

THE CONFLICTING ASPECTS OF HUGH McCANN'S THEORY OF ACTION

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The paper focuses on two aspects of Hugh McCann's theory of action and shows that they stand in conflict. The first of them is McCann's defense of the claim that all overt actions are grounded in a special kinds of mental action – volitions (from the Gilbert Ryle's famous 'dilemma' argument). The second aspect is his answer to the problem of causal deviance. The paper shows that the same element that makes his theory immune to Ryle's argument limits its strength in dealing with the problem of causal deviance. In conclusion it appears that the only version of volitionism that can be defended is its understanding which restricts the scope of human action to mental activity.

Keywords: Voluntary action – Infinite regress – Causal deviance

Introduction. What is action? What makes some event an action? Most philosophers agree that some events are actions because they are the consequences of other actions. For, when I perform an action of pushing a door, and as a result of my pushing the doors open, the consequence of my action is another action, the action of door opening. However, if every action has to be based on some other action, we would have to perform an infinite number of actions before performing any action. Therefore, it is obvious that on every account that explains some actions as consequences of other actions, some actions must be basic, that is, such that we do not perform them by performing other actions.

However, while philosophers seem to agree on this point, they are divided concerning the nature of basic actions. For some argue that basic actions are reducible to states and events that are not active by their own nature, while others hold that some actions represent the non-reducible elements of reality. The former usually analyze basic action either in terms of the causal relation between the person's desire-belief set, the person's reasons for action, and the bodily movement that constitutes action or between the person's intention and the intended behavior.¹ The latter usually hold that agents have a special power, the power of will that makes them able to produce the intrinsically active events or volitions, that is, the acts of will.

This paper is focused on Hugh McCann's version of the volitionist theory, the theory that conceives the basic actions as non-reducible acts of will. It argues for the immunity of

¹ In the rest of the text, for the sake of simplicity instead of the term 'desire-belief set,' the term 'desire' will be used to refer to the same thing.

this theory to the Gilbert Ryle's famous objection that volitionism either rests on absurdity or leads to infinite regress. In addition, the paper discusses the ability of the theory to deal with the problem of causal deviance. Finally, it points out that the assumptions on which McCann's theory avoids the objection raised by Ryle limit the ability of his theory to cope with the problem of causal deviance.

Ryle's Attack on Volitionism. In order to answer the question: "what is action?" philosophers usually ask a seemingly easier question: "what makes the difference between voluntary and involuntary behavior?" By "voluntary behavior" they refer to those bodily movements and their consequences that are actions from those bodily movements and their consequences that are not actions (e.g. the reflex bodily movements or the movements of one's body caused by an external force). The volitionists' answer to this question is that voluntary behavior differs from involuntary behavior in being caused by volitions.

However, as Ryle pointed out, if one were to ask the proponents of this definition of voluntary action if volitions themselves are voluntary actions, they would have to choose between three implausible answers: (1) volitions are voluntary, (2) volitions are involuntary, (3) volitions are neither voluntary nor involuntary. Ryle draws this conclusion on the basis of the following consideration: "Clearly either answer leads to absurdities. If I cannot help willing to pull the trigger, it would be absurd to describe my pulling it as 'voluntary.' But if my volition to pull the trigger is voluntary, in the sense assumed by the theory, then it must issue from a prior volition and that from another ad infinitum. It has been suggested, to avoid this difficulty, that volitions cannot be described as either voluntary or involuntary. 'Volition' is a term of the wrong type to accept either predicate. If so, it would seem to follow that it is also of the wrong type to accept such predicates as 'virtuous' and 'wicked,' 'good' and 'bad,' a conclusion which might embarrass those moralists who use volitions as the sheet-anchor of their systems."²

Ryle obviously discovered a serious logical problem for the volitionist theory. He in fact noticed that the volitionist has only two options when asked about the nature of volitions: either to accept the absurd claim that an action that is not voluntary can ground the voluntariness and other predicates of voluntary actions, or, to accept the assumption, contrary to common sense, that before performing any action we must perform an infinite number of acts of will.

