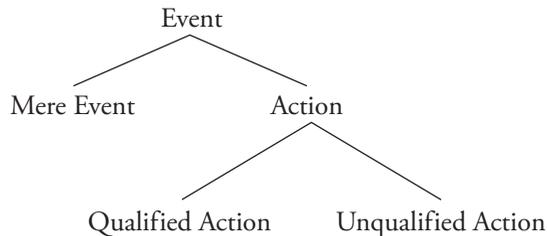


Action and Generality

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1. Methods and Division

Among the events of the natural world, the actions of a human being are thought to be somehow special. But what is it that makes them so? The standard approach to this question proceeds by a method of division. Because certain things that happen are the fruit and flower of the human will, while others clearly are not, philosophers tend to first distinguish an “action” from a “mere event.” And because certain actions, though they spring from the will, do so only indirectly, or directly but imperfectly, a second distinction is frequently drawn between that which is action in a qualified sense—because it is unintentional, or idle, or addictive, or subconscious, or weak-willed, or compelled by force, or what have you—and that which is action unqualifiedly, or action par excellence.



When confronted with these canonical divisions, it is common to suppose that the primary task of the philosopher of action is to hound down the differentiae—to say what an event must be, over and above being an event, in order to be an action, or to say what an action must be, in addition to being an action, in order to be an action in the full and proper sense.¹

Indeed, some such thought is implicit in a question that was famously posed by Wittgenstein: “What is left over if I subtract the fact that my arm goes up from the fact that I raise my arm?”² Wittgenstein’s question appears to be concerned with the first of the two now familiar divisions, but it is easily redeployed in connection with the second: “What is left over,” one might also ask, “if I subtract the fact that I raise my arm from the fact that I raise it *intentionally*—or *whole-heartedly*, or *autonomously*, or *freely*?” Of course, the idea of subtraction entails the idea of a corresponding addition. So Wittgenstein’s question appears to assume a certain conception of what it is to be an action, according to which an action is, as it were, the arithmetic sum of an event and something else. On the model of, for example, this equation: $7 + x = 12$, we are led to imagine this one: *event + y = action*, and also, by extension, this one: *action + z = intentional action*.³

There is reason to think that in Wittgenstein’s own opinion, the question he posed was deeply misguided, in which case he sought to expose it as such, and not to inaugurate a program of research.⁴ Be that as it may, his question has come to serve as a ritual starting point for the prevailing sort of account in the philosophy of action—the sort of account associated with Donald

1. For an especially clear example of this, see J. David Velleman, “Introduction,” in *The Possibility of Practical Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000).

2. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953), §621.

3. Someone noticing Wittgenstein’s reference to “facts” might be led to imagine equations like the ones in the text above, but with, e.g., “fact of the occurrence of an event” and “fact of the occurrence of an action” in place of “event” and “action,” respectively. However exactly the putative equations are formulated, the attempt to solve them will amount to a search for differentiae and will come within the scope of these remarks.

4. In reply to his own question, Wittgenstein writes: “When I raise my arm I do not usually *try* to raise it” (*Philosophical Investigations*, §622). Whether or not it is true, the *point* of this remark is evidently to insist that the difference between the action of my raising my arm and the event of my arm’s just going up cannot be explained by appeal to an inner state of *trying*, or (presumably) *willing*, or *intending*—an appeal that is more or less inevitable the minute one attempts to say “what is left over.”

Davidson and Harry Frankfurt, and developed more recently by J. David Velleman, Michael Bratman, Alfred Mele, and Michael Smith.⁵ What these and many other theories have in common is that they undertake to answer a version of Wittgenstein's question.⁶ Insofar as they do, they must assume what the question itself assumes: namely, that there is some describable addendum in virtue of which an event is an action, or in virtue of which an action is action par excellence.

G. E. M. Anscombe rejected this assumption and with it Wittgenstein's question. It is clear, moreover, that her rejection of it was a fundamental aspect of her thinking about action, and not a small or peripheral thesis, which an otherwise sympathetic reader might casually disregard. Anscombe framed her whole account of intentional action in explicit opposition to the idea that an action is intentional in virtue of any "mere *extra feature* of events whose description would otherwise be the same."⁷ The latter formulation appears to be a reference to Aristotle's definition of an accident as "something which may either belong, or not belong to some self-same thing"

5. Donald Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980); Harry G. Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); J. David Velleman, *Practical Reflection* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989) and *The Possibility of Practical Reason*; Michael Bratman, *Faces of Intention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Alfred Mele, *Springs of Action* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); and Michael Smith, *Ethics and the A Priori: Selected Essays on Moral Psychology and Meta-Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004). Other prominent examples include John Bishop, Myles Brand, Fred Dretske, Berent Enç, Carl Ginet, Alvin Goldman, Gilbert Harman, and John Searle.

6. The precise terms of the Wittgensteinian equation are different for different philosophers. Davidson's starting point is implicitly that of an event. But other philosophers begin from something rather more determinate. Some begin from the idea of "behavior"—meaning by this *anything* that a person may be said "to do" (even, for example, forgetting something)—and proceed to ask what must be added to *that* (see Kieran Setiya, *Reasons without Rationalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 24n8. For most, though, the starting point is the still more determinate idea of a "bodily movement." Speaking for the field at large, Arthur Danto wrote, "An action [is] a movement of the body plus *x* . . . and the problem . . . is to solve in some philosophically interesting way for *x*." *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), 5.

7. G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), 88; and compare 29–30, 84–89.

(*Topics*, 102b6–7).⁸ So Anscombe rejected what might be called an “accidental-ist” account of intentional action.

Of course, Anscombe did not deny that various things are true of an action if and only if it is intentional, so that there are, if you like, many “qualities” or “features” that all and only intentional actions bear. What she denied is only the claim that action is intentional *in virtue of bearing* the putative marks. She denied, in other words, that any such thing could provide an understanding of what it is *to be* an intentional action. Speaking of the familiar Davidsonian account, she says: “Something I do is not made into an intentional action by being caused by a belief and desire, even if the descriptions fit.”⁹ Anscombe is thus willing to allow, at least for the sake of argument, that the proposed descriptions “fit” their object. Her position is that, *even if they fit*—still, they do not explain.

The accidentalist account that Anscombe attributes to Davidson, and that she herself rejects, is the product of what she calls “the standard approach” in the philosophy of action. This approach has two steps. The first step is preliminary, but nevertheless crucial: it is to isolate a putative genus under which the object of inquiry falls as a species, and to suppose that the genus has already been understood—not, perhaps, that we ourselves have understood it, but merely that it is the object of some prior investigation. The second step yields the substance of the accidentalist account: it is to explain how the salient species differs from everything else of the same genus. So understood, the standard approach might be brought to bear on either of the two canonical divisions: one might take for granted the genus *event* and hunt for the differentia of *action*; or one might take for granted the genus *action* and hunt for the differentia of, say, *intentional action*.

