done D intentionally (which it must be if I am *actually doing* D intentionally, and not merely e.g. trying to do D)?
- (2) What makes it the case that in having done whatever I have done so far in order to do D (A, B, and some of C),<sup>25</sup> it's true that I am doing D? (After all, the steps towards doing D I have already taken might be just the same as the opening steps of doing E, and yet *I am doing D, not E*—even if, as it turns out, I don't end up having done D because something interferes or I change my mind.)

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in the ordinary functioning of the relevant practical capacity (to clench his fist) and the case occurs during the interval in which his capacity is functioning again, though he doesn't know that it is. It is surely not credible—on pain of severing the hard to articulate yet fundamental connection between agency and *control* or the *absence of luck*—to suppose that our basic practical capacities could operate despite our lacking an awareness of their exercises *in general*; and if the relevant awareness were merely observational, we would not relate to those exercises *as agents*. If the subject's clenching of his fist is an intentional action, it is a basic action though not a core case of action (not because it is performed by doing something that *is* a core case—which would make it non-basic—but rather because it is a non-standard exercise of a basic practical capacity the ordinary functioning of which provides for an awareness of its exercises). Conceding that there might be occasions on which—because the conditions for the exercise of the relevant practical capacities are not propitious—an agent might perform a basic action without knowing that she was doing so undermines the claim that basic actions are paradigm core cases of intentional action no more than acknowledging the existence of albino ravens undermines the claim that ravens are black.

<sup>24</sup>See Rödl (2012 chs. 5–6); Small (2012, §4); Wolfson (2012) for elaboration.

<sup>25</sup>An “activity theorist” such as Hornsby might object to talk of “what I have already done” in that I am already doing something, insofar as it attributes actual particularity to what is merely potentially particular, “an” undetached “stretch of activity”. But all that I am appealing to here is the “*concreteness* of actions (of ‘tokens’)” that “*someone's engagement in an activity ... partakes of*” (Hornsby 2013, 3).

It seems obvious that the answer to (2) is given by *intention*: what makes it the case that, in doing what I'm doing, I'm doing *D* (not *E*, or whatever) is that I am doing it in execution of my intention to do *D*. But the intention to do *D* can't explain why, in doing what I'm doing, it will be no accident if I end up having done *D*—at least, it can't if (as many think) it is merely inadvisable or irrational, though not impossible, to intend to do something one doesn't know how to do. It will be no accident that my doing what I'm doing ends up with my having done *D* intentionally only if I *both intend and know how* to do *D* (and I'm exercising that knowledge)—after all, it would be some accident, in the relevant sense, if I succeeded in doing *D* by acting on beliefs about how to do *D* that were false or merely accidentally true, or if I had no idea about how to do *D*. Of course, in the case of non-basic action, my knowledge how to do *D* is non-basic know-how: knowledge that I can do *D* by doing *A* and *B*, and then *C*. This means-end knowledge constitutes the pattern of my practical thought. In conceiving of myself as doing *D* by means of doing *A* and *B* and then doing *C*, I represent these means as *sufficient* (or as part of a larger sufficient plan) for doing *D*; I thereby think it would be some accident if doing what is (as I see it) sufficient for doing *D* did not suffice for ending up having done *D*.<sup>26</sup> My practical thought thus provides for both *the reality* and *my awareness of* the temporal unity of my action—of the fact that, in doing what I'm doing, I'm doing *D* intentionally, and that it'll be no accident if I succeed. Because it is *my* practical thought that is the source of the fact that I'm actually doing *D*, what's happening is *from* me; because it is my *practical* thought through which I'm aware that I'm doing *D*, it is *for* me—that is, my awareness of the unfolding process is that of an agent, rather than that of a spectator.

The previous four paragraphs provided an exposition of the teleological and temporal unity of a core case of non-basic intentional action to show that and how an agent is “in touch with” the progress of her deed. The problem is that, as the default view characterizes the exercise of basic know-how, the agent cannot be in touch with it in the right way.<sup>27</sup>

Basic actions, the default view allows, are temporally extended: it takes time to raise your arm, clench your fist, type a word, tie your shoelaces, make a left turn on skis, etc. Thus if an agent performs a basic action, there will have been a time at which she

<sup>26</sup>A completely sufficient and determinate plan isn't required at the start: it can be filled in as I go along. Of course, a plan to do *D* by *doing A and then figuring out what to do next*, may, if reasonable, be viewed as a kind of sufficient plan.