However, the claim that volition is voluntary leads to infinite regress only on the assumption that volition can be voluntary only in the sense in which other actions are voluntary, but the volitionist does not seem forced to accept this. In fact, as McCann points out, the idea that 'voluntariness' of volition must rest on some other volition "is rather like supposing that if we explain wetness of a wet street by saying there is water on it we must explain the wetness of water by postulating further water." Instead, McCann suggests that, "volition can be voluntary in the way water is wet – that is, essentially, in a way that

² Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London: Hutchinson House, 1949), 67.

does not require some means as explanation.”³

McCann clarifies this point by comparing the nature of volition with the nature of bodily action. As McCann points out, bodily actions consist of events that are not active by their own nature. For instance, my action of raising my hand consists of the event of hand rising that can occur even when I am completely passive (e.g. if somebody grabs my hand and lifts it). That is why bodily movements need something to make them voluntary (i.e. to turn them into actions). However, according to McCann, that is not the case with volition, because volition is a *mental action* or a sort of *thinking*, and thinking is not constituted of events that can just happen to us, like having our hand raised.⁴ McCann admits that sometimes thoughts occur to us by “happenstance.” In that case, we exhibit less control than in the cases when we deliberately begin to think about some content. However, as McCann explains, the *event* that occurs when we start being aware of some content is regardless of how we became aware of it an *act* of thinking. In other words, what occurs to me and what I deliberately bring about is just my thinking of something, which is an activity. Thus, if volition is a mental act it is difficult to see how it can fail to be a voluntary behavior, and if it cannot fail to be a voluntary behavior then it is essentially voluntary.⁵

However, Ryle has the following argument against the idea that volition is a mental act or a kind of thinking: If volition is a kind of thinking, and hence a conscious process, we should be aware of it. Furthermore, we should be aware of it almost all the time given its functional role according to the volitionist theory. However, according to Ryle, there seems to be no evidence that we are ever aware of such mental events. In fact, Ryle argues that there is evidence that we are never aware of their existence. This evidence, for Ryle, consists in the fact that no one ever talks about volitions in describing his own conduct or the conduct of other people. “No one ever says such things as that at 10 a.m. he was occupied in willing this or that, or that he performed five quick and easy volitions and two slow and difficult volitions between midday and lunch-time. An accused person may admit or deny that he did something, or that he did it on purpose, but he never admits or denies having willed... Novelists describe the actions, remarks, gestures and grimaces, the daydreams, deliberations, qualms and embarrassments of their characters; but they never mention their volitions. They would not know what to say about them.”⁶

In addition, according to Ryle, the evidence that we have no experience of volitions is that we cannot answer simple questions about their nature. “By what sorts of predicates should they be described? Can they be sudden or gradual, strong or weak, difficult or easy, enjoyable or disagreeable? Can they be accelerated, decelerated, interrupted, or

³ Hugh McCann, *The Works of Agency: On Human Action, Will, and Freedom* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1998), 92.

⁴ McCann uses the term “thought” to refer to the sort of mental action that is volition. Here “thinking” is used to avoid the ambiguity between the mental act and the content of the mental act.

⁵ McCann, *The Works of Agency: On Human Action, Will, and Freedom*, 85 – 91.

⁶ Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, 64.

suspended? Can people be efficient or inefficient at them? Can we take lessons in executing them? Are they fatiguing or distracting? Can I do two or seven of them synchronously? Can I remember executing them? Can I execute them, while thinking of other things, or while dreaming? Can they become habitual? Can I forget how to do them?”⁷

These observations indeed produce suspicion that the idea that volition is a mental act is an ad hoc solution to the problem discovered by Ryle. However, there are reasons to believe that we do experience volitions. The most important is the observation that without mental actions that ground our bodily actions, we would not be able to have non-inferential knowledge or immediate awareness of our own activity. It is plausible to claim that we do have such knowledge because it seems that we do not need to have sensory information about our behavior to know that we are acting. Therefore if we possess this knowledge, the most natural way to explain it is by postulating volitions, since volitions are mental acts or a sort of thinking, and we are immediately aware of our own conscious processes.

In addition, the cases of behavioral illusions seem to offer evidence for the existence of volitions. William James was the first to draw attention to this fact: “Close the patient’s eyes, hold his anesthetic arm still, and tell him to raise his arm to his head; and when he opens his eyes he will be astonished to find that the movement has not taken place.”⁸ What explains the patient’s astonishment? A plausible explanation seems to be that the patient did everything he normally does in raising his arm, but failed to raise it on this occasion. The immediate awareness of his act of will, explains his belief that he was active, even though no bodily action was in fact performed. The astonishment then stems from the fact that this awareness is normally accompanied by bodily action.