Anscombe’s opposition to the standard approach, and to the resulting accidentalist account, has never attracted much attention—not even from those philosophers, like Kieran Setiya and J. David Velleman, who adopt

8. *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, vol. 2, ed. Jonathan Barnes, trans. W. A. Pickard-Cambridge (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

9. One might question whether Davidson really held the view that Anscombe here attributes to him, and my point is not to endorse her attribution. What matters is only that Anscombe’s interpretation of Davidson is the usual one, especially among philosophers who defend an accidentalist account. For Anscombe’s criticism of Davidson, see “Practical Inference,” reprinted in Rosalind Hursthouse, Gavin Lawrence, and Warren Quinn, eds., *Virtues and Reasons* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 3.

such an approach, offer such an account, and cite Anscombe as a major influence.¹⁰ If it is mentioned at all, it is usually dismissed as the expression of “behaviorism,” which Anscombe is supposed to have inherited from Wittgenstein. This, however, is unconvincing, not only because Anscombe explicitly rejects behaviorism, but also because her denial of an “extra feature” is, on the face of it, a much more radical claim.¹¹ And yet, what has made it possible for philosophers to ignore the *true* source of Anscombe’s opposition is in part the fact that she herself says little to explain it. Anscombe gives only one terse argument, appearing in a single dense paragraph of *Intention*, §19, where she claims to establish that “we do not add anything attaching to the action at the time it is done by describing it as intentional.”¹² The argument is tremendously obscure. But even if it could be clarified, and were sound, it would not, I think, succeed in uprooting the standard accidentalist account. This is because even if her argument proved that, in fact, there is no “extra feature”—still, it would not address the most difficult question, which is how there could fail to be

10. See Velleman, *Practical Reflection*, and Setiya, *Reasons without Rationalism*.

11. Anscombe is called a “behaviorist,” one gathers, because she openly opposes any attempt to account for intentional action by reference to mental states and other psychic phenomena. But to suppose that this rejection of psychologism explains her opposition to the standard approach is in fact to invert the order of her thought. Anscombe’s claim is categorical: according to her, there is *no* feature—*none whatsoever*—in virtue of which an action is intentional. It follows as a mere trivial consequence of this claim that an action is not intentional in virtue of this or that particular feature. So, to take one instance, on a par with any other: an action is not intentional in virtue of its being related thus-and-so to the agent’s “inner states.” Anscombe does not deny the existence of a definitive “extra feature” because she rejects a psychological account; rather, she rejects a psychological account because she denies the existence of a definitive “extra feature.” Of course, if that is true, then for the same reason that Anscombe rejects psychologism, she must also reject behaviorism. After all, it *also* follows from her categorical claim—and every bit as trivially—that an action is not intentional in virtue of its being related thus-and-so to the agent’s “overt behavior.” Psychologism and behaviorism involve exactly the same commitment to a definitive “extra feature,” and differ over the question of *which* feature is definitive. Both are thus equally good examples of the standard two-step approach, whereby we first isolate a genus and then ask what distinguishes the relevant species from all of its congenics. For Anscombe’s view of behaviorism, see “Analytic Philosophy and the Spirituality of Man,” in *Human Life, Action and Ethics: Essays by G. E. M. Anscombe*, ed. Mary Geach and Luke Gormally (Charlottesville, Va.: Imprint Academic, 2005).

12. Anscombe, *Intention*, 28.

one.¹³ In the end, what maintains the standard approach in its dominant position is not the idea that there *is* an “extra feature,” of the sort that Anscombe denied, so much as the idea that there *must* be one, as a matter of logical or metaphysical necessity.

One might complain on these grounds that Anscombe failed to establish a basic tenet of her theory. In any event, it is fair to say that she did not prepare one to receive it. My principal effort, here, is to make such preparations. In section 2 I will explain how there could possibly fail to be an “extra feature” in terms of which to forge the contrast between something somehow general and something more specific—between a genus, like *event*, and a species, like *action*. Doing so will require me to distinguish three different forms of generality. These three forms are associated, respectively, with the traditional ideas of an accident, a category, and an essence; and I will therefore speak of generality as being accidental, categorial, or essential. The purpose of this preliminary foray into extra-practical territory is to raise the following question: “What kind of generality is exemplified by each of the two canonical divisions drawn in the philosophy of action?”

As soon as this question is properly framed, it will have become apparent that what Anscombe called the standard approach depends upon a gross, but undefended, assumption. The assumption is that *both* of the two canonical divisions are examples of the same particular form of generality—the one I label “accidental”—this one being the only form that permits itself to be explained by reference to genus and differentia. To see this assumption *as* an assumption is already, I think, to make significant progress. If nothing else, one will have seen what it means to affirm or deny the existence of an “extra feature.” And this, I think, has not always been clear.

In the latter, more speculative part of the essay, I will argue that the standard assumption is false on both counts, so that neither of the two canonical divisions is mediated by a differentia. My aim in what follows is therefore predominantly negative: it is in effect to reanimate Anscombe’s claim that

13. Anscombe’s argument is a classical *reductio ad absurdum*: she assumes the targeted proposition and argues that it leads to incoherence. The problem with such an argument is that it fails to address the philosophical motivation of the one whose position is under attack. The details of Anscombe’s *reductio* are discussed by Rosalind Hursthouse, “Intention,” in *Logic, Cause and Action*, ed. Roger Teichmann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), and by Candace Vogler, *Reasonably Vicious* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 213–229.

the standard approach in the philosophy of action “leads us into inextricable confusions, and we must give it up.”¹⁴

2. Three Forms of Generality

2.1 *Accidental Generality*

If the standard approach appears, at first blush, utterly beyond criticism, the reason is in some part simply this: every action is an event, but not every event is an action; and every intentional action is an action, but not every action is intentional. Let us say that B is a “species” of A, and that A is conversely a “genus” of B, if something’s being B entails that it is A, but something’s being A does not entail that it is B. Then *action* is a species of *event*, and *intentional action* of *action*.

This alone does not, in fact, support the standard approach. But it does if combined with the reflex assumption that wherever there is a contrast between a species and its genus, there must also be a differentia in terms of which to understand the contrast. The latter idea appears to be so obviously true that any claim to the contrary is apt to be met with bafflement. One is sure there must be *something* the presence of which accounts for the specificity of the species, and the absence of which explains the generality of the genus. And it is, at bottom, this idea that gives the standard approach its air of unquestionable legitimacy. Nevertheless, as we will see, the common reflex assumption is false: there is not for every difference a differentia.

Certainly, there is *one* kind of species–genus relation that *is* mediated by an “extra feature.” To borrow a famous example from Aristotle, every snub nose is a nose, but not every nose is snub: so *snub nose* is a species of *nose*. And no great difficulty is posed by the equation: *nose* + *x* = *snub nose*. What is left over, if you subtract the fact that Socrates has a nose from the fact that he has a snub nose, is whatever it is to be concave. So here there is a definitive “extra feature.” Or, to take another example, this time from Chisholm, every brother is a male, but not every male is a brother. Again, there is a straightforward solution to the equation: *male* + *y* = *brother*. What is left over, if you subtract the fact that I am a male from the fact that I am a brother, is whatever it is to be a sibling.

14. Anscombe, *Intention*, 29.

Let us consider the equation “*nose + concavity = snub nose*” in a little more detail. That which is represented by the first term of the equation—i.e., the genus—is independent from that which is represented by the other two terms. It is “independent” in the following sense: in order to explain what a nose is, one need not make reference to, much less explain, either what concavity is or what a snub nose is. Meanwhile, that which is represented by the second term of the equation—i.e., the differentia—enjoys exactly the same independence. One need not make reference to, or explain, either what a nose is or what a snub nose is, in order to explain what concavity is. By contrast, that which is represented by the third term of the equation—i.e., the species—is utterly dependent on that which is represented by the other two terms: in order to explain what a snub nose is, one must not only mention, but explain, *both* what a nose is *and* what concavity is.

