

Actions and Events

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Abstract:

Kent Bach has argued that certain traditional problems of action theory (concerning the individuation of actions, their timing, their location, and the manner in which they enter into causal relations) arise only on the supposition that actions are events, and he has argued further that actions are not events. In this paper these arguments are examined and rejected.

Article:

I

“I flip the switch, turn on the light, and illuminate the room. Unbeknownst to me I also alert a prowler to the fact that I am home.” Of this case Donald Davidson confidently asserts that the agent performed just one action, of which four different descriptions have been given.¹ Others, however, have maintained that at least four distinct actions were performed.² This is the problem of how actions are to be individuated. Call it Problem A.

“Suppose a man is shot, fatally, in January. Suppose then, not knowing that the wound is fatal, he goes south, to Miami, in hope of recuperating. And suppose this does him no good: he dies in June.” Judith Thomson claims that the killing occurred from January to June.³ Others have denied this.⁴ This is the problem of when actions may be said to take place. Call it Problem B.

There are many other similar problems in the theory of action to which philosophers have paid attention, such as the problems (C) where actions may be said to take place, (D) how actions may be said to enter into causal relations, and the like. I mention Problems A—D in particular, though, for it has recently been argued that they, at least, are not genuine problems at all. If this argument passes inspection it is surely very important. For then the work of past action theorists will prove to have been badly misguided (insofar as they have taken Problems A—D seriously) and that of future action theorists considerably simplified (insofar as they need not grapple with these problems). The argument in question has been proposed by Kent Bach.⁵ It is his contention (p. 117) that Problems A—D “arise only on the supposition that actions are events”, and, while this may be a natural supposition⁶, it is nonetheless, according to Bach, a false one. The significance of its implications for the work of action theorists renders Bach’s argument deserving of careful scrutiny. It is the purpose of this paper to provide such scrutiny.

One way to try to argue that actions are not events is to deny that events, and therefore actions, exist. Some philosophers have indeed taken this tack.⁷ But this is not what Bach does. On the contrary, Bach accepts that events exist. It seems to me prudent of him that he should do so. While anyone with a penchant for ontological parsimony would be suspicious of their existence, there are nonetheless powerful reasons for accepting that they do exist.⁸ At any rate, caution in matters ontological requires at least a provisional acceptance of the existence of events. What makes Bach’s argument so interesting is that he accepts the existence of events and yet denies that actions are events.

Another way to argue that actions are not events is to develop a detailed theory of events and then to point out that, perhaps surprisingly, actions turn out not to be events on this theory. This is not what Bach does either. On

the contrary, Bach simply says the following with respect to the nature of events (p. 115): “I will make an assumption common to most theories, and beyond that rely on the reader’s pretheoretic intuitions about events. I assume that events exist in space and time and that they enter into causal relations as causes and as effects.” Let us now examine his argument.

II

Bach contends that to act is to bring about an event. Actions are therefore to be treated as instances of the relation of bringing about whose terms are agents and events. Bach distinguishes two main theories concerning the nature of bringing about. According to the Agency Theory, bringing about is an irreducible relation between agents and events.⁹ According to the Causal Theory, which Bach himself favors¹⁰, bringing about may be reduced, on analysis, to a causal relation between one event and another event. All of this seems right. Why should it lead us to believe that actions are not events and that A—D are not genuine problems?

Let us begin with what Bach has to say about the Agency Theory. While he discusses this theory only briefly (his main concern is the Causal Theory), nonetheless what he has to say about it is important, since the Agency Theory is a legitimate rival to the Causal Theory.

As noted, the Agency Theory claims that action involves an agent’s bearing a special relation to an event. This relation—often called the relation of agent-causation—is special in that it admits of no reduction to any other relation; it is unanalyzable; it is *sui generis*. Agency Theorists have traditionally insisted on the irreducibility of this relation for one or the other (or both) of two closely related reasons. The first reason is that they have feared that the reducibility of the relation (in particular, its reducibility, as on the Causal Theory, to a causal relation between events) would imply that agency is in some way not genuine; that is, that “actions” would turn out to be events that *happen to* “agents”, so that “agents” would be passive rather than genuinely active. The second reason is that they have feared that the reducibility of the relation would imply that agents, even if somehow genuinely active, would not be in control of their actions; that is, *freedom* of action would be impossible.