Therefore, if volition is a mental action, the proponents of the volitionist theory do not have to be embarrassed when they are asked whether volitions are voluntary. The claim that volition is voluntary does not lead to infinite regress because mental actions are essentially voluntary, and this way of stopping the regress is not an ad hoc solution because there are independent reasons to believe in the existence of such mental actions. Therefore, Ryle did not show that volitionism (at least McCann’s version of it) is trapped in the dilemma between infinite regress and absurdity.

Causal Deviance. It is possible that a desire or intention causes the desired or intended behavior in a way that makes it unintentional or even “non-actional.” This is known as the phenomenon of causal deviance. This phenomenon speaks against the theory that reduces actions to events with the appropriate causal history. Roderick Chisholm provided one of the most famous examples of deviant causation: “Joe wants to kill his rich uncle, as he stands to inherit a large sum of money. He formulates his plan to murder his uncle, and begins the drive to his uncle’s home. Excited at the prospect of soon ac-

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ William James, *Principles of Psychology*, vol 2 (1890; New York: Dover, 1950), 105, quoted in Robert Audi, *Action, Intention and Reason*, (New York: Cornell University Press 1993), 81 – 82.

quiring a lot of money, Joe is a bit careless at the wheel and hits and kills a pedestrian. This pedestrian turns out to have been his uncle.”⁹

Chisholm’s point is that Joe’s desire caused his action, but his action was not intentional. Thus, the reductionist thesis that an action is intentional if it is caused by a desire or intention to perform that action seems to be incorrect. However, instead of abandoning their thesis the reductionists developed it further by claiming that to produce an intentional action a desire or an intention must cause the behavior in the *right way*. They gave different hypotheses about what the right way might be.

They suggested, for instance, that for an intentional action to occur, a person’s mental states must produce his or her behavior in *the way the person plans*.¹⁰ On that suggestion, Joe’s murder correctly turns out not to be an intentional action because Joe’s desire to kill his uncle did not cause his uncle’s death in the way Joe planned, because there was a ‘mismatch’ between his plan and his behavior. Joe had no idea that his uncle would cross the street in that particular place and time, and never desired to kill him the way he did. Thus, it seems that for an intentional action to occur, there must be a ‘match’ between the agent’s plan for bringing about the desired outcome and the way the outcome is brought about.

However, the following example provided by Donald Davidson shows that whether there is a match or a mismatch is irrelevant for the question of whether there is an intentional action: “A climber might want to rid himself of the weight and danger of holding another man on a rope, and he might know that by loosening his hold on the rope he could rid himself of the weight and danger. This belief and want might so unnerve him as to cause him to loosen his hold, and yet it might be the case that he never *chose* to loosen his hold, nor did he do it intentionally.”¹¹

In this case causal deviance occurred before a basic action (in the reductionist sense) could occur. This explains the fact that intentional action did not occur although there was no ‘mismatch.’ For a match between plan and outcome is irrelevant in the case of basic action, since planning makes sense only when there are means to achieve a result, which do not exist when the result to achieve is a basic action, (which is on the reductionist account the overt bodily movement or in this case the “loosening one’s hold”). For, there is no way to bring about a basic action except to engage in it.¹²

⁹ David A. Pizarro, Eric Uhlmann and Paul Bloom, “Causal Deviance and the Attribution of Moral Responsibility,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* (2003)

http://www.yale.edu/minddevlab/papers/Causal_deviance.pdf Adapted from Roderick Chisholm “Freedom and Action” (1966).

¹⁰ McCann, *The Works of Agency: On Human Action, Will, and Freedom*, 116.

¹¹ Donald Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1980), 79.

¹² Thalberg argues that we can speak about matching in the case of ‘basic actions,’ as well because we can also perform or fail to perform basic action at the time and place we planned to perform it. However, even if the basic movement matches this sort of plan, it is not clear whether it is an action for the reason that will be presented later in the text. See Irving Thalberg, “Do Our Intentions Cause Our Intentional Actions?” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 21 (1984): 252.

Is there an alternative reductionist explanation of the climber's failure? The reductionist might point to the fact that the climber's behavior resulted from the activity of his autonomic nervous system, instead of the activity of the voluntary one.¹³ Therefore, the reductionist might suggest that to find out what the causal path to action is, we just have to learn what the voluntary nervous activity consists in. In other words, they might suggest that it is a *job of science* to determine what kind of causal connection leads to action.¹⁴

However, as McCann points out, one cannot eliminate Davidson's example by referring to the fact that the climber's behavior resulted from the activity of his autonomic nervous system without explaining "why is this pathway to behavior unacceptable – what crucial element of intentional action is missing – even though the preferred sort of cause was at work."¹⁵ For the problem in question is how to *define* intentional action, rather than the problem of finding out which particular causal pathways lead to intentional action.

