

Body as the Unity of Action

Prologue

About thirty years ago, I suffered from severe back pain. For some weeks I lay in a body cast, dazed by pain-killers and muscle-relaxants. When I was recovering, I decided one day that I needed exercise. Very gingerly I got on my bike and, feeling rather sorry for myself, rode slowly up the road. As I drew abreast of a group of boys, one of them turned and stuck a stick into the spokes of my front wheel. Since I was moving very slowly, I was able to stop before falling. Perhaps unwisely, I challenged them: "Do you think that's funny?" One of the boys stepped forward, laughed and brazenly replied, "Yes, I do!" Enraged, my hand reached out and slapped him across the face.

The boy was startled and frightened. I suspect, however, that I was the one most disturbed. I think of myself as having a peaceful character and as normally keeping my anger under control. Non-violence is high on my hierarchy of values, yet the slap was clearly a violent and abusive act. I aim to be reasonable, yet this action was without reason. Indeed, I had not even deliberated about it beforehand; it was a purely impulsive reaction. It felt to me as if my hand had initiated the action alone, as if my body had acted without my permission. It was like some alien force outside my self had taken control of my hand.

I mentioned the incident to a psychiatrist who told me that a known side-effect of some drugs, such as muscle relaxants, is occasional impulsive violence. So perhaps it was the drugs that caused my behaviour.

The incident raises a number of philosophical issues. The behaviour was, of course, illegal, but was it immoral? Perhaps the brat deserved it! What makes some acts moral and others immoral? Since I was unaware of any act of will, was the action mine? With respect to this action, was I -- that is, my self -- an agent at all? Indeed, was the slap an action in the first place? I experienced it as a kind of reflex. What is the difference?

Introduction

Christine Korsgaard offers an account of self-constitution that attempts to answer these three philosophical questions simultaneously. What makes a behaviour an action by an agent, as opposed to just a movement? What (or Who) is a self and how is it identified or unified? Why are some actions morally right and others wrong? Hence the sub-title of her book *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity and Integrity*.¹

While I am inspired by her project, I think it goes off the rails at certain points. Most notably, it neglects the role of the body in the unification of agency. I turn to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the lived body to get us back on track. Yet, as a naturalist, I want to go beyond phenomenology and integrate action and agency into the evolutionary view of the world.

My paper is in three parts. First I will outline Korsgaard's argument. In the second part, I will present some themes from Merleau-Ponty, most notably his notion of the lived body and his criticism of intellectualism, Korsgaard's main failing. In the final part, I will offer a brief sketch of my own thoughts on these issues.

Part I: Korsgaard's Project

Korsgaard's Position

Korsgaard claims that she has a theory of the constitution of the self that can account for three problems simultaneously: the distinction between action and mere movement; the unity of the self; and the foundation of morality. She holds that, to be an action, a series of behaviours must be unified and effectively directed at a goal by an agent. This is possible only if the inclinations and incentives within the individual that drive the action are unified under reason so that the person acts as one whole, not just a heap of parts. It is the unifying of the parts into one action that constitutes the individual as an agent.² Such unifying of action and agent is a matter of degree: some behaviours are better at being actions than others. Behaviours that are good as actions are the ones that are morally right.

Korsgaard uses three conceptual approaches in explaining her position, approaches she borrows from Plato, Aristotle and Kant.

First, she relies on an analogy with the unity of the state. Plato's republic is composed of component parts: rulers, auxiliaries, and workers. These parts form a unified state only in so far as they each behave according to the role defined for them by the constitution of the state. A state such as Sparta can perform an action, going to war for example, only if it does so constitutionally. An individual Spartan warrior might kill an Athenian, but this is not an action of Sparta unless the auxiliary was authorized by the Spartan rulers in accord with the constitution. It is not simply that what the rulers do is what the state does; it is only in so far as the rulers act according to their constitutional role that their actions are the actions of Sparta. It is the following of the constitution that makes something an action by Sparta, not just the behaviour of any of the components, not even of the rulers. In Korsgaard's analogy, an individual is made up of drives, inclinations, values, impulses, reason, etc., but he can perform an action only in so far as these parts (even reason) play their roles within the constitution that unifies the self. If the behaviours are not unified, then the result is not an action at all, just a series -- a heap -- of movements. Korsgaard calls this the Constitutional Model for the unity of self and of action.³