<sup>27</sup>I fear this must be true of the views of Hornsby, Frost, and Wolfson, too, as the formulations in the next paragraph in the text suggest.

was performing it—she had begun but not finished (e.g.) tying her shoelaces. From some perspective, that she is tying her shoelaces consists in various movements that have taken place and are taking place with her fingers, wrists, and other parts of her body (and the laces). From some perspective—but not from her perspective as agent. From her point of view, the action has no articulation. For, according to proponents of the default view, the details of the realization of an act-type belonging to an agent's basic repertoire are “not controlled by the centers that control such units [of behaviour]” (Enç 2003, 61); her (e.g.) fingers “just get on with the job by themselves” (Steward 2009, 301); she “no longer [has] any idea how [her] fingers are moving, except perhaps through memory” (Setiya 2007, 55). If the agent *has* any idea of the details of her movement, in performing a basic action, it will be through perception or memory—forms of awareness that, unlike practical knowledge in Anscombe's sense, are independent of their objects. If she is aware of them, the agent confronts these details as a reality that is independent of her practical thought—she relates to them as observer, not as agent.

Of course, there are details and there are details. Many of the details of a course of intentional activity will lie, perfectly innocuously, outside the agent's rational control, and many descriptions of such a course of activity (including, but not restricted to, descriptions that make such details salient) are descriptions under which it will not be intentional. But some of the details *matter instrumentally*: not just any movements of an agent's fingers can constitute her (e.g.) tying her shoelaces. The teleologically significant details or aspects of basic action are the ones at issue here. And according to the default view, these details—the movements in which the basic action's unfolding consists—are not *for* the agent. They are not intentional actions; nor do they figure in either the agent's standing know-how or her intention to exercise it here and now.

Because the teleologically significant *details* are not for the agent, neither is the basic action *as a whole*. This is because the agent is not responsible for its temporal unity. The default view has an account of the temporal unity of basic action, but the *explanans* lies outside the agent's practical thought: while the basic action is unfolding—while it is true that the agent *is tying* her shoelaces, say—what makes it the case that she is actually tying her shoelaces (that it will be no accident if what's happening here and now ends up with her shoelaces getting tied) is a general pattern in a subsystem, her fingers, etc. As her practical thought does not account for the basic action's temporal unity, the agent can (as such) at most be aware that she *intends* to tie her shoelaces: she cannot (qua agent) be aware that she *is tying* them. The truth of the progressive thought requires more than a mere trigger, but that is all that

the agent's intention to perform the basic action could be. In particular, an intention to perform a *basic* action cannot “guide” the unfolding of the basic action that executes it, because—by hypothesis—the intention has no means-end articulation in its content, and thus it carries no information with which to guide the unfolding basic action. If the agent's practical thought figures merely as a trigger, any progressive awareness the agent might have is not *qua* agent—her basic action is not *for* her. Therefore the way the default view represents a basic action's being *from* the agent would seem to preclude its being *for* the agent.<sup>28</sup>

To be a core case of intentional action, a basic action would have to be *from* and *for* the agent.<sup>29</sup> To be from and for the agent, an action must be constituted by practical thought. However, we have but one way of understanding how this is possible—namely, through the exercise of teleologically structured (i.e. non-basic) know-how. But to be a basic action, an action cannot be the exercise of non-basic know-how; it must be the exercise of basic know-how. These thoughts are inconsistent, and as far as I can see the default view lacks the resources to resolve the contradiction. The appeals by Hornsby and others to the idea that basic action (or activity) consists in thoughtfully exercising skills and capacities, made while they deny that these thoughtful exercises are teleologically articulated from and for the agent, seem at best to give names (“skill”, “thoughtful exercise”) to what we still do not understand.

The apparently innocuous and incontrovertible ideas with which we began—that deliberation must come to an end, that there must be things we can do “just like that”, that not all know-how can be derivatively practicable—lead, seemingly inexorably, to a picture of the exercise of skill as action from which the agent is *necessarily* estranged, as Lavin points out (2013, 22).<sup>30</sup> While the agent is doing A “directly”, the teleologically significant details of the movements that go into her doing A are alien

<sup>28</sup>To be clear, my contention is that the default view's conception of an agent's practical thought does not provide for awareness of the details of the teleologically significant movements that constitute her basic action, and that lack of practical awareness of these movements (in form either of ignorance or mere theoretical awareness) is incompatible with the basic action's being for her. I have not tried to argue that it would be impossible to develop the default view in order to account for basic action's being for the agent; my argument is intended as a request for an account, not as a proof that none can be provided. Nevertheless, I think this is sufficient motivation to pursue a non-default view of basic action (§4 below). Thanks to an anonymous referee for prompting this clarification.

<sup>29</sup>A non-core case of intentional action will (characteristically, though see n.23 above) be *from* the agent by virtue of being performed by doing something that is a core case of intentional action, but it will not be *for* the agent.

