

Mistake in Performance

On Anscombe's Account of Error in Action

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Abstract

Mistake in performance is when we simply fail to do what we intend to do. According to Anscombe, in cases of error in action, the notion of mistake in performance allows for the possibility of there being nothing wrong with the agent's judgment(s), the mistake is solely to be found in his performance. One may choose to refuse this thought and argue that mistake in performance presuppose some erroneous judgment, or, on the other hand, one can claim that mistake in performance is a unique phenomenon. I support the latter strategy, which again opens up for two new options: given that there is some such phenomenon, are these cases to be regarded as actions, or not? I think that they are. How then shall cases of mistake in performance be captured as actions? There are two strategies to choose between here, either to argue that they are actions on theory-independent grounds or to provide theory-dependent reasons for this claim. I consider both alternatives. I offer different reasons for why cases of mistake in performance should be regarded as actions independent from any theory of action, and I discuss the latter option through Peabody's claim that Davidson's account cannot capture mistakes in performance as actions, while that of Jennifer Hornsby can. I support the former, but not the latter. It is my aim to show that Peabody has not successfully demonstrated that Hornsby can capture cases of mistake in performance as actions. I conclude by arguing that Anscombe's original account is best suited for that purpose.

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Part 1 Preface

Let us consider a man going round a town with a shopping list in his hand. Now it is clear that the relation of this list to the things he actually buys is one and the same whether his wife gave him the list or it is his own list; and that there is a different relation when a list is made by a detective following him about. If he made the list himself, it was an expression of intention; if his wife gave it to him, it has the role of an order. What then is the identical relation to what happens, in the order and the intention, which is not shared by the record? It is precisely this: if the list and the things that the man actually buys do not agree, and if this and this alone constitutes a *mistake*, then the mistake is not in the list but in the man's performance (if his wife were to say: 'Look, it says butter and you have bought margarine', he would hardly reply: 'What a mistake! we must put that right' and alter the word on the list to 'margarine'); whereas if the detective's record and what the man actually buys do not agree, then the mistake is in the record.¹

This quote, known as the shopper story from Anscombe's *Intention*, is often cited in contemporary philosophy. When I was first introduced to it² I was told that it is the origin of the metaphor 'direction of fit', and that the idea of the metaphor is to illustrate the different natures of the mental states belief and desire: Belief, on the one hand, aims after fitting the way the world actually is, and it may be true or false, while desire, on the other hand, aims for the world to fit with it, one can think of desire as either satisfied or unsatisfied. At the time I kept reading the shopper story over and over again feeling increasingly depressed. Clearly, I must have missed something here, I thought, because even though there certainly is a way in which one may interpret the story as one of mental states, Anscombe seemed to me to be speaking of a particular kind of error in action, namely that of 'mistake in performance'. This notion struck me as having importance on its own, and I got curious to find out more about it.³ But while philosophers have embraced the metaphor 'direction of fit', the notion of 'mistake in performance' has received disappointingly little attention. Hence it was not much background information to be found about it. I managed to find only one article which seriously treats 'mistake in performance' by giving a positive account of it, Peabody's⁴ "Trying Slips: Can Davidson and Hornsby Account for Slips?" I have also found one voice of dissent: Houlgate's "Mistake in Performance". My search clearly indicates that others have treated the topic quite superficially. In my own discussion I have used Peabody's article to a

¹ G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention*. 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 56, §32, emphasis in original.

² Lecture on Philosophy of Action, 13.09.05. Gjelsvik, Olav.

³ There can be no doubt that Anscombe's text gave inspiration to the idea of the metaphor direction of fit (apparently it did). However, neither the explicit phrase, nor the psychological allegory it is often interpreted as figure in her text.

⁴ Pseudonym for Katarzyna Paprzycka.

great extent. I do not pretend to having found all of the arguments here on my own, a fair part of them stem from her challenging and interesting article.

The following is an inquiry into Anscombe's concept of mistake, more specifically an attempt to illuminate her notion of 'mistake in performance' and map it down in the landscape of actions.

Part 2 Introduction

2.0 Introducing the Master's Thesis

According to G.E.M Anscombe when an agent *simply* does something other than what he intended to do, the mistake is not to be found in a judgment of his, but is solely to be located in the action. She dubbed such actions ‘mistake in performance’.⁵ I begin this Master's Thesis by explaining the concept of mistake in performance (part 3). In part 4 I discuss a critique of it. In short, it has been argued that there are no unique cases of mistake in performance; all such cases presuppose some erroneous judgment. According to this view an agent always fails to do what he intends to do due to some failure of judgment, alternatively, he experiences some form of accident. If a man says ‘I will push button A’, but pushes button B, on this account, he must have misidentified the buttons, or else he pushed the wrong button by accident because, say, the machine unexpectedly moved. Contrary to this view I aim to show that mistake in performance happens on the basis of flawlessly formed intentions. I also discuss some other criticisms against the notion. In part 5 I provide some background material for considering mistake in performance as actions. One may argue that they are not actions, or one can claim that they are. My position is to defend the latter through theory independent grounds, that is, I think there are pre-theoretical reasons for why incidents of mistake in performance should be considered actions. Peabody offers three *prima facie* reasons which I support. I build out her arguments by adding some points she has left out. An outline of this discussion is as follows. One reason for why mistakes in performance should be regarded as actions is that of family resemblance, that is, these acts and ordinary actions seem to have many features in common. The *locus classicus* case is William James' story of the man who goes upstairs to dress for dinner, but puts on his night clothes and climbs to bed instead.⁶ At the surface his absent minded action of going to bed is identical to all of the times he *intentionally* goes to bed. One cannot separate the one act from the other just by looking at what he does then and there. Two further reasons appeal to our common sense intuitions about what we treat as doings, and what we treat as happenings. First, we intuitively separate cases of mistake in performance and performances that merely look like the former, but in fact are not caused by the subject. To clarify this point: Imagine Ron saying (truthfully) that

⁵ Anscombe attributes the phrase to Theophrastus, *Magna Moralia* 1189b 22, but remarks that it is uncertain whether he was the correct source of it. Today it is common to hold that Aristotle was the author.

⁶ I have seen it referred to in various versions, this is James' own “Very absent-minded persons on going to their bedroom to dress for dinner have been known to take off one garment after another and finally get into bed” (James, 1890: 115).

he will push a button on a machine, say button A, but when he finally presses a button it is not A, but button B, right next to it, he presses his finger towards. It is a natural response to think that Ron slipped. There is nothing awkward here, sometimes we just fail to do what we intended to do. Now, consider the same scenario with the difference that Ron tells you afterwards that he suffers from the anarchic hand syndrome, and that he was a mere observant to how his finger pushed the wrong button, he saw his finger do it, but felt now ownership towards the act. In the former case we are inclined to think that Ron would have pushed the correct button were he to pay enough attention to the task at hand, but we treat the latter case differently, because it seems that Ron could not have influenced the incident at all. Second, a very good example of a mistake in performance gathered from Peabody's treatment of the topic comes from the field of linguistics. There seems to be no doubt that the person who says 'I like Mike' meaning to say 'I like Ike', is saying, that is *doing*⁷, something even though what comes out of the mouth is something different from what he intended to let out of it. In addition to these points that also are discussed by Peabody, I will add an argument from phenomenal experience. Cases of mistake in performance phenomenally feel like actions.⁸ I will argue that all though they do not feel the exact same as what we can call 'full blown actions', they do feel just as a sort of performances we unproblematically call actions, that is actions done while the agent is absent minded. In part 6 I present an unsuccessful attempt at rendering mistake in performance actions on Davidson's account, in part 7 I present what Peabody takes to be a successful attempt at it, namely Jennifer Hornsby's account of tryings. Briefly, Davidson cannot capture cases of mistake in performance as actions because he defends the doctrine that for an event to be an action it must be intentional under a description, and there are no descriptions that succeeds in rendering a mistake in performance intentional (it is a defining mark of them that they are *not* intentionally performed by the agent). Peabody holds that Hornsby, in contrast to Davidson, can accept mistakes in performance as actions through a disambiguation of tryings. I term Peabody's implementation of some radically new features into Hornsby's account 'transformed Hornsby' (TH). According to Peabody, TH manages to capture mistakes in performance as actions because on this account one operates with two concepts of trying, and one of these opens up the possibility of saying that in cases of mistake in performance what the agent does is divorced

⁷ This is not to say that, consequently, all sayings are doings. One may, for instance, hesitate to call talking in the sleep or during hypnosis an action.

⁸ A remark is in place here. If we restrict enquires to full-blown actions (whatever that may be), a great deal of our performances will pass us by. To quote Stout: "Most of what you are doing is done without any thought. If we ruled all this behaviour out of the category of intentional action, we might not be left with very much" (Stout: 2005, 4).

from intention, he just bodily tries to perform an action. Finally, in part 8, I offer a critique of Peabody's account by way of returning to the original approach established by Anscombe in her *Intention*.

Part 3 The Concept of Mistake in Performance

3.0 Introduction

Mistakes in performance are everyday occurrences that we all should be familiar with. A standard example is the slip of continuing to write last year's date when writing dates on notes, checks, letters etc. during the first few months of a new year, and who have not had the experience of performing a slip of the tongue?' Here are some other reported examples:

"I meant to take off only my shoes, but took my socks off as well."

"I had decided to cut down my sugar consumption and wanted to have my cornflakes without it. But the next morning, however, I sprinkled sugar on my cereal, just as I always do."

"I was making shortbread and decided to double the amounts shown in the recipe. I doubled the first ingredient – butter – but then failed to double anything else."⁹

What these cases have in common is that the agent does something other than that he intended to do. I guess it is not the least controversial whether such cases exist, rather the difficulty is how we shall interpret them. In her 1957 monograph *Intention* Anscombe dubbed such cases 'mistakes in performance'. According to Anscombe there are two ways in which one can be mistaken, first, one can *judge* something to be other than what it is, which is due to a mistake of judgment, or, second, one can *simply do* something other than one intended to do, which is to make a mistake in performance. Anscombe doesn't treat the notion of mistake in performance thoroughly; it is described briefly in several passages in *Intention*, and one has to follow the thread of the argument by oneself. The following is an attempt at trying to pin down what the notion mistake in performance is.

3.1 The Location of a Mistake

In cases of mistake in performance the mistake is to be located in what the agent does, that is, in how he changes some state of the world, and not in the agent's mind. The crux of the matter is *where* to locate a mistake. Recall the shopper story: When asked at a seminal

⁹ James Reason, *Human Error*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 70.

presentation what the difference between the shopping list and the list written by the detective was, Anscombe gave the following answer:¹⁰

It is precisely this: if the list and the things that the man actually buys do not agree, and if this and this alone constitutes a *mistake*, then the mistake is not in the list but in the man's performance (...) whereas if the detective's record and what the man actually buys do not agree, then the mistake is in the record (Anscombe, 2000: 56, emphasis in original).

When introducing mistake in performance in *Intention* Anscombe adds the following two qualifications:

- 1: It is not a mistake in performance if a person A fails to achieve something that cannot possibly be achieved, and
- 2: It is not a mistake in performance if A changes his mind.

To illustrate the former: Imagine that I write a shopping list containing something I should have known is impossible to come by in the store, say Plutonium. If I had put the impossible to get plutonium on my list, the mistake on my part is clearly in a judgment of mine. The error on my part happens when I write my list. This is so because I ought to know that Plutonium is not accessible in the store. In addition, no sane person would say to me: 'You sure made a mistake when you failed to buy Plutonium at Wall-mart. And what concerns the second point it is not a mistake to change one's mind, I cannot be said to do a mistake in my performance if I while I am out shopping change my mind and decide to buy something other than what my list tells me to. To clarify: there are two ways in which one can be mistaken, first, one can behave on behalf of erroneous judgment, or, second, one can *do* something other than one intended to do, which is due to a mistake in performance, and such a mistake occurs when there is a discrepancy between what a man intends to do, and what he actually does, with the following qualification: if this, and only this constitutes his mistake. What is important for our discussion in the case of the shopper-story is to notice that there is nothing wrong in the shopper's propositional attitudes; his mistake is solely in his action. He acts on the basis of a

¹⁰ This information is provided by Humberstone in his 'Direction of Fit', p. 59. I assume it to be correct, the same quote as the one offered by Anscombe in her presentation appears in *Intention* (as part of the shopper-story), and I also quoted it in my Preface.

flawlessly formed intention. Mistake in performance is not an inferential mistake. It is not as if the shopper moves from one attitude to another.

3.2 Examples of Mistake in Performance

The shopper story occurs for the first time in §32 of *Intention*, it is followed up by Anscombe's mentioning of two other examples meant to illuminate the subject of mistake in performance. One tends to focus solely on the shopper-story. It has taken attention away from the other examples. A presentation of them should help to illuminate the topic.¹¹

The Button-example

If you intend to ϕ you may not do it because you, say, forgot it, was prevented or changed your mind. It does not follow from your not doing ϕ , though, that you lacked the intention to ϕ . You may have truthfully reported to someone something you intended to do even though you never brought to life that plan of yours. While it is possible that your not doing ϕ can indicate that you had no intention to ϕ , this need not be the case. Anscombe asks the question 'What is the contradictory of a description of one's own intentional action?' (Anscombe, 2000: 54-55). Her answer to this question is that to contradict the description 'I'm replenishing the house water-supply' is not to provide information as the fact that there is a hole in the pipe so that the water is running out, rather one who contradicts the description says: 'You won't because I am going to stop you'. Anscombe presupposes that the agent has the intention in question. She dubs these cases 'falling to the ground'. A slightly different case she offers of 'falling to the ground' is a story from the *New Statesman*'s:

A certain soldier was court-martialled (or something of the sort) for insubordinate behaviour. He had, it seems been 'abusive' at his medical examination. The examining doctor had told him to clench his teeth; whereupon he took them out, handed them to the doctor and said 'You clench them'.¹²

Why then, are these cases falling to the ground? In the replenishing-case what the agent says is untrue, but this is unknown to the agent because he has not seen the hole in the pipe, so he is not lying, he provides a truthful description of his intention. In the Statesman-example the order falls to the ground because the agent hasn't got any teeth of his own. The lesson is that you cannot replenish the water-supply if there is a hole in the pipe and you cannot clench your

¹¹ This is not an exhaustive list. Anscombe offers other examples as well, many of which will occur later in the text.

¹² Anscombe, *Intention*, 55.

teeth if you haven't got any. Cases of mistake in performance, on the other hand, allows for the possibility that a man is *simply* not doing what he says. Anscombe's button example is such an example. That is why she calls it 'direct falsification' of what one says. The other cases (of replenishing and false teeth) are not cases where the agents are *simply* not doing what is said, neither do they, themselves, explicitly falsify what is said through their performance as is the case with the button-pusher:

[I]s there not possible another case in which a man is *simply* not doing what he says? As when I say to myself 'Now I press Button A' pressing Button B – a thing which can certainly happen. This I will call the *direct* falsification of what I say. And here, to use Theophrastus' expression again, the mistake is not one of judgment but of performance. That is, we do *not* say: What you *said* was a mistake, because it was supposed to describe what you did and did not describe it, but What you *did* was a mistake because it was not in accordance with what you said.¹³

There is a discrepancy between what I say I'll do (now), and what I do (now). The agent describes what he is at present doing, and he fails to do what he says he does. The agent says to himself 'Now I push button A' while pushing button B' and therefore commits a 'direct falsification' of what he says, not because he misdescribes what he is at present doing, but because what he is doing does not conform to what he says he is doing. The fault is imputed to the performance and not to the description of the performance. He is *simply* not doing what he says. According to Anscombe if I say 'I write my name here on the blackboard', and the text turns out to be something else than I said it would be, the facts are impugned for not being in accordance with my words, and not the other way around. The mistake is not in what I *say*, but in what I *do*. This is illustrated by Anscombe through a joke she has gathered from Quine:

One might do the thing 'to make an honest proposition' of what one had said. For if I don't do what I said, what I said was not true (though there might not be a question of my *truthfulness* in saying it).¹⁴

As Anscombe remarks this is a joke because what is incorrect here is not necessarily to be found in what is said by the speaker. The insight is that sometimes it is nothing wrong in the words uttered, but in the act performed: "In some cases the facts are, so to speak, impugned

¹³ Ibid., 57, emphasis in original.

¹⁴ Ibid., 4, emphasis in original.

for not being in accordance with the word, rather than vice versa.¹⁵ When speaking of ‘facts’ Anscombe wants us to think about someone’s *performance* – what is *done* – in comparison with what was *said*. Anscombe writes explicitly that “the truth of a statement of intention is not a matter of my doing what I said.”¹⁶ Her point is that a statement of my intention may still be true even if I do not do what I said I would do. What Anscombe wants us to see is that we have two possible mistakes here a) in what was said and b) in what was done.

The Order-example

A soldier gets the order ‘Left turn’, and thereby turns right.

There is a discrepancy between the language and that of which the language is a description. But the discrepancy does not impute a fault to the language – but to the event.¹⁷

Once again, Anscombe’s point is to show that what goes wrong can be located in what has been done, what was said, on the other hand, was correct. I will return to these examples later on in the text. For now, what is important to notice is that there is a contrast between mistake in performance and mistake in judgment. What more is, this contrast is connected to the link there exists between the agents beliefs and intention (for instance the shopping list), and the link which is located between the intention (for instance the shopping list) and the action (what the agent buys). Discrepancies in the former connection (i.e. between belief-intention) results in cases of mistaken judgment. Mistake in performance, on the other hand, happens in cases of a discrepancy between the intention and the action of an agent. When we can speak of mistake in judgment something is not as it should be in the mind-to-world fit, the agent has a false belief about some aspect of the world. But in a case of mistake in performance the error is not to be found in some judgment of the agent. His situation is that he intended to do something, but erred and did something different from that he intended to do, due to the mistake what happens is not something the agent did intentionally. In Peabody’s words: “Just as he is about to act intentionally, his intention slips on reality.”¹⁸

To sum up:

¹⁵ Ibid., 5-6.

¹⁶ Ibid., 4.

¹⁷ Ibid., 57.

¹⁸ Kay Peabody, “Trying Slips: Can Davidson and Hornsby Account for Mistakes and Slips?” in *Philosophia*, (Des., 2005), 177.

A mistake in judgment may be formulated as follows:

If A believes that p while not-p is the case, A's belief is mistaken.

And,

A mistake in performance may be formulated as follows:

If A intends to do p, but *simply* fails to do p, A's action is mistaken.

3.3 Some Remarks Concerning Direction of Fit

My topic here is not direction of fit considerations, but I feel that I have to say something about it because there are plenty of distracting associations linked to the above quoted shopper-story due to its connection to the metaphor. By way of introduction I will sketch some of them with the aim of showing that the metaphor has come to overshadow the notion of 'mistake in performance'. I realize that in doing so I may be interpreted as being unable to appreciate the metaphor, and it may even seem that I am willing to replace one notion with another. To avoid such an interpretation of my aims, I want to state that it is my opinion that the metaphor direction of fit may be a useful tool when doing philosophy of action. It is not my main topic here though, it will only figure in the background in some sections of my text (see sec. 4.5 in particular). My main concern will be on the concept of 'mistake in performance'.

Anscombe does not mention 'direction of fit' in her 1957 monograph *Intention* even though the shopper story is famously held to be the source of it. Despite the fact that it is commonly attributed to her, Anscombe does not mention the exact term herself, nor does she write about mental states in the way they are captured by the metaphor (it should be added that there is no uncontroversial use of it). As early as in 1953, that is, before Anscombe wrote *Intention*, Austin, used the term to coin a distinction between what he called 'the onus of match' and 'the direction of fit'.¹⁹ A standard interpretation is to read the shopper story, inspired by Platts, as a psychological allegory (it seems to be a fair guess that he was the first to give the interpretation that is widely attributed to Anscombe).²⁰ The interpretation goes something like this: The idea of differences in 'direction of fit' describes the distinction between the two

¹⁹ This fact is provided by Humberstone p. 60.