Secondly, she adopts an Aristotelian approach. Every substance is defined by its Form: the Form is its nature that makes it be the kind of thing it is. An organism performs an action in so far as it behaves in accord with its Form. When a giraffe reaches up to eat the leaves on a high tree, that reaching is an action because the long-neck-reaching movement is part of the Form of giraffes. When the giraffe accidentally falls off a cliff, however, this is not a mistaken or a defective action by the giraffe; in this

case the giraffe *does* nothing. The movement is not due to its Form as such, so it is not an action at all. It is the Form that unifies an agent, and a movement is an action of the organism just in case the organism acts from its Form. Korsgaard claims that the human species is unique in that each individual has their own Form, based on their history, values, etc. In the Aristotelian approach, a person is a unified agent and performs actions when, and only when, she behaves in accordance with her Form.⁴

Thirdly Korsgaard borrows some themes from Kant. Persons are autonomous in the sense that they act in accord with laws that they give themselves; they are self-legislators. They are unified by two principles. First, the categorical imperative requires that they act on maxims that are universalizable, that is, that govern them not just for this particular behaviour, but for all past and future behaviours. Secondly, they are governed by the hypothetical imperative – "if you will the end, you must will the means: this is what makes an action effective, for to will an end but not the necessary means is not to will at all, but just to wish. Only activity in accord with the categorical and hypothetical imperatives is "willing."⁵ An "action" is an act willed for an end.

In all three models, Korsgaard argues that it is in the process of unifying actions that the self is constituted. The self is not first a pre-existing entity, like a Cartesian substantial ego for instance, that secondarily performs an action. The agent comes into being as a unity in so far as the action is unified. Her title, *Self-Constitution*, is double-pronged: she is referring to the self being constituted, but also to the self being the constitutor.⁶

Korsgaard maintains that these three approaches – Constitutional, Formal and Principled – amount to the same thing. Together, they make up her theory of self-constitution.

Let us apply her analysis to my example. The impulse to slap the boy on the face was unconstitutional. The impulse, like the wayward Spartan warrior, was not authorized by my constitution to carry out the behaviour, so it was not an action of my self. My individual Form involves a character that is non-violent, that repudiates aggressive values, and that endorses the use of reason before responding to provocation, so this behaviour did not flow from my individual Form: I did not act as a whole. The behaviour therefore failed to constitute me as a unified agent, so I was not, with respect to this behaviour, a self. The maxim, "slap any kid who provokes you," is, from the Kantian perspective, not universalizable, and so the behaviour is not in accord with the categorical imperative, hence, once again, I was not an agent and the behaviour was not an action.

Critique of Korsgaard's approach

Korsgaard's project of showing that the nature of action and the unity of the self are one and the same is a project with which I am very sympathetic. And if she can found morality along the way, so much the better. Unfortunately, in my judgment, her project fails for two reasons. First, her arguments for aligning the Platonic, Aristotelian and Kantian approaches are often little more than equivocations on key terms such as constitution and principle. Secondly, she is seduced by what Merleau-Ponty calls "intellectualism."

To say that the constitution of water is H₂O and that the constitution gives the Senate specific powers is to use the word in quite different ways. Yet, as far as I can see, Korsgaard's only argument for aligning Aristotelian Form -- what makes a thing what it is -- with the Platonic constitution of the state -- a set of explicit, probably written statements -- is that we use the English term "constitution" for both.⁷

More crucially, for my argument in this paper, is her play on the word "principle." When we say that an Aristotelian Form is a "principle" we are translating the Greek term "archê ." "Archê" means something like source, origin or ontological component that accounts for how things are.⁸ In a Kantian context, however, a "principle" is something like a linguistic formula, a law that one establishes or adopts in a conscious and explicit manner. Korsgaard's assimilation of Kantian verbal maxims and Aristotelian ontological components requires argument: one cannot simply identify them on the grounds that they can both be translated by the English term "principle." Yet I see little other basis for her claim that they are getting at the same point.

But why would a philosopher of Korsgaard's repute fall into such simple equivocations? The equivocations are but the surface appearance of a more fundamental error. Her explanatory paradigm assumes the priority of ideas that are conscious, explicit and linguistic. This is the error that Merleau-Ponty labels "intellectualism." (I will explain in more detail what this error is later.) Korsgaard's intellectualism blinds her (and Kant before her) to the role of the body in unifying agency.