<sup>30</sup>There is no problem with supposing that we are *sometimes* estranged from our (basic) actions; what is problematic is the idea that estrangement flows from the nature of (basic) action.

to her practical thought. They are not rationally constrained by her understanding that in making them she is doing A as a means to doing B; they are just as they would be if she were doing A as a means to something else. The character of the A-ing that she gets done will be determined “from below”—not by practical thought and rationality, but rather, and in contrast, by skill. In fact, Lavin understates the problem: the extrusion of practically rational structure from basic action threatens the idea of practically rational structure in intentional action *tout court*. If the agent’s understanding that she is doing what she’s doing in order to do B does not permeate the teleologically significant movements that go into her doing A, then her doing A will not be rationally governed and constrained by her intention to do B. But if she is doing B by means of doing A, yet her doing A is not rationally governed and constrained by her intention to do B, then her *doing B* (insofar as it consists in her doing A) is not rationally governed and constrained by her intention to do B. And if her doing B is not rationally governed and constrained by her intention to do B, how can it be a proper exemplification of the concept of intentional action?<sup>31</sup> If the intentionality of the basic actions by means of doing which the agent performs a non-basic action is undermined (because the basic actions are determined from below), then the intentionality of the non-basic action must be undermined—because it is determined from below as well. Neither basic action, nor action based on basic action, is action at all. And so as the default view turns out to conceive of it, basic action is not regress-stopping action after all.

I confess that I cannot see how the default view might be amended so that it meets the challenges raise in this section; but whether it can be or not, it is worth considering whether there is another way of halting the regress.

#### 4. THE TELEOLOGICAL STRUCTURE(S) OF BASIC ACTION

We face a dilemma. On the one hand, we cannot make sense of the practicability of non-basic know-how, and thus the very idea of non-basic intentional action, unless we can make sense of basic—directly practicable—know-how and its direct exercise, basic action. On the other hand, we cannot make sense of an intentional action the unfolding of which is not *from* and *for* the agent; yet the only understanding we have

<sup>31</sup>Recall that many of the details of intentional action (basic and non-basic) will innocuously lie beyond rational control. But a paradigm of rational control is the control that the *end* exerts over the *means* in a case of complex intentional action, and that is what goes missing when basic action is construed as a sort of “prefab” element in the architecture of rational agency.

of how action-in-progress can *be* from and for the agent appeals to a constitutive role for means-end articulated practical thought (i.e. the deployment of non-basic know-how)—something that a basic action must necessarily lack. Or must it? The regress argument I endorsed in §1 above concludes that there must be directly practicable know-how. To the extent that it shows the necessity of basic action, basic action is defined solely as the exercise of non-derivatively practicable know-how. It does not follow that exercises of basic know-how must be teleologically-unstructured actions.<sup>32</sup> That would follow only if non-basic know-how is the only possible source of teleological structure in action. This is something that is clearly widely assumed. But is it true?

According to Lavin, it is not. Although he argues that basic action—in the sense of action “barren of means-end structure” (2013, 274)—is not action at all, he accepts that there must be basic *know-how*—and thus that there *must* be basic *action* in the sense that is defined solely as the exercise of basic know-how. Despite the predominant rhetoric of his paper, Lavin aims to *legitimate* a conception of practical “basicness.” To avoid terminological confusion, I will henceforth use the term “basic action” to mean the exercise of basic know-how (i.e. that which the regress demands we make sense of) and “simple action” to mean a teleologically-unstructured action (i.e. that which I rejected in §3). By drawing this distinction, we open the possibility of avoiding both horns of our dilemma.<sup>33</sup> Of course, it is one thing to say that the exercise of basic know-how is teleologically-structured action and another to explain how this can be: to explain the source and character of this structure, in a way that does not undermine basic action’s status as action. Lavin offers an interesting sketch, but as instructive as it is (and it is surely not intended as the whole story), I will argue that is inadequate as it stands (§4.1): an adequate account requires a more thoroughgoing rejection of the simplicity of skill and its exercise (§4.2).

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<sup>32</sup>See n.10 above.

<sup>33</sup>In the discussion of action in which his initial segment argument occurs, Thompson explicitly brackets questions concerning “what might be called the intellectual aspect of rationalization” (2008, 93), which would include questions concerning the relationship between basic and non-basic know-how. Thus, though his argument aims to show that there are no *simple* actions, it leaves open the question whether there are *basic* actions (i.e. whether there is know-how that can be put into practice directly). I am grateful to Matthias Haase for discussion of this point.