Where the contrast between a species and its genus is mediated by an independent quality, or “accident,” and where, consequently, a two-step approach is required to account for the species, I will call the latter an *accidental species*.

The account of an accidental species presupposes that of its genus, because the species is itself a secondary, or derivative kind of thing. Something belongs to an accidental species in virtue of belonging to the relevant genus, and not the other way around. Something is a snub nose in virtue of being *inter alia* a nose; it is not a nose in virtue of being a snub nose. And someone is a brother because he is a male, a male who happens to be a sibling; he is certainly not a male because he is a brother. Here the genus is not only logically more abstract than its species, but also metaphysically more fundamental. This is no doubt a very important form of generality. It is not, however, the only form.

2.2 *Categorial Generality*

2.2.1 THE CATEGORIAL SPECIES AND ITS GENUS. Every horse is an animal, but not every animal is a horse: so *horse* is a species of *animal*—as indeed one would expect. But to the question, “What is left over if I subtract the fact that Bucephalus is an animal from the fact that he is a horse?” no answer is forthcoming. The question assumes that Bucephalus is a horse in virtue of something additional to—and thus separable from—his animality, whereas in fact his being a horse is nothing but the determinate form that his

animality takes. In that case, however, there is no solution to the equation: *animal* + x = *horse*. Or, to take another example, everything red is colored, but not everything colored is red: so *red* is a species of *color*. About this case, A. N. Prior writes:

We do sometimes call “the red” and “the blue” species of “the coloured”; though we do not do so . . . because the red possesses some quality added to or conjoined with its colour, and the blue possesses some different quality added to or conjoined with its colour—some quality which, in each case, might have been given first, and “coloured” added on afterwards. The colour of what is red is its redness; and the colour of what is blue is its blueness; we can say that the red and the blue agree in being coloured, but of their difference we can only say either that their colour is different, or that one is red and the other blue.¹⁵

If “the color of what is red is its redness,” then no version of Wittgenstein’s question is legitimate, here, because no value can solve for the equation: *color* + y = *red*. Following W. E. Johnson and others, Prior calls *red* a “determinate” and *color* a “determinable.”¹⁶ Though I will sometimes speak this way myself, I will in general prefer the terms “categorical species” and “categorical genus,” as these tend to give some indication—if only a very vague one—of the kind of specificity and generality that is at issue.¹⁷

15. A. N. Prior, “Determinables, Determinates, and Determinants (I),” *Mind* 58 (1949): 5–6.

16. The *locus classicus* of the determinable–determinate relation is the eleventh chapter of Johnson’s *Logic*, Pt. I (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1921), 173–185. Before Johnson, Brentano discussed the relation, which he attributed to Aristotle, under the name “one-sided detachability” (or “one-sided separability”); see *The Theory of Categories* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), 111–116, and *Descriptive Psychology* (Hamburg: Miener Verlag, 1982), 12–19. Brentano’s view is discussed by Chisholm in “Brentano on One-Sided Detachability,” *Conceptus* 21 (1987): 153–154. Chisholm introduces the idea to action theory in “Adverbs and Subdeterminates,” in *Actions and Events: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, ed. Ernest LePore and Brian McLaughlin (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987). The idea has recently been put to work outside of action theory by Timothy Williamson, *Knowledge and Its Limits* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 1–48.

17. A note on terminology. The relation between *nose* and *snub nose* shares something in common with the relation between *color* and *red*; and it is most natural to characterize what is common by saying that the first term in each pair is “general” and the second is “specific”; I therefore speak of a “genus” and of a “species” in both sorts of case. In order to mark that something is different in the second sort of case, I have elected to speak of a “categorical genus”

The distinction between accidental and categorial generality is revealed by the fact that no quality can account for the contrast between a categorial species and its genus—or, at any rate, no quality that is logically independent of the species. Concavity, the quality that distinguishes a snub nose from all the rest, is not a quality unique to snub noses: it belongs to many other sorts of things and has, as it were, a life of its own. But if there is a quality that distinguishes a horse from all other animals, it is a quality that nothing could possibly have except a horse. On the one hand, obviously, no other animal could have it, or else the quality would not be distinctive. On the other hand, less obviously, nothing could have it except an animal. It is true that a horse differs from an octopus in various respects, and that in many of these it also differs from an iceberg: e.g., in respect of its weight, smell, texture, volume, temperature, and flammability. But a horse also differs from an octopus in ways that it could only differ from another animal: e.g., in respect of its organs and

and of a “categorial species.” This is preferable to speaking of a “determinable genus” and a “determinate species,” first, because that could easily be construed as “general genus” and “specific species,” which is clearly uninformative. A second reason for not speaking of “determinables” and “determinates”—despite the obvious attractions of maintaining continuity with the tradition—is that in the literature following Johnson these terms have become too closely associated with a certain particular array of examples. The favorites include color, shape, pitch, and pressure—all of which bring with them a “dimension of difference” by reference to which the determinates may differ *by degrees*. This narrow focus is, I think, an unfortunate limitation of the received conception of “determinability.” It obscures the fact, which Brentano emphasized, that we have to do with the same phenomenon that Aristotle identified in connection with his categories—and not just the category of *quality*, where distinctions of degree are at home.

Not everything that I call a “categorial species” is a “category” in any traditional sense: *horse*, for example, is not. What makes it fitting to call *horse* a “categorial species” is the fact that, although it is not itself a category, it is a general determination of one—viz., the category of *substance*. Thus, in speaking of the contrast between a categorial genus and its species, I mean to pick out an extremely abstract phenomenon—one that is exhibited in the relation between two categories, where one is “higher” and the other “lower” (e.g., *substance* and *organism*), but a phenomenon that is *also* exhibited in the admittedly very different relation between a category and a concrete form falling under it (e.g., *organism* and *horse*). For many philosophical purposes, the important relation will be the first, which has only to do with “pure” or “formal” concepts. In fact, I think that on Anscombe’s view “action” is precisely such a concept, defining a category subordinate to *event*, so that a true vindication of her positive view would require one to elucidate the inter-categorial nexus. I do not undertake that here, because the argument of this essay, which is primarily negative, does not require it, and because I think that the more abstract phenomenon is of considerable interest in its own right.

members, and in respect of its manner of nourishing itself, and of reproducing, and of moving itself from place to place. The latter are differences internal to the genus. Just as what is red and what is blue differ in respect of color, and what is a square and what is a circle differ in respect of shape, and what is over here and what is over there differ in respect of place, so, too, what is a horse and what is an octopus differ in respect of animality. And this is the respect that matters, if what we aim to understand is the nature of a horse—this is the respect in which we must reveal it as “distinct.” Now given that only what is an animal can be alike or different in respect of animality, and given that whatever is indistinguishable from a horse in respect of animality is a horse—given all that, it is clear that if there is, in fact, a quality that distinguishes a horse in the salient respect, this must be a quality that nothing could possibly have except a horse. And similarly, if there is, in fact, a quality “added to or conjoined with” a thing’s being colored, in virtue of which it is red, this must be a quality that only a color could possess, and only red among colors.

No such quality could ever fulfill the explanatory function of a differentia, because it is logically dependent on the *explanandum*. Since such a quality can in principle only belong to one kind of thing, an account of the quality will have to make reference to this very kind of thing: there is, by hypothesis, no other way for the intellect to grasp it. But then it will be *circular* to appeal to such a quality in an account of the kind of thing to which it belongs.