Korsgaard's intellectualism – her obsession with explicit laws, principles and rules – is evident in her quandaries about animal action. Since they lack Kantian imperatives and Platonic constitutions, it would seem that animals could never be agents. Korsgaard recognizes the implausibility of this position. An antelope's running from a lion is an action; its falling off a cliff is not. So even in animals there is a distinction between movements that are actions and those that are non-actions.⁹ Using the

Aristotelian paradigm to analyze this distinction makes sense: it is its Form, its bodily biological essence, that unifies the animal's agency and makes its behaviour an action.¹⁰ Unfortunately, it makes no sense to attribute a principle such as the categorical imperative to giraffes. Nor can one claim that the giraffe has adopted a constitution – American, Spartan or otherwise. Her chapter on animal action relies on a wholly Aristotelian paradigm, which has the advantage that she can claim that action and agency are matters of degree. Categorical imperatives, like constitutions, however, are not matters of degree. Being a self-legislator governed by a categorical imperative is an all or nothing proposition: one cannot be more or less obliged by a categorical imperative. Korsgaard faces a dilemma:

I have claimed that we cannot recognize someone as acting unless he is at least in some degree governed by the hypothetical and categorical imperatives. ... So how can other animals possibly act? I surely do not want to claim they try to obey the Kantian imperatives. I seem to be faced with a choice -- either give up the idea that the Kantian imperatives are constitutive standards of action, or give up the idea that the other animals act. (92-93)

Since as far as I can see Korsgaard fails to resolve this dilemma, her project of accounting for the unity of agency by assimilating the three paradigms fails. It fails primarily because the constitutional and principled models are intellectualist approaches that are ultimately incompatible with her Formal, Aristotelian model, despite her equivocations. Appeal to ideal principles is incapable of handling animal action. Indeed, as we shall see, this top-down approach is incapable of handling even ordinary human actions.

Part II: Merleau-Ponty's Lived Body

Maurice Merleau-Ponty would agree with Korsgaard that the unity of action and the unity of agent go hand in hand, but his account, in contrast, starts from the bottom up. He claims that it is the body and its abilities, not the intellect with its ideas, that unifies both action and agent. I will first explain Merleau-Ponty's special use of the term "body" -- lived body -- by examining his account of perception. I will then show how the lived body unifies action. We will then be able to see how intellectualism distorts Korsgaard's analyses.

Unity of perception

The dictionary offers at least a dozen different uses of the word "body," all equally legitimate, so my project is not to tell you what the "body" really is -- a project I consider seriously misguided: think of "corporate body" or "body of work." Early mechanists, such as Galileo, used body to mean a piece of matter. In Descartes' dualism, body is the opposite of mind. Merleau-Ponty, following Husserl, uses the term body in a different way than any of the above -- "lived body" (*corps veçu*, own body, body proper, experienced body, body-subject, etc.) It is only in this distinctive use of the term that he claims "the body" unifies action.

The best way to understand Merleau-Ponty's distinctive notion of the lived body is by starting with his description of perception. A perceived object (a cup of coffee) is experienced phenomenologically as a unity. It is given as one integrated thing that has other sides than the side currently perceived -- otherwise it would be only a two-dimensional appearance, a facade. In experiencing it as real, I perceive it as more than what appears from my current perspective.¹¹ Part of its meaning for me ("coffee cup") is that it can be touched, heard if I bang it, and possibly tasted. But, following an insight of Husserl, Merleau-Ponty claims that the unity of the thing is paralleled by the unity of the perceiving body -- the "lived body" or "body-subject." If Mary could only taste the coffee, John only hear it, Jack only see this side of it, Jill that side, then no real, unified thing could ever be experienced. The seeing from different perspectives, the tasting, the hearing, etc. must all be done by the one, unified experiencing body. I must be one body for the cup to be experienced as one, real thing.¹² Note that it is the *capacities* of the one unified body that are implicated: I am not *currently* seeing the cup from the other side; it is the *potential* for the body to look at it from other sides that constitutes the cup with the meaning "real object," as opposed to a mere appearance.

Unlike the "bodies" of physics or biology, the lived body is not itself an object perceived. It is on the side of the perceiving. One could think of the lived body as the condition for the possibility of perceived objects, just as Kant proposed that his categories are the conditions for the objects of the Newtonian, physical world. This would not be quite right, as we will soon see, but it's a good first approximation for understanding the role of the body in perception.