²⁰ See Humberstone p. 59, Vogler p. 1 n2 and Moran and Stone p. 32 n55 for making a similar reference to Platts.

mental states belief and intention/desire. Beliefs, the story goes, has world-to-mind direction of fit, because their content is supposed to match the world (detective's list). Intention/desire, on the other hand, is said to have mind-to-world direction of fit because the world is supposed to match its content (shopper's list). Roughly, we can say that the standard misinterpretation is to make a distinction between the two mental states, belief and intention/desire, and attribute to them different directions of fit. Humberstone has commented that the direction of fit metaphor is not making the same distinction as Anscombe herself pointed to when she explained the difference between the shopper and the detective. What Humberstone notices is that what Anscombe claims does not fully correspond to what Platts writes:

The distinction is in terms of the direction of fit of mental states to the world. Beliefs aim at being true, and their being true is their fitting the world; falsity is a decisive failing in a belief, and false beliefs should be discarded, beliefs should be changed to fit the world, not vice versa. Desires aim at realization, and their realization is the world fitting with them; the fact that the indicative content of a desire is not realised in the world is not yet a failing *in the desire*, and not yet any reason to discard the desire; the world, crudely, should be changed to fit our desires, not vice versa.²¹

It is my impression that this is the standard interpretation of the shopper story. There are plenty of examples to support this claim. Here is a quote from *Dictionary of Philosophy*,

Direction of fit: The expression was introduced by G. E. M. Anscombe to bring out a salient difference between the two ways in which desires and beliefs relate to the world. An illustration of hers is the list of contents in a shopping basket. If the content does not fit his shopping list, the shopper will change what is in the basket. But a shop detective who makes a list of the contents in the basket but then notices that her list does not fit the contents will change the list. Desires aim at fulfilment, i.e. that the world accord with the desire; beliefs aim at truth, i.e. that the belief accord with the world. In this sense, desires and beliefs have opposite directions of fit.²²

As remarked above, that Anscombe introduced the term is bluntly wrong. However, in this section I have simply aimed at informing that it circulates several diverging interpretations of the shopper story, and that a large part of them concerns the metaphor direction of fit (while mistake in performance is often not mentioned at all). I am aware that plenty of questions remain to be answered about the metaphor direction of fit, but that is quite another debate than

²¹ Mark Platts, *Ways of Meaning*. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), 257.

²² *Dictionary of Philosophy*, (Penguin 2005), 164.

the one I discuss here, in the following I will keep my main focus on the notion of mistake in performance.

3.4 Mistake in performance and practical knowledge

Originally Anscombe's shopper-story was meant to show the differences there are between theoretical and practical knowledge,²³ Anscombe moves straight on from introducing the concept of 'mistake in performance' unto discussing practical knowledge. She marks off the difference between theoretical and practical knowledge through the concept of mistake. In the shopper-story the distinction is shown by the different locations of mistake – to each kind of knowledge belongs a specific kind of mistake. Anscombe criticized contemporary philosophers for having "blankly misunderstood"²⁴ the ancient account of practical reasoning leading to practical knowledge.²⁵ The neglecting of this account, claims Anscombe, has led to a one-sided focus on contemplative knowledge:

Certainly in modern philosophy we have an incorrigibly contemplative conception of knowledge. Knowledge must be something that is judged as such by being in accordance with the facts. The facts, reality, are prior, and dictate what is to be said, if it is knowledge.²⁶

The shopper story can help us understand this critique. What Anscombe criticises is that contemporary philosophy conceives of knowledge as if all knowledge is of the kind had by the detective. There exists another form of knowledge, though, according to Anscombe, which is the knowledge the shopper has. It is a practical variant (in contrast to the theoretical and contemplative one), and it is this type of knowledge that opens up the possibility of making a mistake in performance. The shopper is the active part of the story; it is his performances that reveals agency proper. His actions are the execution of his intentions (if he succeeds in his performance): "Roughly speaking, a man intends to do what he does."²⁷ Anscombe argues that the conception of intention is central to our understanding ourselves as rational agents. The intentions with which we act are identified by the reasons we give in answering why-questions about our actions.

²³ See Vogler, 2001: 1 for making the same claim. (I find this quite clear from what Anscombe says herself in §32 in *Intention*).

²⁴ This is not exactly the way she put it, but it sure seems to have been her opinion. What she actually says is this: "Can it be that there is something that modern philosophy has blankly misunderstood: namely what ancient and medieval philosophers meant by *practical knowledge*? (Anscombe, 2000: 57, emphasis in original)

²⁵ Anscombe, *Intention*, 57.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 57.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 45.

On Anscombe's account reasons usually form a kind of hierarchy that constitutes in a practical syllogism which concludes in action. Hence our intentions are a form of active practical knowledge that can lead to action. This is very sketchy, and serves as an introduction only.²⁸ Most importantly we must be aware that according to Anscombe an agent has a distinctive way of knowing what he is doing. A radical move made by Anscombe is her claim that agent's knowledge is typically not based on observation. This might be illustrated by us taking a further look at the different situations there is between the shopper and the detective following him in the store. If the shopper started thinking about a philosophical problem and needed some fresh air to clear his mind and therefore left the store, it would be reasonable of the detective to guess that he was finished shopping. The shopper on the other hand would not reason like this: - Aha! I left the store, I am probably finished shopping. Rather he knows that shopping is still what he is up to, he simply had to do something else first – try solving a philosophical problem while breathing in some fresh air. While the detective has to await further observation, such as the shopper walking back into the store, the shopper has persisting knowledge that he's still shopping, this knowledge is not in need of any kind of (observational) support.

Furthermore, the shoppers list and the detective's also differ in that the detective probably lacks knowledge of the daily routine of the shopper and his wife. This is trivial, but important. When you write a shopping list you normally write butter, bread, milk and so on, but what you *think* is what *kind* of butter, bread, milk etc. If you think that you shall buy skimmed milk, you need not put down 'skimmed' if that is the kind you are used to buy, because this is something you know. Thinking about it we can see that the detective might not be sure that his list really got it right, it would not necessarily be able to report whether there had been a mistake in performance on the man's part. If their lists look the exact same, the detective would probably believe that the man did everything perfect, but the man, on the other hand could know that he failed to buy a particular *kind* of purchase. Say, for instance that the man and his wife normally buys Biggy butter, but that a new kind of butter has come to the store, and this, Billy butter, looks quite similar to the Biggy-variant. If the shopper mistakenly buys Billy butter, the detective writes 'butter', and the man's list says 'butter', the detective here

²⁸ My presentation here is uncomfortably brief, but to pay due respect to the topic would take too much space and it would remove attention from the main topic. For Anscombe's own treatment of it see 'Practical Inference' and *Intention* §32-§52. See also Geach p. xiv-xv.

cannot see plainly from the lists that the man has done a mistake, while the shopper would have seen it right away: ‘What kind of butter is this? This is not my brand!’²⁹

An agent on Anscombe’s view has a distinctive way of knowing the nature of his actions *because* he has knowledge of that which he intends to be doing. The knowledge is non observational in contrast to the spectator’s knowledge which is in need of support through observations. Falvey uses the terms ‘open’ and ‘broad’³⁰ to get at the different perspectives and nuances that are at work here. When we are concerned with actions we first notice events and processes describable by sentences in the progressive. Some features of the progressive must be noticed. First, the *openness of the progressive* – An event can be in progress, but never get finished. It would not be a false statement to yell ‘the lamp is falling!’ even though another manages to catch it in the fall. Specifically: a person can be doing something without in fact doing it, this sounds weird at first glance, but the explanation is as simple as the fact that we may be prevented in our doings or we can for instance change our minds. Second, the *broadness of the progressive* – this category fits descriptions of intentional actions. I can do something in a *broad sense* without for the moment doing something for the sake of fulfilling the task (*narrow sense*). This is so when I make myself a cup of tea and a piece of bread while I am in fact writing an essay. If you ask me: - What are you doing? I would not have been lying to you if I gave the answer: - Writing an essay, because that is what I am doing even though it is not what I do at the exact moment when you ask. On other occasions we take an interest in a broader sense of what people do: If you call someone on the phone wondering if they have time to pay you a visit, you ask: ‘Hey, what are you doing?’ You are not expecting them to answer: ‘Well, right now, I am talking to you on the phone’. You are interested in a more *broad* sense of their doings, and that sure is the information they will be most likely to provide. When acting intentionally we need not rely on observation or inference to know what we are doing, and when asked ‘what are you doing’ in the midst of an act we are able to provide the answer ‘I am ϕ ’ing’ right away. Due to the broadness of the progressive it might not be that obvious to others what we do, as it, for instance, is not obvious to the detective that the shopper is to solve a philosophical problem before he continues shopping. The point is put like this by Falvey:

²⁹ I do accept the possibility that the detective could have known such facts if he followed the shopper around 24/7.

³⁰ Falvey attributes these terms to Galton.

[M]y judgments about what I am doing intentionally are simply not sensitive to the kinds of observations that may constitute the only basis on which an observer would be in a position to frame judgments about what I am doing.³¹

We do a multitude of things every single day that are not intentional, like digesting, breathing, blinking and moving the tongue around in our mouths³², but a great deal of our actions result in doings we know that we perform. These actions sort under the heading: intentional actions. When performing intentional actions we don't need to do any research to discover what we are doing before we know what we do. What we do intentionally, we do knowingly. If I have no idea what so ever that I am annoying you when I hesitate to answer your questions, I cannot be said to annoy you intentionally. I am likely to get surprised if you said: 'Could you stop hesitating that much?' Our intentional actions, in contrast, do not beat us by surprise. In Anscombe's words:

[The] failure to execute intention is necessarily the rare exception. (...) What is necessarily the rare exception is for a man's performance in its more immediate descriptions not to be what he supposes. Further, it is the agent's knowledge of what he is doing that gives the descriptions under which what is going on is the execution of an intention.³³

If I want to work in the garden I am likely to dress for that purpose and go out, and I could easily explain my behaviour if asked to do so. According to Anscombe we have on the one hand, spontaneous and non-observational knowledge of our intentional actions, and on the other, knowledge by observation of what takes place³⁴. In other words, Anscombe takes action to involve two different forms of knowledge, so to say, one of which is practical knowledge of what one is doing independent of perception, and another one whom she calls speculative knowledge which involves perceptual knowledge³⁵:

[I]n any operation we really can speak of two knowledges – the account that one could give of what one was doing, without adverting to observation; and the account of exactly what is happening at a given moment (say) to the material one is working on.³⁶

³¹ Kevin Falvey, "Knowledge in intention," *Philosophical Studies* Vol. 99, (May, 2000), 26.

³² Some of these things may be done intentionally, you can for instance blink intentionally, but most of the time you do it without an intention to do it.

³³ Anscombe, *Intention*, 87.

³⁴ See Anscombe's *Intention*, 51, for the introduction of the topic.

³⁵ See Moran 2003 for an illuminating work on the relation between practical and non-observational knowledge.

³⁶ Anscombe, *Intention*, 88-89.

An illustration from Velleman³⁷ is helpful, though, I have to say, it is somewhat ‘over the top’. What Velleman does is to describe Anscombe’s use of the term ‘practical knowledge’ as a nod to medieval philosophy as it originally was Aquinas term for the knowledge God had of his creation. The thought is that “we invent our actions, just as God invented the world.”³⁸ God knows how the world is because he meant it to be as it is. So, if we imagine ourselves as a kind of designers we come closer to an understanding of the term practical knowledge. “Practical knowledge is ‘the cause of what it understands’, unlike ‘speculative’ knowledge which ‘is derived from the objects known’.”³⁹ Moran has pressed the point that the ‘cause’ is not to be understood as an efficient cause, but rather that the moves that I do to achieve my ends would not count as practical knowledge unless my practical understanding so conceived of them.⁴⁰

We can now provide a list of features of practical knowledge (this is not meant as an exhaustive list):

- It is non-observational. In contrast to speculative knowledge it is not “derived from the objects known”.
- It is not an efficient cause, but is itself “the cause of what it understands”.
- It concerns intentional action.
- When such knowledge fails we can speak of mistake in performance.

Practical knowledge is flawed in cases of mistake in performance. When such a mistake happens we lack the practical knowledge we normally have of our actions.

3.5 Conclusion

If an agent *simply* fails to execute a flawlessly formed intention by performing another act than the intended one, on Anscombe’s account, he makes a mistake in performance. In her view it is not such a mistake on the agent’s part if he fails to achieve something unachievable, or if he changes his mind during the performance. A mistake in performance is to be located in the changes the agent does to some state of the world, not in some change of his mind. In

³⁷ The reference to Velleman is only meant to shed some light on the topic. The association with God fits very well with his theory of self-knowledge, very briefly, on his account we have authority over our acts because we do that which we believe we are going to do. This framework is far from the general picture here.

³⁸ J. D. Velleman, *Practical Reflection*, (Stanford: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), xv.

³⁹ Aquinas, quoted from Anscombe, *Intention*, 87.

⁴⁰ For more on this theme, see Moran, “Anscombe on ‘Practical Knowledge’”, 47.

the shopper-case, if there is a discrepancy between the list and the items the shopper buys, and if this and *only* this, constitutes a mistake, then we can speak of a mistake in performance. It is when practical knowledge is flawed such mistakes occurs.

Part 4 A Negative Account of Mistake in Performance

4.0 Introduction

One need not accept the notion of mistake in performance as it is put forward by Anscombe. In the following I will consider some criticism against it. First, I consider the claim that the notion of mistake in performance fails to reflect the umbrella character of the concept of mistake. I will argue that this is not the case, quite the contrary; it brings to our attention facets about being mistaken that is lost without it. Second, I discuss the thought that actions are intentional under a description, this may be seen as a way of constructing a distinction between cases of mistake which in fact is not there. Though admitting that the use of 'intentional under a description' may confuse, I aim to show that it is in place. Third, I reject the claim that cases of mistake in performance always presuppose erroneous judgment. Briefly, I think such a view borders on a misunderstanding of the notion, there are no false belief in mistake in performance. Finally, I try to clarify the relation between mistake in performance and practical knowledge, such clarification seems to be in place.

4.1 The Manifold Character of the Concept of Mistake

In performing a particular action there is normally only one way (or at least very few ways) of performing it right, while the possibilities of failing to perform it are plenty. There are a multitude of things that might go wrong during an action. Just think about all the steps that have to be successfully traversed just for you to make a cup of tea. The list of possible errors that you could make on the way to the finished cup of hot liquid is exhaustingly long. You could for instance forget to boil the water before you fill it into the cup, you could put coffee in the cup instead of a teabag, or you might remove the tea bag too late so the tea gets bitter, you could have salt instead of sugar added to it, and so on. Now, if you err there could be many reasons as to why, for instance absent mindedness, forgetfulness, inattention or disruption to mention some. In sum, there are numerous of possible ways to make a mistake in action and several mechanisms to explain them. It can be claimed that Anscombe's notion of mistake in performance neglects this fact. Houlgate has argued that the notion of mistake in performance suffers from the handicap that it fails to give a realistic picture of the manifold character of the concept mistake. By thinking, as Anscombe does, that there are cases where only the slip-up between intention and action can make up the mistake done in a performance one fails to capture the umbrella concept of error. Houlgate illustrates this point by use of the

shopper-example. What he wants us to consider is whether it is as obvious as Anscombe says that if the shopper fails to buy what he ought to, then the discrepancy between the shopping list, and what is bought, and this *alone*, can constitute a mistake. Houlgate claims that the following examples are counterexamples to Anscombe's theory of mistake in performance: The shopper might incorrectly read 'margarine' on his list even though it says 'butter', or he might mistake butter for margarine on the shelf in the store, he might also have memorized the list in his head, and due to a lapse of memory when out shopping forget to buy butter. Houlgate points to the fact that there is a discrepancy between the list and what the shopper places in his cart in all of these examples (due to the misreading, mismatching and forgetting). It is therefore likely to say that it is common to all of them that the shopper has made a mistake in his *performance*. If the shopper for instance misreads 'margarine' for 'butter', and this makes him buy margarine, there is, Houlgate says, clearly something wrong in what is *done*. To drive his point home, let us consider another example. One of Anscombe's examples of mistake in performance is of the man who is ordered to turn left, but in stead turns right. Anscombe makes it clear that this is *not* a case of ignoring nor disregarding neither is it a case of disobeying an order, the man *simply* gets the order wrong. From Anscombe's point of view the discrepancy between the order 'left turn' and the act 'right turn' indicates a fault to the act, and not to the words uttered:

[There] is a discrepancy between the language and that of which the language is a description. But the discrepancy does not impute a fault to the language – but to the event.⁴¹

Houlgate, on the other hand, thinks that all of the mentioned cases, that is obeying an order wrong, ignoring, disregarding and disobeying, are, in some way, examples of a mistaken action. "It would be obviously absurd to say", he writes, "in each case, that the order 'left turn' was supposed to describe what the man was going to do, and failed to describe this."⁴² A soldier is supposed to do what he is ordered to, and in all of these cases he did not. 'Left' was said and he went right, so something is clearly wrong about what the man *did*. According to Houlgate, all of these cases are, somehow, examples of making a mistake in the agent's performance. He thinks it is a bad move to distinguish for instance disobeying from simply getting an order wrong by stating, as Anscombe does, that the discrepancy between order and performance *alone* constitutes the mistake of getting an order wrong. Houlgate's problem is to

⁴¹ Anscombe, *Intention*, 57.

⁴² Laurence Houlgate, "Mistake in Performance," in *Mind* (Apr., 1966), 258.

accept that there is (solely) a slip-up between intention and action. He thinks that what we need is a more thorough description of the case to get at the core of what went wrong. There are many possible explanations for why the soldier acted as he did. We must investigate each case carefully to be able to tell what made up the mistake, and on his view such a scrutiny will always reveal that the case is one of mistaken judgment. He sketches a procedure we would be likely to follow if we wanted to find out why there was a discrepancy between the order and the performance. If we were interested in finding out whether the soldier really had gotten the order wrong, we would maybe ask if he did not grasp the captain's meaning, or, maybe he just mistook his right hand for his left. If the soldier made a right turn because he in the spur of a moment got the idea that the right hand of his was the left, for instance, say, he normally distinguishes his right from his left by the watch on his left hand wrist, but this day had forgotten to put on his watch and so got confused, because it became difficult for him to judge which hand was which. We have several explanations as to why the soldier did something other than that his captain ordered him to. The problem, as Houlgate sees things, is the option Anscombe claims there is of simply failing to execute one's intention.⁴³

It is understandable that it may sound strange to some that it is a mistake in performance if a soldier obeys an order wrong when he turns right, while a companion of him that turns right because he disobeys orders are not performing such a mistake. Since Anscombe has described this philosophical tool in such a way that there are cases where mistakes happens in action without it being, in her view a 'mistake in performance' one might get mislead to believe that Anscombe does not accept the other cases as mistakes, but of course, her account is not that implausible. Quite the contrary, she is well aware of the different facets of error in agency. Houlgate, on the other hand, has, in his eagerness to pay respect to mistake as an umbrella concept overlooked the cases Anscombe labels as mistake in performance. As is clear from the above discussion he does indeed use Anscombe's examples, but because he refuses to acknowledge that it is even possible to experience that an intention slips on reality, he fails to catch her point. Let us take a fresh look at the order example. Anscombe describes it like this:

⁴³ Houlgate finds it hard to accept Anscombe's qualification that only the discrepancy between the intended and the performed action can make up a mistake in performance. In addition he applies the same critique to cases of changing one's mind: "[I]t is an equally unilluminating move to distinguish [mistake in performance] from cases of 'changing one's mind', on the grounds that we are to count the discrepancy between what one intended to do, and what one did, and the discrepancy alone, as a mistake" (Houlgate, 1966: 259). It strikes me that he cannot possibly have grasped Anscombe's point. Contra Houlgate I do find it illuminating to make a distinction between on the one hand to change one's mind, and on the other to perform an action one did not intend to perform. The change is intended, the latter case is not. I would say, following Anscombe, that there *is* a difference here. Or, would Houlgate say that it is a mistake in performance to change one's mind?