At this point, the reductionist might say that the question of the right causal path arises only if we assume that causation is transitive, that is, if we assume that an event can cause other events indirectly (via the causal intermediary). For, if causation is not transitive, the climber's and the nephew's desires do not cause their behavior at all, since they are connected with their behavior by the chains of causal intermediaries. If that is the case, Davidson's and Chisholm's examples are not offending for the reductionist, because they do not show that the desire or intention can cause the behavior without the behavior being an intentional action.¹⁶ Hence, the reductionist might claim that intentional action requires a direct causal link between intention and overt behavior.

However, the problem is that there is no other way for desires or intentions to cause bodily movements except via causal intermediaries. For there are no "direct causal links" between the brain states corresponding to desires or intentions and bodily movements.¹⁷ The connection would be direct only if action starts with the *nervous and muscular events* that connect those brain states with the bodily movements. However, as McCann points out, the reductionists cannot endorse this view because they define basic action as overt movement. Therefore, they must explain the difference between the deviant causal chains and those chains that lead to actions.

Some philosophers tried to explain this difference by suggesting that that non-deviant causal chains are *reliable*.¹⁸ This eliminates Davidson's counterexample since the nervousness that played a causal role in bringing about the climber's behavior does not

¹³ McCann, *The Works of Agency: On Human Action, Will, and Freedom*, 116.

¹⁴ Alvin Goldman seems to defend this position. See Thalberg, "Do Our Intentions Cause Our Intentional Actions?" 252.

¹⁵ McCann, *The Works of Agency: On Human Action, Will, and Freedom*, 116.

¹⁶ Dorothy Mitchell, "Deviant Causal Chains," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 19 (1982): 351 – 353.

¹⁷ McCann, *The Works of Agency: On Human Action, Will, and Freedom*, 118.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

lead reliably to desired ends. Nevertheless, the strategy that insists on reliability fails because we do not always need reliable causal means to perform actions. For instance, a person's nerves could be so unreliable that they manage to raise their hands only half of the times they form the intention to do that. Nevertheless, every time they succeed, they would perform an intentional action. Therefore, 'reliability' does not make a difference between deviant and non-deviant causal chains.

Another suggestion is that a causal chain must be such that a person's behavior exhibits *guidance*.¹⁹ This suggestion is promising, because it seems that a person performs a bodily action only if he or she guides the movements of his or her body. This is clear in the case of complex actions. For, as Harry Frankfurt points out, it is difficult to imagine that the complex and meaningful behavior that constitutes a complex action could occur if the person performing the action does not guide his or her movements.²⁰

However, the problem with this suggestion is that guidance seems necessary only for the performance of complex actions. Therefore, it is difficult to see how the appeal to guidance can eliminate Davidson's counterexample in which the agent failed to perform a simple action. However, Irving Thalberg offered an explanation. According to Thalberg, a person guides his or her movements if and only if they are caused by his or her intention to perform those movements and he or she has that intention when the movements occur. Obviously, this sort of guidance can be a characteristic of the complex as well as the simple actions. However, as McCann points out, a person can be the victim of causal deviance even if his or her movements exhibit guidance in the sense specified by Thalberg. McCann illustrates this possibility with the following example: "Suppose there is a contraption attached to my head that enables a neurophysiologist to read my intentions by monitoring my brain activity and also enables him to cause overt behavior on my part by sending efferent nerve signals to my muscles. As a result, he is able to preempt whatever is the normal neurological sequence whereby intention issues in behavior and produce bodily movement on my part that match my intentions, but without any exercise of agency on my part."²¹

According to McCann, the reductionist could eliminate this counterexample by "insisting that the alleged causal sequence not run through the actions of anyone else but the agent."²² However, as he points out, this strategy is poor because "it ignores the fact that in certain cases alien intervention does not destroy agency."²³ He gives an example of such a case: "...my efferent nerves are damaged, so that the signals from my brain have to run through external machinery to be safely delivered to my muscles. If, in a case like that, the efforts of the neurophysiologist were necessary to see that the machinery func-

¹⁹ Thalberg, "Do Our Intentions Cause Our Intentional Actions?" 259.

²⁰ Harry G. Frankfurt, "The Problem of Action," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 15 (1978): 159.