Unity of action

The lived body has role in action analogous to its role in perception. An action must be unified. Riding a bicycle requires that the handlebars be coordinated with the direction of motion, with the

pedals and with posture. The balancing mechanism in the brain, the goal of the cycling, the values of fitness must all come together. In drinking, my hand moves out to the cup; it closes around the handle; the cup is carried towards my mouth and tilted; the coffee in my mouth is swallowed. These are a series of separate movements that, in themselves, have nothing in common. The action of drinking coffee is a unity that is possible only when these separate elements are integrated into the one being, the one action. And the separate movements need to be referred to one body, one unified drinker: my handling, your drinking and Mary's swallowing would not make for a unified action of drinking. One could call this the unifying of the acting body, but it could just as well be called the unification of the action performed. The action is constructed as an object in the world, an "action-object" as it were, and the process of constructing this unity is simultaneously the unifying of the agent – the body-agent, as Merleau-Ponty might put it.

The most central thesis of phenomenology is that the world we experience is made up of unities of meaning. That is the point of Husserl's doctrine of intentionality. Some of these unities are objects, like the coffee cup. But some of the unities are actions: riding a bike; drinking coffee. The perceiving body is the condition for objects; the acting body is the condition for actions. The relationship of agent to action closely parallels the relationship of perceiver to perceived.

Body-perceiver (body-subject) and body-agent are, of course, one and the same thing.¹³ Already in the case of perceiving a cup, Merleau-Ponty would say that the perceiving body is not a pure, uninvolved spectator. That the cup is experienced as a "cup" – a drinking vessel – already refers to my ability to drink. That it has another side that is potentially visible makes reference to the capacity of the body to walk around behind it – an action. That the cup is given as touchable refers to the ability of the hand to reach out. The potentialities of perception are in fact motor capacities of the body. Seeing the real thing as more than a facade implies that I have the capacity to move around and view the self-same thing from a different perspective. It must be the same body that moves and that perceives. The lived body is as much a unity of action as of perception; indeed, the unity of perception, properly understood, is a unity of action.¹⁴

It is time, however, to correct the (Kantian) approximation I offered above. It is true that Merleau-Ponty is not a Realist: there is not some independent, in-itself action called "drinking coffee" that the drinking agent comes across and performs. It is only in a world-for-a-drinker that the action of drinking coffee can exist.¹⁵ Nevertheless, it is not Merleau-Ponty's position that a pre-fabricated lived body

constitutes the world. That would cast the body in a role analogous to a Kantian transcendental ego, and make Merleau-Ponty some kind of (bodily) Idealist. Unlike a transcendental ego, the lived body is not a pre-established unity: its unity is an ongoing task to be accomplished.¹⁶ It is not just that body-unity and thing-(or action)-unity are parallel: the processes or conditions that allow the drinking to be one action-object are the same conditions that allow the body's motor capacities to be the capacities of the one, self-same body. The constitution of both the body and its world originate in the same process, what Merleau-Ponty calls being-in-the-world.¹⁷

This is, of course, what Korsgaard says too. Agent-unity does not precede the unification of action but is brought about by it. Korsgaard's error is to think that this integration is an intellectual construction by a pure mind and so she misses the role of the body. Unification is not an intellectual operation; if I think about the physical or physiological principles that allow me to balance my bike, I'm likely to fall off. Or spill my coffee. The foundation for thought, consciousness and intellection lies in being-in-the-world. Being-in-the-world is one process or system from which both subject and object, agent and action are constructed. These are two sides of the same coin and come about in the same constitutive process. If we use the term "transcendental" to refer to the giving of meaning, that is, to the construction of objects of experience, then for Merleau-Ponty being-in-the-world is the transcendental source of objects, but also of subjects. "Transcendental," however, no longer refers to something otherworldly: it is in the everyday bodily process of drinking coffee that cups, the action of drinking, and the lived body, as drinker and perceiver, come into being.¹⁸