The circularity is important, for our purposes, because it shows that a philosophical account of a categorial species must be altogether different from that of an accidental species. It is necessary, as we saw in the previous section, to proceed from a prior understanding of the genus, *nose*, to a posterior understanding of the species, *snub nose*, by way of an understanding of an independent quality, which in that case was concavity. But the intellect has no similar passage from *animal* to *horse*, or from *colored* to *red*. Thus, the two-step approach, by which we first explain (or assume) the genus, and then distinguish the object of inquiry from everything else within that genus, is impossible with respect to a categorial species.

The need, here, for a different kind of account reflects a different metaphysical order. Whereas an accidental species is posterior to its genus, a categorial species is prior. Earlier we saw that something belongs to an accidental species in virtue of belonging to the relevant genus: a person is a brother, for instance, because he is *inter alia* a male. But something belongs to a categorial

genus in virtue of belonging to one or another categorial species thereof. So, for instance, a surface is colored because it is red, or because it is blue; it is not red, or blue, because it is colored. And Bucephalus's being a horse does not consist in his being an animal; rather, his being an animal consists in his being a horse. The categorial species, though less abstract, is more fundamental than its genus.

These considerations show that the bare concept of a "species" is, in the words of Kit Fine, "insensitive to source."¹⁸ If *all* that we know is that A is a genus of which B is a species, it remains to ask: "What is the source of the truth of it that, *as we know*, every B is at the same time also an A? Is it the case that something is a B because it is, among other things, an A? Or is it, perhaps, that something is an A because it is, for instance, a B? Does the species in question transpire from its genus, or the genus from its species?"

Bear in mind that nothing depends on any putative example of categorial generality. All that matters, here, is the reader's recognition of a second intelligible pattern—a pattern that could in principle receive many diverse instantiations. Arguably, *human being* is a categorial species of *rational being*, *water of liquid*, *four of number*, *seeing of knowing*, and *walking home of going home*. And the history of philosophy is rich with apparent examples. Take, for instance, Frege's distinction between concept and object. These, he says, are "logically simple" and cannot be given proper definitions.¹⁹ But they surely *could* be given proper definitions, and not just Frege's "hints," if they were accidental species of a common prior genus—if, that is, we could first grasp the nature of a "logical entity," and if we could then divide the class of such things in two, distinguishing the ones with holes from the ones without.

Or take Aristotle's doctrine of the categories. It is a well-known thesis of his that no differentia mediates the contrast between *being* and, for instance, *being human*, or *being six feet tall*.²⁰ Thus we cannot explain what substance is, or what quantity is, by first explaining "being in general," and then pointing to an attribute of being that distinguishes one way of being from the rest. To paraphrase Prior, we can say that substance and quantity agree in being

18. Kit Fine, "Essence and Modality," *Philosophical Perspectives* 8 (1994): 9.

19. Gottlob Frege, "Concept and Object" (1952), reprinted in *The Frege Reader*, ed. Michael Beaney (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1997), 181–193.

20. The Aristotelian dictum that "being is not a genus" means, I think, that being is not what I have called an "accidental genus." See *Posterior Analytics*, 92b14; see also *Metaphysics*, B.3, 998b22.

categories, but of their difference we can only say either that their category is different, or that one is substance and the other quantity.

Consider, as a final example, the distinction we are presently drawing, the distinction between *categorial species* and *accidental species*. These latter would appear to be categorial species, not accidental species, of *species*. In that case, the super-abstract notion of “generality” from which I began is itself something that transpires from various prior concrete forms.

2.2.2 THE IRREDUCIBILITY OF CATEGORIAL GENERALITY. But is this really a second form of genus–species relation, or might it be somehow reducible to the first? One reason for suspicion is that attempts to elucidate categorial generality tend to focus on the example of color. They do so, presumably, because it is in connection with color that the existence of a second form seems to be most plausible. Faced with the question, “What distinguishes red from all other colors?” we are speechless. By contrast, we have no difficulty answering the question, “What distinguishes a snub nose from all other noses?”

But a color is in this respect quite unlike the other examples of categorial species; for often one has much to say. Sissy Jupe, in *Hard Times*, “was thrown into the greatest alarm” when asked to give the definition of a horse—much to her schoolmaster’s horror: “Girl number twenty unable to define a horse! Girl number twenty possessed of no facts, in reference to one of the commonest animals!”²¹ But whatever is true of a girl like her, a philosopher, far from being dumbstruck, is apt to give an answer like that of white-eyed Bitzer:

Quadruped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive. Sheds coat in the spring; in marshy countries, sheds hoofs, too. Hoofs hard, but requiring to be shod with iron. Age known by marks in mouth.²²

What does Bitzer give, if not the definition of a horse, by reference to genus and differentia? Let us suppose that what he says is true, and that the qualities he adduces really do distinguish a horse from all other animals. In that case, it is difficult to see how the mention of these qualities is any different from the mention of concavity in connection with a snub nose. So perhaps, after all, there *is* something “left over” when we subtract the fact that Bucephalus is a

21. Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2004), 11.

22. “Thus (and much more) Bitzer.” *Ibid.*, 12.

horse from the fact that he is animal: the metaphysical remainder is just whatever would answer to a true account of the sort provided by Bitzer.²³

Whenever one has something to say about what differentiates the species, categorial generality threatens to collapse back into the accidental. In the face of this impending collapse, it is important to consider the logical character of *what one has to say* about how the relevant species differs from its congenics. Recall that the original argument for the distinctiveness of categorial generality depended on the idea that the contrast between a categorial species and its genus cannot be drawn by reference to a quality that is independent of the species. If that is right, then although it may be possible to adduce a list of distinctive qualities, these qualities will be such as to logically depend on the species, in which case they cannot contribute to a non-circular account of it.

Now someone attempting to define a horse will inevitably appeal to the horse's parts and vital processes.²⁴ One will say, like Bitzer, that a horse has four *feet* and forty *teeth*, and that it *eats* grain and *sheds* in the spring. But such an appeal can only contribute to a real definition if something's being a "foot" or "tooth" or "eating" or "shedding" is available to thought in advance of its being that of some particular kind of animal. Such an appeal thus quietly assumes that being a "foot" is rather like being "four in number"; and this assumption appears unfounded. For just as there is no such thing as an animal in general, but only one of this or that specific kind, so, also, there is no such thing as a foot in general, but only that of, say, a horse, a clam, or a mosquito. And while it is true that each of these animals has a "foot," their feet are as different as the animals themselves, and different in exactly the same way. In other words, the genus *foot* is related to the species *equine foot*, *clam foot*, and *mosquito foot* exactly as the genus *animal* is related to the species

23. This is evidently the opinion of Searle, who treats the relation between being an animal and being a specific kind of animal as a paradigm case of accidental generality. See "On Determinables and Resemblance, II," in *The Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volume XXXI* (London: Harrison and Sons, 1959), 141–158.

