1 Introduction

Suppose I am holding an apple and raising it to my mouth. How far does the province of my agency extend? Does it extend to an act of will, which causes my body to move? Or does it extend to a bodily movement, which causes the apple to rise? Or does it, perhaps, go all the way out, coming to fruition in the movement of the apple?

The central question I mean to pose can be given a more systematic expression. Traditionally, a power is defined by appeal to its act, and an act by appeal to its object.¹ Vision, for example, is a power defined by seeing, where the object of sight is a feature of the surrounding natural world. And agency, like vision, is a certain kind of power. What, then, is its definitive act, and what is the relevant object?

To this traditional question there are three principled answers. According to the first, the definitive act is willing, where the object is nothing apart from the will: one changes one’s mind—or ‘makes it up’—disposing it in a particular way. According to the second answer, the definitive act of agency is willfully moving oneself, where what one changes is not one’s mind, but rather one’s own body. And according to the third answer, the definitive act is willfully moving another, where the object of change is not oneself—neither one’s body nor one’s mind—but some external object or bit of foreign matter.

¹See Aristotle, De Anima, 415a14ff.
These three answers correspond to three increasingly expansive conceptions of human agency. I will refer to them, respectively, as volitionalism, corporealism, and materialism. In considering their merits, I will not be concerned with the details of any particular theory, but with three philosophical impulses or tendencies of thought. The tendencies will be, I hope, immediately familiar, despite one’s having met with them in countless subtly different forms.

Contemporary action theorists may not understand themselves to take a position on what I have called the definitive act of agency; but in their practice they implicitly do. They do, because “agency” and “action”—like “power” and “act” more generally—are strictly correlative terms, and any conception of one entails a conception of the other. Thus, a theory of intentional action necessarily privileges some agentive phenomenon as basic, primitive, or irreducible. According to whether it privileges (i) an act of will, (ii) a bodily movement, or (iii) a material transaction, a theory will count, for my purposes, as volitionalist, corporeal or materialist.

Almost universally, the agentive phenomenon privileged by contemporary philosophers is an act of will or a bodily movement. According to the standard theory, an intentional action is a bodily movement caused (in the right way) by an intention. Some philosophers place the accent on the bodily movement; some on the intention; and some appear to waver back and forth between the two. But on any version of the standard theory, the definitive act can only be one or the other.

Even among philosophers who are critical of the standard theory, the tendency is still to suppose that the proper expression of agency falls somewhere short of a transaction. John McDowell, for instance, rejects volitionalism inasmuch as it implies what he calls a “withdrawal of agency from nature.” According to him, the “actualizations of our active nature” extend into the “goings-on in which natural things, like limbs, do natural things, like moving.” But that is as far as it goes. The mind enters the world, according to McDowell, but only to the limits of the body.

There is no need to multiply examples: anyone familiar with contemporary action theory will recognize immediately that the consensus against materialism is broad and well-entrenched. Or rather, since calling it a “consensus” suggests a deliberate judgment, which in turn suggests a conscious weighing of reasons for and against, it is, perhaps, more accurate to say that materialism is simply unconsidered.

This is a striking state of affairs if only because our pre-theoretical understanding seems to favor materialism over its two philosophical rivals. More often than not, in ordinary life, the question what a person did is answered by mentioning some transaction—that is, by saying of the agent that she did something

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2I will take it for granted that someone’s thought may be pulled in different directions, and that what is said in this context may exhibit one tendency, while what one says in that context may exhibit another.


4Ibid., 90.
to something else: “She closed the door.” “She turned on the light.” “She set
down her bag.” “She hung up her coat.” It is equally so when the question
is posed directly to the agent and answered in the first person: “I closed the
door, turned on the light, set down my bag and hung up my coat.” Thus, in
the typical case of intentional action, the agent both understands herself, and is
understood by others, to be acting under one or another transitive description.

Meanwhile, there is nothing in the consciousness either of the agent, or of
another person, suggesting any limitation of the agent’s power—that is, any
limitation that would have it falling short of a transaction. Suppose, again,
that I’m holding an apple. First I lay it down; then I pick it up again; then
for a while I toss it back and forth between my hands; next I bring it to eye-
level and turn it 180 degrees; then I rub it against my shirt; now I take a bite.
To all mundane appearances, what the apple is doing throughout—including
the gentle arc it makes as I toss it between my hands—is entirely “up to” me.
There does not seem be a point when any external force steps in, relieving me of
command, or when, for any other reason, I am not in charge. It seems, on the
contrary, that the apple is under my constant control, and that it does what it
does, when it does, only at my behest. Given these appearances, any
theory according to which agency exhausts itself on the near side of transaction,
so that the intended career of an external object rests in the hands of an alien
power, is, on the face of it, a form of practical skepticism.

A vindication of materialism is beyond the scope of this paper. I will content
myself to argue that the most forceful objections against it are, if good, equally
good mutatis mutandis against corporealism. In that case, the apparently sen-
sible middle position occupied by corporealism, and expressed in the epigraph
by Davidson above, cannot be coherently maintained. Thus, one is forced in
the end to choose between volitionalism and materialism. One can say, echoing
Wittgenstein, “the world is independent of my will,”—conceding thereby that,
properly speaking, I never so much as move my body. Or one can say, following
Anscombe, “I do what happens,”—affirming that nothing intended by me is left
in the hands of nature. But this is a difference that cannot be split. The choice
is all or nothing.