Bach states (p.117) that the Agency Theory entails that actions are not events, but he doesn’t say why. Perhaps he has in mind this remark made by Roderick Chisholm, the most prominent contemporary Agency Theorist:

We have said that there must be some event A, presumably some cerebral event, which is caused not by any other event, but by the agent. Since A was not caused by any other event, then the agent himself cannot be said to have undergone any change or produced any other event...which brought A about. But if, *when the agent made A happen, there was no event involved other than A itself*,...what did the agent’s causation consist of?... The only answer...can be this.... There was a brain event A; the agent did, in fact, cause the brain event; but there was nothing that he did to cause it.¹¹

This passage suggests the following argument¹².

- (1) If someone, S, acts, then there is some event A such that S agent-causes A.
- (2) If S agent-causes A, then no event causes A.

Hence

- (3) If someone, S, acts, then there is some event A such that S agent-causes A and there is no event involved in the act other than A itself.

This is, of course, a *non sequitur*. While it may be that no event causes A, there may nonetheless be an event involved in the act other than A itself. In particular, it may be that the act, namely, S’s agent-causing A, is *itself* an event. Indeed, it is hard to see how this could plausibly be denied. If nothing else happens when S agent-causes A other than A itself, then it would seem that S’s agent-causing A is identical with A; but this must be

rejected, since a person's bringing about an event cannot be thought to be identical with that event. However, if something else does happen, then (it seems—but see the next paragraph) some event other than A does occur; and if no event causes A, the obvious candidate for this other event is S's agent-causing A.

One might try nonetheless to support Bach's contention that the Agency Theory entails that actions are not events in either of two ways. First, one might insist that events involve a *change* in some individual and that S's agent-causing A, even if it happens and hence is an occurrence of some sort, involves no change (in S or anything else) and hence is not an event. This is hard to assess. While some theorists have certainly contended that events essentially involve change, contrasting them with states¹³, it is not clear that we should accept this. (If someone keeps perfectly still, is this not an action? If so, and if Bach is right, then some *event* is brought about. What event? Presumably that of the agent's being perfectly still. But what change in the agent does this involve?¹⁴) Moreover, what reason do we have to say that S's agent-causing A involves no change in S? Certainly we must agree (if the Agency Theory is to be preserved) that no change in S *causes* A, but this doesn't imply that no change in S *occurs*. The second way to try to support Bach's contention here is to invoke his claim that events enter into causal relations as causes and effects and to interpret this as meaning that *all* events are *both* causes of other events *and* caused by other events. This might well rule out S's agent-causing A as an event; for Agency Theorists (such as Chisholm) frequently claim that actions are not event-caused, and this surely implies that S's agent-causing A is not event-caused. The trouble is, this move would also rule out A as an event, contrary to the initial assumption of the Agency Theorist.

The foregoing is, of course, very obscure, the obscurity being inherited directly from the obscurity of the notion of irreducible agent-causation itself. No Agency Theorist that I know of has been able to dispel the mystery surrounding this concept. Still, this much can, I think, be said: it is not at all obvious that, as Bach claims, the Agency Theory entails that actions are not events. On the contrary, Chisholm himself seems later to have accepted that they are events. While in the passage cited (first published in 1964) Chisholm may seem to intimate that actions are not events, in later writings (published in 1971 and 1976) he seems to intimate that they are events. For in these writings he subscribes to the view that, if S agent-causes A, then S agent-causes his agent-causing A.¹⁵

III

More important is to assess what Bach has to say about the Causal Theory and its implications regarding actions as events, for two reasons. First, the Causal Theory has enjoyed much broader support among philosophers than the Agency Theory; and second, Bach's argument in this regard is much more detailed and explicit.

According to the Causal Theory, acting consists in a mental event's causing another event (often a physical event). For example, raising one's arm might be said to involve a decision to raise one's arm causing one's arm to rise. Such a theory may appear to be better suited to support Bach's contention that actions are not events, inasmuch as it implies that, when an agent brings about an event, some event occurs that is distinct both from the event brought about and from the bringing about of that event; hence, on the Causal Theory, even if one wishes to maintain that actions are not events, there is no danger (as on the Agency Theory) of being committed to the apparent absurdity of saying that, when someone acts, nothing happens other than the event that is brought about.

Bach suggests several arguments as to why actions are not events. First, he says this (p.117):

[W]e need not accept the Agency Theory, which entails that actions are not events, rather than the Causal Theory, which reduces the relation of bringing about to a causal relation between pairs of events. Even supposing that actions are causings, it does not follow that actions are events. Indeed,...one event's causing another is not itself an event....

Thus we have this argument:

- (1) All actions are causings.

(2) No causing is an event.