24. The argument of this paragraph is modeled on one by Michael Thompson, *Life and Action* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008), chap. 2. Thompson considers the question whether *life* can be given a real definition—the question, as I would put it, whether *organism* is an accidental species of *substance*—and he argues that the answer is No. In chapters 3 and 4 of that book, Thompson gives an account of the role of a life-form in determining the content of any thought about a creature's vital parts or processes, an account that provides the material for arguing, as I do in the text above, that *horse* cannot be given a real definition, either. Reflection on Thompson's account of *life* is particularly instructive in the present context because it is explicitly modeled on Anscombe's account of *action* (see 47–48).

horse, *clam*, and *mosquito*. So if one tries to define a horse as a four-footed animal, the "foot" to which one appeals will have to be understood either determinably or determinately. If that to which one appeals is common to the feet of every footed creature, it will not carry enough information to adequately characterize the equine foot. But how can one specify what is distinctive about a horse's foot without appealing to—a horse?

Let us try. It is obviously insufficient to say that a horse has a *hoofed* foot, because so do many other animals; nor will it help to add that the horse's hoof is of such-and-such a size and shape, even if the horse is the only animal in existence with hooves of that description. After all, the fact that there are many kinds of animals with hoofed feet is nothing but a contingent profusion in the variety of species: the horse might have been the only one. And if the horse is, in fact, the only one with hooves of the specified size and shape, this shows nothing but the poverty of earthly fauna: another such animal might have evolved, and might still yet. But if such an animal *were* to evolve, then, just in virtue of its separate genesis, it would not be a horse and its foot would not be a horse's foot. The same goes *mutatis mutandis* for any mere chemical or physical description of any equine part or process (or any conjunction of these): it defines a categorial genus under which there could conceivably fall a part or process that does not belong to a horse.

In that case, color is not so exceptional after all. It is true that we can say much about the distinctive character of a horse, and nothing about that of redness. But what we can say about a horse does not contribute to a real definition—and so, for that purpose, may as well be nothing. The horse is like the color red in that *it does not have* such a definition. And if someone should nevertheless demand that we produce one, the best and only appropriate response is the stunned silence of girl number twenty.

2.3 *Essential Generality*

2.3.1 THE ESSENTIAL SPECIES AND ITS GENUS. All pure gold is gold, but not all gold is pure: so *pure gold* is a species of *gold*. And every perfect circle is a circle, but not every circle is perfect: so *perfect circle* is a species of *circle*. Nevertheless, it is pointless to ask, in either case, "what is left over" if the genus is subtracted from the species. For there is nothing extra that gold must be, over and above being gold, in order to be pure: the "purity" of pure gold is just its being gold—gold and gold alone. There is, then, no solution to

the equation: *gold* + x = *pure gold*. And similarly, there is no solution to the equation: *circle* + y = *perfect circle*; for, again, there is nothing that a circle must be, over and above being a circle, in order to be perfect: the “perfection” of a perfect circle is its unimpeachable circularity. I will call a species of this third variety an *essential species*.

It came out in the previous section that the contrast between a categorial species and its genus cannot be drawn by reference to a quality that is independent of the species. The situation now is precisely the reverse: the contrast between an essential species and its genus cannot be drawn by reference to a quality that is independent of the genus.

Suppose, for example, that there was some quality that distinguished pure gold from all other gold. The only “other” gold is impure, so the imagined quality would have to distinguish pure gold from impure gold. But the difference between pure gold and impure gold is that the latter is composed, in part, of something that is not gold. So the quality would have to determine, for each part, whether it was gold or not. But if there was in fact a quality that could discriminate between what is gold and what is not, this would be the differentia of *gold*, which is the genus. Or, again, suppose there was a quality that distinguished a perfect circle from all other circles. The difference between a perfect circle and an imperfect circle is that the latter is, in some respect, not circular. So the imagined quality would have to determine, for every respect in which a shape can fail to be circular, whether it was circular or not. And if there was in fact a quality that could make the required discrimination, this quality would be the differentia of *circle*, which again is the genus.

A two-step approach is once more impossible, but this time for the opposite reason. And this reflects a third distinctive order of priority. An essential species is neither posterior to its genus, like an accidental species, nor prior to its genus, like a categorial species. If, as it seems, to be pure gold is to be gold and gold alone, then there cannot be any priority, either way, between the species *pure gold* and the genus *gold*. And if to be a perfect circle is to be in no way uncircular, then the species *perfect circle* is neither more nor less fundamental than the genus *circle*. An essential species and its genus are coeval.

2.3.2 THE IRREDUCIBILITY OF ESSENTIAL GENERALITY. But is there any such thing as essential generality? In everyday life we are happy to say that

a wedding ring is gold, though we admit that it isn't *pure* gold. And similarly, we are happy to say that the ring is a circle, though we admit that it isn't a *perfect* circle. But this, it seems, is only a loose way of speaking. Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as impure gold or an imperfect circle. Even schoolchildren know that from the point of view of chemistry *all* gold is pure, and that from the point of view of geometry *every* circle is perfect. And so, from a scientific point of view, there is no logical space, and thus no distinction to be drawn, between the essential species and its genus. But if a species and its genus are the same, then, strictly, there is no species, and there is no genus to speak of.

This line of thought presents itself as an objection, but in fact it is only another way of describing what needs to be understood. There is, indeed, a striking contrast between "loose" and "strict" ways of speaking—between, on the one hand, what is good enough for ordinary talk, and, on the other hand, what rises to the need of a rational discipline. But the most striking thing about this contrast is that it only emerges in a certain sort of case. No one is of the opinion that "strictly speaking" to be a nose is to be a snub nose, or that "strictly speaking" to be an animal is to be a horse. What needs to be understood is precisely the form of generality that underwrites a contrast between "disciplined" and "undisciplined," or "rigorous" and "lax," or "scientific" and "vulgar" modes of thought and expression.

The contrast in question applies across an astonishingly wide domain of objects, so it will help to diversify our menu of examples. Arguably, the same abstract structure that we found in connection with *gold* and *circle* is also exemplified by each of the following trios.

	PRIVATIVE	ANTI-PRIVATIVE
<i>human body</i>	lifeless human body	living human body
<i>human body</i>	unhealthy human body	healthy human body
<i>human hand</i>	deformed human hand	undeformed human hand
<i>human being</i>	vicious human being	virtuous human being
<i>doctor</i>	incompetent doctor	competent doctor
<i>law</i>	unjust law	just law
<i>contract</i>	invalid contract	valid contract
<i>inference</i>	invalid inference	valid inference
<i>calculation</i>	incorrect calculation	correct calculation
<i>word</i>	meaningless word	meaningful word
<i>judgment</i>	false judgment	true judgment

With respect to each of the listed trios, there have been philosophers, at one time or another, who have held that the “primitive” or “original” or “fundamental” conception of what is in the left-most column is in fact a conception of what is in the right-most column; or that to explain the former is to explain the latter; or that, “strictly and philosophically speaking,” *to be* the former is *to be* the latter. It is possible, of course, that all of these philosophers were wrong, and that none of the listed trios exhibits the relevant asymmetry. But it does not matter. What matters is not the purported examples themselves, but only the form they purport to exemplify, which evidently transcends the specific mode of deprivation that attaches to the privatives.

The common form exemplified here suggests that where gold is concerned, impurity is a privative condition. And we may take the claim that, strictly speaking, impure gold is not gold as marking this. Certainly there is something that seems paradoxical about the sentence, “Impure gold is not gold.” But when we think of impurity as a privation, we see that it is not a contradiction.