2 Volitionalism

2.1 Mind and Body

Let us begin with volitionalism, the family of theories according to which the
prime expression of agency extends as far as, but no further than, the inner
willful act itself. This conception of agency is a common species of dualism.
It is ‘dualistic’ in the sense that it marks a certain divide, within the scope of
intention, between what the agent properly does, and what is a merely intended
effect. An event or process is ‘within the scope of intention,’ as I will understand
the phrase, if, and only if, it is intended by the person who is responsible for
doing it—that is, the one to whom we should normally point in answer to the
question, “Who did that?” So understood, an apple’s rising is squarely within the scope of a person’s intention to raise it, since, of course, one cannot intend to raise an apple unless one intends it to rise. The dualist maintains that to the state of affairs describable as someone’s ‘raising an apple,’ what the agent contributes stops somewhere short of the apple’s rising. There is, therefore, a remainder. This remainder is said to be an effect of the agent’s contribution: it is not what the agent does herself, but nature taking its course.

In saying so, a dualist may of course concede that what the agent ‘does,’ in the vulgar sense of the verb ‘to do,’ also includes the remainder. It needn’t be denied that an ordinary sentence describing someone as ‘raising an apple’ implies that the apple is rising; that it attributes responsibility to whomever is said to be raising it; or that such a sentence is oftentimes true. The dualist need only claim that that which makes such a sentence true is a pair of discrete contributing factors, related as cause and effect. These two factors are: first, whatever the agent contributes herself (this being less than the whole shebang); and second, the rest. Of course, if the agent herself only contributes one of the two constitutive factors, the other one coming from an external power, then what the agent ‘does,’ strictly and philosophically speaking, is less than she is vulgarly said ‘to do.’

In effect, the dualist draws a distinction between ‘agency proper’ and ‘agency-by-courtesy,’ or ‘agency-by-extension,’ where the ‘courtesy’ is ‘extended’ in recognition of a causal chain linking the true agentive act to its many intended consequences. Whereas, on the face of it, an action-description like ‘raising an apple’ seems to represent a single seamless whole, this is, for the dualist, a mere nominal unity: what the description refers to is a pair of discrete existences, related as cause and effect. One may as well drape two chairs with a sheet and call ‘it’ a sofa.

So understood, there are several species of dualism, which differ from one another according to where they draw the line between the two contributing factors. A theory is ‘volitionalist’ (as I employ the term) if it draws the line on the near side of bodily movement, so that, e.g., not only the rise of the apple, but even the rise of the agent’s arm is a consequence of what she does. This of course allows for varieties of volitionalism. The classical volitionalist, epitomized by Descartes, draws his line between the will and all of the natural world, such that any physical process—even one in the brain—is a consequence of what ‘I’ do. Needless to say, contemporary volitionalists tend to reject the Cartesian thesis that the mind is an immaterial substance. Many of them (the so-called ‘naturalists’) claim that the relevant mental act is itself a natural phenomenon, which happens inside the body, somewhere in the nervous system. Others (‘anti-naturalists’) deny that the relevant mental act is identical to any physical state of the agent. Meanwhile, some (‘agent-causalists’) hold that the rise of the agent’s

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5 For a discussion of some varieties, see Jennifer Hornsby, *Actions* (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1980), Chapter 4. Hornsby is concerned to distinguish two main versions: some volitionalists hold that actions are caused by volitions; others identify actions and volitions. In the first group she places Descartes, Hume and Locke, in the second Berkeley, Pritchard and herself.
arm is caused by the agent herself, while others (‘event-causalists’) claim that it is caused by something the agent does. There is endless scope for nuance, here, but the differences do not matter. Both the classical and competing forms of latter-day volitionalism are united by the thesis that the prime expression of agency is something less than a bodily movement, something of which a bodily movement is a mere effect.

2.2 Willing as the Prime Expression of Agency

Certain ideas at certain times are so deeply held that one cannot fairly summarize the reasons people think them true. Volitionalism is such an idea. But three considerations speaking its in favor stand out as especially forceful.

First, the agent’s authority over her will seems qualitatively different from her authority over physical objects, including even her body. This is so whether the will is considered metaphysically, in terms of its efficaciousness, or epistemologically, in relation to knowledge. On the one hand, metaphysically, control of the will is invulnerable to certain sorts of failure. Whereas objects in the natural world, including my own body, often resist what I want them to do, my will always obeys me—or rather, there is no space for the distinction between command and execution: “in these things,” as Augustine wrote, “the ability is one with the will, and to will is to do.”6 Thus, while I can try and fail to raise my arm, I cannot fail to try to raise it. Even when the action fails, the trying itself succeeds.

On the other hand, epistemologically, knowledge of the will is similarly secure. Material objects often do things quite without my knowing. But insofar as my will obeys, I always know its whereabouts. I may, perhaps, be wrong in thinking that I am raising my arm—wrong, because (unbeknownst to me) I have suffered a sudden paralysis—but I cannot be wrong in thinking that I am trying to raise it.7 Whatever really happens, at least I know my mind.