Rejection of intellectualism

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the lived body is a rejection of some major theses of "Modern Philosophy." First, it rejects dualism. Descartes divides being into matter and mind. The human body is pure matter, and so is blind. Only the *ego cogitans* can perceive. For Hume, the body supplies isolated, atomic sense-data to the mind and it is only in the mind that they can be unified into objects. Kant's Unity of Apperception is non-bodily, and only it is capable of synthesizing the manifold of sensations. Merleau-Ponty rejects this dualism. The lived body itself unifies, and so perceives and acts. Secondly, Merleau-Ponty rejects the spectator model of the subject impartially observing the world. As a bodily being I live and act in the world. Thirdly, he rejects the (Platonic) notion that the Idea comes first, that the only real unity is an ideal unity and that it is in function of Ideas that we grasp the world and act in

it. The *Phenomenology of Perception* is a sustained argument rejecting this Cartesian-Kantian "intellectualist" paradigm.¹⁹ The condition for the possibility of experience, argues Merleau-Ponty, is not the conscious intellect with its explicit ideas, but the lived body with its unifying structure of implicit potential actions. The world of unified perceived objects is constructed by the pre-reflexive body before reflection and consciousness enter the picture.²⁰

So Korsgaard is right that an agent is not a pre-established unity that secondarily produces actions: it is in the acting that the agent self-constructs. What Korsgaard misses is that the unification happens on the bodily level: the self/action structure is constituted by being-in-the-world rather than being "synthesized" by some ideal, disembodied, intellectual being. It is not some explicit law or principle, like the categorical imperative, that constructs the unity. We are not ideal egos who unify ourselves by universalizable self-legislation. Her Kantian intellectualism leads her astray at this point.

So, to summarize: Merleau-Ponty agrees with Korsgaard that both action and agent must be unified; that the two are unified by the same process; and that this is a dynamic, ongoing process rather than some pre-fabricated unity. Where they disagree is the source of the joint unity. Korsgaard finds the origin in intellectualist principles such as the categorical imperative, in a top-down, mind-first fashion. Merleau-Ponty takes the bottom-up, approach and finds the origin of the unity in being-in-the-world.

III My Naturalism

Evolved unities

But what is being-in-the-world? My own, naturalistic position, extrapolating Merleau-Ponty's, interprets it as the systemic relationship between organisms and their worlds that is a feature of all life. Organisms do not interact with raw, physical objects – those defined by physics – but allow the purely causal order to impinge upon them only "with respect" (as Merleau-Ponty puts it). Each organism lives in its "own" world, its *Umwelt* or surrounding environment, within which things-for-the-organism are constituted in correlation with the organism's body.²¹ A single-cell amoeba lives in its own world with objects such as food-for-amoebas and poison-for-amoebas that its body structure allows it to perceive. Eating food-for amoebas and fleeing from poison-for-amoebas are actions proper to this world and

these actions constitute the amoeba as a unified agent. Even in the case of the amoeba, there is a distinction between movements due to purely causal processes – being carried along by a current, falling due to gravity – and unified actions based on responses to things in its world as they are categorized with reference to the amoeba's body structure.

When evolution gives rise to more complex animals, such as giraffes, they live in a more sophisticated world with more elaborate perceptual and motor abilities and so their world is populated with more elaborate objects and actions. The visual system of pigeons is sensitive to ultra-violet so they recognize each other as distinct individuals by their unique patterns, inaccessible to human sight. The echo-location world of bats is made up of entities we can scarcely imagine. A centipede cannot see a "cup" – there is no place for a drinking vessel in its life. Humans too live, not in a world of atoms and molecules – to which we are blind – but in a world of cups and tables, men and women, loonies and elections. At every stage of evolution, we can attribute action of some kind to the organism involved, and such action requires unification.²²

It is not just that every organism must be organized. What evolves is the structure made up of the organism and the niche to which it is fitted. For each mode of life there must be a system that integrates perceptual abilities with things-for-the-organism, that defines the repertoire of actions in terms of motor capacities, and that ensures that the organism acts on the same world that it perceives. This (naturalistic) evolved system of organism, action and perceptual object is analogous to (perhaps identical to) what Merleau-Ponty calls "being-in-the-world." It is this system that unifies actions and agents at all levels of life.