“[W]e ought to be struck by the fact that there is such a thing, [as simply obeying an order wrong]and that it is not the same as ignoring, disregarding or disobeying” an order. If the order is given ‘left turn!’ and the man turns right there can be clear signs that this was not an act of disobedience. But there is a discrepancy between the language and that of which the language is a description. But the discrepancy does not impute a fault to the language – but to the event.⁴⁴”

What fascinates Anscombe is that it is that which is *done* that is mistaken, and not something that was *said*. Houlgate asks, quite ironically⁴⁵, whether Anscombe really thinks that we should be *struck* by these cases because the discrepancy between the intention and the action imputes a fault, not to the order, but to the action. Well, the answer is yes. Anscombe clearly thinks so, and with a closer look at her examples maybe we get struck too. Here are some of her examples of mistake in performance rewritten from first person perspective:

1: “I wanted to push A, but I pushed B.”

2: “I meant to follow orders, and heard the captain order me to turn ‘left’, but I turned right.”

3: “I thought I had written ‘I am a fool’ on the blackboard, but when I saw my writings it said ‘I am a tool’.”

4: “I intended to buy margarine, but when I unpacked at home, to my surprise, I found a pack of butter in my bag.”

And here are some analogous examples from real life studies:

⁴⁴ Anscombe, *Intention*, 57.

⁴⁵ His exact wordings are: “But why should we be *struck* by this fact? Would Miss Anscombe say: because the discrepancy does not impute a fault to the order, but to the man’s action? But surely, we should reply this is characteristic of all those cases mentioned. That is, in regard to ‘ignoring’, ‘disregarding’, or ‘disobeying’ the order, we can equally well say that something had gone wrong ‘in the performance’ (Houlgate: 1966: 258). What my point, and Anscombe’s as well, I think, is that it is correct that something is wrong with the performance in all of these cases, it is *not* the case, though, that we can call all of them a mistake in performance. This is because only one of the cases, the one mentioned by Anscombe, is an action where the man simply does something he did not intend to do. A common denominator of the other actions mentioned is that they were intentional. I hope this point will be utterly clear from the discussion to come, at least that is what I aim at accomplishing.

5: “I was putting cutlery away in the drawer when my wife asked me to leave it out, as she wanted to use it. I heard her, but continued to put the cutlery away.”

6: “I walked to my bookcase to find the dictionary. In the process of taking it off the shelf, other books fell onto the floor. I put them back and returned to my desk without my book.”

7: “I went to my bedroom to change into something more comfortably for the evening, and the next thing I knew I was getting into my pyjamas trousers, as if to go to bed.”⁴⁶

It is examples like these Anscombe finds striking, and surely, striking they are. Such cases are puzzling because they disturb the feeling we normally have of control over our agency. We are puzzled by our own, or other people’s acts of this type because it turns out to be different from how we, or they, intended it to be. Successfully performed actions in contrast don’t surprise us.

It simply occurs now and then that we fail to do what we intend to do. We may think to ourselves: ‘I don’t believe it! How *could* he possibly manage to put his glasses in the refrigerator!’, but we all know that such things happen. What Houlgate fails to see is that, there is no reason to be “struck” in the same way when it comes to disobeying, disregarding and ignoring. If you intend to disobey an order, get an order, and then disobey it, there is nothing wrong in your performance the way you conceive of it, and you possess practical knowledge of your act because you did what you intended to do. To the degree that your performance was mistaken, it was mistaken because the order in question was not obeyed, but, then again, you never intended to obey it. Therefore this is not a case of mistake in performance in Anscombe’s terms. Your practical knowledge in the act was never flawed. The same argument goes for both ignorance and disregarding. None of these examples are cases of mistake in performance in the way Anscombe thought of it. Rather Houlgate has failed to catch Anscombe’s point. Anscombe is in fact immune to the critique from Houlgate because he never considers the kind of cases she is concerned about.

⁴⁶ Reason, *Human Error*, 70.

To sum up, Anscombe's notion of mistake in performance does not fail to reflect the umbrella character of mistake, quite the contrary, it captures cases that otherwise would have been forgotten. It should be clear by now that we do wisely in not agreeing with Houlgate in that we can "equally well say that something had gone wrong 'in the performance'⁴⁷" in all of the different cases mentioned, that is obeying an order wrong, ignoring, disregarding and disobeying. There certainly is something wrong in all of these acts, but only one of them have the particular character of mistake in performance, that is, the agent does something different from what he intends to. The other examples are of agents committing mistake in judgment. In seeing things this way Anscombe manages to reflect a distinction between these cases, something which shows that by introducing the notion of mistake in performance to contemporary philosophy Anscombe has not failed to give a correct picture of the manifold character of the concept mistake, quite the contrary, she has succeeded in showing a facet that is often overlooked in accounts of agency.

4.2 Actions as Intentional Under a Description

Another source of confusion when it comes to cases of mistake in performance is Anscombe's thought that actions are intentional under some description. How shall we describe the act of the soldier who turned the wrong way? Houlgate seems to believe that on Anscombe's account 'left turn' should have described the act of the soldier who turned right. This is not exactly precise. Anscombe says:

What can be meant, for example, by saying that something happened under one description, but not under another? No natural sense suggests itself for "happening" or "being done" or "being performed" together with the phrase "under description d".⁴⁸

Houlgate remarks that we can plainly see that the description 'left turn' does not correctly describe any of the mentioned cases where a soldier does something different from the captain's command, so why does Anscombe make the confusing distinction between them? It should be said to Houlgate's defence that it is far from obvious what is meant by 'under a description'. When introducing the term Anscombe thought it to be immune to debate, but later on she felt forced to write an essay on the topic simply to answer to all the criticisms and

⁴⁷ Houlgate, "Mistake in Performance", 258.

⁴⁸ Anscombe, "Under a description." *Nôus* Vol. 13, (May 1979), 220.

misunderstandings it led to. She introduced the thought of ‘under a description’ in the following phrase from *Intention*:

Since a single action can have many different descriptions, e.g. ‘sawing a plank’, ‘sawing oak’, ‘sawing one of Smith’s planks’, ‘making a squeaky noise with the saw’, ‘making a great deal of sawdust’ and so on and so on, it is important to notice that a man may know that he is doing a thing under one description, and not under another. Not every case of this is a case of his knowing that he is doing one part of what he is doing and not another.⁴⁹

Further,

The statement that a man knows that he is doing X does not imply the statement that, concerning anything which is also his doing X, he knows that he is doing that thing. So to say that a man knows he is doing X is to give a description of what he is doing *under which* he knows it.⁵⁰

It is a feature of practical knowledge that the agent non-observationally knows what he is doing. The soldier who simply turned right in stead of left lacked such immediate knowledge since he did something he did not mean to do. That that is what he did does not imply that he was totally blank concerning every part of his act. Anscombe holds the view that an action can be intentional under one description and not under another, hence the act of the soldier may be intentional under the description “step on a snail”, but not under the description “turn right”, because he did not *intentionally* turn right. He intended to turn left, but mistakenly turned right. A mistake in performance is, by definition, to do something other than that one intends to be doing. It follows from this that the mistake in performance *per se* cannot be intentional under a description. I take this to be part of what it actually is to perform a mistake in performance: *the mistake in itself is not intentional under any description*. Houlgate is confused because he believes that ‘left turn’ was meant to describe the action, but this is a strange way of seeing things.⁵¹ It is not as if Anscombe thinks that we act on one single description. Rather, we act on a cluster of such descriptions. She imagines that the descriptions under which an action is intentional are connected to one another. An agent’s intentional actions are linked through descriptions which together make up means and ends of the action in question. Under normal circumstances an agent A’s in order to B, the A’ing is a

⁴⁹ Anscombe, *Intention*, 11-12.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁵¹ See Anscombe 1981 p. 4 for further comments on the topic.

means to his B'ing, the B'ing is done in order to C and so on. Anscombe's descriptions are meant to form a link of answers to the why-question:

Are we to say that the man who (intentionally) moves his arm, operates the pump, replenishes the water supply, poisons the inhabitants, is performing *four* actions? Or only one? The answer that we imagined to the question 'why' brings it out that the four descriptions form a series, A-B-C-D, in which each description is introduced as dependent on the previous one, though independent of the following one.⁵²

It is not as if there is one single description to one act. What Anscombe wants us to see is that we can speak of an action under different descriptions if the descriptions given can be related to each other as descriptions of means to descriptions of ends:

[I]f we say there are four actions, we shall find that the only *action* that B consists in here is A; and so on. (...) In short, the only distinct action of his that is in question is this one, A. For moving his arm up and down with his fingers round the pump handle *is* (...) operating the pump; and (...) it *is* replenishing the house water supply; and (...) it *is* poisoning the household. So there is one action with four descriptions, each dependent on wider circumstances, and each related to the next as description of means to end. (...) If D is given as the answer to the question 'Why?' about A, B and C can make an appearance in answer to a question 'How?'. When terms are related in this fashion, they constitute a series of means, the last term of which is, just by being given as the last, so far treated as an end.⁵³

Not once does Houlgate consider this part of Anscombe's notion of intention. Her why-question is intimately related to the thought of non-observational knowledge and what it is to be intentional under some description. As was shown in part 1, these features are parts of what we can understand as practical knowledge. Practical knowledge is the kind of knowledge we are concerned with when dealing with intentions. When this knowledge fails, we lack practical knowledge in the way that what we do is not what we would describe ourselves as doing if asked a why-question about the act. This is crucial to Anscombe, if there is a description of my action that I am not familiar with, then my action cannot be interpreted as intentional under that particular description:

[T]he term 'intentional' has reference to a form of descriptions of events. What is essential to this form is displayed by the results of our enquiries into the question 'why?'.⁵⁴

⁵² Anscombe, *Intention*, 45, emphasis in original.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 46-47, emphasis in original.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 84.

Most actions can be described in a vast amount of ways, my action is only *intentional* under the descriptions I know, and would, myself provide as an answer to the question why. The description does not fit the action from the agent point of view if this is not the case. To quote Moran: “If the agent didn’t know this happening under this description, then as so specified it would not be what he is intentionally doing.⁵⁵” But if the description does not say what the agent *intentionally* did, it can still be a description of his performance if it is a *true* description of what he did. We may gather from this that it is not the case that ‘right turn’ is a false description of the act even though the soldier wanted to turn left. This is the point with mistake in performance – the mistake is not in the description, it is *in* the act. “Right turn” is a true description of the action despite the fact that it was not intentional under this description. It is not as if the description failed to describe what happened as Houlgate thinks, rather it is a mistake in performance, it is the agent that fails to do what he intended to do. Anscombe’s point is that it is not the description that is mistaken here, it is the action. Practical knowledge is flawed if what the agent actually does fails to be in accordance with the intention. The knowledge of an agent is practical if it succeeds in its goal to make the facts fit with it. (Speculative knowledge, in contrast, is propositional knowledge understood “as something that is judged as such by being in accordance with the facts”)⁵⁶. Hence, an intention executed as planned constitutes practical knowledge of the intended action, if not, there is a lack of such knowledge. The soldier did not want to turn right, therefore his act is not *intentional* under that description, still it is a true description of what the soldier did:

What happens happens under every description that is true of it! Whereas – and that was the point of the expression – there may be descriptions that are true of a happening, though the happening is not known, or willed, or derived or explained under those descriptions. It is usually to the point to say that something was intentional under the description d, only when the description d is true of it. Certainly one would never say “It was unintentional under that description” unless the description was true of it.⁵⁷

This applies just fine to the above case. Our soldier may be said to unintentionally have turned right, because he did turn right even though he meant not to.

⁵⁵ Moran, “Anscombe on ‘Practical Knowledge’”, 54.

⁵⁶ Anscombe, Intention, 57.

⁵⁷ Anscombe, Under a Description, 220.

4.3 Does Mistake in Performance Presuppose Erroneous Judgment?

Having come thus far one may be tempted to say that even though it can be illuminating to call some sort of behaviour mistake in performance it is not so that this behaviour is a unique phenomenon. One may hold the view that all mistakes there are can be traced back to some error in judgment, or else we are dealing with accidents. Defendants of this approach hold that mistake in performance presuppose some erroneous judgement. Houlgate articulates the view as follows:

[The] fact that we may wish to distinguish ‘*judging* something to be other than what it is’ (mistake of judgment) from ‘*doing* something other than what we intended doing’ (mistake in performance) does not eliminate the integral role of mistake of judgment within those cases dubbed as illustrative of ‘mistake in performance’⁵⁸

Recall the above examples regarded by Houlgate as counterexamples to Anscombe’s shopper-case. When shopping he could for instance err by misreading his list, mistake one purchase for another, or forget a memorized item he ought to buy. One can easily see the point Houlgate wants to press, namely that all of these examples involve judgment in some way. To take one of them - if the shopper really misreads ‘margarine’ for ‘butter’ on his list, then there is something wrong in a judgment of his. When reading he has judged a word to be other than what it is. The performance ends up to be mistaken because the agent performs according to a faulty judgment. According to Houlgate: “We cannot even speak of ‘mistake’ unless we can pick out some occurrence of judgmental error.”⁵⁹ If we carefully observe the details of an erred act, we will as Houlgate sees things, eventually find some erroneous judgment. Jarvis⁶⁰ has made this view even more explicit by claiming that in cases of mistake in performance there must always be a false belief. Jarvis imagines that we can always illustrate cases of mistake in performance by sketching out a practical syllogism with one or more false premises, in accordance with Houlgate’s view she thinks this applies to the examples of Anscombe. When an agent errs because he has done a mistake in performance, he has acted on a false premise (or some false premises), and therefore done something that was not intended. Jarvis writes out one of Anscombe’s examples as a practical syllogism:

It would be fun to write ‘I am a fool’ on the blackboard with my eyes shut.

⁵⁸ Houlgate, “Mistake in Performance”, 259, emphasis in original.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 261.

⁶⁰ She treats the topic of mistake in performance briefly in her review of *Intention*.

To do this, first I have to set one end of a piece of (dry) chalk against the blackboard, and then...
The object in my hand is a piece of (dry) chalk
So I'll first set one end of the object in my hand against the blackboard.⁶¹

Normally when a person reasons like this, what he sets out to do will occur as planned, but in cases of mistake in performance, he errs because he has a false premise. Jarvis imagines an analogous example of a person who presses his foot on a long narrow pedal believing it to be the correct way to stop a car, while in fact this act accelerates it. The person here does a mistake; he accelerates the car instead of stopping it, because he has a false belief about how to stop a car. Jarvis says that what happens was not what was intended because of one or more false premises, it is here we have the basis of mistake in performance. It is simply impossible, she says, that a man assents to a true set of premises but just fails to do the act the reasoning terminates in because something happens other than the act he wanted to perform. If he fails, according to Jarvis, it is because he does not assent to the premises. Jarvis doesn't spell out how the above writing-example would have been with a false belief in it. An obvious possibility is that the agent writes with a wet piece of chalk believing it to be dry, unfortunately, since the chalk is wet, no writing gets produced.

Jarvis's version is more refined than that of Houlgate, but they have that in common that none of them ever consider a unique case of mistake in performance as Anscombe attempted to convey it. However, Jarvis' argument is on par with the traditional thought that there is a clean cut distinction between action (intentional) and that which merely happens (unintentionally). There is not space for anything in between here. Mistake in performance must necessarily be fitted in somewhere in between these contrasts because even though it is obviously not done intentionally, neither is it something that merely happens as when the wind blows your hair into your face. This differs from Jarvis' view. She seems to hold that either you act intentionally, or, what you do is not an action:

If a man intentionally does something else, he did not assent to *these* premises or want *this* kind of thing. And if what happens happens unintentionally, we may notice *first* that not only must his X-ing be unintentional, but so must his action in all its more immediate descriptions (...), *second*, that this man

⁶¹ Judith Jarvis. "Intention by G.E.M Anscombe," *The Journal of Philosophy* Vol. 56, (Jan., 1959), 40. This is *not* a complete syllogism (of course).

does not *do* anything at all – in which case we can say again: he did not assent to these premises or want this kind of thing.⁶²

She concludes that if what happens in an act is a) something other than what the agent intended it to be, and b) the agent does not recognize his act in his immediate descriptions, then he “does not do anything at all”. This amounts simply to the claim that there does not exist anything in the nature of Anscombe’s mistake in performance. Jarvis even goes to the point of changing Anscombe’s examples, for example as follows:

[A] ‘mistake in performance’ must always be regarded as due to a false premise – even such cases as Miss Anscombe’s ‘Now I press Button A’ said as I press Button B (...) We *can* always set them out in the form of practical syllogisms with one or more false premises – but where something is *done* and it is *the* action in which the reasoning terminates.⁶³

This reasoning is analogous to that of Houlgate, the thought is that there is some mistake first, in the reasoning, then in the performance, and, as we have seen earlier on, the mistake then only qualifies as mistake in judgment.

It must be clear that, in contrast to what Jarvis and Houlgate believes, when we do a mistake in performance it is not because we have a false belief.⁶⁴ The following story can illustrate this point: One morning my cat refused to eat, this contrary to her normal greed. Instead she only circled around her bowl of food, sniffing at it, and looking at me perplexed. Though wondering why she did not eat, I did not think much about it until some hours had past and I noticed that the food was still untouched. So I finally went to take a closer look, and only then did I notice that instead of her normal dish of dried cat food I had given her Coco Pops⁶⁵. No wonder why she did not want that dish! Now, when I have told you this, would you ask me: ‘You must have thought that the Coco Pops was Kitty Kat’? I doubt it, but if you did, I would answer that I had no such belief during the performance of the action, I guess my attention simply was elsewhere than on what I did at that exact moment. If this story does not seem convincing, recall Anscombe’s button-example. If I say I will push button A, but push B, it is not because I have the false belief ‘button B is A’. Rather, I simply slip. If I really thought that Coco Pops was Kitty Kat and if I really believed that button B was the A button, my

⁶² Ibid., 40, emphasis in original

⁶³ Ibid., 40.

⁶⁴ Humberstone has remarked that there is a distinction between false belief and *mistaken* belief, but I have chosen to set that aside, and operate solely with false belief.

⁶⁵ Honey Puffs with chocolate flavour on it.

action is as it should be according to the false belief, there is no further mistake in the performance in such a case, the mistake is in the judgment, and even though the performance that follows is mistaken somehow it is not an example of mistake in performance. If I misjudged button B to *be* button A what happened was not what I intended, that is so, but the reason for this is that I did not *know* what to do to achieve my ends. In other words, my erred knowledge was not the same as yours if you *knew* which button was which, but failed due to a mistake in performance. There is a distinction between *kinds* of erred knowledge here. The person who does a mistake in performance has contemplative knowledge, but lacks practical knowledge in the execution of his intention, in contrast, the person who acts on a false belief lacks theoretical knowledge. To clarify, due to his false belief the person in the latter case does exactly what he intends to do (i.e. he intends to push ‘this particular button’ because he takes it to be button A, which is the button he wants to push. It follows that this man does precisely what he intends to do). In contrast, the person who does a mistake in performance, lacks practical knowledge in that he fails to do what he intended to do *despite* the fact that he acts on the basis of a flawlessly formed intention. We must keep in mind that we are talking about practical knowledge here. In sum, strange as it may seem at first sight, Anscombe’s cases of mistake in performance allows for the possibility that an agent assents to a set of true premises, but in the end does something other than the action which the reasoning terminates in. We can now try to apply this to Jarvis’s example of the guy failing to stop the car. He intended to stop the car, but had a false belief about how to do it. Given the false belief ‘the narrow pedal is the one to step on to stop the vehicle’, he did what he intended to do, that is, he intended to stop the car by stepping on the gas pedal (!), it follows from this that in this case we cannot speak of mistake in performance. The mistake in question here was one of lack of knowledge (theoretical/speculative/contemplative) of how to perform a certain act. Mistakes in performance happen when we have the correct *theoretical* knowledge how but fail anyway. The thing is that we fail in the *performance*, our intention sort of slips on reality, and we thereby lack *practical* knowledge. The whole point is that there is a difference here. Practical knowledge on Anscombe’s account is immediate, that is, non-inferential, and non-observational. There is some sense in which you fail to have such knowledge in cases of mistake in performance. Surely, you may be aware of the fact that you press ‘this particular button’, but if you intended to push A, but push B instead, you lack the immediate, non-observational knowledge that you push A, a practical knowledge that you would have had under normal circumstances. Most of the time when you want to push A, you do push A, and you know *that* you do it, when you do it, but in the case of mistake in performance you simply

fail to pull off the act you normally would have succeeded in doing. What you may know in the mistake in performance-case is that you are pushing a button, what you do not know, is which button that is. All this time you do know how to push button A, and you know which button is which, you know how to buy butter and how to write your name – it is not here you can trace the root of your mistake. Take a look at the Theophrastus-quote (Aristotle) which inspired Anscombe in the first place:

[N]o one deliberates how he ought to write the name Archicles, because it is a settled matter how one ought to write the name Archicles. The error, then, does not arise in the thought, but in the act of writing. For where the error is not in the thought, neither do people deliberate about those things. But wherever there is indefiniteness about the how, there error comes in⁶⁶.