Thus, metaphysics and epistemology seem to converge on the same conclusion. Every atom of the physical world is a locus of possible failure. But so far as concerns the will itself, the agent is supreme, omniscient and omnipotent, just like a little god.8 The contrast is as stark as it is unflattering to our embodied condition. It prompted Wittgenstein to write, “I am completely powerless.”9

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6 Confessions, VIII.

7 That is, I cannot be wrong on account of the paralysis. My thought about my own will is susceptible to familiar forms of intra-psychic disturbance (e.g. unconscious desires, bad faith and self-deception). But a paralytic arm is not that kind of problem: it is a material impediment to action. And the point, here, is that such an impediment, though it threatens to falsify my thought of what I am actually doing, cannot undermine my thought of what I intend (or am trying) to do.

8 It is not just a tradition of metaphysics and epistemology that converge on this conclusion, but also a corresponding tradition of moral and religious thought. The notion that the province of human agency is limited to the will is plain in the words of Epictetus: “They [the gods] have discharged you from all accountability for your parents, and likewise for your brothers, and for your body, and for property, death, life. For what, then, have they made you accountable? For that which alone is in your power, the proper use of your impressions.” [I.13 (pg. 35)]

9 Notebooks, CITATION
The second consideration that seems to support volitionalism is that an act of will appears to exist independently from what actually happens. It appears to exist independently because a person’s will may be exercised in acts that have no outward manifestation. Anscombe writes that “a man can form an intention which he then does nothing to carry out, either because he is prevented or because he changes his mind: but the intention itself can be complete, although it remains a purely interior thing.”\(^\text{10}\) This phenomenon, which Davidson calls “pure intending,”\(^\text{11}\) draws one’s attention to another impressive contrast: while there \textit{can} be an act of will in the absence of a willful movement, there \textit{cannot} be willful movement in the absence of an act of will.

A third consideration follows upon the second. The very act of will that is present in the “pure” case, where nothing actually happens, is, it seems, also present in the “impure” case, where the agent’s intention is realized. And where the intention is realized, the physical action depends, not only for its character, but also for its existence, on the intention of which it is the realization. Thus, between the act of will and its outward manifestation, there seems to be an order of etiological priority: one is the source of the other—the intention of the intentional action.

Though these are not the only things that seem to favor volitionalism, they do help to explain its strong, intuitive appeal.

3 Corporealism

3.1 Body and World

Alongside volitionalism, we find in modern action theory another competing tendency, which prides itself on emphasizing that agency is embodied. According to the corporealist, the province of human agency reaches beyond the spiritual realm and into that of nature—that is, into the moveable parts of the body and all the way out to the fingertips.

Like volitionalism, corporealism is dualistic. In the typical case of intentional action, where an agent transacts with something else, the corporealist draws a line between what the agent properly does and what she ‘does’ by courtesy: what she properly does, now, is move her own body, while everything else she said ‘to do’ is chalked up to her, after the fact, because it is caused by her bodily movement.

The most influential expression of corporealism is Donald Davidson’s classic paper, “Agency.”\(^\text{12}\) Davidson rejects volitionalism—“the bad old doctrine that all we ever do is will things to happen, or set ourselves to act”—in favor of the view that “we never do more than move our bodies.”\(^\text{13}\) As he himself observes, the latter formulation is potentially misleading. Davidson’s point is not to

\(^{10}\text{Ibid., 9.}\)
\(^{11}\text{Davidson, “Intending.”}\)
\(^{12}\text{“Agency,” reprinted in Donald Davidson, Essays on Actions and Events (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).}\)
\(^{13}\text{Ibid. 59.}\)
deny the truth of sentences that portray the agent as doing more than moving her body—sentences like, “Eve is raising an apple.” His point is merely that, *strictly and philosophically speaking*, anything more than a bodily movement is ‘done’ by the agent in a derivative way. As the consequences of bodily movement ripple away from the agent, the bodily movement itself attracts wider and wider “redescriptions.” The phenomenon described as someone’s raising an apple is therefore, again, a mere nominal unity: what we are really faced with are a pair of distinct existences—a cause and an effect.

Though otherwise a champion of a two-factor analysis, the corporealist insists that it does not apply to bodily movement: bodily movement is ‘basic,’ he says, an unanalyzable whole. The point of calling it ‘basic’ is well-expressed by Arthur Danto:

> A basic action is perfectly simple in the same sense in which the old ‘simple ideas’ were said to be: they were not compounded out of anything more elementary than themselves, but were instead the ultimately simple elements out of which other ideas were compounded.¹⁴

It was presumably some such thought as this that moved Davidson himself to say that a bodily movement is a “primitive” action, attracting what he called “the first attribution of agency on which the rest depend.”¹⁵

But here we must be clear about what is new and what is not. There is nothing new in the corporealist’s claim that *one* expression of agency is “basic,” “primitive,” or “elementary.” On pain of vicious regress, dualism as such requires that *some act or other* receive this special status. The requirement derives from a base-line commitment to providing a two-factor analysis of the typical case of intentional action, where the agent transacts with something else. After all, if the apple’s rise is a consequence of what the agent does in raising it, then there must be some act of which it is a consequence, and to which the agent has an utterly different relationship: otherwise, the chain of causes would never reach back to her.¹⁶ Dualists need a regress-stopper; and given their first commitment, the only open question is what agentive act will be chosen to fill the role. To put the point in other words, a person cannot be “indirectly” responsible for anything unless she is “directly” responsible for something; and because every dualist is committed to thinking that an agent is merely “indirectly” responsible for the career of external objects, dualism as such requires the identification of a “basic” act—an act that is in principle immune to the analysis destined for transactions.