#### 4.1. *Simple skills and their spatiotemporally structured exercise*

Basic know-how, Lavin says, “*can* be exercised in particular actions structured by means-end reason. Indeed, my own view is that it *must* be” (2013, 286). His thought is that the practicable know-how regress shows that there must be “simple skills” (284). If I have a simple skill of doing A, “it might be that I do not know any *general* procedure for [doing A], but that nevertheless, when I [do A] on particular occasions, I perform these actions by knowingly taking *particular* means” (286, my emphases). If my simple skill is *walking*, I do not just walk, I *walk from HERE to THERE*, and in doing so I *walk around THIS obstacle*, etc. These “particular means” are particular to this deployment of my simple skill and make reference to the particulars in its material circumstances. They do not, however, introduce action-types *other than* walking, by means of which I walk (e.g. *bend my left knee*, etc.); instead they *specify* the generic act-type *walking*:

any performance manifesting [basic know-how] must involve drawing on knowledge of particular means in the course of realizing an end. This means-end order is not contained in the action concept itself, but in material circumstances in which such a concept is exercised. ... When making a left turn skiing, one does not simply go left in an indivisible instant and one does not merely make generic leftward movement. One has to, and, knows one has to, turn left somewhere and somehow—turning left is not something that can be realized simply per se. Making the turn takes time and essentially involves a course of leftward movement: one is already moving downhill and faced with an array of possible trajectories, some more or less steep, more or less dangerous, and when turning left one charts a course leftward, as it were, ordering one’s movement in a certain definite way. (Lavin 2013, 287)

According to Lavin, basic know-how has no teleological structure (it is a *simple* skill): the means-end order that the agent inscribes in its exercise “is not contained in the action concept itself, but in material circumstances” in which that concept is realized. The simplest—or purest—version of this derives from the fact that “a subject who moves self-consciously through space, or does things that take time, grasps [the continuous magnitudes of space and time] at least intuitively” (2013, 287). It thus belongs to the self-understanding of an agent who is pushing a stone from  $\alpha$  to  $\omega$  that she must push it “the entire continuous distance,” and thus that she must push it “halfway there, and halfway to halfway there, and so on. ... [T]his sort of understanding supplies a basis for the unlimitedness of rational teleology” (287).

The idea that an agent's spatiotemporal surroundings and their contents need to figure in an account of the means-end structure of an unfolding exercise of skill is important. The specific way in which I exercise basic know-how on an occasion will depend on the contingencies of the case. The exact shape my hand takes and the degree of tension in my grip will be conditioned by the shape, weight, etc., of the apple I'm picking up, and this is something that I am aware of, though of course my awareness is an apple-involving one: I certainly couldn't specify the details except by reference to the apple and my grasp of it; they are not contained in my general knowledge how to grasp things. Lavin here provides an important insight into the *exercise* of skill—one that I endorse—but it is not self-standing, for it occurs in the context of an inadequate conception of that which is thusly exercised; as a result, it doesn't underwrite the “unlimitedness of rational teleology.”

To see this, consider again the objection made by Setiya (and others) to the initial segment argument: the agent didn't care whether he pushed the stone through  $\beta$  while pushing it from  $\alpha$  to  $\omega$ , so he didn't push it to  $\beta$  intentionally. Obviously, the specification of  $\beta$  matters: actions are intentional under descriptions. Perhaps  $\beta$  is the spot where N.N. died. The argument doesn't aim to show that the agent pushed the stone to the spot where N.N. died *intentionally*—he might not have known that that's where N.N. died; even if he did, he might have been “practically indifferent” (Frost 2016, 42) to it. For the claim that the agent pushed the stone from  $\alpha$  to  $\beta$  intentionally to be plausible, the specification of  $\beta$  must be one that is *internal* to the project of pushing the stone from  $\alpha$  to  $\omega$ : e.g., *the midpoint of the path  $\alpha$ — $\omega$* .<sup>34</sup> Having made clear that the description of the purportedly intentional action of pushing the stone from  $\alpha$  to  $\beta$  is wholly internal—and thus brings no content of its own—to the description of the action of which it is a part, we see that the (allegedly) teleologically-articulated task *pushing the stone from  $\alpha$  to  $\omega$  by pushing it from  $\alpha$  to  $\beta$*  is more per-spiciously notated not as *doing B by doing A* but as *doing B by doing B\**. Here the

<sup>34</sup>Mightn't the agent be “practically indifferent” to pushing the stone to the midpoint of that path? What does it matter whether he went to  $\omega$  via  $\beta$  rather than a nearby point either side? Why should he care that, as it happened, he went via  $\beta$ ? Only an improbable project (of pushing the stone in a *dead straight line* from  $\alpha$  to  $\omega$ ) or improbable circumstances (a shoulder-width canyon running between  $\alpha$  and  $\omega$ ) would demand pushing the stone through  $\beta$  to push it from  $\alpha$  to  $\omega$ . —These reflections are irrelevant, as the purely temporal case shows: when I waited for the bus from noon to 12:07, there wasn't some other time, slightly to the left or right of 12:02, until which I could have waited in order to wait for the bus. Moreover, there's something disquieting about writing off the agent's determination of his path through space and time as an unintended side-effect or by-product of acting, like the noise produced by firing a gun: there couldn't be anything analogous to a silencer that would enable me to walk from  $\alpha$  to  $\omega$  without crossing any lines perpendicular to  $\alpha$ — $\omega$  at determinate points.