Consider a similar charge of paradox, which has been brought against the slogan of Natural Law Theory, “*Lex iniusta non est lex*”—an unjust law is not a law.²⁵ The jurist John Austin dismissed this slogan as “stark nonsense”: it is, he said, “an abuse of language”; and it is “not merely puerile, it is mischievous.”²⁶ According to Austin, the natural lawyer is guilty of “confound[ing] what is with what ought to be.”²⁷

The existence of law is one thing; its merit or demerit is another. Whether it be or be not is one enquiry; whether it be or be not conformable to an assumed standard, is a different enquiry.²⁸

Without passing judgment on the truth or falsity of the natural law slogan, it ought to be clear that at least it is not nonsense, and that Austin’s division of inquiries really is beside the point. After all, it would be obvious what to reply if someone denounced the slogan “impure gold is not gold” on the grounds that the existence of gold is one thing and its purity or impurity another. We

25. For a discussion of this slogan, see Norman Kretzmann, “LEX INIUSTA NON EST LEX: Laws on Trial in Aquinas’s Court of Conscience,” *American Journal of Jurisprudence* (1988): 99–121.

26. John Austin, *The Province of Jurisprudence Determined*, Lecture V (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1832), 185.

27. *Ibid.*, 184.

28. *Ibid.*

would concede that the question whether some particular ring is gold—rather than, say, pyrite, or silver, or platinum—is, indeed, distinct from the question whether it is pure gold. But we would nevertheless insist that the question *what it is to be gold* and the question *what it is to be pure gold* define a single scientific inquiry.

The latter insistence does not make one guilty of confounding what gold *is* with what it *ought to be*. And the absurdity of such a charge cannot be chalked up to the fact a normative concept like “ought” has no application to chemical kinds, for normative concepts certainly do apply to the object of anatomy. Just open any anatomy textbook: every limb and organ, every bone and muscle, every cell, is shown to be exactly where it *ought* to be, doing exactly what it *ought* to do. Such a textbook does not portray defect, deformity, disability, or disease—or, if it does, they are clearly not the main event. The science of human anatomy is right to identify the question “What is the human body?” with the question “What is the healthy human body?” For, as Aristotle says, “We must look for the intentions of nature in things which retain their nature, and not in things which are corrupted” (*Politics* 1254a35–37).²⁹

2.4 *Comparison of the Forms*

To conclude this discussion of the forms of generality, it will be useful to consider how a species of each variety relates to a contrary species, and how such a pair of contraries falls under their common genus. In the figure below, B and C are contrary species of A—“contrary” in the sense that what is A cannot be both B and C simultaneously—and the underlined terms are prior to those not underlined.

<i>Accidental Generality</i>	<i>Categorial Generality</i>	<i>Essential Generality</i>
<u>A</u>	A	<u>A</u>
B C	<u>B</u> <u>C</u>	<u>B</u> C

With accidental generality, the genus is prior to both of its species: thus, e.g., the genus *nose* is prior to the species *snub nose* and also to the contrary species

29. Translated by Benjamin Jowett in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*.

aquiline nose. With categorial generality, both the species are prior to their genus: thus, e.g., being red and being blue are both prior to being colored. With essential generality, the genus is coeval with one of its species and together they are prior to the contrary species: thus, e.g., *gold* is coeval with *pure gold*, and together they are prior to *impure gold*.³⁰

Having said, I hope, enough about these forms of generality, I can now formulate a thesis that I will attempt to defend in the remainder of this essay. The standard approach in the philosophy of action proceeds on the assumption that both of the two canonical divisions are instances of accidental generality. But this assumption is doubly false. The division of events into mere events and actions is an example, not of accidental, but of categorial generality. And the subsequent division of actions into the unintentional and the intentional, or the unfree and the free, or the half-hearted and the whole-hearted—in short, into the qualified and the unqualified—this division is an instance, not of accidental, but of essential generality. I will treat these points in reverse order.

3. Unqualified Forms of Action as Essential Species Thereof

3.1 *Argument from the Dignity of a Philosophical Topic*

The presumptive task of the philosopher of action is to answer the question, “What is action?” But the usual practice is not what one might expect: it is not, after all, to treat every genuine instance of action as equally worthy of account. Instead, philosophers tend to focus one or another species of action, presenting this as the principal object of inquiry. Thus, Anscombe inquires specifically about *intentional* action; Frankfurt about *whole-hearted* action; Velleman about *autonomous* action; and others about action that is *free*, or *purposeful*, or *conscious*. Have these philosophers each made a fetish of some particular species of action, neglecting the nature of action as such, or is the practice legitimate?

The practice does, indeed, seem legitimate, on the supposition that the relevant forms of action have an anti-privative character and are suitably arranged in a table like the one we saw before:

30. I do not claim that there are *only* three forms of generality.

	PRIVATIVE	ANTI-PRIVATIVE
<i>action</i>	unintentional action	intentional action
<i>action</i>	half-hearted action	whole-hearted action
<i>action</i>	un-autonomous action	autonomous action
<i>action</i>	forced action	free action
<i>action</i>	purposeless action	purposeful action
<i>action</i>	unconscious action	conscious action
<i>action</i>	involuntary action	voluntary action

Suppose that the forms of action in the final column are rightly seen as anti-privative—and thus, as picking out essential species.³¹ In that case it is clear, on the one hand, why philosophers of action should focus on these topics, and, on the other hand, why such focus does not amount to neglecting the topic of action in general. An essential species is that by relation to which all other species fall under the same genus, and it is that by reference to which the genus as a whole is properly elucidated. The anatomist who seeks a general theory of the human body does not concern herself indifferently with *all* bodies—the living and the dead alike—but exclusively with the living ones, and among the living, primarily with the healthy ones. Just so, a philosopher who aims at a general theory of action does not concern herself indifferently with *all* actions—the intentional and the unintentional alike—but exclusively with the intentional ones, and among the intentional, primarily with the ones that are undeformed. This, I say, is how it will look, if the relevant forms of action are essential species thereof.

But a partisan of the standard approach is committed to rejecting this picture. So for him there is an awkward question: “What can explain the interest we have in these particular forms of action—the ones, namely, in the rightmost column of the table?” There is no mystery if the chemist takes a special interest in pure gold: her interest in pure gold is nothing apart from her interest in gold. But if she focuses instead on Peruvian gold, this will need explaining. The problem for a standard theorist is that his method commits him to thinking that *intentional action* is related to *action* as *Peruvian gold* is related to *gold*. And it is just the same for all of the other privileged forms of action. Why, then, do we privilege them? The fact that we do looks utterly mysterious.

31. There is admittedly a deep difference between the first two listed trios, a difference parallel to that between the first two trios on the list of section 2.3.2 above.

But really the problem is worse than that. In addition to being, say, whole-hearted (or not), any particular action will have an infinite number of “features.” It will be done, for example, at night, in California, on the telephone, and under government surveillance. But none of these possible “features” of an action will present itself as a topic for philosophical reflection. Why not? Why, for example, has no one yet given us a theory of nocturnal action? The answer seems to be that whether an action happens to be done at night is neither here nor there as far as concerns its being an action. This suggests that nocturnal action is philosophically unmentionable precisely because it is defined by reference to an “extra feature”—that is, precisely because it is an accidental species.

Thus, the standard theorist faces a dilemma. Either (as I think) his favorite privileged form of action is *not* an accidental species, or else it is, but, precisely because it is, it lacks the dignity of a philosophical topic. So that either (as I think) it *cannot* be explained by means of the standard approach, or else it can, but, precisely because it can, it is not worth explaining.