What blinds Korsgaard to this picture is an anachronistic understanding of science. 17th century science approached matter as a heap of atoms governed by mechanistic laws, reminiscent of billiards. Atoms of matter are intrinsically defined and isolated from each other, related only by the external relationship of causality, and so they are passive and incapable of active unification, of integration. She therefore sees the activity of unification as the preserve of mind, for what else but mind can synthesize the heaps, the manifolds? This dualism, however, is no longer plausible. Mechanism is not an adequate view even of contemporary relativistic and quantum physics, but it certainly fails as an account of biological structures and evolutionary design. Even an amoeba cannot be understood as a piece of mechanistic matter: it is unified and is capable of action within its world. To say that evolution produces design is to say that the establishment of meaning, the constitution of objects and the

unification of bodies already takes place within any organic system, even in the absence of anything we can label “mind.”

Unity of the self

Nevertheless, there are different levels of integration. While single cell organisms continue to define their own food, evolutionary adaptation has led to multi-cellular organisms that superimpose new constitutive systems upon the cellular ones. Animal bodies then come to have their own unity, to live in their own worlds and have their own forms of action.

But humans also have culture, which is passed on by learning rather than genetics. In particular, language allows for the construction of a world based on linguistic labelling rather than on purely perceptual categorization. This system constitutes a new kind of agent-unity, and so of corresponding action-objects. Social actions are constructed that unify a new kind of agent, one that is integrated across time: a self.²³

A self is an agent distributed and unified over time. Who I am today, my own individual Form, depends on my past in so far as it is preserved in language. To say that the self is a narrative unity is to say that its current being participates in a longitudinal structure – its linguistic “body” – that constructs it as the self-same self over different time-slices of the narrative. Just as this moment's recognition of a coffee cup before me involves the synchronic unification of the different sense capacities and the potential actions my body is capable of, so time-distributed actions require a self that involves the diachronic unification of different capacities. The action-unity of obeying a promise, for instance, can exist only in a world in which there are organisms with the capacity to make a promise, carry it out, develop a trustworthy character, cultivate a reputation for honesty, etc. The narrative self is to temporal actions what the lived body is to synchronic actions.

A self inhabits a social world. Any society, perhaps by definition, involves norms for behaviour. Actions based on selfhood are constructed by a particular kind of culture, one that sets a norm of responsibility. Trading and monetary exchange, marriage and other social commitments, certifications by degrees, and so on, are all temporally distributed actions which make sense only for a temporally unified self. The action of making a promise is a social construct that comes into being only in promise-making societies which also construct responsible promise-keepers. It is social being-in-the-world

(being-with-others) that constructs not only these possibilities of action, but simultaneously, the type of responsible being we call a self.²⁴

Natural unity

Each layer of the evolutionary hierarchy builds on earlier ones. If single cells could not be unified in their worlds, giraffes could not be unified in theirs. If the lived-body as Merleau-Ponty describes it did not live in its perceived world, the self as a responsible unity over time could not live in its social world.

So Korsgaard is not wrong that certain kinds of agents – selves – get unified by linguistic laws and principles. But these explicit principles do not originate from some Transcendental Ego; they are norms constructed by our social world and have the same contingent, evolutionary status as the norms governing the worlds of other species. Reliance on articulated principles is not a break with the being-in-the-world approach. It is just the most recent phase of the evolutionary pattern that has characterized nature from the beginning.

Conclusion

So what have we learned? Was I an agent that performed an action when I slapped the boy across the face? From Korsgaard's intellectualist perspective my behaviour was not based on reason, not governed by the categorical imperative or any other self-legislation, was caused by only a part of me not my whole self, and so it did not qualify as an action attributable to my agency. Merleau-Ponty might say that my lived body perceived the boy and his ridicule, and responded with a unified action that was, in some sense, appropriate to the situation. The nuanced, hierarchical position I have tried to elaborate would claim that there are different kinds of action attributable to different kinds of agents. The behaviour was not a mechanistic reflex but a meaningful event, an action within the system or being-in-the-world unified around my body-subject. However, my narrative agent, my self, was not unified by the behaviour, so it was not my action in the sense of a unity that expressed my history, my character and the values I had adopted.

From my naturalist point of view, there are different modes of organic unity, each with its correlated world of objects and actions. During evolution, each mode of unification builds on top of and

incorporated earlier forms of unity and continues to depend on them. The most recent mode of unity is the culturally constructed narrative self unified over time by the social attribution of responsibility. Which level of unification we label "agent" or "action" is arbitrary and depends on the context of our conversation. What we should not do is give a non-contextual definition of action and agency and then excommunicate all other uses of the terms. When conversing about amoebas or giraffes, we can use the term "agent" to mark the important distinction between eating and falling. Talking of bike riding, we can attribute balancing to the action of a body-subject to distinguish it from the movement of flying through the air when hit by a car. In the interpersonal, social context we can hold a narrative self unified over time responsible for their actions, while accepting that there are behaviours not attributable to the narrative self, but which qualify as actions nonetheless.