The error arises in the act, that is the lesson here. If there is a false belief, then the mistake is contemplative, if all your premises are correct, but your act is flawed, then, it is a mistake in performance.

4.4 Accidental Cases

There is an option that we have not yet considered, namely, the possibility of explaining cases dubbed by Anscombe as mistake in performance by saying that the agent is having an accident. Could it be that mistake in performance is ruled out because cases of error in action may be captured by applying an exhaustive dichotomy of mistake in judgment and accidents? Houlgate seems to believe that some such dichotomy is all that we need. The following quote from Houlgate exemplifies a view on both mistakes and accidents in one go:

If I am wrong in saying what I am at present doing, I am *mistaken* only if I have made some error of judgment. For example, if I should push Button B while saying ‘Now I push Button A’, I have made a mistake (in performance) only if it is true to say that I misidentified Button B as Button A. Otherwise it could be the case that, e.g. the machine had moved as I pushed my finger down towards the button, and I pushed Button B ‘by accident’.⁶⁷

Notice the distinction put to do the work here: either you make an erroneous judgment and thus fail to do what you intend to do, or you experience an accident where what happens is out of your control. Houlgate thinks that the mechanisms we need to explain mistakes is all

⁶⁶ Aristotle, *Magna Moralia*, in W. D Ross (ed. and trans.). *The Works of Aristotle*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1915), 66, 1189b 20-24.

⁶⁷ Houlgate, “Mistake in Performance”, 261.

present here, it follows that mistake in performance is a superfluous notion. On Houlgate's view the dichotomy can explain both cases where you have done something you did not intend to do, and that the discrepancy between what you intended to do and what you ended up doing imputes a fault to your performance. Houlgate attempts to show that there is no such thing as a mistake in performance as a single notion operating on its own.

A mistake can be hard to clarify as in the following story: If you shoot a pigeon you believe to be wild shows out to be a homing pigeon, have you then committed a mistake in performance or judgment – or both?⁶⁸ What is important, says Houlgate, is that unless we took it to be an error of judgment on your part, that you shot what you happened to *believe* was a wild bird, we could not describe it as any sort of mistake. I interpret Houlgate here as saying that either, there is a mistake, which necessarily must be traced back to a mistaken judgment, or, there is an accident, something merely happens to you as, say, when you loose hold of your rifle and therefore pull the trigger, and fire a shot which kills a homing pigeon. Houlgate's answer as to how we can trace the source of what happened is that we must more fully describe the cases, something which would reveal that what happens in cases of mistake is due to some error in judgment, for instance, in the bird-example, you *judged* the bird to be another kind of bird than it really was. You failed to do what you intend to do *because* you acted on an erroneous judgment. So, what differs between these two types of cases is that mistake is due to an erroneous judgment, while cases of accident is like the happening quoted above where the *machine* made an unexpected move that forced your finger onto the wrong button, or as in the example of you loosing hold of your rifle and *therefore* pull the trigger. In sum: Houlgate takes it that Anscombe's notion of mistake in performance boils down to cases of judgmental error, other incidents are cases where something unexpected happens. Houlgate's move of turning mistake into an exhaustive dichotomy between accidents and mistake in judgment simply excludes mistake in performance. It can be refuted by giving an example that doesn't fit the dichotomy. I think my example of feeding the cat is such an example. Was it due to a mistake in judgment that I failed to give my kitten proper cat food? Certainly not, I did no such judgment, I just grabbed the box from the closet, I didn't even look at it. Could it be that it was a mistaken judgment on my part that I failed to pay attention to what I did? A feature of cases of mistake in performance is that the agent in these cases are typically not engaged in problem solving, he acts on basis of previous experience, he knows how to solve the task, and

⁶⁸ Houlgate attributes this example to Morris, see Houlgate p. 260.

therefore does not put any effort to it, and thinking about it, why should he? Maybe most of our actions are done on autopilot, normally we manage to perform them perfectly well. It is a familiar situation so why put your mind to it, most of the time you succeed. Put rather bluntly: we are spoilt by previous success. So, while it may be the case that I failed to pay as much attention as I should to have pulled off the feeding-attempt successfully, it is not the case that failing to pay attention is equivalent to acting on false premises – something I clearly did not. Houlgate could appeal to the accident-solution, but it would not apply either. To call up on accidents here would be implausible since the Coco Pops box did not accidentally fall into my hands or something like that. In addition such an interpretation would completely remove my part as an agent, but it is my opinion that I really *did* something here. It should be clear from this that mistake in performance has a philosophical function in that it is able to capture cases that cannot easily be captured by appeal to an exhaustive dichotomy between mistake in judgment and accidents.

4.5 More on the Relation between Practical Knowledge and Mistake in Performance

Practical knowledge and mistake in performance are thoroughly entwined concepts. What we want to understand is what the notion of mistake in performance amounts to and how it relates to practical knowledge. On Anscombe's account practical knowledge is akin to the knowledge held by the man "directing a project, like the erection of a building which he cannot see and does not get reports on, purely by giving orders"⁶⁹ in contrast to the man in possession of only contemplative knowledge: "a man merely considering speculatively how a thing might be done; such a man can leave many points unsettled."⁷⁰ Practical knowledge is a 'knowledge of what is done'.⁷¹ Anscombe says:

I wrote 'I am a fool' on the blackboard with my eyes shut. Now when I have said what I wrote, ought I to have said: this is what I am writing, if my intention is getting executed; instead of simply: this is what I am writing? [Intentions] [can] fail to get executed. That intention for example would not have been executed if something had gone wrong with the chalk or the surface, so that the words did not appear. And my knowledge would have been the same even if this had happened. If then my knowledge is independent of what actually happens, how can it be knowledge of what does happen? Someone might say that it was a funny sort of knowledge that was still knowledge even though what it was knowledge

⁶⁹ Anscombe, *Intention*, 82.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 82.

of was not the case! On the other hand Theophrastus' remark holds good: 'the mistake is in the performance, not in the judgment'.⁷²

Moran has stated that an agent cannot have *practical* knowledge that he is writing if no writing is produced when he puts the pen to the paper. This seems to me correct. However, I do not quite follow Moran in commenting on the above quoted passage:

Anscombe herself seems to confuse the requirement of truth for knowledge, which applies to any knowledge, practical or speculative, with the question of whether it is the action or the (putative) knowledge that is to be corrected in the case of disparity.⁷³

I don't think Anscombe confuses anything at all here, rather, her point is that we cannot apply the same concept of truth to practical and speculative knowledge. We can appeal to the direction of fit metaphor here, there is a difference between how the truth of belief relates to the world, and how the truth of intention relates to the world. If we treat belief, say, as a 'truth-tracker' and intention as a 'truth-maker'. The former aims at fitting the world (as is the case with speculative knowledge), while the latter aims for the world to fit with it. Let's say I intended to write 'write', but that I failed to write 'write' right. I told you 'I will write 'write'', but what appeared at the paper was 'wait'. I simply made a mistake during my performance to write a word I know perfectly well how to spell along with an ability to pull off the act, and the knowledge how to do it, that is, I possess the speculative knowledge that is needed to perform the task in question. It is in the process of the execution of my intention, specifically, when writing, that I do something wrong. I fail in my attempt to make the world accord with an intention of mine, hence I made a mistake in performance. This seems to me plausible, but Moran is of another opinion, he refuses to use the direction of fit metaphor here:

[I]t is *not* a good answer to this problem of error and knowledge to advert to Theophrastus and the thought that the mistake here lies in the performance and not in what is said. To disqualify as knowledge, it doesn't matter where the error comes from so long as there is error; 'direction of fit' considerations are not to the point here.⁷⁴

It should be clear from what I have just said that contra Moran I *do* mind where the error comes from. It is an important distinction between whether I know how to write 'write', but,

⁷² Ibid., 82.

⁷³ Moran, "Anscombe on Practical Knowledge," 60.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 61.

say, simply misspell it, due to a mistake in performance (which is related to intention and practical knowledge), or if I lack such knowledge and write the wrong word because I don't know how it should be written in the first place, so that I just write 'wait' which I believe to be the correct way to write 'write'. The latter is due to a mistake in judgment (which is related further to belief and speculative knowledge).

When it comes to Moran's claiming that we should not attribute the mistake to the performance here instead of what is said, I must say, I cannot see why not. Recall Anscombe's discussion of the joke from Quine. There certainly seems to be cases where there is *no* falsehoods to be detected *in* what I have said, while there may be a 'direct falsification of what I say.' The button-example is such a case. The man says that he will push one button, but pushes another. What he says, on Anscombe's account, is not a mistake because it failed to describe what he did, it was a mistake because it did not accord with what he said.⁷⁵ One may ask, of course, why was not what the man *said* mistaken? The answer is that we consider the man honest when he expresses his intention. If he lied, well, then, it would obviously have been something wrong in his statement. Of course some people lie about their plans and doings. But things are different when people do something other than they *truthfully* said they would. It is familiar that we sometimes perform another action than that we meant to perform. In such cases the mistake is in the performance, because the person didn't perform the intended act, his words, on the other hand, gave a truthful statement of what he intended to do.

I think there are good reasons for using direction of fit considerations precisely in such cases as mistake in performance. The notions, mistake in performance and direction of fit, may, strengthen one another. This thought seems to correspond well with Anscombe's thought, commented upon above, that there are two kinds of knowledge, first, "knowledge of ones intentional action, and second, "knowledge by observation of what takes place,"⁷⁶ the former is practical knowledge, the latter is speculative. While practical knowledge allows for mistake in performance, mistakes in speculative knowledge is due to faulty judgement. These are contrasting notions, as belief and intention are contrasting states. That is, different ways of knowing, theoretical vs. practical knowledge, corresponds to different ways of being mistaken. If one refuses these thoughts, one may accept that mistake in performance and mistake in judgment can operate in tandem, so to say. Setiya, among others, is of the opinion

⁷⁵ See Anscombe, *Intention*, 57. See also my section 3.2.

⁷⁶ See Anscombe, *Intention*, 51.

that intention involves belief⁷⁷. His account does not accept the possibility of a man *simply* not doing what he intends to be doing, there must be a corresponding false belief. According to Setiya, it is an implausible view to hold that there may be mistakes of performance which has nothing, not whatsoever, to do with judgment: “On the more natural view, [the] mistake is one of judgment *and* performance”, he writes further: “When I intend to be clenching my fist and fail to do so, there is a mistake in what I do – but also a mistake in what I believe about myself.”⁷⁸ Contra Setiya I think that there need not be any such belief – at all. Say, you suddenly find yourself in a fist-fight, but you are not much of a fighter, actually, you have never fought before, but you have seen a bunch of fights in bad Hollywood movies, so you manage to think that the least you could do is to clench your fist and hit your opponent as hard as you can. You intend to clench your fist, then, but when preparing to hit you get so perplexed that you don’t clench your fist at all, you simply lower your arm instead. There is no erred belief here. It is not the case that you have the false belief that you are capable of clenching your fist, while in fact you aren’t. You know how to clench your fist, and you are able to do it right now, because no one is holding your hand, and you suffer from no paralysis either. It is just that at that very moment you simply fail to do it. On Anscombe’s account, it is a feature of practical reason that it allows for the possibility of mistakes in performance, that is, a mistake which occurs in the execution of a flawlessly formed intention. You may intend to clench your fist and fail to do so without having done any erroneous judgement. Certainly, that is what mistake in performance *is*.

4.6 Conclusion

My main aim in this part has been to show that mistake in performance is a unique phenomenon. It does not overlook the fact that mistakes take various forms. An attempt at clashing mistake in judgment and mistake in performance together will rule out that which is special about mistake in performance. What more is, mistake in performance is importantly not due to a false judgment. It is a feature of cases that are performed on behalf of a false judgment that the agent, given his false judgment, does what he intended to do. In a case of a mistake in performance the agent in question does something other than he intended to do. In part 5 I provide reasons for why such cases should be considered as actions despite the fact that they are not done intentionally.

⁷⁷ For examples of this view see, for instance, Setiya’s “Explaining Action”, Harman’s “Practical Reasoning” and Velleman’s “Intentions”. (Velleman has made some revisions in the view presented in the original version of *Practical Reflection*, see his introduction to the 2007-edition).

⁷⁸ Kieran Setiya, “Practical Knowledge,” (forthcoming 2008), 33, n.28, emphasis in original.

Part 5 Cases of Mistake in Performance as Actions

5.0 Introduction

Imagine that you are in a new relationship and participate for the first time in a family dinner at your beloved's home. During the dinner a person suddenly rises and yells out: 'Fuckers! Fuckers! Fuckers!' and then takes his seat. People around you continue eating as if nothing had happened. Wouldn't you feel relieved and refrain from holding the person to be responsible if your darling told you: 'Sorry, he does things like that because he has Tourette's'. In contrast, is it not possible that you would hold your darling responsible if he, when the two of you were leaving, tells the rest of the company that he shall take Lisa home if your name happens to be Christa?⁷⁹ These two cases, both of which are examples of uncouth behaviour, are different from one another in that one involves a mental disturbance, while the other is a particularly ill timed slip of the tongue – a variant of mistake in performance. The former is an example of a piece of behaviour that most of us would not hold a person accountable for, the latter, in contrast, is an example of a case where we intuitively place some responsibility on part of the person who has slipped (we can imagine that Lisa would say something like 'Did you forget my name?', or 'Who's Christa?', or 'How could you possibly embarrass me like that in front of your family', and so on). Both of these cases are examples of unintentional behaviour, surely, your beloved did not deliberately call you by the wrong name when showing you off to his family for the first time, and it makes no sense in treating the peculiarities of a Tourette's patient as intently produced – that would be analogous to holding that an Alzheimer's patient forgets things on purpose. The point here is that while we don't treat the Touretter as responsible, it seems to be a feature of cases of mistake in performance that we take responsibility for them, and we hold others responsible as well.

Why should we care about the concept mistake in performance? What is its philosophical importance? The answer is, I think, that they form a part of our nature as agents, and a quite unique part at that. They are often, if not always, quite different from cases of the involuntary ticks that come out of the mouth of a person that suffers from Tourette's or the incidents

⁷⁹ The Touretter-example is inspired by Nomy Arpaly, "Blame, Autonomy and Problem Cases", 152. The slip of the tongue error could have been a Freudian slip if Lisa, say, was his former girlfriend. The sense I am interested in here, in contrast, is the sense where he simply slipped and said the wrong name, for no reason. He just happened to say the wrong name 'just like that'. While there may indeed be reasons for slips, there must not be some such Freudian hidden reason. For Freud's treatment of slips see his *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*. I briefly discuss Freudian cases in sec. 5.5.

happening to persons suffering from the anarchic hand syndrome when their anarchic hand starts unbuttoning a shirt the healthy hand just buttoned. It would be reasonable to ask someone jumping up and down ‘Why do you do that?’ while it is out of place to ask the Tourette’s patient why he swore seventeen times in a row. The ‘Touretter’ who yells ‘Fuckers!’ at a family gathering is excused⁸⁰. In contrast, if I tend to spill coffee on your papers when I hand you your cup ‘Oops! I did it again!’ most people would probably think that this is something I can be held responsible for and I can blame myself for it as well. This points towards the thought that many cases of mistake in performance are part of our character - we ‘care about them’, to use a phrase from Frankfurt, and we even take responsibility for them.

One who accepts that there is some such phenomenon as mistake in performance need not be convinced that they qualify as actions. Such scepticism is understandable, by admitting them into the concept of an action one may fear that one also lets in obvious non-actions and mere happenings. I aim to show that cases of mistake in performance have too much in common with actions to be dismissed as mere happenings. In this part I consider theory independent reasons for treating cases of mistake in performance as actions. First, I give an outline of why cases of mistake in performance are treated as non-actions. Second, I briefly discuss whether all cases of mistake in performance in fact are slips. Third, I argue that family resemblance to actions is a reason for taking mistake in performance to be actions. Fourth, I appeal to the fact that we intuitively treat people’s slips as doings of theirs. Fifth, I treat the topic of linguistic slips. Such slips are (often) uncontroversially treated as something we do. Sixth, I argue that the phenomenal feel of a slip is similar to that of an intentional action, and finally I sketch some reasons for why slips count as part of our character. It is my hope that the following will show that we ought not to have an ignorant approach towards mistake in performance-cases, and that they can be thought of as actions.

5.1 Why are Cases of Mistake in Performance not treated as Actions?

An agent doesn’t make a mistake in performance intentionally. He lacks a reason for this part of his behaviour. Neither does he possess full control over these performances of his. It is not as if what happens in a case of mistake in performance is something the agent planned to do.

⁸⁰ If one intuitively feels like saying that not even the ‘Touretter’ should be excused for such improper behaviour, one might agree to the weaker claim that there is at least more reason to excuse the ‘Touretter’ than it would be to excuse a mentally well family member for the same offence. To accept this weak sense is enough to appreciate a difference between these cases – a sense which is sufficient for my ends here.

A person who spreads juice over his cereals did (probably) plan to grasp the nearby carton of milk from the refrigerator, he just happened to take out another carton than the one he had planned to take out. These features of occurrences of mistake in performance (they are not inferential, there's a lack of a reason and also a weaker sense of control) separates them from what we consider to be clear cut cases of action).

It is common in philosophy of action to make a distinction between actions and mere happenings where the former is considered to be intentional, the latter not.⁸¹ A problem with this approach is that by making such a strict distinction between actions and happenings, one ends up with what is often treated as an exhaustive dichotomy between intentional actions (which are *doings*) and that which merely happens, with no room for anything in between.⁸² In one sentence: on the one hand we operate with what people genuinely do, and on the other, with events people just undergo (mere happenings). We are at the core of philosophy of action here. For it is a main task how to distinguish human behaviour, that is, what we can attribute to a subject as things he does, or have made happen from behaviour where it is plausible to say that the subject was *not* the cause of what took place. The question is often referred to by asking Wittgenstein's "What is left over if I subtract the fact that my arm goes up, from the fact that I raise my arm?"⁸³

When it comes to incidents of mistake in performance they are clearly not intentional, but they seem not be something that merely happens to us either, so we have to make room for them somewhere in between the traditional distinction. My hope is to map them down somewhere in between actions that are *not* intended and mere happenings. Roughly put, I will distinguish intended actions from those that are not intended, and open up for the category of 'mistake in performance' and distinguish them again from mere happenings. We will end up with this axis then: intended actions - not intended actions – mistake in performance - mere happenings.

⁸¹ The distinction is common, see for instance Moya: "In fact, when we first think of the distinction between actions and happenings, we tend to think of the contrast between intentional actions and mere happenings, not the contrast between unintentional actions and mere happenings" (Moya, 1990: 11).

⁸² It should be mentioned that this dichotomy of mere happenings and intentional action is not as popular as it once was. This is partly thanks to Frankfurt who has pressed the fact that in a weak sense even a creature like a spider *do* something (its movements is not *mere* movement) when it makes its webs, it shows purposeful behaviour and is *active* rather than passive.

⁸³ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, (Oxford, Blackwell, 2001), 136, §621.

Let us summarize some of the reasons for why cases of mistake in performance are not seen as actions:

- They are not intentional (one are therefore apt to place them on the mere happenings end of the action-scale).
- They are not full-blooded actions.
- They are not planned.
- They are not something we want to do.
- They are not totally within our control.
- They are not performed due to a reason.

