

**FOUR OBJECTIONS TO THE STANDARD STORY OF ACTION
(AND FOUR REPLIES)**

Michael Smith
Princeton University

What makes it the case that in (say) moving his finger, an agent acts, as opposed to merely being involved in something's happening? Equivalently, when an agent moves his finger, what makes it the case that he is an agent, as opposed to being a patient? As I understand it, this is the question to which the standard story of action, as famously defended by Hume, and developed more recently by the likes of Hempel and Davidson, purports to have an answer (Hume 1777; Hempel 1961; Davidson 1963). The standard story's answer is that the difference lies in the causal etiology of what happens when a body moves.

We begin by identifying some putative action that an agent performs by tracing its effects back to some bodily movement. If the bodily movement is an action, then it must be one that the agent knows how to perform, and his knowledge how to perform it mustn't be explained by his knowledge how to do something else. In Arthur Danto's terms, the movement thus has to be one that could be a *basic action* for the agent in question, something that he can just do (Danto 1963). Once these conditions are met, we establish whether the agent acts by seeing whether this bodily movement is caused and rationalized in the right kind of way by some desire he has that things be a certain way, and some belief he has that a basic action of his—specifically, his moving his body in the way under discussion—has a suitable chance of making things the way he desires them to be: that is, he has to have a relevant a means-end belief. In this way we rule out the possibility that the bodily movement is caused by an alien force such as nerves, or the actions of remote super-scientists who are controlling bodies as if they were puppets. If these further conditions are met, then, according to the standard story, that bodily movement is an action. If not, then it is not.

Let's apply these ideas to a simple example of Davidson's, an example I have used before to illustrate much the same ideas (Davidson 1963, Smith

2010). Imagine that John flicks a switch. Is his flicking the switch an action? According to the standard story, we answer this question by first of all tracing back from the movement of the switch to some relevant bodily movement. Let's suppose that the bodily movement we discover is a movement of John's finger. If John's flicking the switch is an action then this bodily movement has to be one that John knows how to perform and his knowledge how to perform it mustn't be explained by his knowledge how to do something else. It must be the sort of bodily movement that could be a basic action for John, something he could just do. Supposing this to be so, the standard story tells us that whether or not John acts depends on the causal antecedents of that movement of the finger. Is that movement caused and rationalized by a desire John has that things be a certain way and a belief he has that his moving his finger has some suitable chance of making things the way he desires them to be? Does he (say) desire the illumination of the room and believe that he can illuminate the room by moving his finger against the switch? If so, does his desire and belief cause his finger movement in the right way? If these questions both get an affirmative answer, then that finger movement is an action; if not, then we once again have to conclude that John was involved in a mere happening in which he wasn't an agent.

Clearly much more needs to be said to fully spell out the standard story. For example, in a fully spelled out version of the story, talk of desire and belief would presumably have to be replaced by talk of preferences and credences, and we would have to be much more precise about what is, and what is not, implied by the idea that desires and beliefs figure in causal relations. But hopefully what's been said so far suffices both to get the basic idea across and to prompt a much more basic question, which is why we should believe that some such more fully worked out version of the story is correct in the first place. Doesn't the story face some fairly obvious problems? My aim here is to confront some of these apparently more basic problems head-on. In essence, my reply will be that these alleged problems either rest on a misunderstanding of what the standard story is supposed to be a story about, or they rest on a misunderstanding of how the standard story is properly to be told, or they presuppose views about the nature of actions that are themselves implausible. The take-home message will thus be that we have good reasons to stick with the standard story, much as I have told it, and to further develop it in the ways I suggest.

1. An Initial Problem

Some might object to the standard story on the grounds that it seems to entail, implausibly, that there are no actions of leaning motionless against a wall, or lying still on a bed, or relaxing on a couch. We plainly do sometimes act in these cases, the objection goes, but isn't it clear that we do not move our bodies? The objection is, however, without merit, as it depends on an

uncharitable interpretation of what the standard story has in mind when it talks of bodily movements. When a defender of the standard story says that actions are bodily movements, this has to be interpreted so that any orientation of the body counts as a bodily movement, even the orientations involved in leaning motionless against a wall, or lying still on a bed, or relaxing on a couch. In order to see why bodily movements have to be interpreted in this way, consider the example of leaning motionless against a wall.