Thus, the sole innovation of corporealism is its claim that the “basic” agentive act is a willful bodily movement, rather than something less than that. This

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¹⁵Thus, Davidson reasons from the idea that certain actions—transactions, like the sinking of a ship—must be given a two-factor causal analysis to the need for primitive action: “Not every event we attribute to agent can be explained as caused by another event of which he is an agent: some acts must be primitive in the sense that they cannot be analysed in terms of their causal relations to acts of the same agent.”
then raises two questions. First, what speaks for the innovation? And second, however appealing it may be to say that human agency is essentially embodied, how could the claim be justified in view of those phenomena, noted in Section 2.2, which tend to make volitionalism seem inescapable?

3.2 Moving as the Prime Expression of Agency

3.2.1 Against Volitionalism

The main appeal of corporealism is its status as an alternative to “the bad old doctrine,” a doctrine that portrayed the agent as lodged in her body like a pilot in a ship. The reasons for rejecting this picture are, simultaneously, the most compelling reasons to embrace corporealism.

1. **Volitionalism is Alienated.** One objection to volitionalism is cast in terms of alienation. John McDowell writes that, if we accept the old doctrine, our powers as agents withdraw inwards, and our bodies with the powers whose seat they are—which seem to be different powers, since their actualizations are not doings of ours but at best effects of such doings—take on the aspect of alien objects. It comes to seem that what we do, even in those of our actions that we think of as bodily, is at best to direct our wills, as it were from a distance, at changes of state in those alien objects.

The volitionalist’s claim that bodily movement is a mere effect of agency, rather than the power in act, entails a certain “distance” between what the human agent does and what her body does, and consequently also between the agent and her body. Insofar as that is the problem, corporealism may seem the solution, for it promises to reunite the agent with her body.

2. **Volitionalism is Unnaturalistic.** A second objection to volitionalism is that it flouts the naturalistic thought that the power of human agency is a power of animal movement. If our agency is such a power, then its primary and definitive acts are not occult phenomena that happen outside the natural world,

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17Here one should remember that Descartes did not reject this as a picture of human agency, but only of sensation: “Nature teaches me, by these sensations of pain, hunger, thirst, etc., that I am not merely present in my body as a pilot in a ship, but that I am very closely joined and, as it were, intermingled with it, so that I and the body form a unit” (*Meditations*, 6, 80–81). According to Descartes it is the passive, not the active side of embodiment that undermines the analogy with a pilot in a ship: nature teaches that I suffer (pain, hunger, thirst, etc.); it does not teach that I move. Elsewhere Descartes writes: “It is not sufficient that it be lodged in the human body exactly like a pilot in a ship, unless perhaps to move its members, but that it is necessary for it to be joined and united more closely to the body, in order to have sensations and appetites similar to ours, and thus constitute a real man.” (*Discourse on Method*, 5).

18*Mind and World*, p. 91.

19For another example of this response to volitionalism, see Adrian Haddock, “At one with our Actions, but at two with our Bodies,” *Philosophical Explorations*, (2005).
but neither are they natural phenomena that happen inside the body; rather, they are acts on a par with galloping, slithering, flying, and hopping. In that case, they are acts that can be observed only if one looks at a creature, not if one looks in it, or through it to another realm. Moreover, they are acts that are observable in their entirety—i.e. from beginning to end. Because a willful bodily movement is such an act, corporealism appears to address the sensible concern that a theory of human agency must give this power its proper place in the life of a rational animal.

3. **Volitionalism is Fatalistic.** A third objection to volitionalism is that it seems to involve an overreaction to the fact that actions sometime fail. In a well-known passage, Wittgenstein writes:

> Even if what we wish were always to happen, this would only be a grace of fate, for it is not any logical connection between will and the world that would guarantee this, and as for the presumed physical connection, we cannot will that.  

The implication seems to be that it is only thanks to a “grace of fate”—or to a “benevolent dispensation of Providence”—that when I try to raise my arm, my arm always rises, unless something prevents it. And that is, perhaps, a step too far. For even if the “connexion” that unites my will and body is liable to mishap, why should one doubt that the right kind of bond does still exist—the kind, that is, in virtue of which it is no mere happy accident if my actual physical movements are exactly as I intend them to be, and if I know these actual physical movements?

3.2.2 *In Defense of Corporealism*

So much for the reasons why corporealism seems to be an improvement over volitionalism. The question remains how this advance—supposing that it is one—could possibly be justified. At this point, a responsible corporealist needs to confront the appearances that made “the bad old doctrine” seem powerful in the first place. These were, recall, that by comparison to bodily movement, an act of will appears to be *infallible, separable, and prior.*

Here it may be enough to ask what the power of agency is a power to do. Is it simply a power to will, thanks to which, as it happens, one is able also to move? Or is it, rather, a power to move, thanks to which, by the way, one is able simply to will?