Hence

(3) No action is an event.

Given the Causal Theory, the first premise must be accepted. But why accept the second? Bach says this (pp. 117–8):

Clearly we cannot identify the causing with either the cause or the effect, and even if we suppose that these two events combine to form a composite event, it is odd, to say the least, to describe that composite event as the causing of one event by another (or even as the following of one event by another).

But this won't do. Suppose that some mental event, M, causes some physical event, P. Do these events "combine" to form a third, composite event? I find it plausible to say that they do. We may call this event M-and-P. (We certainly appear to recognize the existence of composite events in many cases. We give them names, such as "battle" and "tornado". It is arguable that every causally related sequence of events involves such composite events.) I think that we should also agree with Bach that M-and-P is not the same thing as M-causing-P. After all, M-and-P *itself* appears to involve no causal relation between M and P but merely their conjunction. But of course it does not follow from this, contrary to Bach's apparent suggestion, that M-causing-P is not itself an event. Why think that it is not? Here Bach gives no explicit reason, but he does cite the work of N. L. Wilson. So let us look at what Wilson has to say.

The passage by Wilson to which Bach makes reference is very brief. It is this: "But the causing of e_2 by e_1 is not itself an event. (What could it cause? Not e_2 !)"¹⁶ This suggests the following argument:

- (1) All events can have (or, perhaps, do have) effects.
- (2) No causing can have an effect.

Hence

(3) No causing is an event.

Let us grant the first premise (for argument's sake). Let us also grant that the causing of e_2 by e_1 does not itself cause e_2 . This of course does not imply that the causing of e_2 by e_1 has no effect whatsoever. We have not been given any reason to accept the second premise.

Now, none of the foregoing provides a positive reason for saying that causings *are* events; it has merely been critical of the reasons given for the claim that they are not. But if we follow Bach and say simply that events exist in space and time and enter into causal relations, I think we can provide a positive reason for saying that causings are events. For it seems that, contrary to Wilson's claim, causings may indeed enter into causal relations. Suppose that Smith is taking an introductory course in metaphysics. Before taking the course he never contemplated the existence of causings. The instructor assures him, however, that such things do exist. Sceptical, Smith looks for one and is surprised to find one involved in that series of events that constitutes one billiard ball's striking another and causing it to roll into the corner pocket. It seems accurate to say that the causing itself causes Smith's surprise. It may be retorted that it is Smith's *finding* the causing that causes his surprise. I would grant this but reply in turn that the causing causes his finding it and thereby also causes his surprise. If this is correct, causings can and sometimes do themselves enter into causal relations.¹⁷

Another reason for thinking that actions are not events is presented by Bach in the following passage (p.119):

Instances are not individuals and not subject to quantification. Imagine the silliness of a debate over whether, in the case of a red, round ball, there is one instance or two. There is an instance of redness and an instance of roundness, but one and the same individual, the ball, is an instance of both.

This suggests the following argument:

- (1) All actions are instances (of the relation of bringing about).
- (2) No instance is an event (for events are quantifiable individuals, while instances are not).

Hence

- (3) No action is an event.

Here, I think, Bach confounds two senses of “instance”. In one sense, an instance is a thing which instantiates; it is an *instantiator*. In another sense, an instance is an episode of instantiation; it is an *instantiating*. In the example given, there is (fairly clearly) just one instantiator, the ball; it instantiates both redness and roundness. How many instantiatings there are is a moot point. Identity theorists would claim that there is just one instantiating involved, although it falls under several descriptions.¹⁸ Fine-grained theorists would say that there are several distinct instantiatings involved, including those of an instantiating of redness and an instantiating of roundness.¹⁹ In neither sense of “instance”, let it be noted, does there appear to be reason to think that instances are not quantifiable individuals.

In which sense of “instance” are actions instances of the relation of bringing about? Clearly, it cannot be the first (although the passage just cited strongly suggests that Bach has just this sense in mind). Actions don’t instantiate the relation; agents, and the events brought about, do that. (Of course, actions *can* be instantiators; for example, a kind action instantiates kindness. It is just that actions don’t instantiate the relation of bringing about.) Actions are, rather, instances of the relation of bringing about in the sense that they are instantiatings of it; they are what happens when the relation is instantiated. Now, it seems clear that instantiatings *can* be events; indeed, if some theorists are right, *all* events are instantiatings.²⁰ Thus the second premise of the argument just attributed to Bach cannot be sustained. I submit that the reason that he apparently subscribes to the premise is that, failing to notice the confusion of senses of “instance”, he feels drawn to say, with respect to the case cited, both that there is just one instance and that there are two. Since this cannot be correct, he concludes that instances are non-existent—they are mere *façons de parler*- and hence that, since actions are instances, they too are mere *façons de parler*. But this conclusion is unwarranted.