asterisk indicates that the content of *do B\**, though *different* from the content of *do B* (as *do A* is), depends wholly on the content of *B* (as *do A* does not). It is one thing to know that I can make an omelette (*do Z*) by first breaking an egg (doing *A*) and then doing some other things (doing *B, C, D...*); it is another thing to know that I can make an omelette by carrying out some of the process of making an omelette (doing *Z\**) and then the rest (doing *Z\*\*, Z\*\*\*, Z\*\*\*\*...*): the former is a piece of non-basic know-how that someone who didn't already know how to make an omelette could find useful, whereas the latter is not—it amounts to saying that one can *do Z* by doing *Z*, which no one could find useful.<sup>35</sup> But if no one could find it *useful*, how could it underwrite the idea that by exercising such knowledge I am taking *means*?<sup>36</sup>

What makes “I can do *B* by doing *B\**” *useful*, on Lavin's view, is located *not* in my generic knowledge how to do *B*, but in the material circumstances in which I am doing *B*: I can walk from *HERE* to *THERE* by walking from *HERE* *around THAT tree* to *THERE*. But now that we see what the view comes to, we can see that it is not self-standing. We may illustrate the reason why by asking: what is the difference between exercising one simple skill rather than another? What is the difference—for the agent—between *walking* from *HERE* to *THERE*, *running* from *HERE* to *THERE*, and *skiing* from *HERE* to *THERE*? By hypothesis, these are *simple* skills, things the agent has no means-end knowledge of how to do. The knowledge of “particular means” that I at once acquire and exercise in manifesting a simple skill on an occasion, which accounts for my basic action's permeation by means-end structure, has what content it has for me by virtue of its reference to the particular places, times, objects (etc.) through, during, on, around (etc.) which I act: but the generic action concept that this particular content specifies is, for me, contentless.<sup>37</sup>

Of course, it's not true that, for me, there is no difference between my basic knowledge how to walk and my basic knowledge how to play a C major scale on the piano—or that the differences are exhausted by their distinctive whethers and whences. But this is because it's not true that I lack means-end knowledge how to do these things:

<sup>35</sup>Such “knowledge” makes explicit an aspect of the formal concept of movement (*kinesis*) that is always in play in the idea of doing something (cf. Rödl 2011, §1.1); it remains empty until content is supplied by the movement's material circumstances. Like Thompson, Lavin assumes that every *phase* of a movement is, as such, a *part* of it (in the relevant sense of “part”); for criticism, see Ford (2018a).

<sup>36</sup>Cf. Wolfson (2016, 59); Frost (2016, 46).

<sup>37</sup>This objection does not presuppose that there cannot be simple representations, or that it is never possible to distinguish between them. Russellian acquaintance would be an example. But acquaintance depends on an object of acquaintance; differences in given objects can account for differences in content. In the case of practical know-how, however, there is no given object: the knowledge *produces* its object.

it is not true that these—or, I hazard, any—skills are *simple*. The assumption that ran throughout §§1–3 was that unless an action manifests knowledge of the form *I can do B by doing A*, it must lack teleological structure. We have since seen that basic action (action that is the exercise of basic know-how) needn't be simple action (action that is—for the agent—teleologically unarticulated). The assumption that persists in Lavin's attempt to draw this distinction is that basic know-how (non-derivatively practicable know-how) must be simple know-how (know-how that is—for the agent—teleologically unarticulated). The assumption is that what contrasts with, and makes possible, “complex” know-how (of the form *I can do B by doing A*) must be know-how that *lacks* means-end complexity. This assumption should be rejected: it ignores the possibility that basic know-how might exhibit an *alternative form* of that complexity, an outline of which I will now sketch.