Once these two possibilities are both clearly stated, the threatening phenomena lose their sting. All that need be said is that the power to move one’s body is a power that enables one to will along the way—as, for instance, the power to become a tree, inherent in a seed, enables the seed to do things on the way to becoming a tree: e.g., to become a sprout, a seedling and a sapling.

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20 Tractatus 6.374
If an act of will is the seed-form of a willful bodily movement, then a corporealist can take in stride that an agent’s authority over her will is qualitatively different from her authority over her body. It is one thing to note a distinction and another to center one’s theory on it. To the question whether an agent can try and fail to move her body, or fail know how her body is moving, the answer is certainly, “Yes.” And to the question whether she can fail to try, or fail to know that she is trying, the answer may be, “No.” But even if so, so what? There are real and important differences between a seed and a tree, among which is the obvious fact that a full-grown tree is vulnerable to things that do not threaten seeds—i.e. to things like drought, frost and powerful wind. Nevertheless, a seed is only a tree in nuce, and we cannot hope to understand what a seed is except insofar as we understand what it has in it to become. It may likewise be acknowledged that a willful bodily movement, having burst forth, is exposed to unprecedented risks and liable to fail in ways that a mere act of will cannot. To acknowledge this as a genuine philosophical distinction—and as one that needs a full account—is consistent with thinking that this distinction ought to be conceived as the inner articulation of a more encompassing whole. And that is, I think, the force of the claim that the prime expression of agency is a willful bodily movement. According to the corporealist, this is the “whole” or “complete” act, by reference to which a mere act of will is properly explained.

A corporealist may therefore concede the existence of “pure intending,” if by this one simply means an act of will that has not had, and may never have, any outward manifestation. True, people change their minds, often before they move, and even if the course, things can go so badly wrong that nothing ever comes of it. But then, not all acorns ever become oak trees. The corporealism may simply say that “pure intending” is a privative act—an act that falls short of what the relevant power is a power to do.

Finally, if the natural course of things is such that, just as seeds turn into trees, acts of will develop into willful bodily movements, then there is an obvious order of dependence. But the character and existence of a willful bodily movement may depend on an act of will without its being the case that agency is the power to do anything less than move oneself.

Thus, Davidson seems to be right: “nothing stands in the way” of our rejecting the old unpleasant idea that all we ever really do is will for things to happen. Nothing prevents our thinking that the prime expression of agency is something more extensive, something more ‘impure,’ and something more susceptible to failure. This, however, sets the stage for a third conception of agency.

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22That is, if Aristotle is right that “each thing’s nature is the character it has when its coming-into-being has been completed.” Politics, 1252b30. (To ‘test’ this, ask someone to draw an oak, and see if what she draws you is an acorn, a sprout, a sapling, or a tree.)

23Notice that Davidson, despite his belief that intentional movement is caused by the agent’s intention to move, and despite his belief in “pure intending,” does not identify the “basic sense of agency” with intending to move oneself, but with moving oneself intentionally. The definitive act, on his view, is precisely the one that is impure.
4 Materialism

4.1 Practical Monism

According to the materialist, the definitive act of agency is neither willing to change something, nor willfully changing oneself, but changing what one means to change, and nothing less than that. Unlike its competitors, materialism is not dualistic, for it does not mark a distinction between agency proper and agency-by-extension. On this conception of agency, the typical case of intentional action, where the agent transacts with something else, is also the most fundamental case—the case in which our power expresses itself completely.

Though scarcely represented in contemporary action theory, materialism belongs to a well-known philosophical tradition. Aristotle held that what an agent does in transacting with a patient is—not causes, but is—what the patient suffers. The same tradition would seem to include the young Karl Marx, according to whom all of “nature is man’s inorganic body—nature, that is, in so far as it is not itself the human body.”

In twentieth-century analytic philosophy, materialism is defended in Anscombe’s book *Intention*, where she quips, for example:

> People sometimes say that one can get one’s arm to move by an act of will but not a matchbox; but if they mean ‘Will a matchbox to move and it won’t’, the answer is ‘If I will my arm to move in that way, it won’t’, and if they mean, ‘I can move my arm but not the matchbox’ the answer is that I can move the matchbox—nothing easier.26

The butt of Anscombe’s little joke is clearly the corporealist; and the point of her joke is aptly expressed in the words of the later Wittgenstein, who writes that, “willing, if it is not to be a sort of wishing, must be the action itself. It cannot be allowed to stop anywhere short of the action.”27 So understood, the point is general: if the will or intention to move a matchbox stops nowhere short of the action willed or intended—thus, nowhere short of one’s actually moving the matchbox; and thus, nowhere short of the matchbox’s actually moving—this is so whether one happens to be pushing it with a finger, prodding it with a spoon, and so forth.

\[24\] Aristotle’s thesis is defended in my paper “Action and Passion.”


\[26\] Anscombe, *Intention*, p. 52. The inspiration of Anscombe’s joke would appear to be Wittgenstein. (See the Peter Geach’s preface to *Notes of Wittgenstein’s Lectures on the Philosophy of Psychology*, xiii.) And the point of the joke is aptly expressed in Wittgenstein’s remark that “willing, if it is not to be a sort of wishing, must be the action itself. It cannot be allowed to stop anywhere short of the action.” *Philosophical Investigations*, §615.

\[27\] *Philosophical Investigations*, §615. The inspiration of Anscombe’s joke about the matchbook was also, apparently, Wittgenstein. See the Peter Geach’s preface to *Notes of Wittgenstein’s Lectures on the Philosophy of Psychology*, xiii.
or tossing it into a drawer. Whatever the case, there is scope for Anscombe’s formula: “I do what happens.”