Sometimes, when you lean motionless against a wall, the orientation of your body is under your control. Your doing what you are doing is caused and sustained by some desire you have and the belief that you can get what you desire by leaning motionless against a wall. It is this feature of the orientation of your body—the fact that it is under your control in the sense of being sensitive, moment by moment, to your desires and means-end beliefs—that the standard story says makes it an action, whether or not you happen to be actually moving. Sometimes, however, when you lean motionless against a wall, the orientation of your body isn't under your control. Imagine a case in which you're fast asleep, leaning against a wall. You are leaning against a wall, but you are plainly not acting. As I understand it, the standard story offers an account of what the difference between these two cases consists in, and in so doing illuminates the idea of agential control. Though in both cases there is an orientation of your body that could be a basic action, in the former case, that orientation of your body is sensitive to what you believe and desire, whereas in the latter, it isn't. This is the sense in which it is under your control.

From here-on I will simply assume that any way in which an agent might orient his body counts as a bodily movement for the purposes of the standard story. The question on which we must focus is whether every action can be identified with some such bodily movement, caused in the right way by a belief-desire pair. Some might think that the answer to this question is still plainly 'no', as there are remain many cases of actions that aren't bodily movements. They might point to mental actions like the action of *forming a belief* on the basis of some other belief one has; or *forming a desire* for the means on the basis of one's desires for ends and beliefs about means; and so on. There is some merit to this complaint, but, as we will see, it turns out it is not only not inconsistent with the standard story to admit that there are some such actions, but that their existence is entailed by the standard account. What this shows is that the standard story of action is a story of actions in a special sense that we have yet to identify. More on this towards the end.

2. Problems Raised by Jonathan Dancy

Everyone agrees with the truism that someone acts just in case he does something for a reason. One distinctive feature of the standard story, at least

as in the form in which I have told it in earlier work, is that it builds out from this truism in a distinctive way (Davidson 1963, Smith 1998). However, if we accept what Jonathan Dancy tells us about the way in which actions are appropriately explained, then it is a mistake to build out from the truism in the distinctive way that I suggest the standard story does. This provides us with a reason to reject the standard story so told.

Let's begin with the truism that someone acts just in case he does something for a reason. It is widely accepted that there is a distinction between *motivating* reasons and *normative* reasons, so one question is which kind of reason the truism concerns. Let's start with normative reasons. Normative reasons are considerations that justify an agent's conduct. One possibility is thus that the truism is a truism about the relationship between actions and normative reasons: those who act do so on the basis of considerations that justify their conduct. But those who accept the standard story, at least as I have told it, think that it is a mistake to interpret the truism in this way, as the truism, so interpreted, wouldn't be true at all. When someone acts, he need not act on the basis of a consideration that justifies his conduct, and nor need he believe that he acts on the basis of such a consideration either. Actions are the product of desires and means-end beliefs, according to the standard story, where the desires in question can be desires for anything. Though agents do sometimes do act on the basis of considerations that justify their conduct, sometimes they act without believing that there is any such consideration, and sometimes they act on the basis of considerations that they believe to be *dysjustifying* (Stocker 1979).

So what sort of reason is the truism about? This is where motivating reasons come in. According to the standard story, at least in the form in which I have told it in previous work, the reasons mentioned in the truism are motivating reasons, where motivating reasons are constituted by the desire and belief pairs that figure in the standard story. Whenever an agent acts, he acts for reasons, because whenever he acts, there is a suitable pairing of a belief and desire that causes his actions in the right way. Jonathan Dancy's account of the nature of motivating reasons is, however, inconsistent with this. Here is what Dancy says.

When someone does something there will (normally) be some considerations in the light of which he acted—the reasons for which he did what he did. There are not so many things we do for no reason at all. Intentional, deliberate, purposeful action is always done for a reason, even if some actions, such as recrossing one's legs, are not—or not always, anyway. So normally there will be, for each action, the reasons in the light of which the agent did that action, which we can think of as what persuaded him to do it. When we think of reasons in this way, we think of them as *motivating*. The consideration that motivated the agent was his reason for doing what he did.