5.2 Are all Cases of Mistake in Performance Slips?

It can be argued that all cases of mistake in performance are slips,⁸⁴ this would be in harmony with the psychological literature where the standard interpretation of slips fits roughly with the notion of mistake in performance. Norman has given a very short explanation of the difference between mistakes and slips: “If the intention is not appropriate, this is a mistake. If the action is not what was intended this is a slip”⁸⁵. Recall the example (section 4.3) of failing to stop the car. The agent’s intention to stop the car by stepping at the gas pedal was flawed, to stop the car he should have stepped on the pedal which was the break. Had he intended to step on the break, but simply failed to do so, then we could have dubbed his mistake a case of mistake in performance. While we would dub the latter ‘mistake in performance’, Norman would classify it as a slip. This way of understanding error in human behaviour is similar to a dichotomy Peabody has made between mistake in performance and mistake in judgment:

Let us call discrepancies (...) resulting ultimately from some mistake in judgment, mistakes proper, and discrepancies of the latter sort resulting from no mistakes in judgment, mistakes in performance or slips.⁸⁶

Peabody has the view that all occurrences of mistake in performance are slips. I am not certain whether this is entirely unproblematic. There seems to be cases where ‘mistake in performance’ could not be easily replaced with the word ‘slip’. One thing is the vocabulary, another problem is that a generalization gives rise to the thought that mistake in performance

⁸⁴ The converse does not hold, of course. It is not the case that all slips are cases of mistake in performance.

⁸⁵ Quoted from Reason, *Human Error*, 8.

⁸⁶ Peabody, “Trying Slips: Can Davidson and Hornsby Account for Mistakes and Slips?” 176.

cases are simple cases. The word ‘slip’ gives associations to cases that are not the least complex; the vocabulary doesn’t invite to take the topic seriously. This problem may not be substantial, it has to do with how we use and think of words. It is my opinion though that it should be mentioned, because if we are blind towards how words affect us important features may escape our attention. There seem to be cases that are incidents of mistake in performance, which we don’t naturally want to call a slip. Take for instance extremely detailed actions as, say, surgery. It is not that there could not have been slips in this field, as in the (hopefully untrue) urban legend of the doctor who forgot a pair of scissors in his patient’s stomach. But cases of detailed operations as brain surgery and the like are of such character that one is not (in most cases) likely to accuse the doctor who does something wrong of a ‘slip’, that would sound as an extreme oversimplification, while it may be in place to say that he made a mistake in performance (of course unless this surgeon commits the same mistake over and over again, then slip sounds a natural choice).

In accordance with the above comments I don’t want to operate with the generalisation as Peabody does that all occurrences of mistake in performance are slips because I am not sure whether that is correct. These are my intuitions, others may think of it differently. I am not sure whether anything substantial will turn out of this. Anyway, with this in mind, out of convenience, we will from now on use the terms ‘mistake in performance’ and ‘slip’ interchangeably.

5.3 Family Resemblance

One reason to treat cases of mistake in performance as actions is that of family resemblance. On the face of it many slips look just like ordinary actions, and in general slips and full blooded actions have many features in common. At the surface it can be plainly impossible to judge whether an action is a slip or not (at least sometimes). This argument may not sound especially convincing, somehow it seems to be analogous to arguing that some human-like doll should be considered human because it seems to be alive at first glance. But, it is not as far fetched as it may seem to appeal to family resemblance when it comes to slips. This is because a fair part of our slips, probably most of them, are in fact quite close up to what the agent in fact did intend to do. An agent who slips often *almost* succeeds in executing his intention. To slip is to do some other act than the intended one. If an agent has the intention ‘close the window’ a slip of his may be that he walks across the room and closes a nearby door instead. If the agent with the intention ‘close the window’ starts yelling and barking at

the window, any rational person who hears him will put him in the category of the mentally disturbed. If you want to say ‘lies’ you may slip and say ‘rice’, it is not very likely that you intend to say ‘lies’, but end up saying ‘cellular phone’. We can draw from this that the person who slips is as he should be mentally, and we do treat him as he is. His act of slipping doesn’t just resemble an intentional act, in fact, it is (often) close to being the act he wanted to perform intentionally.

Peabody argues that it is a feature of slips that they, in many cases, could have been avoided. It is bluntly implausible to claim that you have as much control over your slips as you have over the other actions you perform, but it is so that to a certain degree it would be fair to say that you could have done something to prevent them, for instance by paying enough attention.⁸⁷

5.4 Intuitions of Slips

We intuitively separate slips and performances that merely look like slips, but in fact are not caused by the subject. To clarify this point: Imagine Ron saying (truthfully) that he will push a button on a machine, say button A, but when he finally presses a button it is not A, but button B, right next to it, he presses his finger towards. It is a natural response to think that Ron slipped. There is nothing awkward here, sometimes we just fail to do what we intended to do. Now, consider the same scenario with the difference that Ron tells you afterwards that he suffers from the anarchic hand syndrome, and that he was a mere observant as to how his finger pushed the wrong button, he saw his finger do it, but felt now ownership towards the act. In the former case we are apt to think that Ron would have pushed the correct button were he to pay enough attention to the task at hand, but we treat the latter case differently, because it seems that Ron could not have influenced the incident at all. In this latter case we are apt not to hold Ron responsible at all.

We do not think of a person that he is either irresponsible or irrational just because he slips now and then. Rather we do believe that a person is perfectly capable of performing with success the act he now failed to pull off. If we didn’t believe that the person making the mistake could manage to do the action correctly we would not have had any reason to apply to

⁸⁷ Note that sometimes attention decreases the agent’s possibilities of pulling off an act successfully, as for instance in the following example from Roessler: “Attention [can] disrupt well-practised performances, as when a skilled typist focuses her attention on the movements of her fingers” (Roessler, 2003: 389).

him a mistake in the first place, for instance we don't blame a lunatic for improper behaviour, (in fact if we consider people to be lunatics we *expect* such behaviour). On the other hand, you do blame your neighbour if he parks his car in front of yours so it is impossible to drive by even though your neighbour did it by mistake and had absolutely no want or intent to park just there. Surely, you are likely to be more willing to forgive him if he did the parking by mistake than if he deliberately parked his car in front of yours because he wanted to annoy you, or something like that. Surely, the fact that he made a mistake doesn't remove your possible anger or frustration at him. That is, you are not irrational if frustrated at his parking. In contrast imagine that you saw your neighbour's car fall from the sky and land right in front of yours. If so, I think it is quite intuitive to say that you are irrational if you get annoyed at your neighbour, thinking something like: 'That bloody neighbour! There's his car in front of mine again!'. This is so because this time your neighbour was totally innocent. The story reveals a distinction between cases where something happens (car falls from sky, lands in front of yours), and cases where something happens unintentionally, by mistake in performance (neighbour parks his car in front of yours). Cases like this are hard to fit into a dichotomy between actions (intentional) and mere happenings, they do not quite fit any of these two categories. They are clearly not intentional, but not something that merely happens either. Anscombe's notion of mistake in performance can shed light on such cases.

5.5 Linguistic Cases

It seems reasonable that we may blame others for their slips, and likewise blame ourselves for ours. A good candidate for motivating the thought that we connect slips and responsibility is to be found in the linguistic field. The prime example of a slip in Peabody's treatment of the topic is to be found in this field. There seems to be no doubt that the person who mixes the name Lisa with the name Christa is saying, that is *doing*, something even though what comes out of the mouth is something different from what he intended to let out of it. We do hold people responsible for what they say, also when they fail, in the sense that even when people say something obviously wrong we continue thinking of what they said as their performance. We don't stop taking people seriously if they do a slip of the tongue, what I mean to say is that we don't take what they say literally if it somehow seems inappropriate with a view to their obvious intention. Actually we are often quite good at adjusting our interpretation of people's slips of the tongue and the like. We tend to be both flexible and tolerant in these cases. Very often we easily manage to understand what was meant even though it was not what was said. Empirical studies can support this thesis:

A noticed that B was using his special (and expensive) scissors with serrated blades to cut some loose threads from clothes. (Both A and B had agreed that the scissors were reserved for trimming hair.)

A: Hey-No! That's a hair comb.

B: Oh-sorry.

The normal activities then continued. There was no further conversation. B went and got another pair of scissors. About a minute or two after the conversation:

A: I meant that was a hair *scissors*, only to be used to cut hair.

B: I knew what you meant. I did have the vague feeling that something was wrong, but I wasn't sure what. Now I realize that you called the scissors a comb. I understood you though. (Norman, 1981: 12).⁸⁸

This example reveals good teamwork, and there is never any doubt that the person making the slip of the tongue said something, that he in some way *acted*. Actually, thanks to the context, it all made sense somehow, even though it was the wrong word that was used. A person responsible for a linguistic slip may become quite irritable if you are correcting him, saying things like: - You understood what I meant, didn't you? One can get frustrated when corrected; yet, we reasonably acknowledge our responsibility in these cases. I guess many have had similar discussions to this one: – I did not mean *that*! – But you said *that*. – Ah, all right, sorry then! Maybe you just said something other than what you intended to say, as for instance in the cases of spoonerisms like saying “You have tasted the whole worm” instead of the intended “You have wasted the whole term”⁸⁹ There is no reason to blame yourself for a happening you could not possibly have influenced. When it comes to slips, in contrast, we have the feel that had we just not been so forgetful, aggressive, absent minded and so on, then we had avoided slipping. This indicates that we do in fact blame ourselves.

Freudian slips is a subcategory of slips of the tongue. I will provide such an example just to sort it out of the discussion – my topic is not Freudian slip-cases. Here is one of Freud's own examples:

⁸⁸ It should be said that Norman's point is not the one I am making. *His* point is to show that slips are not necessarily detected at an instant. My point is that in this case there is never any question as to whether the person who slipped *acted* or not, it is taken for granted that he said (did) something.

⁸⁹ Quoted from Norman, “Categorization of Action Slips”, 10. It has been claimed that Spooner constructed his examples, but even if that is so, it is easy to imagine that such cases could have happened for real.

A young father presented himself before the registrar of births to give notice of the birth of his second daughter. When asked what the child's name was to be he answered 'Hanna', and had to be told by the official that he already had a child by that name. We may conclude that the second daughter was not quite so welcome as the first had been.⁹⁰

Freud treats slips as only seemingly accidental, while they in fact, as he sees it, are intentional. It is not obvious that the daughter in this story was unwanted, of course she could have been. But, while there can be cases where Freud is correct to say that there is some hidden reason for the outcome – as it would have been if it was true that the second daughter really was unwanted – but this need not be so. We may *simply* slip, without there being any hidden desire leading us to our sayings and doings. So, slips of the tongue can occur without there being any 'hidden' desire causing it. But even though we don't believe people to commit slips of the tongue on purpose, we do not accept that they are totally irresponsible for their speech.

5.6 The Phenomenal Feel

In addition to the above discussed points which are all mentioned by Peabody in her treatment of the topic, I will add phenomenal experience. We don't feel that slips are something that merely happens to us. Slips phenomenally feel like actions.⁹¹ I will argue that all though they do not feel the exact same as what we can call 'full blown actions', they do feel just as a sort of intentional performances we unproblematically call actions, that is actions done while the agent is absent minded.

We are normally aware of when we have done something ourselves. Consider the following dialogue:

"Ow!" squeaked something.

"That's funny," thought Pooh. "I said 'Ow!' without really oo'ing."

"Help!" said a small, high voice.

⁹⁰ Sigmund Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, (London: Hogarth Press, 2001), 224.

⁹¹ See Perner's "Dual Control and the Causal Theory of Action: The case of Non-intentional Action" for a similar argument.

“That’s me again,” thought Pooh. “I’ve had an Accident, and fallen down a well, and my voice has gone all squeaky and works before I’m ready for it, because I’ve done something to myself inside. Bother!”

“Help-help!”

“There you are! I say things when I’m not trying. So it must be a very bad Accident.”⁹²

The comedy of this scene is that Pooh interprets what is happening to him as if he is performing actions that he is not intending to perform. Furthermore, it evokes laughter because Pooh becomes seriously worried by his own ability to know what he himself is up to (when he is not really up to anything, it is Piglet). The hilarity resides in the fact that we normally have no difficulty at all in separating our own actions from things we do not do. The mere notion of such a difficulty is actually enough to bring a smile to anyone’s face. It is absurd. Under normal circumstances we can easily discriminate something we did from something we did not do. This, I think, counts for slips as well. If I take your hand and raise it you will have the sensation of your arm being raised, what you will lack, though, is the sense of control you would have had if you raised it on your own. The phenomenal feel of a mere happening differs radically from the feel of a mistake in performance. There is a mental component in such cases which is absent in cases of mere happenings.

5.7 Slips as a Part of Character

We seem to intuitively think that a person’s slips can reflect his character. If a person, say, has clumsy behaviour all the time we might label him absent-minded, if a mother continuously slips around her child (for instance by saying obscenities) we may dub her careless, or if a speaker commits plenty slips of the tongue and other kinds of slips while speaking, we may fasten to think of him as having a nervous character. This insight is well-known in fiction literature, as well as in real life, as for instance in the topos of the absent minded professor and the clumsy teenager. I will not commit myself to the implausible view that they are always a part of our character, that is a very strong thesis difficult to defend, and I don’t think it correct either. What I do think, though, is that our experiences of mistake in performance often can say something about the kind of person we are. We do not detach ourselves or other people from such action. We do judge people by their mistakes. When people tend to do the

⁹² From A.A. Milne, *The House at Pooh Corner*. Quoted from Patrick Haggard “Conscious Awareness of Intention and of Action”, in *Agency and Self-Awareness*, Roessler and Eilan, 2003, 111.

same mistake over and over again, we find it rather easy to blame them instead of bluntly accepting an apology. We blame ourselves in the same manner. We can also accept some slips as part of our identity even though we dislike them, that is, we accept that they represent a picture of who we are. If this is correct it indicates that we are not indifferent towards our slips, they matter to us. We care about them. Frankfurt has opened up for the possibility that there are parts of our character that we consider as such even though we do not wholeheartedly embrace them, according to Frankfurt we have resigned towards these features of ourselves.⁹³ It is my opinion that mistake in performance may be such a part of a person's character. He identifies with it even though he dislikes this side of himself, in Frankfurt's vocabulary he has resigned. In this manner we may care about our doings that sort under the heading mistake in performance. This manner is (at least most of the time) not a positive embracement, Frankfurt, in contrast, seems to think that the importance of what we care about is something positive for us.⁹⁴ He even argues that it may be better for a man to care about avoiding the cracks in the sidewalk than not to care about anything at all.⁹⁵ I will not claim that it is good *per se* to care about one's mistake in performance; in fact I think some care so much that it becomes a problem to them. My point is meant descriptively, I think it is a feature of human thinking that we really do care about our slips.

These are some features supporting the thought that slips should count as actions:

- Most of the time slips resembles ordinary actions, and they are often close to be the intended act.
- We (often) treat people's slips as something they have *done*.
- We manage to intuitively distinguish between cases of slips and cases that seem to be slips, but in fact are not.
- We take responsibility for our slips and we hold other people responsible for theirs.
- They are not involuntary gestures.

⁹³ Frankfurt speaks of passions, but I think what he says here could be modified to include slips as well. What he says, among other things, is that "after long struggle and disillusion with himself, a person may become resigned to being someone of whom he himself does not altogether approve" (Frankfurt, 2005: 64).

⁹⁴ For Frankfurt's treatment of the topic, see his 'The importance of what we care about'.

⁹⁵ Frankfurt says that: "If there were someone so limited that he could really do nothing better with his life than devote it to avoiding the cracks in the sidewalk, then it would be better for him to care about that than to care about nothing" (Frankfurt, 2002: 252). I do not find this intuitive at all. Quite the contrary, the way I see it one can be so troubled by caring about such things that one gets oneself into serious trouble. So, contra Frankfurt, I would say that (depending on his overall character) it is possible that I would advice this person not to care at all. But this is not my topic here, let this serve only as a hint on to how one may approach the further topic 'Should one care about one's slips'.

- We have some kind of control over them.
- Slips have a phenomenal feel different from the feel of mere happenings.
- We (at least sometimes) regard people's slips as part of their character.

5.8 Conclusion

What consequences can we draw from these findings? In dealing with the questions concerning human agency we tend to concentrate on what it is for an agent to act in a full-blown way, where full-blown is considered intentionally. I don't want to claim that this is totally wrong or absurd, there is something fundamentally correct in thinking about action in this way, but one should keep in mind that dichotomies tend to overshadow fine nuances that ought to be captured. If only clear cut cases of intentional action were to count as agency, only a small piece would be left to make up the picture. I do believe that we include something important in our thoughts on agency if we take into account mistake in performance. We are not nonchalant towards whether, for instance, that we tend to act absentmindedly when we are around other people. I think it is commonsensical that such facts matters to us, and a theory of action ought to reflect this in order to draw a proper picture of agency.

Part 6 Why Davidson fails to capture slips as actions

6.0 Introduction

As is clear from the previous discussion mistakes in performance are not done intentionally, they are not done for a reason, and yet they have features that can incline us to call them actions. This picture contrasts sharply with that drawn by Donald Davidson's theory of action. For according to Davidson what makes an event into an action is that it is an action in virtue of being intentional under a description. In addition he holds the view that consequently actions are done for reasons. But as Peabody argues, and successfully at that, I believe, it seems to be a feature of slips that they refuse any attempt to render them intentional under descriptions.⁹⁶ In this part I will consider theory dependent reasons for casting slips as actions. My approach is to go by way of Peabody's critique of Davidson. Her claim is that he fails to account for slips as actions, because to render them actions he must find some description under which they are intentional.⁹⁷ The crux of the matter in the coming discussion is to grasp what it means for a performance *to be intentional under a description*. According to Peabody Davidson has three options to render mistakes intentional under a description: first, The Mistaken-Belief Method, second, The General Intention Approach⁹⁸, and third, The Accidental-Consequences Method. As we are about to discover Davidson may be successful at the task of capturing mistakes rooted in erroneous judgment as actions, but the method used to include such mistakes cannot be successfully transferred to cases of slips. I begin by providing a sketch of Davidson's account before I turn to Peabody's critique of it.⁹⁹

6.1 An Outline of Davidson's Theory of Action

This section offers a rough sketch of Davidson's theory of action as it is presented in *Essays on Actions and Events* with main focus on the essay "Agency". It is just meant as an

⁹⁶ In an introductory comment Peabody says about slips that "there is *often* no description that would render them intentional at all" (Peabody, 2005: 173, my emphasis). The use of 'often' indicates that there certainly are cases where some such description of slips can be found. However, Peabody leaves this part of the discussion in the dark. This is clear, in particular, from the Davidson-part of her text (he doesn't provide any examples of cases where he could manage to render a slip intentional under a description).

⁹⁷ Importantly, Davidson himself doesn't treat cases of mistake in performance; his discussion is restricted to cases of mistake in judgment. Peabody's strategy is to consider whether the options there are for him to render mistake in judgment-cases intentional under a description can successfully be transferred to cases of mistake in performance as well.

⁹⁸ This is my label, the other labels are provided by Peabody. I made the label out of convenience since Peabody lacked a label for her second category.

⁹⁹ Note that Peabody defends the general view that explanation-based theories (as that of Davidson) cannot capture slips as actions. Her critique of Davidson's account concerns his explanation-based interpretation of what it involves to conceive of a performance as intentional under a description.

introduction to the further discussion, I do not pretend to give a full description of his thoughts here. With this in mind, we can begin with a kind of summary of his position. Davidson's treatment of agency is as follows:

An event is an action if and only if it can be described in a way that makes it intentional.¹⁰⁰

Qualification 1: A person A is the agent of an event iff there is a description *d* of what he did that makes true a sentence that says he did it intentionally¹⁰¹

Davidson's original theory of intention faced the problem of cases of pure intending. If there are cases where one simply intends to do something without the occurrence of any action, how then shall one explain intention? When Davidson revised his theory of action, he added the criteria that the agent's reason must cause the intention 'in the right way'. It is a requisite for Davidson revised model that the performance in question has been caused 'in the right way' by the agent's primary reason.¹⁰²

Qualification 2: A person A has performed an action ϕ which is intentional under description *d* if it is caused 'in the right way' by the agent's prior intention to perform ϕ under description *d*.