Anscombe famously held that practical knowledge, too, encompasses external matter. She therefore tarred volitionism and corporealism together with the same brush:

I think it is the difficulty of this question [sc. the question how practical knowledge could encompass the movements of an intentionally-moved external object] that has led some people to say that what one knows as intentional action is only the intention, or possibly also the bodily movement; and that the rest is known by observation to be the result, which was also willed in the intention. But that is a mad account.

The trouble is, of course, that Anscombe’s account may seem madder still. On her view, if I am intentionally moving a matchbox, then I have practical knowledge, not only of my movement, but also of its movement. It is, perhaps, no wonder that philosophers of action have tried to push such knowledge back, “first to the bodily movement, then perhaps to the contraction of the muscles, then to the attempt to do the thing, which comes right at the beginning.”

4.2 Willfully Moving Another as the Prime Expression of Agency

4.2.1 Against Corporealism

Though it raises many difficulties, materialism also has much to recommend it. In fact, the very considerations that favored corporealism over volitionism also favor materialism over corporealism.

1. Corporealism is Alienated. To begin, imagine a man drifting somewhere deep in outer space or floating in a large vat of warm transparent jelly. Though otherwise utterly destitute, he would have, at least, his power of choice—the treasure of any Stoic. Meanwhile, because he could form an intention, he would also have what is sometimes called “freedom of the will” as well as the power to introspect and (we may suppose) a clear moral conscience. Not only that, he might retain a knowing control of his body. For, in addition to his

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31 What makes Anscombe’s view especially hard to swallow is her claim that practical knowledge is acquired “without observation.” If this is supposed to mean, “without perception,” then it does indeed seem absurd to say that I could have such knowledge of a matchbox I am pushing. The attempt to expel perception from the realm of practical knowledge is, I think, misguided; but that is a topic for another occasion.
32 Ibid., p. 53.
motor skills, he might retain the proprioceptive knowledge of the position of his limbs, the kinesthetic knowledge of their motion and, with these, “bodily sensation,” the power to feel things—pain, pressure, itches, etc.—“in” specific parts of his body. Given all this, he could perform the actions perennially given as classroom examples of agency: he might raise his arm, or clench his fist, or bend his leg, or blink. And though nothing would prevent him from performing these actions all at once, he might also form a complex plan to do them in sequence, at which point he might engage in practical reasoning, deliberating about the most efficient (or graceful, or funny, or pious) order in which to do them. And as he carried out his plan, he might know that he was doing so, perhaps without observation, and his knowledge might be the cause of what was known.

Here we see the ‘embodied agent’—the hero of corporealism—in all his shining splendor. Not one of his vaunted powers has been withheld. That his actions seem, nevertheless, little more than gestures, that he may as well be a mime, and that the skill of a Marcel Marceau could never restore what is missing, shows that we are dealing with an impoverished conception of agency. Meanwhile, its poverty is of a classic form: the agent we have just imagined is estranged from others like himself and also from anything else.33

The illustration serves to highlight two structural features of corporealism. The first has to do with the agent’s relation to others. Because it expels all transactions from the primary sphere of agency, corporealism expels a fortiori all transactions between human beings. For instance, the primary sphere excludes any form of linguistic communication (e.g., telling someone something, teaching someone something, and asking or advising or ordering someone to do something). It also excludes any form of social cooperation. Thus, the chasm that separates bodily movement from its mere effects equally separates each of us from anybody else. In fact, the agent’s isolation is so extreme that there needn’t be anybody else. Corporealism explains its basic concepts—intention, freedom, motor skill, proprioception, kinesthesis, spontaneity, practical reasoning, practical knowledge, etc.—entirely egocentrically, by reference to the agent’s own body. Nothing in the theory requires (or even anticipates) the existence of a second person. This conception of agency is therefore incompatible with one extremely modest claim that ought to appeal to any philosopher bold enough to mention alienation: namely, that relations between human beings might play some role in constituting the nature of human agency.

The second point concerns the status of extra-corporeal objects. As to their existence, the corporealist adopts the same cool agnostic posture that Laplace took to the existence of God: it is a hypothesis of which he has no need. The corporealist does not need the ‘hypothesis’ of extra-corporeal objects to give his account of the basic concepts of action theory, since these are all defined by relation to the body. He does not need it to explain primitive action, since this is simply bodily movement. And he does not need it to state his position on non-primitive action, since his position is purely hypothetical and commits him

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33 Rather than speaking of estrangement, or alienation, it would be possible to frame this discussion in terms of solipsism, and to focus on the two associated forms of skeptical doubt: the problem of other minds and the problem of the external world.
only to thinking that if the agent’s bodily movement should happen to cause a further event, then the latter is also the agent’s doing. Obviously, the relevant condition might never be fulfilled. If it were not—because, say, the universe was empty but for one embodied agent—corporealism could stand without revision. Hence, we are offered a theory of agency on which it makes no difference, one way or the other, whether the acting subject inhabits an empty universe. By virtue of its agnosticism on the question of extra-corporeal objects, the theory entails that nothing belonging to the nature of human agency depends on any relation between the agent and anything else.