We may, of course, know the reasons for which the agent acted without yet knowing whether there was a good reason to do what he did. . . . When we think of reasons in this way, we are thinking normatively. We could even call such a reason a *normative reason*. All such reasons will be good reasons, though some will be much better than others. . . .

If we do speak of reasons in this way, of motivating and normative reasons, this should not be taken to suggest that there are two sorts of reasons, the sort that are motivating and the sort that are good. There are not. There are just two questions that we use the single notion of a reason to answer. When I call a reason ‘motivating’, all I am doing is issuing a reminder that the focus of our attention is on matters of motivation, for the moment. When I call it ‘normative’, all I am doing is stressing that we are currently thinking about whether it is a good reason, one that favours acting in the way proposed.

If an agent does a truly bad or silly action, then, he will surely have acted for some reason; he will, that is, have had a motivating reason for doing what he did. But there will have been little reason to act in that way. In the worst possible case, indeed, we would have to say that there is no reason at all to do what he did (no good reason, that is). This would happen if the reasons the agent took to count in favour of acting in fact do nothing of the sort; this might happen when making complicated financial decisions, for instance, for one can easily get confused in such cases and make a complete mistake about which way a consideration counts. (Dancy 2000, pp.1–3)

As I understand him, Dancy makes two main points here, both of which look on the face of it to be incompatible with the standard story, at least in the form in which I have developed it.

Dancy’s first main point is that, just as a normative reason is a consideration that justifies, a motivating reason is also a consideration, albeit one that motivates an agent. Consider again the example of John’s moving his finger against the switch, and let’s imagine asking him what motivated him to flick the switch. His answer would presumably be something like, ‘What moved me was the fact that the room would thereby be illuminated.’ His answer would not be, ‘What moved me was the fact that I had a desire to illuminate the room and a belief that I could illuminate the room by flicking the switch’. This is why, later on, Dancy says that “what motivates us is not a state of ourselves at all, but rather the nature of the situation” (Dancy 2000, p.77). But if this is right then the standard story is wrong to identify normative reasons with considerations and motivating reasons with psychological states. Normative reasons and motivating reasons are all of a piece. They are both considerations: that is, ways situations could be.

So Dancy argues. However, there are two responses to this. The first is that, *if he succeeded in illuminating the room*, then John probably wouldn’t say that what moved him to flick the switch was the fact that he had a desire to illuminate the room and a belief that he could illuminate the room by flicking the switch. But the reason he wouldn’t say this is because it may

well misleadingly suggest that he isn't aware of the fact that the room was illuminated. But if he *failed* to illuminate the room then he would be forced to say that the belief is what moved him, as in that case it wouldn't be true that flicking the switch illuminated the room. Quite in general, then, when we are motivated by a false view of a situation, it is not true that what moves us is what Dancy says it is, namely, something about the nature of the situation in which we find ourselves. What motivates us is rather what we falsely believe to be the nature of the situation in which we find ourselves.

The second response is to focus on what is really going on in cases in which we are motivated by the nature of the situation in which we find ourselves. Dancy cannot think that features of a situation that bear no relation at all to the psychology of an agent are able to explain that agent's actions. Only explanatory connections that go via the psychologies of the agents whose bodies move are able to explain their actions. So even though Dancy says that what motivates us is the nature of the situation, it seems that even he has to admit that which features of a situation motivate us is a function of our psychology. This is where the standard story comes in, as it can be seen as telling us what this function is. According to the standard story of action, the features of situations that motivate agents are fixed by the contents of the desires and means-end beliefs that cause those agent's actions in the right way. More specifically, they are the features of the situations that specify the ways in which the agents believe what they do bears on the realization of their desires.

