As agents we think of ourselves as having power over the world. We believe that we are, on occasion, capable of molding what happens in the world according to our desires and our convictions about how things ought to be. On these occasions we are not passive victims of circumstances but active beings who shape the course of events in accordance with our wills. Sometimes we are able to constrain the world to remain the same (in certain respects) when we like the way things are. Sometimes we are able to change the state of things to one which we prefer. Although we know that all too often we are powerless in the face of events, we believe that sometimes, at least, we are not.

In this paper I shall be trying to shed some light on this picture which we have of ourselves. I shall argue that when we think of ourselves in this way, we have in mind a very pervasive, but by no means exhaustive, class of actions. I shall argue further that this class of actions cannot be adequately understood apart from a certain point of view or conceptual framework. Finally, I shall argue that an understanding of how this special point of view is involved in our conception of these actions will help us to solve certain puzzles about the idea of prevention.

There are in the philosophical literature several expressions which serve, at least very roughly, to mark off the class of actions with which we shall be concerned. That great logician of the will, Jeremy Bentham, defined a class of actions which he called transitive acts:

Acts may be called transitive, when the motion is communicated from the person of the agent to some foreign body: that is, to such a foreign body on which the effects of it are considered as being material; as where a man runs against you, or throws water in your face.¹
More recently, Professor Max Black has referred to a similar type of actions as cases of *making something happen*.\(^2\) Perhaps wisely, Black does not attempt, as Bentham did, to define his expression in a precise way; rather he indicates what he has in mind by giving examples: “closing a window, opening a drawer, turning a door knob, sharpening a pencil” (153). Shifting, in a footnote, to the formal mode, he says that he is investigating “a class of transitive verbs, like ‘moving’, ‘breaking’, ‘opening’, ‘upsetting’, etc., indicated by the blanket expression ‘making something happen’”, and adds:

When the expression ‘making something happen’ occurs, the reader may usually imagine the more specific expression ‘moving a glass’ substituted – with the understanding, however, that the discussion is intended to apply indifferently to an entire class of similar expressions. (153)

This reference to transitive verbs brings Black’s characterization of ‘making something happen’ very close to Bentham’s definition of ‘transitive acts’. However, the latter’s distinction between transitive and intransitive acts cannot be drawn on the basis of grammar alone, for “Jones is moving his arm” has, at least superficially, the same grammatical form as “Jones is moving a glass.”\(^3\) And, as his subsequent discussion makes clear, Black himself does not wish to construe raising one’s arm (in the ordinary way) as a case of making something happen. Thus, when he goes on (160) to list some seven features which he takes to be true of any ‘perfectly clear case’ of making something happen, one of them, the third, appears to rule out raising one’s arm. Referring to the agent as ‘P’ and the object upon which he acts as ‘O’, he writes: “P made this happen by doing something (moved his hand to O, clasped it, and brought it back to him)” (160). Actions which have this feature—that they are performed by performing some other action—have been called by Professor Arthur Danto ‘non-basic actions’\(^4\), and although it is not true, as Black’s article sometimes seems to imply it is, that all actions correctly describable by expressions involving transitive verbs (e.g., ‘moving’) have this feature, we shall do greater justice to the spirit of Black’s account if we include this feature as a *defining* property of ‘making something happen’.\(^5\)

Summing up, I can indicate the items with which I shall be concerned in the following way: they are items (A1) which are cases of making something happen and are (also) actions, (A2) in which what is made to