Bach hints, however, at another reason for thinking that actions do not exist. Immediately after the passage just quoted, he says (p. 119):

Rather than get mixed up in such a debate [over the number of instances at issue], we can simply say that one individual, the ball, is an instance of both properties, that is, that the ball is red and round. Similarly, we need not worry about individuation in the case of actions, construed as instances of the relation of bringing about between agents and events. Since an action is performed if and only if someone has brought about an event, we need not count actions but only agents and events.

And he adds in a note (p. 119): “Metalinguistically, the claim is that expressions of the form ‘A’s bringing about *e*,’ as well as gerundive forms of action verbs generally, do not refer.”

This suggests the following argument:

- (1) All actions (at least on the Causal Theory) are reducible to other entities.
- (2) If something is reducible to something else, the former is not a real existent.
- (3) All events are real existents.

Hence

(4) No action is an event.

The second premise of this argument is unacceptable. Bach fails to distinguish reduction from elimination.²¹ For example, there is presumably no such thing as the average table; any apparent reference to such an entity is merely apparent. Anyone who accepts this is an eliminativist with respect to the average table. But most of us would accept that normal, everyday tables are genuine existents and so are not eliminativists with respect to them. Reference to (non-fictitious) tables, we believe, is genuine reference. And this is true even if we believe that tables may be reduced, in some sense, to their parts—their tops and legs, perhaps—together with some spatial relation between these items. Similarly, Causal Theorists are of the opinion that actions may be reduced, in some sense, to agents and events together with some causal relation between these items. Acceptance of this, however, does not warrant the inference that actions don't exist. Reduction is one thing, elimination quite another. The final sentence in the passage just quoted from Bach seems to me as bizarre as saying this: since a goal is scored if and only if someone puts the ball in the net, we need not count goals but only people and balls and nets.

IV

Bach has therefore failed to give us sound reason for rejecting the common supposition of action theorists that actions are events. Of course, this does not imply that his thesis that they are not events is false. For all that I have said, it *might* be that actions are subject not just to reduction but to elimination. Some people claim that tables are not genuine existents, and it may be that the same may be said of actions. But in the absence of a cogent argument for this view, it seems prudent to accept the existence of actions. In particular, it is very hard to see just how one might cogently argue that actions do not exist while accepting, as Bach does, that events do exist.²²

Also, for all that I have said, it *might* be that actions, like events, do exist, but that actions are not events. My main purpose here has been to show that Bach has not given us good reason to think that actions are not events, especially if, following Bach, we simply say of events that they exist in space and time and enter into causal relations. But suppose now that we conceded that actions are not events but entities of some other sort. (This is certainly arguable, I suppose; for even if we accept that all actions are occurrences of some sort, since it seems that not all occurrences are events²³, it may yet be that actions are not events.) What impact would this have on traditional theory of action? Very little, I think. For the problems that Bach mentions—problems A—D above—and others too (such as how to distinguish intentional from unintentional action, how to distinguish action from omission, and the like) would still remain, whether or not we take actions to be events. The problem of individuation arises *whenever* an individual existent is posited. Bach's remark that Problem A arises only on the assumption that actions are events is thus simply mistaken. Similarly, any non-instantaneous occurrence, whether an event or not, endures; hence Problem B remains. Problem C, concerning location, besets any occurrence that (literally) takes place. And, if actions can enter into causal relations, Problem D remains, whether or not actions are events. Moreover, it is these problems on which theorists have focussed; the assumption that actions are events has for the most part *not* played an essential role in their theorizing. Of course, if, as Bach maintains, actions do not exist at all, then, as he says, A—D are merely pseudo-problems. But he has not succeeded in showing that they do not exist. And as long as we accept that actions are genuine occurrences, genuine instantiations of the relation of bringing about, then Problems A—D must be tackled head-on, whether or not actions are events.²⁴

Endnotes

¹Donald Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), p. 4. This position is commonly known as the identity, or austere, or unifier's thesis. Compare Elizabeth Anscombe, *Intention* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969).

²For example, Alvin I. Goldman, *A Theory of Human Action* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), ch. 1. This position is commonly known as the fine-grained, or prolific, or multiplier's thesis. Compare Jaegwon

Kim, “Events as Property Exemplifications”, in Myles Brand and Douglas Walton, eds., *Action Theory* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1976), pp. 159–77.