The upshot is that, even if we do go along with Dancy and reject my suggestion that, for the purposes of the truism, we should think of motivating reasons as psychological states, there would still be an easy translation from the standard story's preferred account of action explanation into Dancy's way of talking about motivating reasons as considerations. But if there is an easy translation of the one view into the other, then there is no deep disagreement between them, just a superficial disagreement about whether to use the words 'motivating reason' to refer to the psychological states that explain an action, or to the considerations that are fixed by the contents of those psychological states.

Dancy's second main point is, however, more radically opposed to the standard story. He suggests that though we can talk of motivating and normative reasons, we mustn't suppose that there are two different concepts of a reason in play. There is just one concept of a reason in play, the concept of not just a consideration, but more specifically of a consideration that counts in favour of some action: that is, the concept of a normative reason. Equipped with this concept we can distinguish between, on the one hand, the considerations that count in favour of some action, and, on the other, the considerations that an agent believes count in favour of some action. The former are normative reasons, the latter are motivating reasons. But both are defined in terms of the single concept of a normative reason.

Dancy's second point thus stands in stark opposition to the standard story. For, in Dancy's preferred terms, the standard story holds that what makes an action an action is the fact that an agent is moved to act by a consideration that is fixed by the contents of that agent's desires and means-end beliefs, where there is no restriction at all on what an agent's desires are desires for, and, in particular, where it is allowed not just that an agent may act without believing that some consideration counts in favour of their doing what they do, but that they might act believing that all of the considerations favour their *not* doing; that is, they might act on some *dysjustifying* consideration. But why does the standard story, at least in the form in which I have told it, have this view of desire?

The reason is that the standard story, told in the way in which I have told it, conceives of the desires that move us as simply dispositions to be moved in certain ways, depending on what means-end beliefs we have, and it so conceives of desires because, absent such a disposition, motivation is a conceptual impossibility. What it is to be motivated just is to be disposed to move in certain ways, depending on your means-end beliefs (Smith 1987). But since the considerations that are motivating reasons are fixed by the dispositions we have to be moved in certain ways, depending on what means-end beliefs we have, and since there is no *a priori* restriction on what we might be disposed to do, it follows that our beliefs about the considerations that justify our acting in certain ways may not fix the contents of our motivating reasons. These beliefs won't fix the contents of our motivating reasons in all of those cases in which the desires that fix our motivating reasons are not desires to act ways that we believe we are justified in acting.

Warren Quinn's Radioman provides us with a striking example of what such desires might be like, at the limit (Quinn 1993). According to Quinn, Radioman desires to turn radios on, but he doesn't desire to listen to the news or to the music that's being played; he doesn't desire to escape from the silence; he doesn't get any pleasure from turning radios on; he doesn't like having radios on; and so on and so forth for everything else that you think might be true of Radioman in addition to his being disposed to turn on radios. This is because Radioman's desire to turn radios on is simply a brute urge to do so. Since, for Dancy, motivating reasons have to be considerations that the agent at least believes counts in favour of his action, he therefore seems committed to supposing that Radioman, so understood, isn't acting at all. In deciding between the standard story and the story that Dancy offers in its stead, the question we must ask is therefore whether we should suppose that is the right thing to say about Radioman.

I said earlier that the reason we should believe the standard story is because the sort of causal history it takes to be constitutive of action is presupposed to be present whenever we give other sorts of explanations of actions (Smith 1998). The case of Radioman, as I have described him,

thus prompts the question what sort of explanation we might give of what Radioman does, and whether that sort of explanation presupposes a causal history like that posited by the standard story. When the question is put like that, however, I suspect that our initial reaction, if confronted by someone like Radioman, would be to throw up our hands.

When ordinary people desire to do things, they typically believe that there is some consideration that counts in favour of their doing what they desire to do, and they even more typically like it when the thing they desire to bring about comes about. Indeed, they typically desire and like to do what they desire and like to do *because* they believe that some consideration counts in favour of their doing so. An urge like Radioman's, totally disconnected from both his beliefs about what's worth doing, and his likes and dislikes, thus seems to verge on the pathological. In so far as we are able to give an explanation of his conduct at all, the explanation we would give would be one in the terms of the cause of the urge itself. Was his urge the result of conditioning, or taking drugs, or what? And if we were unable to come up with such an explanation, then I suspect that, at least initially, we would simply rest content with saying that we find what he does utterly baffling.