Faced with this dilemma, a partisan of the standard approach might try to say that a certain unqualified form of action, though indeed an accidental species, is nevertheless philosophically significant, its significance deriving not directly from the nature of action, but by way of its relation to some other topic. The self-proclaimed “philosopher of action” will hereby abandon any pretense of explaining what action is; but let it be abandoned. What could be said in this vein?

Well, for example, one might try to say that the philosophical importance of intentional action is to be explained by reference to rationality. There is, after all, a close relation between rationality and intention: an action done for a reason is intentional, and intentional action is typically done for a reason. The problem with this maneuver is that it only pushes the problem back, for it raises the question of why philosophers care so much about rationality. Why not *irrationality*? Why not whatever is shared in common by rationality and irrationality alike? Once again we seem to find a disciplinary preference for the undistorted, undiminished term. That, however, is exactly what one was trying to avoid.

Instead of appealing to rationality, one might appeal to ethics. Intentional, voluntary, free action is the principal object of moral evaluation: it is good or bad, right or wrong, virtuous or vicious. And so, one might say, it is an interest in morality that sets the agenda for the philosophy of action. But this

forgets that ethics, too, is a rational discipline with its very own definite set of priorities. Its central concepts are the right and the good, not the wrong and the bad; it contains doctrines of virtue, not doctrines of vice, and it produces theories of justice, not theories of injustice.³² But if that sort of bias is proper for ethics, then why not for the philosophy of action?

In general, a science or rational discipline privileges the “positive” over the “negative,” putting order before disorder, law before lawlessness, and form before deformity. And in each particular case, the priority is explained directly by reference to the nature of the object of the discipline. But if we are going to have to say that in the end, then why not say from the very beginning that our abiding concern with intentional action, and with all of the other unqualified forms, derives directly and immediately from the fundamental question of action theory: “What is action?”

3.2 *Argument from the Unity of Unqualified Forms*

The foregoing argument is not, I think, conclusive, but it puts one in position to observe a certain striking unity, or mutual accord, among the unqualified forms of action. The self-same particular action may be, at once, intentional, autonomous, free, whole-hearted, voluntary, purposeful, conscious, and so on. And this is not *per accidens*, for it is perfectly clear how to extend the three-columned list. And it is clear in advance that whatever might appear in the right-most column must harmonize with everything else. Thus, the compatibility of unqualified forms is internal to the order in question.

But how is this to be explained? The anti-privative forms of a thing are always compatible in just this way: the infinite respects in which a body may fail to be deformed, or a shape irregular, or a sample impure, or a law unjust—these necessarily harmonize. But the same is not true of accidental species. Consider that *one* accidental species of nose is the snub, and *another* is the aquiline; yet a particular nose cannot be both. And, of course, a particular action cannot be both nocturnal and diurnal. For any random pair of congeneric accidental species, it will be a complete accident if they turn out to be compatible. The harmony of unqualified forms of action is totally inexplicable, except on

32. The tendency in ethics to prioritize the right and the good is criticized by John Herman Randall Jr., “The Wrong and the Bad,” *Journal of Philosophy* 51 (1954): 764–775. For a compelling reply, see John Wild, “Ethics as a Rational Discipline and the Priority of the Good,” *Journal of Philosophy* 51 (1954): 776–788.

the supposition that these are, in fact, essential species. In that case, however, none of them can be explained by means of the standard approach.

4. Action as a Categorical Species of Event

4.1 *The Humean Circle*

Earlier I observed that if one tries to explain a categorical species by reference to genus and differentia, the account is ruined by circularity. In the remainder of this essay, I will pursue the idea that *action* is a case in point.

Anscombe notes the danger of an explanatory circle where she warns against the attempt to define an action as an event that is done for (or caused by) a reason:

Why is giving a start or gasp not an ‘action’, while sending for a taxi, or crossing the road, is one? The answer cannot be “Because the answer to the question ‘why?’ may give a *reason* in the latter cases”, for the answer may ‘give a reason’ in the former cases too; and we cannot say “Ah, but not a reason for *acting*”; we should be going round in circles.³³

Whether it is an “action,” like sending for a taxi, or a “*mere* event,” like giving a sudden start, one can ask for the “reason” “why” it “happened.” On the one hand, there is the question, “Why did you give a start?” where the reason might be, “I thought I saw a face in the window.” On the other hand, there is the question, “Why did you call for a taxi?” where the reason might be, “I am going to the airport.” According to Anscombe, the problem with defining an action as an event that is done for (or caused by) a reason is that corresponding to the two determinate kinds of “event” are two determinate kinds of “reason,” and two different senses of the question “Why?” Thus, the “reason” mentioned in the would-be account must be either a reason-for-acting or a reason-for-merely-happening. But the latter is not what one wants. And one cannot appeal to the former except by treating “acting” as something already understood, whereas as this is exactly what needs to be explained.

A version of this circle was discovered by David Hume.³⁴ Hume observed that we praise an action as morally good only if we think that it was done

33. Anscombe, *Intention*, 10.

34. Though Anscombe does not mention the Humean Circle in *Intention*, she discusses it in a series of later articles. See “On Promising and Its Justice, and Whether It Need Be Respected

from a good motive. And according to him, this presents a problem for anyone who would claim that part of what makes an action good is its having been done with regard to its goodness:

To suppose, that the mere regard to the virtue of the action, may be the first motive, which produc'd the action, and render'd it virtuous, is to reason in a circle. Before we can have such a regard, the action must be really virtuous; and this virtue must be deriv'd from some virtuous motive: And consequently the virtuous motive must be different from the regard to the virtue of the action.³⁵

In this passage, Hume is concerned with an agent's motive, but his deeper insight can be expressed without any reference to motivation. It is clear that in order to be motivated by the genuine goodness of her action, an agent must *know* that her action is good. And what generates the Humean Circle is really just the relation between an agent's *knowledge* that her action is good and the *fact* that it is good. According to Hume, the fact that an action is good cannot depend essentially on the knowledge that it is good, on pain of its being unintelligible what a good action is. And the argument is simple: in order to understand what a good action is, we would need to understand the agent's knowledge that her action is good; however, in order to grasp the content of this knowledge, we would need already to know what a good action is. And thus we are caught in a circle.

Hume thought he could avoid the circle that arises in connection with virtue. But according to him, there are other circles of precisely the same structure that cannot be avoided, and that cannot be explained away. Certain special things we do are, in his words, "naturally unintelligible." Examples include making a promise, signing a contract, giving a gift, and getting married. What is curious about such forms of action, and what gives rise to the Humean Circle, is that they cannot be done unknowingly.

In her own discussion of knowledge-dependent forms of action, Anscombe points out that every condition requisite for a marriage might be satisfied—the

in Foro Interno," and "Rules, Rights and Promises," in *Ethics, Religion and Politics* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981). See also "The Question of Linguistic Idealism," in *From Parmenides to Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981).

35. David Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge and P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 478. This is a point that reappears in slightly different forms a number of times in his *Treatise*: see also 467, 468, 480, 526.

priest and witnesses solemnly gathered, the nuptial oaths intoned and repeated, the rings exchanged, and all the rest—but for this one thing: that one of the parties to the would-be marriage does not know that what he is doing is getting married. (Following Anscombe, we may imagine that he misunderstood someone's remark, "This is only a rehearsal.") Well, if he does not know that what he is doing is getting married, then getting married is not, in fact, what he is doing. For knowing that one is getting married is essential to getting married: it is an ineliminable constituent of the fact, whenever the fact obtains.