According to Davidson 'a primary reason' -

Qualification 3: "consists of a pro attitude of the agent towards actions with a certain property, and a belief of the agent towards actions with a certain property, and a belief of the agent that A, under the description *d*, has that property" (Davidson, 2001: 5).

Davidson's 1971 paper "Agency" includes his attempt at capturing mistakes as actions. Though unwilling to include cases of tripping over a rug¹⁰³ as a piece of action, Davidson

¹⁰⁰ Donald Davidson, "Psychology as Philosophy", *Essays on Actions and Events*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 229.

¹⁰¹ See Davidson, "Agency", 46.

¹⁰² See Davidson, "Actions, Reasons and Causes" 9-19.

¹⁰³ As Davidson remarks the tripping over a rug may be done intentionally, but, he also says that it is normally not an action. See Davidson, "Agency", 44.

wants to conceive of the event of spilling a cup of coffee as an *action* even though the agent who spilled it thought that the cup contained tea. We have the following situation:

Intention: A intends to spill a cup of tea.

Belief: This cup contains tea.

Event: A spills a cup of coffee.

A person spills a cup of coffee falsely believing it to contain tea. How can we best describe this situation? It is normal to say that A spilled coffee even if someone jiggled A's hand. Since we speak of spilling in this way, that is, we say that 'A spilled coffee' even when A did not cause the event to happen (in the right way), there are followingly three different scenarios where it is correct to describe the situation as one where A spilled coffee (using normal linguistic conventions):

Scenario 1: A spilled coffee intentionally.

Scenario 2: A unintentionally spilled the cup of coffee thinking it was tea.

Scenario 3: someone jiggled A's hand so that A spilled coffee.

According to Davidson both the first and the second performance count as something A *did*, they are actions, while scenario 3 is not an action since someone jiggled A's hand. That scenario 3 is a mere happening and thus no action at all is uncontroversial, we can leave it out of the discussion. Scenario 1 is a clear cut case as well, the agent deliberately spilled coffee. Because our concern here is cases where an agent errs we can leave out this scenario as well. What we want to understand is Scenario 2. The problem here is that the agent spills another kind of fluid than he intended to. This example may strike one as confusing, at the surface one may be misled to believe that it is a mistake in performance. The reason for the possible confusion is that A here intends to perform a slip-like action, that is, he intends to do something that very often would look like as if he actually slipped. But, we must not let this mislead us to think that we are dealing with a mistake in performance, as we have seen such mistakes occur when the agent *simply* does something other than he intended to do (on the basis of a flawlessly formed intention), the agent in scenario 2, on the other hand, fails because he *misjudges* the content of the cup he wants to spill. His error, in other words, is to believe (falsely) that the cup of coffee is a cup of tea. Davidson's puzzle is how to describe this mix-up of fluids as an action, due to his view that actions are intentional under some

description, he must fit it into such a description. The question is: If a mistake shall count as an action, how then shall it be described? As Peabody correctly observes Davidson has put forward that the description must be *true* of ϕ (the above mentioned qualification 1), so he cannot claim that the event of spilling coffee is intentional under the description ‘spilling a cup of tea’ (which certainly describes the intention, but definitely is an *untrue* description of what actually happened, since A spilled coffee). Davidson’s further discussion of the matter is not very illuminating. As Peabody remarks, it is not clear how his interpretation of mistakes as intentional under a description is to be understood, in fact, he doesn’t spell out any method as to how one may render mistakes intentional. We shall soon consider the three alternative methods Peabody thinks he could have approved of. First, to clarify, imagine a perfectly normal case of intentional action: Sandra intends to read a book, she reads a book, thus Sandra’s action is intentional under the description ‘reading a book’. But the spilling-example is importantly different because the agent did *not* intend to spill *coffee*. While not accepting that the spilling of coffee when thinking it is tea is intentional under the description under which it is a mistake, that is ‘spilling a cup of coffee’, Davidson does think that what happened is intentional under *some* description. The crux of the matter is to get a hold on what this *some description* should be. What underlies Peabody’s discussion is Davidson’s claim that the agent’s performance is an action *in virtue of* being intentional under some description.¹⁰⁴ We may now consider the three options Peabody thinks Davidson has of rendering a mistake intentional under a description.

6.2 The Mistaken-Belief Method.

Peabody starts off her discussion here by proposing that Davidson may argue that mistakes are intentional through the Mistaken-Belief Method. As is clear from the above outline Davidson’s agent did not intentionally spill coffee under the description ‘spill coffee’. If there is some description under which the action is to be conceived of as intentional it cannot be either of these two: ‘A spilled coffee’ or ‘A spilled tea’, these solutions are both implausible. The former is not true of the intention and the latter is not true of the event. What Davidson can say is that the agent intentionally spilled what she *believed* to be tea. Due to the false

¹⁰⁴ Davidson’s claim here is what she bases her whole argument on, it should be mentioned though, that she has some reservations: “I will abstain here from the question whether Davidson accepts [this claim]. There is little question that it is common wisdom that Davidson accepts [it], but it is always a question whether common wisdom is wisdom or just common. I will nonetheless use some of the arguments Davidson provides that might be taken to support [the claim].” (Peabody, “Trying Slips: Can Davidson and Hornsby Account for Mistakes and Slips?” 183).

belief held by the agent, he can provide a description under which the act is intentional. We can formulate the Mistaken-Belief Method as follows:

MBM: A person A ϕ 's by mistake when he ϕ 's because he intends to ψ (thinking that ψ is a rational thing for him to do), and he has reasons to believe that his ϕ 'ing is a ψ 'ing (which it is not).¹⁰⁵

Even though this could help us to solve the puzzle of rendering a judgmental mistake intentional under a description, it would not hold for slips. This is so because there need not be any such false belief, as has been shown earlier on cases of mistake in performance are not based on false beliefs (see discussion in sec. 4.3). The point is illustrated in an example Peabody uses as a leitmotif throughout, call it the Pouring-Example (PE). PE says that Martin and Kerstin are thirsty, she wants water, and he wants orange juice. Gentleman as he is, Martin does the pouring. It is only that when he fills the glasses he pours orange juice into both his own glass and in Kerstin's. Now, imagine that Martin believed that the jug with orange juice in fact was the jug with water, if so, we could say that Martin's action is intentional under the description 'Martin poured what he thought was water into Kerstin's glass'. This is an example of mistake in judgment though. Compare this to the view that Martin need not hold such a false belief (that the orange juice jug is water the water jug). We may imagine a slightly different scenario, an occasion where Martin pours orange juice into Kerstin's glass because his mind is caught thinking about something totally different from the act he is now performing, say some unhappy incident that occurred to him at work earlier that day. What we have here is the situation that Martin holds no false belief about the orange juice being water, he just fails to pay attention to the task at hand because of his troubled mind. If this is not convincing, consider the analogous example: If I intend to push 2nd floor button in an elevator, but slip and press the alarm button instead, my error is not due to me falsely believing that the button I finally pushed in fact was the 2nd floor button. However, some may feel inclined to hold that I did have the belief that I pushed the intended 2nd floor button when I in fact pushed the alarm button.¹⁰⁶ Well, as is remarked by Peabody, it is not impossible that I had, but it is as likely that I had *no* belief concerning what I did. Even though I could have had the false belief about the button it does not follow that my performance was intentional under a description. A person that is tempted by the Mistaken-

¹⁰⁵ For Peabody's formulation see p. 185.

¹⁰⁶ This example is from Peabody p. 207, n3.

Belief solution might hold that the mistake in performance is perfectly understandable from first person perspective given the false belief. Because I do believe that the alarm button is the 2nd floor button, I take myself to act as I should. However, given the fact that there may be cases of slips where such a false belief is lacking, MBM fails to render slips intentional under a description.

6.3 The General Intention Approach.

Is it a possible strategy for Davidson to come up with a more *general* description of the mistaken action, and in this way render it intentional? In fact it is quite likely that this was the approach he had in mind when offering his own solution to the spilling-example, namely, that “spilling the coffee is the act of a person who does it by intentionally spilling the contents of his cup” (Davidson, 2001: 46). On this approach then, while it was not intentional to spill the exact liquid that in fact got spilled, it *was* intentional acting on part of the agent to spill that *something* which was the content of the cup. Hence Davidson’s proposal:

I am the agent if I spill the coffee meaning to spill the tea, but not if you jiggle my hand. What is the difference? The difference seems to lie in the fact that in one case, but not in the other, I am intentionally doing *something*. My spilling the contents of my cup was intentional, as it happens, this very same act can be redescribed as my spilling the coffee.¹⁰⁷

If we try to apply the General Intention Approach (GIA) to the slip-case in PE we get the interpretation that Martin’s mistake (pour orange juice instead of water) is intentional under the more general description ‘pouring in *some* liquid’ to Kerstin. A formulation of GIA could be as this:

GIA: If a person A has a specific intention to ϕ , he also has the more general intention to ψ . If A fails to ϕ , his act may be described as him intentionally doing ψ .

A defendant of this view may hold that there is a logical connection between the specific intention on the one hand, and the general one on the other. This approach is to take it that if A has the specific intention ‘pour water’, A necessarily has the general intention ‘pour some liquid’ as well, we thereby get to the result that even though Martin’s action was not intentional under the description ‘pouring in orange juice’, it was intentional under the general

¹⁰⁷ Davidson, “Agency”, 46, emphasis in original.

description ‘pouring in some liquid’. If Martin held the intention ‘pouring in some liquid’, we can say, by appeal to GIA, that he intentionally did just that. It follows from this approach that Martin intentionally poured the liquid *whatever* liquid it was, because he intended to pour that which was in the jug. The mixing up of the different kinds of liquids sounds rather innocent, compare an analogous case: Huey the hunter intends to shoot a deer. As things are, without Huey noticing, his fellow hunter has already shot a deer and comes towards him carrying it through the woods on his back. This appearing to Huey like a live deer is actually approaching, so he shoots the deer – that is, his fellow hunter. If we apply Davidson’s ‘right way’-criteria here, that is, we say that the intention caused the act in the right way, we would say that surely, Huey did not intentionally shoot his *companion*, but it is the case that he intentionally shot *something*. According to GIA Huey had a specific intention to shoot a deer, and a more general intention to shoot something, so Huey succeeded in intentionally shooting something. While being correct somehow, this looks weird. However, the general dilemma for GIA is the possibility of generalizing an action in such a degree that we end up calling action events that obviously not disserve the action-label. Peabody constructs an example where even the watering of one’s mouth turns out to be labelled intentional:

Take the intention to eat the steak and suppose that it causes your mouth to water. Your mouth watering is not normally regarded as an action. [Suppose] (...) that the intention to eat the steak implies the intention to do something. If so, however, then your intention to do something would cause your mouth to water. Since your mouth’s watering could be described as your doing something and so as your fulfilling your intention to do something, it would be intentional under some description and hence an action.¹⁰⁸

This is strikingly implausible; one would not want to let in these kinds of events into the category of doings – which they are clearly not. The problem with GIA is that if you intend to do something specific it doesn’t logically follow from that specific intention that you intend to do something more general. If this were the case it would have had the most absurd consequences, as was shown in the above example.

It should be clear that there is no logical relation between specific and general intentions, but is there an empirical relation to be found? Peabody, understandably, refutes this option as well. If Martin as a matter of fact has both the intention ‘pour Kerstin water’ and the intention

¹⁰⁸ Peabody, “Trying Slips: Can Davidson and Hornsby Account for Mistakes and Slips?” 187.

‘pour Kerstin some liquid’, our problem seems to disappear, because then we have found a way of rendering the mistake in performance intentional under some description. But as Peabody remarks this would be contingent upon that contingent fact. It is true that we can imagine to ourselves that Martin has present in his head both the specific and the more general intention, but it is even more likely that he lacks the general one.

Peabody’s next move is intricate. She holds that the above critique also serves to refute Davidson’s claim that “misreading a sign, misinterpreting an order, underestimating a weight, or miscalculating a sum”¹⁰⁹ are actions. First, notice what kind of mechanisms that are set to do the work in Davidson’s approach. Although Davidson thinks that the mistakes cannot be done intentionally *per se*, he does hold however that they can be described as intentional in some way, hence his view that: “making a mistake must in each case be doing something else intentionally.”¹¹⁰ Davidson’s strategy is to claim that, for instance, the person that misread a text, nevertheless, did read it. This seems promising. If I miscalculated when trying to solve the mathematical quiz in the morning paper, at least I can say that I intentionally did calculate, hence Davidson’s comment:

A misreading must be a reading, albeit one that falls short of what was wanted; misinterpreting an order is a case of interpreting it (and with the intention of getting it right).¹¹¹

Peabody reads Davidson as saying that “misreading the sign is intentional under the description ‘reading the sign’.”¹¹² Davidson himself does not say this explicitly, but it is, I think, reasonable to hold that that is what follows from the above quotes. Anyway, what Peabody bases her attack on here is to question what it is to misread, specifically, “why to misread a sign is to read it.”¹¹³ If I understand Peabody correct here her thought goes something like this. According to Davidson misreading a sign is intentional under the description ‘reading the sign’. The problem with this is that it is not clear why the misreading of a sign is to read it. If one answers the question ‘How do you know this?’ by saying ‘I know it because I read it in yesterday’s newspaper’ one implies, as I interpret Peabody’s view, that one has read it *correctly*. Peabody’s philosophical tool here is to split success verbs from failure verbs, we thereby get dichotomies like: read(success verb)/misread(failure verb),

¹⁰⁹ Davidson, “Agency”, 45.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 45.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 45.

¹¹² Peabody, “Trying Slips: Can Davidson and Hornsby Account for Mistakes and Slips?” 188.

¹¹³ Ibid., 188.

calculate(success verb)/miscalculate(failure verb), and so on. She thereafter makes a further split between the dichotomy cases and the cases where no such dichotomy is in function. Put differently, ‘read’ can be interpreted as opposed to ‘misread’, but sometimes the word is used without it being associated with either success or failure. Recall the newspaper-example; maybe I simply made some sounds based on the sentences I saw in the paper, we can imagine that an absent minded person could fumble like this. This is, of course, a very weak sense of understanding the word ‘read’. The absent minded agent does not read correctly, but he does not read incorrectly either. Peabody’s claim is that it is only with this way of seeing things that we can say with Davidson that it follows from a misreading that it was a reading:

Davidson is right to suggest that a case of misreading is a case of reading(correctly/incorrectly) just as a case of reading(correctly) is a case of reading(correctly/incorrectly). But it simply does not follow from this that the agent who intends to read(correctly) also intends to read(correctly/incorrectly).¹¹⁴

What is unsatisfactorily on Davidson’s account is that it doesn’t reflect the fact that the person who intends to read the newspaper intends to read the newspaper correct, period. As Martin would not be happy with pouring Kerstin anything but the water she wanted, the reading agent would not be happy with anything but a successful reading of the newspaper. Hence, it is not helpful to appeal to the thought of a more general intention, that is, specific intention: ‘agent A intends to read(correctly)’ and general intention: ‘A intends to read(correctly/incorrectly)’.

6.4 The Accidental-Consequences Method

As we have seen The General Intention Approach faces some serious problems. There is a third candidate for helping Davidson out, though. He could attempt at including mistakes as actions by what Peabody calls the Accidental-Consequences Method. The thought here is to argue that the agent intended to do something as a *means* to doing what she made a mistake in doing:

What is important is not that the agent intends to read the sign in the sense in which it is indifferent to being read correctly or incorrectly, but rather that she intends to read it in the sense in which reading it is a *means* to reading it correctly. She intends to read the sign in the sense, in which she intends to focus her eyes on the sign in order to read it.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 188.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 188-189, emphasis in original.

If we transfer this way of thinking to Davidson's spilling-example, we get the following proposal: A person has the intention 'spill a cup of tea', and he intends to spill the contents of his cup as a means to fulfil the intention 'spill a cup of tea'. The reason for why Davidson can accomplish to render a mistake intentional under a description using this method, is that the agent who intends to ϕ , but fails, may have successfully pulled off the act of intentionally ψ -ing which was his means to achieve ϕ . This is in a sense related to the first method put forward by Peabody (MBM), in which the agent performs an action that he mistakes for being an action it is not. He thinks he is ϕ 'ing, when he in reality is ψ 'ing (due to a false belief). For also here, in the Accidental-Consequences Method (ACM), we can see that the heart of the claim is that one performs an action that is not the action that one really intends to perform, but this time not because one has a false belief, but because one performs an action that is meant to realize the act that one intends to perform (but that one fails to realize). What is proposed is, therefore, the following: that the agent ψ 's as *a means to* ϕ 'ing, but in the action fails to ϕ , but nonetheless succeeds to ψ . The case is therefore not that he acts on a false belief as in MBM, but that he attempts to perform some action by *means of another action*, which succeeds (even though the intended action fails). For example as follows: You stand in the foyer of an apartment-building and intend to get to the fourth floor in order to visit a friend. In the performance of this action ϕ (getting to the fourth floor) you first walk to the elevator, press a button, wait, then enter the elevator, before you press another button, wait again, and then walk through the doors – you can denote these events as the basic actions $\psi(1)$, $\psi(2)$, $\psi(3)$... and so forth. The sequence of ψ 's, then, are basic actions that are performed *in order to* perform the action ϕ . But in the execution of the intention, you do not get to the fourth floor, and this even though you execute the sequence of basic actions: you walk to the elevator, you press the button, you wait, you enter, you press the button – the wrong button, but you press it, and eventually land on the wrong floor. Hence, the example event in question cannot be described as intentional under the description of getting to the fourth floor, as the agent in question does not get to the fourth floor, but it can be described as intentional (or so is the hypothesis) under the description of the basic actions. We can spell out the formula describing the Accidental-Consequences Method as follows:

ACM: If a person A intends to ϕ but fails to do so, it can still be the case that his failing to ϕ is an action, if he intended to ϕ by intentionally ψ 'ing which he pulled off successfully.¹¹⁶

But as Peabody remarks:

Does the agent *really* spill the cup of tea *by* spilling the contents of the cup? Or is spilling the cup of tea (coffee) something she *simply* does by doing nothing else?¹¹⁷

Independent from whether one accepts ACM or not, it *is* a possible way out for Davidson to conceive of mistakes as intentional under a description. Anyway, our main concern here is on mistake in performance, and mistake in performance cannot be rendered intentional by ACM.

6.5 Conclusion

In this part we have seen that Davidson may render mistakes due to a flawed judgment intentional under a description, but that the methods used to do so (MBM, GIA, ACM) cannot help us render slips intentional. Peabody's argument throughout, independent from which method one chooses, is that the intention, somehow, is sensitive to formulations.¹¹⁸ To clarify, if you have the intention 'spill my cup of coffee', it is not thereby the case that you also have the intention 'jiggle a cup so that the content of it gets spilt'. The latter is importantly different from the former. We could imagine a case where the latter gets realized while the former doesn't. If an evil demon stops the time and switches the cup in your hand with a different, but similar cup (which, of course, is not your cup), then the latter intention will be executed if you spill the contents of the (new) cup, but the former intention is not realized, because it is not *your* cup. The main point here is that one must find a description under which the action (the mistake) is intentional, that is, one must *reformulate* it, but, surely, that is to change it, and how could this be? It seems that slips escape all such attempts at rendering them intentional, they simply are something the agent did *not* intend to do.

¹¹⁶ For Peabody's formulation see, p. 189.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 189, emphasis in original.

¹¹⁸ Compare Davidson's comment "[H]appenings cease to be actions or behaviour only when there is no way of describing them in terms of intention" (Davidson, "Psychology as Philosophy", 229), hence Davidson must render slips intentional under a description if they shall be counted as actions.