But though this might be our initial reaction, it seems to me that we would more or less immediately have to back up and admit that we don't find what Radioman does *utterly* baffling. What he does is, after all, belief-mediated in a way in which a baffling nervous twitch, which is caused by a disposition to so twitch, or an idiosyncratic bodily function, which is caused by a disposition to so function, is not. Nervous twitches and idiosyncratic bodily functions may be utterly baffling, but we know something both distinctive and familiar about the origins of Radioman's behaviour. We know that he has an urge to turn on radios, and we know that whether his urge will have any effect at all will depend on two things. First of all, it will depend on whether he has stronger contrary dispositions: imagine telling him that if he turns on a radio you will shoot him in the head, so bringing his urge into conflict with his desire to preserve his life. And second, it will depend on what options he believes will bring about the thing that he has an urge to do: that is, it will depend on whether he believes that there are radios in the vicinity whose operations he can affect by his bodily movements. We therefore know that Radioman will adjust his behaviour in the light of changing information about the location of radios—and perhaps also the presence of radio-hating gunmen!—and hence that he exercises a familiar capacity for control, the kind of control characteristic of those that people exercise when they act intentionally. To be sure, what Radioman does will remain utterly baffling in one sense. We will still have no idea why he has the urge he has to turn on radios. But in another quite familiar sense, what he does will be readily intelligible to us, and it will be so precisely because his urge plays the role that desires play in a causal history of behaviour.

What all of this suggests, to me at any rate, is that Dancy's account of motivating reasons, which restricts the sorts of considerations that can motivate agents to those that agents believe are features of the situations in which they find themselves that justify, fails to capture the natural similarity among the full class of motivating reasons. Consider three subsets of desire: the subset of desires comprised of urges like Radioman's; the subset comprised of urges like Radioman's coupled with liking the thing's being the case that he desires to be the case; and the subset comprised of desires to do things that agents believe that features of their situation justify them in doing. Though the elements in the first and second subsets have very different contents from those in the third, and though there is a familiar affective element in the second that is missing in the first, it remains the case that there is an element in all three subsets with a similar function. In each subset we find a disposition to bring something about that only functions absent stronger contrary dispositions, on the one hand, and only in combination with beliefs about how things the agent can just do bear on that thing's coming about, on the other. The disposition is thus one whose characteristic manifestation constitutes a familiar display of control.

Since, as we will see, this species of control is the hallmark of action, it seems to me that we should therefore reject Dancy's account of motivating reasons in favour of that offered by the standard story. An agent's motivating reasons aren't fixed by his beliefs about which features of his situation would justify him in acting. They are fixed by his desires, where his desires are understood in the dispositional terms I have suggested, together with his means-end beliefs.

3. A Problem Raised by Thomas M. Scanlon

Thomas M. Scanlon also takes issue with what we've just said about desire in clarifying the standard story:

'Desire' is sometimes used in a broad sense in which the class of desires is taken to include any "pro-attitude" that an agent may have toward any action or outcome, whatever the content or basis of this attitude may be. Desires in this sense include such things as a sense of duty, loyalty, or pride, as well as an interest in pleasure or enjoyment. It is uncontroversial that desires in this broad sense are capable of moving us to act, and it is plausible to claim that they are the only things capable of this, since anything that moves us (at least to intentional action) is likely to count as such a desire. But many elements of this class are what Nagel calls "motivated desires"; that is to say, they do not seem to be sources of motivation but rather the motivational consequences of something else, such as an agent's recognition of something as a duty, or as supported by a reason of some other kind.

A substantial thesis claiming a special role for desires in moving us to act would have to be based on some narrower class of desires, which can be claimed to serve as independent sources of motivation and perhaps also of reasons. (Scanlon 1998, p.37)

Scanlon here concedes that all actions are the products of desires, but he insists that the mere fact that this is so is insufficient to support a “substantial thesis” that claims a special role for desires in moving us to act. But our discussion of Dancy, together with Scanlon’s concession, makes it clear that he is mistaken.