It bears emphasis that getting married depends on knowledge, not merely as an efficient cause but also for its own internal constitution. It is not as though the agent's thought were instrumental in bringing about something whose existence we could perfectly well understand on its own. Rather, we seem to need to refer to the agent's thought in order to understand the substantive fact that is brought about. This means that a person's knowledge that he is getting married is related to its object quite differently than his vision is related to its object. It is possible to explain *what* a person sees without making reference to the fact that it is seen. By contrast, we cannot strip away the knowledge that one is getting married and leave its object intact. If we try to strip it away—as in the case where the groom believes it is only a rehearsal—we find that many of the actions and circumstances that would otherwise be named among the requisites of a marriage will simply be annulled: the groom will say "I do," but he will not make a vow; he will hand a ring to his would-be bride, but he will not give it to her; and the proceedings will be seen, but they will not be witnessed.

It is clear that what attracted the attention of both Anscombe and Hume was the appearance that *every* instance of getting married, or of making a promise, is known by the relevant agent. And someone might question whether this is unexceptionally true. (Is it really impossible to make a promise without knowing one is doing so?) Fortunately, we can lay this doubt aside, because counter-examples, if any exist, are simply not to the point. What matters is not the claim that *in every case* the agent must know she is making a promise, but only that *in the definitive case*—in the one by relation to which every case is a case—the agent *does* know. And about the latter there can be no doubt: a knowing promise is the essential species by relation to which any promise is one. So let it be granted that there is such a thing as an unknowing promise. The fact remains that its existence and intelligibility depend on that

of a knowing promise, and we are obliged to start where Hume did start, with the undiminished form.

Doing so, we find a problem of intelligibility much like the one that arose in connection with virtue. The problem is this: if it is essential to getting married that one should know that one is doing so, then we cannot understand what it is to get married unless we grasp the content of that knowledge; however, we cannot grasp the content of that knowledge unless we understand what it is to get married. It therefore seems totally unintelligible both what it is to get married and what it is to know that one is doing so.

4.2 *The Humean Circle Expanded*

In Hume's estimation, the problem of "natural intelligibility" had a fairly limited scope. It was limited, he thought, to actions that are associated with a human convention or practice. And Anscombe, for her part, appears to have agreed. She thought that it was necessary to expand the class of practice-dependent actions so as to include the following of a rule, and therefore also the speaking of a language.³⁶ But she did not defend, or even discuss, a more radical expansion of the Humean Circle, which we are now in position to contemplate. Could it be that action *as such* is "naturally unintelligible"?³⁷

In considering this question, we can set aside all but one of the essential species treated above (in section 3), and we can focus on the question whether knowledge is a perfection of action. If *one* essential species of action is the action whose agent knows what she is doing, and that it is an action and not a mere event, then it belongs to the nature of action as such, as it does to that of a promise, *that the agent of it knows she is the agent of it*—so that action, too, gives rise to a Humean Circle.

Now Anscombe would be the last to deny that knowledge is a perfection of action. But even Davidson seems committed to the idea that in the fundamental case of action the agent knows exactly what she is doing, and that what she is doing is no mere event. This is implicit in his well-known discus-

36. Anscombe, "The Question of Linguistic Idealism."

37. The question whether action is "naturally unintelligible" is not to be confused with the question whether it is unintelligible. In its expanded form, the Humean Circle is only a special case of the circle we fall into whenever we attempt to explain a categorial species by reference to genus and differentia. The horse and the color red are "naturally unintelligible," but they are, for all that, perfectly intelligible.

sion of “deviant causal chains.” Davidson finds it difficult to explain the postulated causal connection between an action and the beliefs and desires that rationalize it, for, as he writes, “Beliefs and desires that would rationalize an action if they caused it in the *right* way—through a course of practical reasoning, as we might try saying—may cause it in other ways.”³⁸ And though he despairs of spelling out the “*right*” etiology, Davidson is nevertheless bold enough to “try saying” that it involves practical reasoning. The suggestion is apparently that if there is to be the “*right*” etiology, the agent herself must draw a connection between what she is doing and her reason for doing it. However, she cannot draw this connection if she does not know what she is doing. And if what she is doing is not an action, then, it seems, the “*right*” connection is not the right one after all.³⁹

It is hard to say whether anyone would deny the claim that knowledge is a perfection of action. But if we let it stand for now as a conjecture, we find ourselves in a familiar predicament. On the one hand, we cannot understand what action is until we grasp the content of the agent’s knowledge. On the other hand, we cannot grasp the content of such knowledge until we know what action is.

And this must ruin the reductive ambition of an accidentalist account. It is impossible to specify a complete set of non-circular conditions necessary for an event to be an action, if *one* of the conditions is that the agent herself should know that what she is doing is performing an action. The reason is, of course, that in specifying the crucial condition the account would have to mention the very thing it needed to explain.⁴⁰ So a partisan of the standard

38. Davidson, “Freedom to Act,” in *Essays on Actions and Events*, 79.

39. It is true that, according to Davidson, a person may be doing something intentionally without knowing that he is: “A man may be making ten carbon copies as he writes, and this may be intentional; yet he may not know that he is; all he knows is that he is trying” (“Agency,” in *Essays on Actions and Events*, 50). But remember, the question that concerns us is not whether everything that is intentional is done in full knowledge, but simply whether “cognizant” or “knowledgeable” action is an essential species by reference to which any action is one. And Davidson allows as much, immediately adding that, even in the case of the carbon copier, “what the agent does is known to him under *some* description” (50). So, apparently, the possibility of acting under a description that one does not know depends on something more fundamental: acting under a description that one knows perfectly well.

40. Recent attempts by Velleman and Setiya to enlist Anscombe in defense of the standard approach have turned on the idea that the agent’s thought about what she is doing is self-validating or self-referential. Whether they succeed in avoiding the Humean Circle is a question

approach could say *whatever else she liked* about *whatever else she liked*—about belief-desire pairs, or bodily movements, or brain states, or what have you—but to anything else she would have to add this, that the agent, in acting, knows that she is doing precisely that: acting. And then everything else would be swept into the circle.

This would explain why the two canonical divisions are not only legitimately drawn, but rightly placed at the center of the discipline. If one essential condition of an event's being an action, and not a mere event, is that the subject of it should *know* that she is the subject of an action, and not a mere event, then the philosophical distinction between an "action" and a "mere event" is not just idle theory imposed on the world from without; the relevant distinction is drawn by the agent herself, insofar as she acts at all. In that case, the apprehension of action's distinctive character is operative in the genesis of any event that has this character. And it is only because the agent herself draws the relevant distinction that the world itself contains anything for philosophers to distinguish.⁴¹

I cannot consider here: it would require a paper of its own. In any event, the argument above establishes that the question of practical knowledge cannot be avoided. It is clear, moreover, that Hume himself could not have accepted any solution along the lines proposed by Setiya and Velleman. If he thought he could evade the problem just by positing a special thought, or a thought with a special causal role, justice would not have seemed to him naturally unintelligible. Hume's solution involved the appeal to an "institution" or "custom"—an extrasensory, extra-"natural" phenomenon to which nothing corresponds in the relevant theories of action.

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