Up till now it has been assumed that the hero of corporealism is “at one” with his own body. But his relation to his body must itself be rather strange, given his estrangement from the rest of material reality. To see why, return to the man who was drifting in space or floating in a vat, and, in addition to his other powers, let him now absorb the teaching of corporealism—that is, let it become his own self-understanding. As he now conceives of his power to act, it is only a happy accident if he ever encounters anyone or anything apart from himself; thus, none of his practical expectations are disturbed by his current predicament. But how does he understand the fact that he has a pair of hands? The thought that his hands are for, say, picking things up, would only be intelligible if it were assumed that there is, or should be, something laying around, and our hero assumes no such thing. From his point of view, the function of his hands could only be to touch, grab, push, pull, rub, caress, hit or pinch the other parts of his body. For such purposes, as he surely will have realized himself, a matching pair of highly sensitive prehensile appendages is rather excessive: one would have sufficed. Meanwhile, a darker mystery surrounds swirls around his feet, which, by comparison with his hands, have a very limited range of motion and no opposable digits. What could they possibly do? And why are flat on the bottom? He could not think his feet were for walking, or even for standing still, as he does not take for granted any resistant surface. Then are they just for looking at, and are his legs, as it were, pedestals? Since he also assumes nothing about others like himself, what does he make of the fact that he has a voice, genitalia and a belly-button? Why does he have eyes? And why are his eyes so close to his nose? And why are they all so close to his mouth? And anyway, what is a mouth? Why is it full of teeth? Why do his arms bend toward it? Why do his legs bend away from it? What is it all for?

And what is moving for, as he himself now understands it? To take just one example, why should he ever exercise his celebrated power to raise his own arm? It could not be in order to raise a question, or to cast a vote, or to bid at auction, or to demonstrate human agency before a classroom of philosophy students. Then what end could it serve? True, it might feel pleasant. And it might even stave off madness and the atrophy of his muscles. But things being what they are for him, one struggles to see the good in that.

Clearly, a human body is for a world apart from the human body, and human bodily movement is for transacting with that world. Thus, a conception of human agency that does not represent ‘the body,’ or ‘bodily movement,’ or ‘motor skills,’ or ‘kinesthesis’ as having an internal relation to other people and
other things is an alienated conception of embodiment itself.

Because materialism is not agnostic about the extra-corporeal world, because it includes transaction within the primary sphere of agency, and because it explains its basic concepts by reference to the agent’s relation to other people and other things, it does not suffer from alienation.

2. Corporealism is Unnaturalistic. Earlier I mentioned that an unassuming naturalism encourages the idea that human agency is a power of animal movement. I can now simply add that the same unassuming naturalism recommends the thought that a power of animal movement is the power of an animal to preserve its life and that of its kind. In that case, the primitive scenes of animal movement, than which nothing is more fundamental, must at least include the acts of nutrition and reproduction upon which animal life depends—acts like eating and copulating. Humans are known to do such things with some regularity. And because they are acts the object of which is not oneself, but another, only materialism can admit them into its pantheon. Meanwhile, by relegating naturally-indispensable acts like eating and copulating to a second-class status—as non-basic, non-primitive expressions of human agency—corporealism betrays a fairly radical indifference to the real conditions of human life.

A moment of further reflection reveals that even locomotion is an action brought against something else. Animals change location like the punter of a river-boat, who moves the ship by pushing against the riverbed with a pole. In walking, one presses against the ground; in flying, the air; in swimming, water. There is no locomotion in the void. A principled corporealism will therefore have to acknowledge that walking has no place on a list of “primitive” human actions. After all, someone who is walking is intentionally pushing off against a resistant and (relatively) stationary surface—and thus, intentionally acting on something apart from herself.

A conception of human agency that defines its basic concepts by reference to bodily movement alone, in what may as well be a frictionless void, so that human acts of nutrition, reproduction, and locomotion are excluded from among the ranks of primitive phenomena, cannot pretend to be naturalistic.

3. Corporealism is Fatalistic. The search for an alternative to “the bad old doctrine” was motivated, finally, by a sober opposition to its hyperbolic fatalism. But by this measure, too, corporealism is, at best, only slightly less bad than its predecessor. Recall: after securing control and knowledge within the limits of the will itself, the volitionist sighed a deo volente and conceded the whole material world. Of this latter, the corporealist has annexed one small

---Draft 2.4---

34 That locomotion requires an animal to act upon something that is both stationary and distinct from itself is the main thesis of the second chapter of Aristotle’s treatise on animal movement: “Evidence for this is found in this problem: why is it that someone can easily move a boat from outside, if he shoves it along with a pole, putting it against the mast or some other part; but if he should try to do this when he is in the boat itself, he would never move it—no, not even if he were Thyrsis, nor yet Boreas blowing from inside the boat, if he blew in the way the painters show him; for they paint him sending breath from himself.” (De Motu Animalium LINE)
region: the region enclosed by the outer epidermis. As for the rest of objective reality—as for the effects of the agent’s bodily movement, and what she can possibly know about them—“the rest,” we are told, “is up to nature.” And que sera, sera.