There is, Scanlon tells us, a distinction between *motivated* desires, which are desires that are themselves “the motivational consequences of something else, such as an agent’s recognition of something as a duty, or as supported by a reason of some other kind,” and *unmotivated* desires, which are desires that are not the motivational consequences of something else. For the reasons given in our earlier discussion of Dancy, let’s grant this distinction. When (say) an agent acts on a desire that he has because he recognizes something as a duty, he is moved to act not just by his desire, but also by his recognition of the act as a duty. The standard story suggests that we should understand this in terms of the transitivity of causation. Since the agent recognizes the act as his duty, and this causes him to desire to do the act in question, and this desire, in conjunction with a relevant belief, causes his trying to do his duty, it follows that his recognition of the act as his duty is the cause of his trying to do his duty. Scanlon’s thought seems to be that the mere fact that the desire might stand in this complex causal relation to the agent’s recognition that the act is his duty and his trying to do his duty casts doubt on whether the special role assigned to the desire by the standard story is “substantive”. But it is obscure to me why he thinks this is so.

The standard story tells us that what the agent does, when he acts, is move his body in a certain way, and that that bodily movement counts as an action in virtue of having been caused and rationalized in the right way by a desire and means-end belief that the agent has, where desires can be desires for anything. This claim is clearly substantive, as it can be denied. Indeed, as we have just seen, Jonathan Dancy quite explicitly denies it. Moreover, turning now from whether the claim made by the standard story is substantive to whether it is plausible, note that the plausibility of the standard story’s claim isn’t at all undermined by Scanlon’s observation. For though many of the desires that figure in the sorts of explanation that the standard story posits are themselves caused by further psychological states, such as the recognition of acts as duties, that is neither here nor there, from the standpoint of the standard story. It is neither here nor there because the story itself is *silent* about the origins of the desires and means-end beliefs that it says play a constitutive role in the explanation of action, and rightly so. For what is relevant to whether an agent acts is the fact that he has certain desires and

means-end beliefs and that these cause his bodily movement in the right way, not what moved him to desire what he desires, or believe what he believes.

4. A Problem Raised by J. David Velleman

David Velleman objects to the standard story in the following terms:

The states and events described in a psychological reduction of a fully human action must be such that their interaction amounts to the participation of an agent. My objection to the standard story is not that it mentions mental occurrences in the agent instead of the agent himself; my objection is that the occurrences it mentions in the agent are no more than occurrences in him, because their involvement in an action does not add up to the agent's being involved.

How can I tell that the involvement of these mental states and events is not equivalent to the agent's? I can tell because, as I have already suggested, the agent's involvement is defined in terms of his interactions with these very states and events, and the agent's interactions with them are such that they couldn't have with themselves. His role is to intervene between reasons and intention, and between intention and bodily movements, in each case guided by the one to produce the other. And intervening between these items is not something that the items themselves can do. When reasons are described as directly causing an intention, and intention as directly causing movements, not only has the agent been cut out of the story, but so has any psychological item that might play this role. (Velleman 1992, p.125)

The crucial question is what exactly it means to say that, for an agent to act, he must be able to "intervene between reasons and intention, and between intention and bodily movements, in each case guided by the one to produce the other." My suggestion will be that defenders of the standard story have an easy answer to this question.

As is well known, defenders of the standard story disagree among themselves when they try to say not just what's necessary for agency, but also what is sufficient (Davidson 1973; Peacocke 1979; Sehon 2005). The main problem concerns the so-called problem of internal wayward causal chains. Imagine a piano player who wants to appear extremely nervous when he plays the piano and who believes that he can do so by hitting a C# when he should hit a C at a certain point in a performance. However, when he gets to that part of the performance, the fact that he has that desire and belief so unnerves him that he is overcome and involuntarily hits a C#. In this case, the piano player has a suitable desire and belief, and these do indeed cause his hitting a C#, an appropriate bodily movement, but his hitting a C# is not an action. The piano player is a patient with respect to hitting a C#, not an agent, as there was an alien cause: nerves caused by the desire and

belief themselves. The upshot is that, even if a suitable bodily movement that could be a basic action is caused by an appropriate desire and belief, this isn't sufficient for agency.