#### 4.2. *Analytic and constitutive unities of acts*

When someone has *non-basic* knowledge how to do B, the concept ‘do B’ denotes an *analytic unity of acts*. This means that the various types of action, of which she knows that she can do B by realizing them, can be realized independently of doing B, and that the concepts of the sub-actions can be understood independently of the concept of doing B. I know how to make a cheese and pickle sandwich: (1) butter two slices of bread; (2) cut some cheese; (3) spread pickle on one slice; (4) place the cheese on top of it; (5) turn the second slice over and put it on top of the first. Each of these steps is something that can be done independently of the others, and independently of making a cheese and pickle sandwich; and *what it is* to do each of these things does not depend on what it is to make a cheese and pickle sandwich. By contrast, when someone has *basic* knowledge how to do A, the concept ‘do A’ denotes a *constitutive unity of acts*: the various types of action that figure as means in her knowledge how to do A are not independent of the unity in which they figure. Andrea Kern, from whom I borrow this terminology, makes the point by considering short parallel turns on skis. According to the *Ski-Lehrplan* of the *Deutscher Verband für das Skilehrwesen*:

The turn begins with an explosive extension of the legs in which one firmly supports oneself on the downhill pole. Assume the traversing stance. Then rapidly pull the skis upward. (One may experience some heel-tap.) At almost the same time, one then swings one's legs—but not one's hips—quickly in the direction of the turn. As one begins the turn, immediately increase the pres-

sure on the outer ski and turn one's outer leg in preparation. One's rump will be leaned distinctly over the outer ski [...]. (Quoted in Kern 2017, 146)

Kern comments: "We cannot understand what an 'explosive extension of the legs' is, what it means to 'firmly support oneself on the downhill pole', and what it means for one to 'assume the traversing stance' except insofar as we grasp these concepts in relation to the totality of concepts that collectively provide a description of how to ski parallel short turns" (2017, 147). Getting a practical understanding of any of these concepts cannot occur independently of getting a practical grip on the concept of a short parallel turn—that is, of developing the capacity to execute a short parallel turn.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, I know that I walk by means of moving my legs (and, usually, arms), though I cannot give an informative, independent specification of the relevant types of movement—they are all indexed to walking. (We might say that *I walk by means of moving<sub>walking</sub> my legs*. *I can do B by doing A<sub>doingB</sub>* should be contrasted with both *I can do B by doing A* and *I can do B by doing B\**.)

Practical reason is manifested both in exercising analytical (non-basic) know-how and in exercising constitutive (basic) know-how, but these exercises manifest it in specifically different ways. A piece of analytical know-how—knowledge that I can do B by means of doing A—joins together a representation of an end (doing B) with a representation of a means (doing A) where my grip on what it is to do A is in an important sense prior to my understanding of it as a means of doing B. When the beginner skier is still following a taught routine, he relies on a grip of the elements of making a parallel turn that is prior to their being means to making a parallel turn: his knowledge how to do it *consists in* knowing that he can do it by extending his legs while supporting himself on the downhill pole...; and his practical thought and intentions are correspondingly articulated. That these elements still have this degree of independence—that have not yet been incorporated into a constitutive unity—is part of the reason why the beginner's turns are stilted, rigid, or unreliable, or don't quite hang together in the right way. By contrast, the expert skier's knowledge that she can make a parallel turn by explosively extending her legs while... *consists in*

<sup>38</sup>Here I am committed to the view that to have basic knowledge how to ski parallel turns consists in a capacity (of some sort) to ski parallel turns. The idea that knowing how to do something consists in the capacity (ability) to do it is widely rejected in the contemporary debate about knowledge how. Much more would need to be said to engage the relevant discussion. Note, however, that on the view outlined here the relevant capacity is one that can be exercised in various ways: in a teacher's instructions or a seasoned critic's evaluations as well as in a skier's skiing parallel short turns; for discussion, see Small (2014). This view therefore involves rejecting the standard assumption that capacities and abilities are aptly specified by verb-phrases; for discussion, see also Small (2017a, 2017b).

her (basic) knowledge how to make a parallel turn. The expert and the beginner each have knowledge of the teleological structure of making parallel turns (and their parallel turns each exhibit that structure, albeit to different degrees of perfection), but whereas the beginner's knowledge of the parts is prior to his knowledge of the whole, for the expert things are the other way around.<sup>39</sup>

Of course, it may well be that someone who knows how to ski parallel turns would not think of what she does in terms of explosively extending her legs, assuming the traversing stance, etc. (her teacher might not have used the *Ski-Lehrplan's* terminology, for one reason). She may think of the elements of the constitutive unity differently, through less technical concepts. In that case, the dependence of her conceptions of the elements on her practicable knowledge how to ski parallel turns will probably be even more pronounced (the point of the textbook, after all, is to describe a constitutive unity as analytically as possible). That the skier has a practical grip on these elements—something afforded by neither the default view nor the alternatives suggested by Hornsby, Lavin, and others—might be shown in various ways: she might try to make salient to her friend what he ought to do by swinging her legs but not her hips in a slightly exaggerated fashion; she might increase the pressure on the inner ski while beginning the turn, in order to fall over (to let her friend win their race, or to show him what not to do); she might decide to work on her technique for an hour, practising with a focus on making the opening leg extension really explosive *in order* to execute a parallel turn well and on account of her insight that doing this is a way to do that; and so on.<sup>40</sup> That these might all be manifestations of her rational capacity to ski indicates that the structure that belongs to her constitutively unified knowledge how to execute short parallel turns is really present in her activity—that (*pace* Hornsby) it is not a projection or imposition if we discern it there, because it is from and for her.

