ON THE LOCATION OF ACTIONS AND TRYINGS: CRITICISM OF AN INTERNALIST VIEW

1.

A common and influential view in the philosophy of action, which I shall call Davidsonian, holds that actions are causally individuated, and that different descriptions which are true of the same action often describe this action in virtue of its different effects. A shooting might be identical to a killing, since the same action might both cause a bullet to go off and someone’s death. An additional thesis, defended by Jennifer Hornsby, holds that all actions are internal events. This latter view has been taken to be a necessary consequence of a Davidsonian approach to the problem of action-individuation. Critics of the internalist view seem to hold that there is something intuitively wrong in locating actions inside the body. Such intuitions might be held in combination with considerations which show that there are deeper problems in connection with Jennifer Hornsby’s thesis that actions are inside the body. Problems for the internalist view are then conceived of as problems for a Davidsonian view.

One such consideration might be the following. If actions precede and cause bodily movements, then the actions seem to be pushed back in space and time to a point where the actions are threatened by complete disappearance. (Bodily movements are here understood as movements\(_T\). I will use Hornsby’s distinction between movements\(_T\) (nominalisation of the transitive verb move) and movements\(_I\) (nominalisation of the intransitive verb move), and explain it briefly in Note 3.) When we describe the events in the nervous system which cause the bodily movements\(_I\), then we are still describing effects of the action on Hornsby’s view, and as we go back in time, the time of the occurrence of the action seems to be reduced to nothing. Hornsby has persuasively shown that actions disappear on some traditional volitionalist accounts, but a parallel disappearance seems to threaten actions on her own account.

I am interested in this internalist view precisely because it seems to follow from a Davidsonian view, a view I find plausible. I find the
internalist view less attractive, and the aim of this article is to establish that we should not accept the view that actions are internal events in Hornsby's sense. I also claim that a Davidsonian or causal view on action-individuation is fully compatible with this conclusion concerning the internalist view. First I give a short exposition of Hornsby's argument, and sketch the motivation for her view. Secondly I consider one line of argument which Michael Smith has launched against Hornsby's position. I conclude that Smith's interesting counterargument is not successful, since it relies on arguments concerning part-whole relations in the case of events, and Hornsby's view is motivated by considerations concerning causes and effects. When this is seen clearly, Smith's argument has little or no force. I then consider the details of Hornsby's view, and locate three important problems for the claim that actions cause movements of the body. I argue that two of these problems (both concern time-considerations) alone provide sufficient grounds for rejecting her analysis of the crucial relationship between actions and bodily movements. These grounds for rejecting her analysis are independent of the question whether actions are internal events. When this analysis is rejected, we are free to take a different stand on the internalist issue. Still our position is entirely compatible with a causal individuation of actions. The last section is more tentative, and concerns part-whole relationships in the case of actions and events.

2. HORNBY'S ARGUMENT

There are two crucial premises in Hornsby's argument for the thesis that actions are inside the body. These are:

(a) All attempts to act ("tryings") are internal events.
(b) All successful attempts to act are identical with the actions so attempted.

From these two premises, we can draw the conclusion:

(c) All actions are internal events.

I will first make a remark about how 'internal' is to be understood in this argument. It is plausible that 'internal' is to be contrasted with 'external', even if Hornsby does not do that explicitly. If we raise the issue of whether some tryings are external events, we will face two