The obvious response to this problem is to note that, in cases of internal wayward causal chains like that described, the match between what the agent does and the content of her desires and beliefs is entirely fluky. It is, for example, a complete fluke that the piano player wanted to hit just the note on the piano that his nerves subsequently caused him to hit. This obvious response has been further developed by Christopher Peacocke (1979). Peacocke suggests that something an agent does is an action only if what he does is *differentially sensitive* to the contents of his desires and beliefs (Peacocke 1979). Very roughly, his idea is that the movement of an agent's body mustn't just be caused by a suitable desire and belief pair, but that it must also be the case that, abstracting away from the causal role played by factors external to the agent's psychology, if the agent had had a range of desires and beliefs that differed ever-so-slightly in their contents from those he actually has, he would have acted so as to realize the contents of those desires, given those beliefs.

In order to see how this differential sensitivity condition is supposed to rule out internal wayward causal chains, consider once again the piano player. Suppose he had desired to play the piano as if nervously and believed that he could do so by hitting a B at a certain point in the performance, instead of a C. His actually hitting a C# is an action only if, in this counterfactual scenario, he would have hit a B at that point in the performance. Or suppose that he had desired to play the piano as if nervously and believed that he could do so by maintaining a certain rigidity as he hit the C. His actually hitting a C# is an action only if, in this counterfactual scenario, he would have maintained a certain rigidity while hitting the C. And so we must go on for a whole range of ever-so-slight variations in the contents of the piano-player's desires and beliefs. This further condition of non-flukiness, understood in terms of differential sensitivity, is plainly violated in the case of internal wayward causal chains originally described. For even if the piano player had had desires and beliefs with ever-so-slightly different contents, his nerves would still have caused him to hit a C#.

Though there may well be problems with the specific way in which Peacocke develops the differential sensitivity requirement (Sehon 2005), the basic idea behind the requirement seems to be on the right track, and this shouldn't be surprising. For what the differential sensitivity requirement guarantees is that whenever an agent acts intentionally, he doesn't just try to realize the desires he actually has, given the means-end beliefs he actually has, but that he would have tried to realize his desires, given his means-end beliefs, in a range of nearby possible worlds in which he had desires and means-end beliefs with ever-so-slightly different contents. But now consider what it is for an agent to possess the capacity to be instrumentally rational.

It is for her to have the capacity to realize her desires, given her beliefs. And what the differential sensitivity requirement thus suggests is that, for someone to act intentionally at all, she must not just possess but also exercise a certain capacity to be instrumentally rational (Smith 2009). The possession and exercise of this capacity is, after all, exactly what's required to underwrite the truth of these counterfactuals.

When Hempel developed his own version of the standard story, he in fact suggested right from the beginning that there are three distinct psychological states that play a causal role whenever an agent acts, not just two. He claimed that causal roles are played not just by the agent's desire that the world be a certain way, and his belief that the thing done is a way of making the world that way, but also by the agent's possession and exercise of her rational capacities. We need to posit this last as an additional causal factor, Hempel thought, because the agent's possession and exercise of the capacity to be instrumentally rational is needed if he is to put his desire and belief together in the way in which they need to be put together if they are to cause an action. What we have just seen is, in effect, that Hempel was right. An additional causal role is played by his possession and exercise of this capacity. For if the agent doesn't do what she does because of her possession and exercise of her capacity to be instrumentally rational, then her desires and beliefs with ever-so-slightly different contents will not stand in the modally rich pattern of connections that they must stand in if they are to satisfy the differential sensitivity requirement.