Part 7 Peabody's Transformation of Hornsby's Account

7.0 Introduction

We have seen that Davidson's account fails to capture slips as actions because there is no straightforwardly satisfactory way in which one can render slips intentional under a description. The solution to the problem that this represents, Peabody believes, is to create a definition of action that does not involve the notion of intention, as Davidson's theory does. So, faced with the dilemma of slips, she instead of refusing to see slips as actions takes the alternative route of attempting to account for actions in a way that can account for slips. This can be done, Peabody claims, through the use of Jennifer Hornsby's theory of action, if it becomes modified in such a manner that it rejects the main element in the Davidsonian doctrine.¹¹⁹ This is not the only challenge in using Hornsby's account, though. Another challenge is that it operates with a notion of "trying" that is thoroughly ambiguous - at least that is what Peabody argues. To achieve the goal of successfully accounting for slips as actions through the use of Hornsby's theory, Peabody has therefore to radically transform the theory in question. She does this through distinguishing between two different notions of "trying" that she finds to be present in Hornsby's theory - tryingⁱ and trying^a. Where the former is a mental concept, and is best described as intentional-like, and the latter is non-mental, and has the feature of being action-like. And then, followingly, formulating the theory through the use of the latter concept - trying^a.

In the following I will refer to Peabody's variant of Hornsby's account as Transformed Hornsby (TH). I begin this part by giving an overview of Hornsby's account, then I set out to show Peabody's version of it.

7.1 Hornsby's Theory of Action

I will offer quite a rough guide to the basic insights of Hornsby here.¹²⁰ What's important for our discussion is what lies in her notion of trying, and so I will specifically focus on this notion. Hornsby's account can be given a quintessential expression through the thought that a person moves his finger by *trying* to move his finger. Which is to say that, for her, descriptions of actions should be given in terms of tryings. It is always the case that when you

¹¹⁹ It should be said that Peabody is well aware that Hornsby describes her account as an extension of Davidson's.

¹²⁰ For Hornsby's own treatment, see her *Actions*, in particular chap. 3.

do something that what you do is done by trying to do that very thing. On Hornsby's view even successfully performed actions are based on tryings. Part of Hornsby's insight is to capture the difference there is between a person's doing of something, and the movements of a bodily part. The distinction is shown by use of transitive and intransitive verbs respectively. The classic distinction between arm raising and rising shows this difference especially well, as we spell the word differently depending on which time of the verb that counts in that particular situation. However, there are cases where the spelling can't help us out, Hornsby therefore marks off the use by adding transcripts. We can sketch out how Hornsby distinguishes bodily movements as follows:

- 1: Transitive verb – What a person does – Arm raising – person moves_t leg.
- 2: Intransitive verb – What a bodily part does – Arm rising – leg_i moves.

As we can see the distinction between the transitive and the intransitive form of the verb is reflected in the raising/rising case, but it is not manifest in the moves-leg case, therefore the subscripts "t" and "i". The former is what we normally think of as actions, that is, bodily movements performed by an agent, as for instance some person's act of moving his leg or bowing his head, while the latter refers to the movement of the body, for instance that a person's leg moves and the like which may not be acts performed by a person. As far as is possible I will try to avoid subscripts. I treat the transitive cases as default, intransitive uses will be marked off though.

One important thing that Hornsby has in common with Davidson, in addition to the other things mentioned, is that on Hornsby's and Davidson's accounts, actions are seen as basically movements of the body (that is, movements_t). Hornsby takes this thought further than Davidson, though, by holding that it is a common denominator of actions that when acting agents are in fact *trying* to move their body in a particular way. To see this, imagine John kicking a ball. If you ask John how he did that, the answer is not 'by moving my foot like this' (imagine how John does a movement with his right foot to show you how). Hornsby's point is that John's action is not constituted by the actual movement of his foot, but by his *trying* to move his foot in that particular way.

It may seem unintuitive that every single act involves the feature of a trying. Often, maybe most of the time, when we act we need not try to do what we want to do, we simply do it.

Hornsby is well aware of this view – it is normally not the case that we experience any extra effort in the sense of a trying when we perform an action that is easy to pull off. One may feel inclined to say that it is more natural to invoke the notion of trying only in cases where we fail to, or struggle to do what we want. Hornsby considers this line of thought:

It seems that it is only appropriate for a speaker to say that an agent tried to ϕ , if, for some reason or other, the agent did not – or it was thought he did not – straightforwardly and easily ϕ .¹²¹

While accepting that tryings indeed do apply in such cases, Hornsby does not think that they *only* apply in these cases, quite to the contrary, tryings apply to every single action. According to her every intentional action is also a trying: “[A]gents do try to ϕ in every case where they set out to ϕ and succeed in ϕ -ing.”¹²² So, on Hornsby’s account trying is *not* limited to cases of failure or difficult action. Rather, you do try to act even when you have no problems during the performance of your act. It is not as if you don’t try to do what you do when you succeed. Successful acts must have been acts you *tried* to perform as well. That is, when acting you do whatever you expect will successfully lead to the fulfilling of the goal you want to reach, it is in this simple sense that you *try* to do what you do. If an action is as it should be on this account, an agent tries to act and this trying of his causes the wanted movement:

Every action is an event of *trying* or attempting to act, and every attempt that is an action precedes and causes a contractioni of muscles and a movementi of the body.¹²³

We can therefore summarize our partial exposition of Hornsby’s theory through the following features:

- Actions is described in terms of tryings.
- All actions are acts of trying (when an agent does something intentionally, he tries to do that thing).
- Tryings cause the body to move.

¹²¹ Jennifer Hornsby, *Actions*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), 34.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 35.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 33.

7.2 Transformed Hornsby

In order to account for slips as actions Hornsby's theory must be adjusted to fit that purpose. This is what Peabody sets out to do by making up the account I have chosen to dub 'Transformed Hornsby' (TH). Peabody's discussion centres around two different definitions Hornsby has provided of 'an action' (Peabody's versions in brackets):

(α) An action is a person's doing something intentionally. (Or: A performance is an action just in case there is a description under which it is intentional.)¹²⁴

(β) An action is a person's doing something in *attempting* to do something (Or: A performance is an action just in case there is a description under which it is the agent's trying^a to do something and it causes her body to move.)¹²⁵

(α) represents the view held by Davidson that was refuted in part 5, while (β) is the definition favoured by Peabody. I will keep referring to these definitions throughout. Now, due to her view that we should see slips as actions Peabody wants to allow "room for actions that are intentional under *no* description,¹²⁶" thus she has to motivate a sharp distinction between (α) and (β) (since on (α) a performance is an action just in case there is a description under which it is intentional). In her commenting on the above definition (save the brackets added by Peabody) Hornsby writes that "criterion (α) of actionhood might be replaced with (β).¹²⁷" This comment is criticised by Peabody, she thinks that it is unclear exactly what Hornsby is committed to since what she says is ambivalent. Peabody remarks that "the use of 'replace' suggests that there is competition between (α) and (β); the use of 'might' indicates a lack thereof.¹²⁸" In her 'On What's Intentionally Done' Hornsby deduces (β) from (α), but, as is Peabody's concern, she couldn't (mind you - if she wanted to, Hornsby does no such attempt) make the deduction in the converse direction. We will return to what comes out of the distinction between the definitions (α) and (β) later, for now, we will consider how Peabody treats the notion of try.

¹²⁴ Peabody, "Trying Slips: Can Davidson and Hornsby Account for Mistakes and Slips?" 201.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 201.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 205, emphasis in original.

¹²⁷ Hornsby, *Actions*, 60. Peabody, "Trying Slips: Can Davidson and Hornsby Account for Mistakes and Slips?" 201.

¹²⁸ Peabody, "Trying Slips: Can Davidson and Hornsby Account for Mistakes and Slips?" 201.

Peabody's thesis is that we can capture slips as actions by help of the notion she dubs trying^a. We must therefore grasp exactly what this notion is.¹²⁹ Briefly, Peabody creates two concepts of trying, one intention-like variant and one action-like variant. It is through the latter notion that Peabody manages to divorce Hornsby's action theory from explanation-based theories of action, and establish TH.¹³⁰ Recall PE. It goes something like this: Martin and Kerstin are thirsty and want something to drink. Kerstin wants water, while Martin wants orange juice. When filling Kerstin's glass Martin pours from the orange juice jug (even though he really intends to give her what she asked for). Hence Martin's performance is a mistake in performance – he simply does something different from that he intends to do (pours orange juice instead of water). Peabody's claim is that what Martin did was an action, he 'poured orange juice'. If Kerstin had ordered orange juice, this would have been a standard case of intentional action, hence it would have been intentional under the description 'pour orange juice'. He slipped and poured orange juice instead of water, therefore we can obviously not make use of that description. A defendant of the doctrine that for an event to be an action it must be intentional under a description could claim that Martin's slip was an action because it can be made intentional under a description that he tried to pour water. Peabody rejects this option, but I will postpone this for the time being, we will see why Peabody rejects it later on. First, Peabody's question is how we shall understand what Martin did in this story. Can we render it intentional under a description at all? That is, can we say that Martin tried to pour water for Kerstin? This is not entirely unproblematic, because trying is ambiguous. At least that is what Peabody argues. She holds that in cases of slips it can be argued that an agent tries to perform two different acts. In the pouring-example (PE), we may operate with both **Act 1**: Martin tried to pour water for Kerstin, and **Act 2**: Martin tried to pour orange juice for Kerstin. The agent does not merely try to do the action he intends and wants to perform (**Act 1**), but he also tries to do what he manifestly does (**Act 2**). This may sound obscure, but it is not. What Peabody is getting at is that since what Martin intended and wanted to do was to pour water we intuitively think that he tried to do so by lifting the jug and so on, but because what he in fact did was to pour orange-juice, it is reasonable to say that he tried to pour orange juice as well (**Act 2**).¹³¹ On Hornsby's account **Act 2**, opens up for two options, either, that Martin never gets to fulfil his pouring of orange juice in Kerstin's glass, say, he is stopped while holding the jug with orange juice over her glass, maybe she says something

¹²⁹ It is far from clear what exactly try^a amounts to, I will provide a critique of the notion in part 8.

¹³⁰ In original Hornsby's theory is a theory of action explanation, so I doubt whether she would accept Peabody's variant of her account. However, for the sake of the argument I accept Peabody's claims.

¹³¹ Note that Peabody does not claim that Hornsby *must* conceive of the case in this way, see Peabody note 27.

like: ‘Ups! Look what you are doing. That is the orange juice jug, but I want water, you know’, or, that Martin, as is the case in PE, he in fact pours orange juice into Kerstin’s glass. Recall that on Hornsby’s account the notion of ‘trying’ is not reserved for cases of failure, on her account all successful performances are tryings too. This turns out to be problematical because it follows from this that, since Martin first, tried to pour orange juice and in fact poured orange juice, then he succeeded in pouring orange juice. The reason for why this is an unlucky result is that despite his intention and his wish to pour water we have ended up saying that Martin has successfully poured orange juice for Kerstin. This interpretation of ‘trying’ is far more confusing than helpful, in Peabody’s words: “to allow it in a theory is to open the proverbial can of worms.”¹³² What more is, it seems to be sensitive to the implausible view that whenever ‘she ϕ ’s’ is a true description of what an agent is doing, it is also the case that the agent is trying to ϕ – call this: Objection (W). However, Peabody claims that what *she* says is not sensitive to (W). She offers two counterexamples to (W):

First,

Davidson’s agent who flips the switch to switch on a light thereby unintentionally frightening the burglar. Were one to interrupt her switching, it would be inappropriate to say “Look! You were trying to frighten the burglar.”¹³³

And second,

Consider an agent who intends to flip the switch, but who does not intend to switch on a light (perhaps she does not know what the switch is for). It is not as clearly counterintuitive to say “Look! You were trying to switch on the light” especially in a case where she actually intends not to switch on the light because her grandmother is sleeping in the room.¹³⁴

The reason for why it is absurd to appeal to (W) in the first example is that even though it is a true description of the agent that he is frightening the burglar, it is not the case that this action of his was something he actively tried to do, explicitly: he did frighten the burglar without *trying* to do so. It is most likely that the agent had no idea whatsoever that a burglar in fact was there, when switching on the lights one does normally not even think of the possibility of

¹³² Ibid., 196-197.

¹³³ Ibid., 197.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 197.

there being a burglar present at all. What concerns the second example it is not satisfactorily to apply (W) here either because the agent wants to avoid turning on the lights she is about to turn on. It is a true description of the agent that she is about to switch on the light, because the flip she intends to switch happens to be a light switch (maybe she fancies to turn switches?). But it is not true of her that she is trying to turn on the lights, in fact, that is the last thing she wants to do since her grumpy granny is sound asleep in the very same room.

What Peabody wants us to notice through these examples is that there exists such a use of the notion of try that is appealed to in the case of our **Act 2** above, without it being sensitive to (W). The examples, however, serve only to show that there is a notion of ‘try’ that is not affected by (W), Peabody offers other reasons for why we can speak of two acts in cases as PE. For catching up, it seems reasonable in PE-cases to speak of two different tryings, first, ‘pour water’ and second ‘pour orange juice’. How does Peabody solve this puzzle? Her move is to separate the events by in the first case to make an appeal to the mental, and in the second appeal to the manifest event:

We are inclined to say that Martin was trying to pour in water for Kerstin because of his state of mind as well as the way in which it partially managed to get realized. We are inclined to say that Martin was trying to pour in orange juice for Kerstin by focusing on what he was actually doing.¹³⁵

In other words: In PE we feel like saying that Martin in **Act 1** tried to pour water due to his mental state, that is he *intended* so to act. In **Act 2** we say that he tried to pour orange juice because of what he actually did perform. In short, it is a distinction between mental-like tryings and action-like tryings, that is, *two* concepts of trying. Peabody dubs these two concepts, tryingⁱ and trying^a.¹³⁶ According to Peabody these concepts should not be clashed together, “the two tryings are really not on a par.”¹³⁷ Peabody sets out to disambiguate trying as follows:

(Tⁱ) Tryingⁱ – “are mental (or intention-like),¹³⁸” the agent does something because he intends to do it.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 197.

¹³⁶ See Peabody p. 198-205 for her own introduction of these concepts of trying.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 197.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 199.

Formula: Agent A triesⁱ to ϕ only if the agent does something ψ because A intends to ϕ . The formula allows that there are cases where ψ does not pick out any action.¹³⁹

(T^a) Trying^a – “are not mental (or intention-like)” (Peabody, 2005: 199); “is the basic action that starts the chain of consequences.”¹⁴⁰

Further,

“[I]n fact those tryings [the context defines this unambiguously as a trying^a] that are not causally mute just *are* actions” (Peabody, 2005: 199). I.e. trying^a just is the action in question – the basic physical movement of the body. Now, according to Peabody Hornsby’s way of understanding trying is as trying^a.

We can convince ourselves that the agent tries^a to do something in this sense not necessarily by inspecting his intentions or his mind more generally, but rather by reflecting on breakdown cases, where his activity is interrupted in some way.¹⁴¹

She illustrates the distinction between trying^a and tryingⁱ by a version of Davidson’s climber.¹⁴² The example is also supposed to show that if a person A triesⁱ to ϕ by doing ψ , because A intends to ϕ , it is not necessarily the case that A’s ϕ -ing picks out an action:

A mountaineer intends to let go of his partner whom he holds on a rope. This thought makes him so nervous (his hands begin to sweat) that the rope slides out of his hands. Even though the mountaineer did not perform an action here – he was tryingⁱ to do something. All of this happened as he was tryingⁱ (in the sense of “had the intention”) to let go of his partner. But the mountaineer did not try^a to let go of his partner in the sense that matters to Hornsby. There is no action done here – and no trying^a either. Although the agent was tryingⁱ to do something, he did not yet manage to set out to doing it – he did not try^a to do anything.¹⁴³

What is important to notice here is that it is the notion of trying^a which allows us to say that the climber didn’t do anything. If I understand Peabody correctly, I take it that the two notions of trying can be illustrated as follows: tryingⁱ, the climber intends to loosen his hold of his

¹³⁹ Ibid., 198.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 198.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 198.

¹⁴² For Davidson’s original example see his “Freedom to Act”, 79.

¹⁴³ Peabody, “Trying Slips: Can Davidson and Hornsby Account for Mistakes and Slips?”, 199.

fellow climber. He does not trying^a to loosen his hold: “Although the agent was tryingⁱ to do something, he did not yet manage to set out to doing it – he did not trying^a to do anything” (Peabody, 2005: 199). Peabody holds that

There is a logical connection between intending to ϕ and tryingⁱ to ϕ , and there is no independent reason to believe that any additional event is picked out. If ‘a tryingⁱ to ϕ ’ picks out any event, it is the same event that is picked out by ‘a intends to ϕ ’.¹⁴⁴

In other words, to tryⁱ is to intend. The two notions pick out the very same phenomenon and event.

So, in the case of PE, on Peabody’s view, even though we are inclined to say that Martin did try to pour water for Kerstin, there is no reason to claim that this trying is a causally separate event from his intending to pour water:

It is most plausible to think that Martin only triesⁱ to pour in water but not that he tries^a. Were Kerstin to yank out a jug from Martin’s hand, she would hardly say ‘Look! You were trying to pour in water into my glass!’¹⁴⁵

Martin’s actual performance reveals the standard-slip as it is described in the psychological literature: “A slip is the error that occurs when a person does an action that is not intended.”¹⁴⁶ Were we to interpret the act in different terms, as for instance the way that seems to be indicated by Hornsby’s causal approach, we would plausibly think of the two tryings (pour water and pour orange juice) as causally related. Because of this we would end up having two causal chains going on as this scenario illustrates:

Martin intends to pour water – Martin tries to pour water – slip – Martin tries to pour orange juice – Martin’s arm pours orange juice.

With Peabody’s disambiguation of trying, we get this competing scenario:

Martin intends to pour water – slip – Martin tries to pour orange juice – Martin’s arm pours

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 199.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 199.

¹⁴⁶ Norman, “Categorization of Action Slips”, 1. See also Reason’s classic *Human Error*, 1990, especially chapter 1-3.

orange juice.

The interpretation provided by Peabody here manages to capture the slip in a reasonable way because it maps the slip down between intention and action.

I said earlier on that I would return to whether an act could be rendered intentional under a description in cases where the agent was trying to do something (as in PE). We can now spell out why this is not possible. The question is: How can we possibly render Martin's action intentional under a description? According to TH there are two options here, either applying tryingⁱ or by applying trying^a, that is, was the agent, in PE: Martin, trying in the former, or in the latter sense? The former is an intentionalist-approach, we can keep the claim that for an event to be an action is for it to be intentional under some description, but: "the concept of tryingⁱ does not even require that a performance is caused by tryingⁱ to be an action." This is not really¹⁴⁷ an option then (for one who wants to allow slips to be actions). So, how about the alternative of appealing to trying^a? Peabody says: "Martin's slip is an action not because of what he intended to do (not because he was tryingⁱ to pour water for Kerstin) but because he was trying^a to pour orange juice for her."¹⁴⁸ With appeal to tryⁱ we cannot capture slips as actions. Try^a, on the other hand, can allow slips as actions, but they cannot possibly be rendered intentional under a description. It follows from this, on Peabody's account, that the doctrine of claiming that for an event to be an action it must be intentional under some description must be rejected.

Now, recall (α) and (β). Peabody interprets these definitions of agency as follows:

According to (α), what it is to be an action is related to the question whether the performance is intentional under a description. This question is likely to be decided by invoking the agent's reasons.¹⁴⁹,

According to (β) (...) the agent's *mind* is not in sight. All that (β) appeals to is the agent's trying to do something (...) trying in this sense (trying^a) is not something mental at all (Peabody, 2005: 202, emphasis in original).

¹⁴⁷ Peabody, "Trying Slips: Can Davidson and Hornsby Account for Slips?" 200.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 200.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 201.

Hornsby thinks that (α) and (β) are conceptually linked through the following principles:

(1) If someone did something *intentionally*, then there is an *explanation* of why she did it, which mentions that she thinks something and that she wants something – that is which mentions a *belief* and a *desire* (or *pro-attitude*) of hers.¹⁵⁰

(2) Someone who has a *belief* and a *desire* that are relevantly related, has a *reason* for doing a particular thing. (If, for example, she believes that she can bring it about that q by Φ -ing, and she desires that it be the case that q, then she has a reason to Φ .)¹⁵¹

(3) A person who acts because she has a *reason* to do some particular thing, *attempts* to do that thing.¹⁵²

Peabody spells out that from (1)-(3) it follows that:

(4) If someone did something intentionally, then she attempted to do that thing.¹⁵³

According to 1-4 we can see that (β) follows from (α), but the opposite cannot be the case. Peabody inverts (4) into:

(5) If someone attempted to do something, then she did that thing intentionally?¹⁵⁴

Is (5) true? (Compare (W)). If (5) was true we could infer (α) from (β), but this cannot be so, as Peabody remarks, for agent A to try to F, on Hornsby's account, it is necessary but not sufficient for A to F intentionally. In addition a 'right way' criteria should also be applied to allow the possibility of making true that the agent acted intentionally.