David L. Thompson
Memorial University of Newfoundland
2011

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- 1 "In this book I will be dealing with three topics that I take to be intimately related. The topics are the nature of action, the constitution of personal or practical identity, and the normativity of the principles of practical reason." Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 7. All further references to Korsgaard are to this book.
- 2 "I am ready to try to state my view. I believe that it is essential to the concept of action that the action is performed by an agent." Korsgaard, 18.
- 3 Korsgaard, Chapter 7.
- 4 Korsgaard, 103-104.
- 5 "The way to establish these imperatives is by showing how they constitute a unified will." Korsgaard, 58.
- 6 "I am going to argue that in the relevant sense there is no *you* prior to your choices and actions, because your identity is in a quite literal way *constituted* by your choices and actions." Korsgaard, 19.
- 7 For example: "... the principles of practical reason serve to unify and constitute us as agents ... According to this account, normative principles are in general principles of the unification of manifolds, multiplicities, or, in Aristotle's wonderful phrase, mere heaps, into objects of particular kinds (M 8.6 1045a10). ...The form of the house is that the arrangement of those parts that enables it to serve as a habitable shelter ... The walls are joined at the corners, the insulation goes in the walls, the roof is placed on the top, and so on, so that the weather is kept out ... That is the form of a house." Korsgaard, 27. Compare this with, "The Constitutional Model, I have proposed, can be used to explain the nature of action. This is because it can be used to explain how we can attribute a movement to an agent as the agent's own. At the same time, it shows us why certain formal principles -- the categorical imperative, and Plato's principle of justice -- are constitutive principles of action: because they bring the constitutional unity that makes action possible to the soul. If that is so, then agents must act justly and on the categorical imperative, if they are to act at all." Korsgaard, 158.
- 8 "Given the primacy of form as substance, it is unsurprising to find Aristotle identifying the soul, which he introduces as a principle or source (*archê*) of all life, as the form of a living compound. For Aristotle, in fact, all living things, and not only human beings, have souls: 'what is ensouled is distinguished from what it unensouled by living (DA 431a20–22; cf. DA 412a13, 423a20–6; De Part. An. 687a24–690a10; Met. 1075a16–25).
"It is appropriate, then, to treat all ensouled bodies in hylomorphic terms: The soul is the cause and source of the living body. But cause and source are meant in many ways [or are homonymous]. Similarly, the soul is a cause in accordance with the ways delineated, which are three: it is (i) the cause as the source of motion [=the efficient cause], (ii) that for the sake of which [=the final cause], and (iii) as the substance of ensouled bodies. That it is a cause as substance is clear, for substance is the cause of being for all things, and for living things, being is life, and the soul is also the cause and source of life. (DA 415b8–14; cf. PN 467b12–25, Phys. 255A56–10)" [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy article on Aristotle](#).
- 9 "The antelope perceives the approaching lion, and runs away. The antelope is tackled by the lion, and falls over. Running away is something an antelope does while falling over is something that happens to him. But if both are equally cases of the antelope's movements being determined by alien causes, where does the difference lie?" Korsgaard, 91.
- 10 "When an animal acts, he is determined by his form, by his instincts, to produce a change in the world, guided by his conception or representation of the world. But an animal's form is what give him his identity, what makes him the animal he is. So to say that an animal's form determines him to cause a certain effect is to say that the animal determines himself to be the cause of that effect. Action is self-determination, and, to that extent, it is autonomous. ... Autonomy and efficacy are the properties of agents -- all agents, not just human agents." Korsgaard, 107.
- 11 " In other words: to look at an object is to inhabit it, and from this habitation to grasp all things in terms of the aspect which they present to it. But in so far as I see those things too, they remain abodes open to my gaze, and, being potentially lodged in them, I already perceive from various angles the central object of my present vision. Thus every object is the mirror of all others. When I look at the lamp on my table, I attribute to it not only the qualities visible from where I am, but also those which the chimney, the walls, the table can 'see'; but the back of my lamp is nothing but the face which it 'shows' to the chimney. I can therefore see an object in so far as objects form a system or a world, and in so far as each one treats the others round it as spectators of its hidden aspects and as guarantee of the permanence of those aspects." Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 238. All further references for Merleau-Ponty refer to this book. 68
- 12 "The thing, and the world, are given to me along with the parts of my body ... in a living connection comparable, or rather identical, with that existing between the parts of my body itself. External perception and the perception of one's own body vary in conjunction because they are the two facets of one and the same act." (237) "... it is literally the same thing to perceive one single marble, and to use two fingers as one single organ." Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 238.
- 13 "... every perceptual habit is still a motor habit and here equally the process of grasping a meaning is performed by the body." Merleau-Ponty, 176-177.