All of this casts Velleman's objection to the standard story in a rather different light. Remember, Velleman suggests that if we are to have an account of agency at all, we have to add to the standard story the idea that agents who act "intervene between reasons and intention, and between intention and bodily movements, in each case guided by the one to produce the other." It turns out that he is right, but that this was something that certain defenders of the standard story had already seen and built into their theory. For in order to solve the problem of internal wayward causal chains, the standard story needs to insist that those who act "intervene" between their desires and their beliefs and their bodily movements. They must exercise their capacity to put their desires and beliefs together so as to produce a bodily movement. Moreover, for all we have said, this intervention might itself simply be constituted by the modally rich pattern of connections between an agent's desires and beliefs and bodily movements (see Smith 2003). There is thus nothing here that requires us to abandon the standard story, not, at any rate, in the form in which that story was told by Hempel.

What is true, of course, is that actions of the sort that the standard story is a story about have, as part of their explanation, a distinct exercise of agency that is quite different in nature—that is, an exercise of agency for which the standard story is not itself appropriate—namely, an agent's exercise of her rational capacities. But this is a form of agency to which

we were committed to anyway, as it is on display whenever agents exercise their rational capacities, whatever those capacities happen to be. It is thus on display not just when agents form instrumental desires, but also when they form desires to do things as a result of their coming to believe that their doing those things would be their duty, when they form beliefs in response to evidence, when they make inferences, and so on (see also Pettit and Smith 1996; Hieronymi 2009). Any action of the sort that the standard story is a story about is thus bound to have many many such exercises of agency in its causal history. However, to repeat, there is nothing here that requires us to abandon the standard story, and nor is there anything that diminishes the significance of the standard story as a story about what it is a story about.

5. Conclusion

The standard story of action purports to tell us what makes someone an agent, rather than a mere patient. We have considered four objections that might be leveled against the standard story and, in the process, the story has become further clarified. As we have seen, the objections either rest on a misunderstanding of what the standard story is supposed to be a story about, or a misunderstanding of how the standard story is properly told, or they depend on views about the nature of actions that are themselves deeply implausible. The take-home message is thus the one advertised at the outset. We have good reasons to stick with the standard story, notwithstanding the various objections that have recently been levelled against it. Those with an interest in the standard story would thus be well-advised to turn their attention to some of the residual questions that have emerged. Can we convincingly spell out the differential sensitivity solution to the problem of internal wayward causal chains? Can we really turn that account into a plausible and satisfying account of what it is for an agent to possess and exercise the capacity to be instrumentally rational? And can we generalize that account to all of the rational capacities? It seems to me that it is by answering questions like these that we will come to grips with some of the most pressing outstanding issues in philosophy of action.

References

- Dancy, Jonathan 2000: *Practical Reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
 Danto, Arthur C. 1963: 'What We Can Do', *Journal of Philosophy* (60) pp.434–445.
 Davidson, Donald 1963: 'Actions, Reasons and Causes' reprinted in his *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).
 Frankfurt, Harry 1971: 'Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person' reprinted in *Free Will* edited by Gary Watson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).

- Hempel, Carl G. 1961: 'Rational Action' reprinted in *Readings in the Theory of Action* edited by Norman S. Care and Charles Landesman (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University).
- Hieronymi, Pamela 2009: 'Two Kinds of Agency' in *Mental Action* edited by Lucy O'Brien and Matthew Soteriou (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Hume, David 1777: *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding and concerning the Principles of Morals* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).
- Peacocke, Christopher 1979: *Holistic Explanation: Action, Space, Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Pettit, Philip and Michael Smith 1996: 'Freedom in Belief and Desire', *Journal of Philosophy* (93) pp.429–449.
- Quinn, Warren 1993: 'Putting Rationality in its Place' in his *Morality and Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Scanlon, Thomas 1998: *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press).
- Sehon, Scott 2005: *Teleological Realism: Mind, Agency, and Explanation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press).
- Smith, Michael 1987: 'The Humean Theory of Motivation' in *Mind* (96) pp.36–61.
- 1998: 'The Possibility of Philosophy of Action' in *Human Action, Deliberation and Causation* edited by Jan Bransen and Stefaan Cuypers (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers).
- 2003: 'Rational Capacities' in *Weakness of Will and Varieties of Practical Irrationality* edited by Sarah Stroud and Christine Tappolet (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Velleman, David 1992: 'What Happens When Someone Acts' reprinted in his *The Possibility of Practical Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001).