The suggestion that one cannot knowingly control the career of an extra-corporeal object, and that apart from moving oneself one can only hope for the best, is, on the face of it, so outlandish as to appear distraught. Clearly, the unappealing fatalism had nothing at all to do with the question where one drew the line between agency proper and agency-by-extension. The problem was that a boundary was drawn, a boundary designed to separate an awesome power and knowledge within from abject impotence and ignorance without.

On any dualist theory, we do the basic thing we do, and then we hope for the best. Whatever its source, the attitude is especially unattractive when we recall that the realm in which we are supposedly “hope for the best” encompasses everything except what could be done by a body in a vat, including communication, nutrition, reproduction and locomotion. It doesn’t require hubris to follow Anscombe’s lead and say, with confidence, “I can move the matchbox—nothing easier.”

4.2.2 In Defense of Materialism

If the claim that Anscombe ridiculed—“that one can get one’s arm to move by an act of will but not a matchbox”—seems to have something going for it, this is, I think, for three main reasons.

First, the agent has a relation to her body that is unlike her relation to anything else. On the one hand, metaphysically, one has a power to control one’s body (sometimes called a “motor skill”) that is quite unlike one’s power over extra-corporeal objects. On the other hand, epistemologically, one has knowledge of the position of one’s moveable bodily parts (“proprioception”), as well as of their movements (“kinesthesis”), that one does have with respect to anything else in nature.

Second, bodily movement, though often a means of moving extra-corporeal objects, also occurs by itself, quite apart from any intention to act on anything else. One can simply raise one’s arm. Thus, there is such a thing as what we might call “pure bodily movement.”

Third, one cannot move something else, except by moving oneself. There is an obvious order of dependence.

In sum, by comparison to a transaction, a bodily movement appears to be infallible, separable, and prior. Of course, these three considerations are exactly parallel to the ones that were invoked by the volitionalist to establish the primacy of acts of will (see Section 2.2). Thus, any philosopher who has advanced as far as corporealism must recognize that these considerations fail to establish the primacy of bodily movement. That is, by the corporealism’s own lights, there are perfectly legitimate means of accommodating these phenomena. Indeed, the corporealism has already demonstrated how the materialist ought to proceed (see Section 3.2.2).
Consider for a second time what the power agency is a power to do. Is it a power to move oneself, which, in addition, enables one to move other things? Or is it, rather, a power to move other things, which, by the way, enables one to move oneself?

We have already seen that nothing our saying that the more fundamental act is the one that is more exposed to risk and hence more prone to failure. Just as the corporealist acknowledged that the agent’s relation to her will is different from her relation to her body, so, now, the materialist can likewise affirm that the agent’s relation to her body is different from her relation to extra-corporeal objects. If it was legitimate for the corporealist to treat the former distinction as an inner articulation of the power to move oneself, it is equally legitimate for the materialist to treat the latter as an inner articulation of the power to move another.

And just as the corporealist conceded the existence of “pure intending,” the materialist can also concede that people sometimes do perform “pure bodily movement”—i.e. movement that is not in the service of acting on anything else. This would not appear to be an especially prevalent kind of human action. But whatever the case, there is scope for the materialist to say of “pure bodily movement” exactly what the corporealist said of “pure intending”—that, although it does, indeed, happen, it is not, so to speak, the main act: it is rather a kind of dependent phenomenon, which falls out of a power to do something else, something that is both further reaching and more fundamental.

Finally, the materialist can acknowledge that someone’s moving something else requires her to move herself, as a seed’s becoming a tree requires it to become a sprout.

5 Conclusion

Earlier I noted that the main philosophical impulses speaking for corporealism do so only negatively by speaking against volitionalism. Since then I have argued that the same philosophical impulses speak for materialism by speaking against corporealism. The principal result is that corporealism is unstable: all that speaks for it also speaks against it.

Considered as an argument in favor of materialism, the procedure employed here is, I admit, unsatisfying. To argue for one position by contrasting it with a second, less appealing position, leaves open the possibility that in deciding between alternatives one is choosing a lesser evil. That is, I think, the best that a corporealist can offer. But materialism has at least one very striking positive

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Compare this to the claim that it is not in order to perceive oneself that one has the power of vision, hearing, taste, touch or smell. Perceptual faculties such as these are, in the first instance, directed at something other than the perceiving subject itself. Nevertheless, given that one has such a power, one can (and often will in fact) see, or hear, or taste, or touch, or smell one’s own body. According to the materialist, agency is like perception: it is an other-regarding power.

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Davidson anticipates the response that his doctrine, “though not quite as bad as the bad old doctrine [...] may seem to share some of its disadvantages.” (Agency, p. 59)
virtue, which I mentioned at the beginning: namely, that it conforms with our ordinary practical understanding, both of ourselves and of one another.