- 14 “Movement, understood not as objective movement and transference in space, but as a project towards movement or ‘potential movement’ forms the basis for the unity of the senses.” Merleau-Ponty, 272.
- 15 “The natural world is the horizon of all horizons, the style of all possible styles, which guarantees for my experiences a given, not a willed, unity underlying all the disruptions of my personal and historical life. Its counterpart within me is the given, general and pre-personal existence of my sensory functions in which we have discovered the definition of the body.” Merleau-Ponty, 238.
- 16 “In short, what is living the unity of the object or the subject, if it is not making it?” Merleau-Ponty, 278.
- 17 “It is because it is a preobjective view that being-in-the-world can be distinguished from every third person process, from every modality of the *res extensa*, as from every *cogitatio*, from every first person form of knowledge—and that it can effect the union of the ‘psychic’ and the ‘physiological’.” Merleau-Ponty, 92.
- 18 “If then we want reflection to maintain, in the object on which it bears, its descriptive characteristics, and thoroughly to understand that object, we must not consider it as a mere return to a universal reason and see it as anticipated in unreflective experience, we must regard it as a creative operation which itself participates in the facticity of that experience. That is why phenomenology, alone of all philosophies, talks about a transcendental field. This word indicates that reflection never holds, arrayed and objectified before its gaze, the whole world and the plurality of monads, and that its view is never other than partial and of limited power. It is also why phenomenology is phenomenology, that is, a study of the advent of being to consciousness, instead of presuming its possibility as given in advance.” Merleau-Ponty, 71.
- 19 Although he refers to intellectualism hundreds of times, I can find nowhere that Merleau-Ponty gives an explicit definition of the term. A passage from The Stanford Encyclopedia may help:
“In *The Phenomenology of Perception*, he claims that the idea of sensation plays an analogous role in both objectivist and intellectualist conceptions of perception.” If atomic sensation, elsewhere he refers to them as “a wondering troupe of sensations,” is accepted as the basic given of perception, then in order to move from it to the perception of things, we need to employ either ‘the laws of association’, or a ‘theory of attention or of judgment’, in order to give those sensations a unity. Such an initial starting point is by no means given to us by experience, since there is no experience of a lone sensation. Rather this view is imposed on us by the assumption that the body is a mechanical system, affected by the “external” world of which it is a part. Merleau-Ponty contests the idea that perception is a process by which the “external world” is somehow imprinted on the subject. According to him, perception is a behavior effected not by consciousness but by the body, but not by the body as a piece of the physical world, rather by the body as lived, a living body. He refers us to both the experience of our body considered in relationship to scientific knowledge, that is, the objective body, and the “other knowledge which we have of it, in virtue of its always being with us. And of the fact that we are our body” (PP, 206). For this “other knowledge,” the world is not a spectacle with the body as an observer; rather the world is given as a system of possibilities, not as an “I think” but as an “I can.” [The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy article on Merleau-Ponty](#).
- 20 “But—to say nothing at this stage about external objects—our own body acquaints us with a species of unity which is not a matter of subsumption under a law.” Merleau-Ponty, 173.
- 21 The ideas in the next few pages are brief summaries of approaches I have developed in more length in other papers. On the relation of an organism to its world, for instance see my “[What, if Anything, is Represented? Objects in their Worlds](#)” 1992
- 22 For further elaboration, see my “[A Brief History of Mind](#)“ 2006
- 23 See my [What Makes Us Essentially Different?](#) 2007
- 24 On the relationship of selfhood to responsibility, see my [Constructing Responsibility](#) 2009