Donald Davidson – Agency

Davidson wants to know what categorises agency – what counts as a person’s deeds or doings rather than things that happen to him.

He gives an example of being woken up in the morning and performing a number of routine actions – things that he did - and enduring a number of events – things that happened to him - with some items potentially falling into a grey area.

He hopes that there might be a principle at work that explains these characterisations, in particular the difficult cases. Sometimes the form of expression used may affect the answer. Eg. waking up is not an action but is still something I did. Austin was of the opinion that the initial question was ill-formed, but Davidson hopes that there is a fairly definite subclass of events that are properly called actions. Even so, this may involve oversimplification, ignoring exceptions and distinctions of grammar and common sense, as well as “disguised linguistic legislation”. Still, he hopes to learn something from the attempt.

We cannot hope for a simple grammatical solution to the problem of agency where the same grammatical form is used both for examples of agency and where agency is not involved :-

- I drugged the sentry (agency) vs I contracted malaria (no agency)
- I danced (agency) vs I swooned (no agency)
- Jones was kicked by me (agency) vs Jones was outlived by me (no agency)

It’s true of some verbs that they indicate agency – that the person in the subject position is the agent if the verb is active, not the agent if the verb is passive. However, not of all verbs; Davidson gives lots of examples – I turned on the light may indicate agency, but may have been accidental. Davidson thinks these doubtful cases give us a clue. Maybe being intentional is the distinguishing mark of agency. Some verbs describe actions that are always intentional, and therefore (on this theory) always imply agency (eg. I cheated ..), which explains our category of verbs giving certain cases of agency.

However, while intention implies agency, the converse is not the case. Spilling the coffee is counted as an action even when unintentional. Note the complexity of the case :-

- I may intentionally spill the coffee (I am the agent and it’s my action)
- I may intentionally spill the contents of my cup, but think it’s tea. So, I don’t intentionally spill the coffee, but it is still my action.
- Finally, if my arm is jogged, while it’s still true to say that I spilled the coffee, I’m not the agent and it’s not my action

Various kinds of mistake cannot be done intentionally, though one can pretend to make a mistake. Mistakes are failures to do what one intends, and this cannot be done

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1 Chapter 3 of Essays on Actions and Events
2 This is a subtle but important distinction.
intentionally. However, mistakes are still actions – one is doing something intentionally, it’s just the result that’s not quite what one intended (miscalculations are still calculations, etc.).

So, which events involve agency? Intentional actions and some other things we do. Davidson thinks the common element is that an event is my action if I intend something by it, even if not what actually transpires. The way the action is described affects the intentionality but not the agency. So, Davidson concludes that one is the agent of an act if what one does can be described as intentional.

As examples, Davidson gives Hamlet’s intentional killing of the man behind the awning (thought not the intentional killing of Polonius). Davidson thinks there is no class of intentional actions as this would lead to a contradiction - the act of Hamlet’s killing the man behind the awning is the same as the act of killing Polonius, yet under the first description the act is intentional, under the second not. So, the same act is both intentional and not. To avoid this situation, we should talk of sentences and descriptions of actions, rather than actions per se. On these terms, Davidson’s definition of agency comes out as “a person is an agent of an event iff there is a description of what he did that makes true a sentence that says he did it intentionally”. He’s not entirely satisfied with this quantification over linguistic entities – he tries the semantic analysis of sentences about propositional attitudes in the essay *On Saying That*. 

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