It might be objected that these are unusual cases, ones in which the agent deliberates about what to, and that this deliberation is the source of the means-end complexity in her actions. In each case, she has a special end—related to, but distinct from, the end that belongs to knowledge how to execute short parallel turns as such (i.e. the end of executing a parallel turn). She may deliberate about how to show her friend what to do, how best to let him win their race, or how to practise her turns, but she needn't and doesn't calculate how to execute the short parallel turns that she makes in the course of her run down the mountain, "just like that." Why think that when

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<sup>39</sup>The distinction between constitutive and analytic unities of acts should not be overstated. In my view, it is better construed as a continuum than as a dichotomy.

<sup>40</sup>On the idea that skills can be deliberately misused, see Aristotle, *Metaphysics* Θ2.

she is just skiing, and makes a short parallel turn “directly”, that she does so *by means of* (among other things) assuming the traversing stance, then rapidly pulling the skis upward, ...?

As a preliminary response, it is worth pointing out that though the “pure” exercise of a skill, which so often captures the philosophical imagination, may often be relatively unreflective, the *possession* of a skill is usually not: (incipiently) analytical reflection, imagination, and practise are characteristic activities of a skilled agent, and are credibly thought of as exercises of the skill itself.<sup>41</sup> This should undermine the pull of the superficially plausible idea that skill is starkly opposed to practical reason. But more can be said. As we saw, Lavin attempts to make palatable the claim that the spatiotemporal structure of intentional action is a genuine structure of means and ends by appealing to the idea that “a subject who moves self-consciously through space [and time] ... grasps [their continuous magnitudes] at least intuitively” (2013, 287); Thompson makes a similar point, insisting that “the human will is the will of an intrinsically spatial”—or better, spatiotemporal—“sort of being” (2008, 111). In support of my corresponding point about the inner rational or conceptual structure of basic know-how (and thus its exercise), we may say that our agent’s will is the will of a *skier*. In possessing her skill, she exemplifies a *practice*.<sup>42</sup> The practice is teleologically articulated: its constitutive elements are the various things one can do in skiing—stem turns, parallel turns, short parallel turns, carving turns, flat lining, hockey stops, etc.—each of which is itself teleologically articulated into constitutive means. If someone is really *skiing*, and not just sliding down a piste with skis on, then she is doing so by means of e.g. making a series of short parallel turns. And if she is really making a short parallel turn, she is doing so by means of doing the things laid out in the passage from the *Ski-Lehrplan*. If she makes a turn by some other means, she won’t have made a short parallel turn. One cannot be engaged in the activity of skiing without being engaged in more determinate skiing activities; and one cannot be engaged in them without being engaged in realizing their constitutive means (contrast Hornsby, who seems to think that Jones was engaged in the activity of buttering toast without repeatedly moving his hand along the toast then towards the block of butter). What it is to make a short parallel turn, or to butter toast, is not simply to bring about a certain state of affairs (that the skier is at a slightly later time skiing down the mountain in the other direction, that the piece of toast is cov-

<sup>41</sup> When Ryle claimed that skills are “multi-track dispositions”, activities like these were among the “wide variety of more or less dissimilar exercises” of them that he had in mind (1949, 43).

<sup>42</sup> I discuss the dependence of skills on practices in more detail in Small (2014).

ered in butter). It is to bring these results about in specific ways.<sup>43</sup> Thus no further practical thought beyond an intention to do B is required, on the part of an agent who possesses basic knowledge how to do B, for her doing B to be articulated into its constitutive means (doing  $A_{\text{doing}B}$ , etc.).<sup>44</sup>

One might object that the plausibility of this account of basic know-how depends on a restricted range of examples: knowledge how to make short parallel turns, how to hit a topspin forehand or play the piano, etc. But what of the idea that (among the) basic actions are bodily movements? Even if I can hit a topspin forehand “just like that”, I can also raise my arm “just like that”. Yet it is implausible to suppose that there is a practice of arm-raising, responsible for the inner teleological structure of my basic knowledge how to raise my arm (which structure it seems my argument requires, if I am not to be essentially estranged from my arm raisings).