²¹ McCann, *The Works of Agency: On Human Action, Will, and Freedom*, 122.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

tioned properly, his activity would be part of the event sequence issuing in my behavior, but that would not prevent my intentionally writing a check..²⁴

One could object to McCann that in this case of “alien intervention” the agent *acts* because his brain sends signals to his or her nerves, which does not happen in the previous case. Therefore, the reductionist might eliminate the “alien intervention” counterexamples by specifying that only those interventions that block even the signals that the brain sends to the nerves destroy agency. However, to argue in this way the reductionist must assume that action starts before the occurrence of overt bodily movements, which is the view that the reductionist does not accept.

In sum, the ‘matching,’ ‘reliability’ and ‘guidance’ strategies, cannot save the reductionist theory from the counterexamples based on the possibility of deviant causal chains. Furthermore, it is unlikely that other reductionist strategies could solve the problem. For, as McCann points out, “no matter how much we refine the supposed causal sequence, nothing can rule out in principle the production of overt behavior that is not actional but exhibits all the refinement that would be present if it were.”²⁵ This is so because, on the reductionist account, no causal chain, by its own nature, represents the wrong pathway to behavior, but only if it produces the behavior that does not exhibit the characteristics of action. This is why it is possible for causal chains that do not intuitively lead to action to fulfill the reductionist’s criteria, however strict or sophisticated they may be.

However, according to McCann, the *possibility* of causal deviance disappears if we perform bodily actions by performing volitions, because volition is a means of initiating and controlling our bodily movements, and as such it ensures that those movements are the expression of our own desires and intentions. A volition can serve this function because it is an activity, since controlling is an activity. In addition, the activity by which we control our bodily movements must precede those movements and this is also true about volitions. Finally, the problem of causal deviance cannot arise with respect to the performance of volitions because they possess the features of action intrinsically.²⁶

Still, if the relation between volition and the intended behavior is causal and volition is a mental act embodied in a certain brain process, as McCann thinks, that relation can also be affected by causal deviance.²⁷ For, in that case, volition can cause overt behavior only by the chain of causal intermediaries, that is, via the events in nerves and muscles that link the events in the brain that embody volitions with overt bodily movements. Thus, the ‘alien intervention’ scenarios that had put to question the reductionist account of action are possible even if volitionism is true. To see that this is so, one only has to imagine that in the examples of alien interventions presented by McCann, instead of reading a person’s intention the neurophysiologist reads the person’s volition.

McCann seems to give the following reply to this objection. The function of volition

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 124.

²⁶ Ibid., 139.

²⁷ Robert Audi, *Action, Intention, and Reason*, 100.

is the execution of desires and intentions. For volition to perform this function, the content of volition must include the proposition saying that the changes necessary for the intended action occur, rather than just saying that the desired or intended behavior occurs. Only in that case can we really initiate and control our behavior by our acts of will and our behavior is really the expression of our own intentions and desires. Thus, the possibility of causal deviance disappears if the changes that lead to behavior are willed (represented in the content of volition) besides being caused by the volition.

A difficulty for this view, however, is that for a simplest action to occur the agent must be aware of every event that links his volition with his overt behavior and it is unlikely that anyone has such awareness even in the form of how it feels to undergo those events. In other words, McCann seems to be committed to an implausible view that in the absence of the full awareness of what goes on in us when we act, we can never be sure that we have performed an intentional action.

Therefore, McCann's theory cannot explain away the possibility of causal deviance between the basic action, volition, and the overt bodily behavior. However, this sort of causal deviance is obviously not such a big problem as the causal deviance that troubles the reductionist accounts, the causal deviance that can occur before the performance of basic action. Thus, if we accept the McCann's version of volitionism, at least the question of how we can perform *any* intentional action, which troubles the proponents of the reductionist account, does not arise.

Conclusion. The conjunction of the claim that all voluntary actions are based on volitions and the claim that volitions themselves are voluntary, does not necessarily lead to infinite regress. McCann avoids the regress by conceiving the acts of will as essentially voluntary. Furthermore, he strongly supports the thesis that such essentially voluntary actions exist by arguing that they are a sort of mental action and by showing that mental actions cannot fail to be voluntary. However, this aspect of McCann's theory reduces its immunity to the problem of causal deviance. For, given the possibility of deviant causal links between volition (conceived as mental actions) and the overt bodily movements, McCann's theory cannot offer a fully satisfactory explanation of the nature of overt bodily action. This 'conflict' between the two aspects of McCann's theory may be an interesting indication that volitionists who want to avoid incoherence must restrict the scope of their theories only to mental actions.

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