³The case is given in Judith Jarvis Thomson’s *Acts and Other Events* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 48; the discussion takes place in the remainder of ch. 4.

⁴Someone who adopts the identity thesis with respect to Problem A (see note 1 above) and thus identifies the man’s being killed with his being shot must of course deny what Thomson says here; for it is clear that the shooting did not occur in June.

⁵Kent Bach, “Actions Are Not Events”, *Mind*, vol. 89 (1980), pp. 114–20. All page references will be to this article.

⁶It is certainly a common one. Three conspicuous examples of philosophers who have recently and explicitly made this assumption are Davidson, *op. cit.*, p. xii, Goldman, *op. cit.*, p. 3, and Thomson, *op. cit.*, the very title of which is *Acts and Other Events*.

⁷For example, Terence Horgan, “The Case Against Events”, *Philosophical Review*, vol. 87 (1978), pp. 28–47.

⁸Davidson, *op. cit.*, *passim* and especially p. 165. In this connection I think we would do well to heed the advice of Roderick M. Chisholm on p. 117 of his *Person and Object* (La Salle: Open Court, 1976): “From the fact that a true sentence *seems* to commit us to the existence of a certain object, it does not follow that there *is* in fact such an object. What we should say is rather this: If (i) there is a sentence which seems to commit us to the existence of a certain object, (ii) we know the sentence to be true, and (iii) we can find no way of explicating or paraphrasing the sentence which will make clear to us that the truth of the sentence is compatible with the nonexistence of such an object, then it is more reasonable to suppose that there is such an object than it is not to suppose that there is such an object.”

⁹Cf. Roderick M. Chisholm, “The Descriptive Element in the Concept of Action”, *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 61 (1964), pp. 613–25. It should be noted that, in his book *Person and Object*, Chisholm subscribes to a version of the Agency Theory which he claims does *not* treat bringing about as an irreducible relation. (See definition D.II.10 of that work.)

¹⁰Cf. Kent Bach, “A Representational Theory of Action”, *Philosophical Studies*, vol. 34 (1978), pp. 361–79.

¹¹Roderick M. Chisholm, “Human Freedom and the Self”, in Gary Watson, ed., *Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 30–31. Emphasis added.

¹²I am not claiming that Chisholm endorses this argument.

¹³For example: Roderick M. Chisholm, “Events and Propositions”, *Noûs*, vol. 4 (1970), pp. 15–24 (but contrast *Person and Object*, p.128); Thomson, *op. cit.*, pp. 100–101.

¹⁴Cf. N. L. Wilson, “Facts, Events and Their Identity Conditions”, *Philosophical Studies*, vol. 25 (1974), pp. 303–21, p. 313: “As Sherlock Holmes pointed out, the non-barking of a dog can be even more significant than its barking.”

¹⁵Roderick M. Chisholm, “On the Logic of Intentional Action”, in Robert Binkley *et al.*, eds., *Agent, Action and Reason* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), pp. 38–69, p. 47, assumption A3; see also *Person and Object*, p. 71, theorem T2. This view has its own problems, of course, in particular that of the generation of an infinite regress of agent-causation.

¹⁶Wilson, *op. cit.*, p. 318.

¹⁷Bach is willing to grant that, when M causes P, there is a sense in which M-causing-P may be said to enter into causal relations. For, he says (p.120), we might say that M-causing-P is caused to occur when M is caused and then M causes P; and we might say that M-causing-P has an effect when M causes P and P then causes some other event. But Bach calls this sense “dubious”. Dubious or not, it is, I grant, different from M-causing-P *itself* being caused or having an effect. But the case just given of Smith’s being surprised appears to be a case of a causing *itself* having an effect.

¹⁸See the authors cited in note 1 above.

¹⁹See the authors cited in note 2 above.

²⁰See Goldman, *op. cit.*, and Kim, *op. cit.*

²¹Although Bach doesn’t mention reduction in the quoted passage, it is clearly on his mind, and he clearly thinks of reduction as elimination. In an earlier footnote he says of Wilson (p. 114): “Wilson... holds that events are truncated propositions and intends this thesis to be taken reductively. Obviously, if there are no events then actions are not events.”

²² Contrast Horgan's view, mentioned in note 7 above.

²³ An occurrence that seems to me not to be an event is Russia's being such that it was a member of the Soviet Union.

²⁴ My thanks to Joshua Hoffman for comments on an earlier draft.