It is important to acknowledge that knowing how, or having the ability, to raise one’s arm is quite different from knowing how, or having the ability, to hit a forehand. Of course, I cannot raise my arm without raising it in some determinate way; when it’s not just to score a philosophical point, I tend to raise my arm for a reason—to pick up my drink, to reach for a book, to wave to a friend, to “raise the roof”—that will supply criteria for success. And the *way in which* I will raise my arm will differ, depending on why I’m raising it (and where my arm was beforehand): I may bend at the elbow, or raise it from the shoulder, or whatever. Characteristically, my bodily movements are constitutive elements of things I have basic knowledge how to do: walk, pick up cups, turn on light switches, hit forehands, play scales, tie shoelaces, butter toast. It is by learning how to do things (that are not specified as bodily movements) that we develop control of our bodies, and those things we learn how to do are constitutive unities of acts. The idea of a “pure” arm raising is, on this view, derivative: it is an abstract union of those constitutive elements of reaching, grasping, signaling, etc. that involve raising my arm. Though more could be said about how to understand bodily movement as such, this should be enough to indicate a view that meshes with

<sup>43</sup>This opens a normative gap between exercising a skill properly and achieving the intended effect: Jones’s buttering might have been slapdash, yet the toast ended up buttered adequately to his purposes; the skier might have crashed despite executing her short parallel turn properly because her ski fell off. There may be many ways to skin a cat, but *bringing it about that a cat is skinned* is not one of them (Baier 1970).

<sup>44</sup>Cf. Hanser (1998), who argues that an individual agent can “tap into” “autonomous teleologies”—his examples are the teleologies of *machines* (i.e. instruments) and of *jobs* (i.e. social endeavours)—with the result that her actions may inherit means-end structure, even if that structure “originate[s]...outside [her] will” (399).

the account of basic know-how and action I've articulated.<sup>45</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The negative aim of this paper was to show that it's far more difficult to give an adequate account of basic action than most philosophers have thought. An adequate account is required because of a regress that presents itself to a straightforward piece of reflection on the structure of intentional action, the pattern of practical reasoning, and the practicability of know-how: if we cannot understand basic action, we cannot understand intentional action at all. Those philosophers who adopt a picture of basic action on which it is the upshot of skills, conceived of as sub-personal or non-rational dispositions, are saddled—whether they recognize it or not—with the following unenviable task: they must explain how basic action has not been rendered alien to the order of practical thought and intentional action for which it is supposed to provide the foundation. While practical thought and rationality are conceived of as extrinsically related to skill and basic action, this difficulty will arise. The conception of intentional action as essentially teleologically articulated that we arrive at by taking seriously the phenomenon underlying Thompson's and Lavin's arguments against dominant conceptions of basicness helps us to see why "action" that practical thought does not permeate must be (at best) less than fully intentional—why it cannot be *from* and *for* the agent. But those arguments threaten to leave us with the claim—shown by the regress not to be intelligible absent an alternative framework—that what it is to do something intentionally is to do it by intentionally doing something else.

The positive aim of this paper was to show the way out of this impasse. I suggest we reject two parallel assumptions: that if a basic *action* does not have the kind of teleological complexity that belongs to non-basic action, then it must be teleologically unstructured ("simple"); and that if basic *know-how* does not have the kind of teleological complexity that belongs to non-basic know-how, then it must be teleologically unstructured ("simple"), too. If we recognize that exercising non-basic know-how is *one* way, but not the *only* way, in which an action may have teleological structure, then we open the possibility that basic action could have, from and for the agent, the inner structure that it needs to have in order to be a genuine case of intentional action, and thus to be something by means of doing which an agent

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<sup>45</sup>For further discussion of bodily movement, see Small (2016).

could perform a non-basic intentional action. But we cannot recognize this properly unless we also acknowledge that basic know-how itself is teleologically structured, albeit in a specifically different form (a “constitutive unity of acts”) from that taken by non-basic know-how (an “analytical unity of acts”); otherwise we will be condemned, with Lavin, to search hopelessly for the inner structure of basic actions solely in the material circumstances in which basic know-how, lacking any determinate content for the agent, is exercised. The upshot of my proposal is that skill and deliberation are not starkly opposed, as they are often taken to be; rather, they are specifically different forms that practical reason’s exercise can take. These different manifestations are not only complementary but essentially interdependent: non-basic intentional action, and the planning and deliberation that sustains it, is possible only if practical reason informs skilled action; and skilled action is intelligible as an expression of human agency at its rational and intentional best only if it is understood to manifest powers of practical reason for the sake of the complex intentional agency that characterizes human life. Understanding basic action, and genuinely avoiding the regress, becomes a matter of understanding how the exercise of skill, considered as a rational capacity, can have the internal teleological structure that belongs to intentional action as such.<sup>46</sup>

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