Anyway, Peabody's main concern here is the following:

¹⁵⁰ Hornsby, *Actions*, 57, emphasis in original.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 57, emphasis in original.

¹⁵² Ibid., 58, emphasis in original.

¹⁵³ Peabody, "Trying Slips: Can Davidson and Hornsby Account for Mistakes and Slips?" 202.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 202.

Suppose that the agent did something because she tried to do it, where this is understood in terms of her trying^a to ϕ causing (in the right way) her body to $\phi(i)$ (but not in terms of her tryingⁱ to ϕ . Has the agent ϕ ed intentionally? I submit that there is *no reason* for Hornsby to think so.¹⁵⁵

First of all, that a person attempts to do something, does not mean that she *intends* to perform the manifest action in question, (that a person does something does not necessarily imply that the agent intends to do that thing), consider the phenomenon of mistake in performance. This insight is captured in TH by the appeal to trying^a, that is, when an agent attempts to do something, he is trying^a to do that thing. What we have here is a pure extensional version of action, a non-intentionalist approach. In other words, this concept of trying is divorced of affiliation with the dimension of intention. To make this utterly clear, to try^a means simply that you bodily try to perform this or that action. And moreover, it is precisely by use of this concept that TH can define what an action is. Something that means that (5) – that a person attempted to do something, that is attempted to perform an action – does not lead to the consequence that he or she intended to do that something, only – simply and purely – that he or she tried^a to do it. As I remarked above, the present view is bluntly extensional. The mental part of actions is cut off from the definition of agency. Peabody holds (β) but rejects (α) in order to, in her opinion, be able to label slips actions. A defendant of (α) would be forced to say that slips are not actions, because slips are not intentional under any description. There simply is no description under which a slip is intentional. This is what makes (β) a promising alternative for Peabody. A defendant of (β) can call slips actions. A natural question is how a non-intentionalist like Peabody can provide a criterion for what makes a performance an action. Peabody comes up with the alternative of switching ‘intentional under a description’ with ‘voluntary under a description’:

(v) The agent ϕ ’s voluntarily (the agent’s performance is voluntary under the description ‘ ϕ ’) just in case the agent tries^a to ϕ and his trying^a to ϕ causes (in the right way) his body to ϕ i.¹⁵⁶

On this account, slips are regarded as actions because even though they cannot be rendered intentional under a description, there are descriptions under which they are voluntary.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 203, emphasis in original.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 204.

Features of TH:

- An action is not explained on basis of reasons-explanation
- For an event to be an action it must be voluntary under a description

7.3 Conclusion

In order to capture slips as actions Peabody not only rejects Davidson's doctrine that for an event to be an action it must be intentional under some description, but she explicitly rejects any link to the mental aetiology as well. This is done by her introduction of the wholly extensional concept of trying^a. My aim here has been to show the features of try^a as Peabody conceives of them. It is my opinion though that this notion of tryings is highly problematical. In what follows I will offer my critique of it.

Part 8 A Critique of Peabody's Account

8.0 Introduction

We have seen that Peabody transforms Hornsby's account into one that can include slips as actions. She accomplishes this transformation through a disambiguation of Hornsby's central notion of trying, and by the introduction of what she has dubbed 'trying^a'. This new theory holds that what makes an event into an action, is that it is *voluntary* under a description (voluntary and not intentional), where the concept of "voluntary" is defined by means of the concept of trying^a. In this part I offer a critique of Peabody's account.

8.1 Why Trying^a Fails to do What it is Supposed To Do

Peabody makes a sharp distinction between analysing what an action is *as such* and action explanation. Her concern is the former. On Peabody's account what makes an action an action is independent from how it is explained. Recall the two definitions of action we discussed in part 7:

(α) An action is a person's doing something intentionally (Hornsby, 1996: 55). (Or: A performance is an action just in case there is a description under which it is intentional.)¹⁵⁷

(β) An action is a person's doing something in *attempting* to do something (Hornsby, 1996: 60) (Or: A performance is an action just in case there is a description under which it is the agent's trying^a to do something and it causes her body to move.)¹⁵⁸

Peabody adheres to (β) and rejects (α). It is important to notice that to embrace (β) is to support a purely extensional interpretation of action. Put differently: It is to wave goodbye to the mental aspect of action. Peabody herself describes the view as

a departure from the notion that to be an action is to be intentional under some description, and more generally, from the view that seeks to understand the status of an action in its mental aetiology.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 201.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 201.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 201.

Her target is those philosophers whom she labels as ‘intentionalist thinkers’. I will label Peabody as a non-intentionalist (NI). Intentionalist thinkers (IT) hold that all actions have intentional explanations; an example of such a view is represented in Davidson’s account, criticised in part 6. Non-intentionalists, in opposition to Davidson and his followers, holds that for a performance to be an action of an agent, it need not be intentional – in any aspect.

In sum, Peabody’s theory of action, that is TH, must be understood as a theory of action in sharp contrast to a theory of action explanation. Peabody says this explicitly: “What makes an action an action is independent of the way it is explained.¹⁶⁰” Her only task is, therefore, to give a definition of action, not to present us with a way of explaining how actions are produced. In doing this, she has come up with a rather extreme position. But because Peabody offers such a detailed and thorough argumentation (in addition, she hasn’t got a very polemical style) one may miss how extremely radical her position happens to be. In her own words:

[W]ith the replacement of (α) by (β), the corresponding extreme position becomes conceivable, viz the claim that it might be possible for our actions never to have intentional explanations as a matter of fact.¹⁶¹

I aim to show how radical this in fact is. An action is the performance of an agent as opposed to the mere movement of a molecule or the ticking of a clock, and what we are attempting to get at through a theory of action is the elements that are peculiar to human behaviour. This means that in defining an action, what one is defining is something that belongs to the core of what it means to be a human. A *purely* extensional concept of action is incapable of telling us anything about all of this, as such a conceptual tool is incapable of distinguishing between the mechanical movements of a clock’s pendulum and what we deliberately do when we move our arms. What I am saying is that on Peabody’s account important features of being an agent are simply left out. In order to understand how this is so, let us examine the notion of trying^a and its function a little more closely:

Though it is detailed and thorough, Peabody’s treatment of the concept of trying^a is also both messy and, I will claim, non-intuitive. According to Peabody trying^a is a conceptual tool that

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 206.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 205.

is meant to enable us to define what an action *is*. Importantly, it is *not* meant to *explain* an action, that is, it is not meant to enable us to say anything about *why* an action takes place as it does (rather, she wants to answer the question: What are actions?). All it is supposed to do is to tell us whether a given event is an action, or not. (I take it as incontrovertible that something that defines a phenomenon sets forth characteristics upon which one is able to identify the phenomenon in question). Peabody takes great pains to emphasize this point, and it is an integral part of her overall strategy to define slips as actions, that one has to distinguish in-between a theory that defines actions (a theory of action) and a theory of action explanation. See, for example, the following quote: “What is required for an account of action to capture slips as actions is that it not confounds the account of action explanation with the account of action.”¹⁶² It is therefore rather peculiar that she does not use trying^a in the manner that she herself programmatically says it is to be used. Ironical as it may be, it seems to be the case that the concept of trying^a that is produced by means of a disambiguation of Hornsby’s concept of “trying” itself becomes ambiguous in the hands of Peabody. My reason for claiming this is that at one point she explicitly states that a person’s trying^a to do something is what *causes* the movements of the body in question, something which is to say that the trying^a in question of course is what ought to explain the action in question.

8.2 The Impossibility of a Non-mental Concept of Trying

How can trying^a cause one’s body to do anything at all when it is defined as the simple motion of one’s body? Peabody writes that she interprets Hornsby’s notion of trying as trying^a, but this is not very likely to be correct since trying^a is independent from the mental aetiology while Hornsby’s trying, in contrast, is a mental concept. We have seen recounted earlier on Hornsby’s account that every action involves a trying to do what the performance amounts to even when the action is successfully pulled off. Her point is that even though you manage to do what you want to do, you still *try* to do it first, it is just that, in cases where you reach your ends, the trying is successful. On the other hand, for instance in a case of paralysis, where you fail to bring about any movement at all, Hornsby would still say that you tried, that is, you did act despite the fact that your body never as much as moved an inch. Actions, on Hornsby’s account are interior mental events. This insight is at the heart of her theory.

Now, how can the general structure of Hornsby’s theory be kept in place when her concept of trying is exchanged for Peabody’s concept of trying^a?

¹⁶² Ibid., 206.

In Peabody's interpretation of Hornsby's concept of trying, she isolates, as we have seen, two senses of the term: trying^a and tryingⁱ. She then uses the former of them, trying^a, to formulate her own theory of action (TH), a theory that is created with the view in mind to give slips the status of actions. Something it can do, according to Peabody, because the notion of trying^a is a specifically non-mental concept. It does not refer to intention at all in order to define the notion of action, but to a purely *physical, or bodily* notion of trying. (The problem, as Peabody sees things, with reference to intention in defining action is that slips are precisely *not* intentional.) Peabody defines it at one point thus: "Trying^a is the basic action that starts the chain of consequences."¹⁶³ And she goes on to say the following:

We can convince ourselves that the agent tries^a to do something in this sense not necessarily by inspecting his intentions or his mind more generally, but rather by reflecting on breakdown cases, where his activity is interrupted in some way (as in Kerstin's yanking the jug from Martin) [when he tries to pour orange juice to her in stead of the water she asked for].¹⁶⁴

The point with this last remark, that trying^a comes most clearly to the fore when we consider breakdown cases, is, I believe, that it is at this point that it is most natural for us to actually denote the physical motions of the agent as "a trying". For the notion of trying is, as I have commented upon earlier on, most readily used when we do not see our action through, when we fail, or are in the process of learning to perform the movements in question. We do not normally say that we try to do something when we simply do it. But the latter differs from Hornsby's account where even straight forward cases of successfully 'simply doing something' are cases of tryings. To clarify, Hornsby makes the point that there is a sense in which we can be said to always try to do something, whether we succeed in doing it, or not. The following is a summing up of her account provided by Hornsby herself:

If there is an action that is someone's intentionally moving his body, then that someone tries to move his body...Moreover his trying to move it is his moving it...Trying to move the body if it is not an action is an internal event, possibly with external signs...But it need make little difference to trying *per se* whether or not they are actions...So the tryings that are actions also are internal events.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶³ Ibid., 198.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 198.

¹⁶⁵ Hornsby, *Actions*, 44-45.

To spell this out, for Hornsby every act is *identical* to the trying, what is important to notice here is that the trying does not *precede* the act.¹⁶⁶ This is so, but what matters the most to us is that in Hornsby's view, as it is put forth in *Actions*, our acts does not essentially involve our bodies' movements. Tryings (i.e. actions) are interior processes, and it is these processes that cause our bodies to move. Observe that Hornsby's point rests, contra Peabody's, on *a mental understanding of trying*. Which brings me back to Peabody and to what will be the main point of my critique: How can a bodily interpretation of trying be said to cause the action in question? When you approach this question, keep close in mind one thing, and that is that the notion of action is approached quite differently by Peabody than it is by Hornsby, and this is so even though Peabody claims that her theory is a slight variation of Hornsby's. Through her theory, Peabody is attempting to distance herself from intentional, that is, mental, understandings and definitions of actions. She could therefore in no manner speaking agree to Hornsby's hypothesis that actions are interior and mental. Actions, therefore, to Peabody, has to be seen as what we conventionally identify as an action, that is, the movements of our body. Now, it is true that Peabody never states as much, but given her position it is hard to see how else she could conceive of it. The bottom line with this is that given Peabody's eclectic use of Hornsby's theory, and her view of actions as the movements of our bodies, she paints herself into an absurd corner: Peabody namely keeps Hornsby's thought that bodily motions are caused by tryings, understandably with a view to this, she then distances herself from the thought that actions are identified as tryings, but problematically, she defines tryings as *action-like* (given that it is successful, the trying just is the action in question) – but how, then, if trying^a just *is* the action in question, can it cause the bodily movement, which also just is the action? This is what I really asked with the question that introduced these thoughts.

To Hornsby actions are internal events, and to try to move the body is to *cause* it to move. My moving~~t~~ my arm causes my arm to move. Hornsby's account faces some serious problems on its own, one may for instance find it unsatisfactorily to claim that one tries to do something if nothing happens, but this is another story. Our concern here is how Peabody treats Hornsby's theory. Because Hornsby holds that internal actions (tryings) of moving one's body cause one's body to move, I find it hard to accept that her account can successfully be transformed the way Peabody says it can. It is central to Peabody's doctrine, as it is a derivative of Hornsby's, that action stands defined as the result of a trying. Peabody

¹⁶⁶ This point is what distinguishes Hornsby's account from volitionist accounts and the like, her identifying the trying with the action helps her avoid the regress-problem that threatens volitionism.

describes an example of an action as follows: “Martin may have slipped in intending to pour water for Kerstin *but his pouring orange juice for her is something he does because it is something that is caused by his trying^a to pour orange juice for her.*¹⁶⁷” This meaning that an event is an action so long as it is *caused by* a trying^a. Well, this would be simple enough, were it not for the fact that it is difficult to say just how the trying^a of any action is different from the action in question. I refer you to the following quote of Peabody’s that brings this starkly into view, in her own words:

But tryings^a are not mental (or intentional-like), they are action-like – in fact those tryings that are not causally mute just *are* actions.¹⁶⁸

It is the last part of this sentence that is important to us, where she clearly states that those tryings^a that are not causally mute, just are the actions in question. In view of the definition I gave earlier in the text this is not so surprising: “Trying^a is the basic action that starts the chain of consequences.” But in view of the role trying^a has in Peabody’s overall theory, that it *causes* the action in question, this is highly problematical. For how can a trying^a cause an action if it just *is* the action it is to cause? And furthermore, if a trying^a is action-like, just is the action, how can we possibly imagine there to exist a situation in which it is *causally mute* as Peabody claims is a possibility for it? I will not go further into this last point, I will contend myself with pointing out the confusion that it points toward, and thereby strengthen the case that there is something wrong with Peabody’s use of her own main concept.

The main objection, as I see it, is that by wholly divorcing the notion of trying from its mental elements (elements that certainly are present in Hornsby’s notion) Peabody lacks an argumentation for how her notion of trying is present in an action. Importantly, when the trying is defined just as the action, it cannot be said to precede it, and thereby, firstly, I cannot see that it could be said to cause the action (other than in a purely figurative sense), nor, secondly, how it could be meaningful to use the notion in the manner that Peabody does. For if we pause our critical attitude for a moment, and go along with Peabody, and agree to the claim that there is a sense in which the fact that we do something, say successfully drink a glass of water, is both a physical doing of this something and a physical trying to do this something, then would we not simply eradicate the difference there is between “to try” and

¹⁶⁷ Peabody, “Trying Slips: Can Davidson and Hornsby Account for Mistakes and Slips?”, 203, my emphasis.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 199.

“to do”? There would, of course, be some cases in which we try something, but not do it, but there would not, suddenly, exist any cases in which do something but do not try to do it. Now, in Hornsby’s case, this is not that unintuitive, but in Peabody, where the notion of trying is a *wholly* bodily and *physical* notion of trying (it is action-like), this is unintuitive. For when I raise my glass to my lips and take a swallow, to say that I physically try to perform these actions, when I physically am performing these actions, does not make any kind of sense. To try to do something is *not to have done this something*. Conventionally, there is no sense in which one tries to do something when one is doing it (this critique, as has been indicated already, can be modified to hit Hornsby as well). In addition and connected with this, just to remind you, there is also the problem with Peabody’s idea that a trying^a causes an action. For seeing as the trying^a is just defined as the action in question, they are both identified with the physical movements of the agent, it becomes an open question how the trying^a can cause itself.

Peabody has made it utterly clear that she does not want to answer the question ‘How shall actions be explained?’ she just wants to answer the question ‘What are actions?’ The problem is that she has answered this question in such a way that one may wonder whether she believes that one can interpret action independent from the agent performing the act. If one provides, as Peabody does, a solely extensional interpretation of action, completely cut off from the mental aspect, how then can one accomplish to reflect the fact that there is an agent behind the action? Surely, there is a reason for why one, in dealing with philosophy of action, operates with both agents and actions. This is intuitive simply because an action cannot exist independent from the agent performing it. It may seem that Peabody’s concept has the unlucky result of removing quite an essential part from action, namely, the agent. More specifically, how can Peabody manage to distinguish that which a human agent does from the movements made by, say, a coffee machine? Can a coffee machine try^a?

8.3 Voluntary Under a Description

There are further complications with Peabody’s account. In the introduction to this part and at the end of the previous one, I said that she has proposed to replace ‘intentional under a description’ with ‘voluntary under a description’. As we saw she offered the following formula:

(v) The agent ϕ 's voluntarily (the agent's performance is voluntary under the description ' ϕ ') just in case the agent tries^a to ϕ and his trying^a to ϕ causes (in the right way) his body to ϕ i.¹⁶⁹

Now, a worry is how satisfactorily it is to switch one way of describing with another? Will not this new notion face similar problems as the one she wants to reject? A natural question that appears is: 'What does it mean for an action to be voluntary?' An insight of Anscombe is that it is a feature of the voluntary that it may have aspects of the involuntary, and it may even *be* involuntary if described differently: "What is voluntary under one description may be non-voluntary or counter-voluntary under another" (Anscombe, 2005: 208-209). It may, for instance, be so that there are consequences of my actions that I do not approve of, while continuing to do them. If I replenish a house's water supply, I may do so intentionally because I want to earn my pay, but the very same act may be involuntary in the sense that I am not really willing to poison the inhabitants of the house, *that* is something I involuntarily do even though I intentionally (and in some sense, voluntarily) keep on pumping because that is my job and I am desperately in need of the salary.¹⁷⁰ We may find an extreme example to enlighten a problem with the concept of the voluntary in an example from the law court. Many men accused of raping woman says to their defence that 'She gave no resistance, I thought she wanted it'. But if we consider this from the woman's perspective, the story often comes out differently. He is violent and she feels that there is no use in fighting back, he is the stronger part, and she realises that if she fights for herself she might end up being even more hurt, so she resigns and accepts that which he is doing to her body – in this sense, what she does is voluntary, but in another sense, the intuitively stronger sense, I think, she experiences what happens to her as something deeply involuntary. This complicates how to render it voluntary under a description. One and the same person may have both a voluntary and an involuntary experience (attitude) towards one and the same performance. I am well aware that this example is harsh, and one may feel uneasy about its importance for the argument since it

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 204.

¹⁷⁰ See Anscombe, 2000 p. 41-45. It should be said that this is my version of her example, she might have refused to put it like this because the man's action can be interpreted as unintentional to begin with. I do believe, though, that the example is in accordance with the account she gives of the voluntary, see p. 89-90 for her treatment of this topic. What she says here is, for instance, that "[T]hings can be called involuntary, if one regrets them very much, but feels 'compelled' to persist in the intentional actions." (Anscombe, 2000: 89). Note also that in Anscombe's view an act *can be described as voluntary despite the fact that the agent performs no action* at all, her own example of this is the delight one may feel when sitting in a boat someone pushes onto the river. This is voluntary in the sense that one fully consents to what happens. These features of the voluntary, which are appreciated by Anscombe, are not, as far as I can see, captured by Peabody's interpretation of the notion.

is not about a slip. But it is not far fetched; my point is that Peabody in her search for avoiding ambiguities (hence her disambiguation of trying) has found a term, namely ‘voluntary’ which is ambiguous. My point here may as well be set forth in an example of a slip. Let us transfer it to Peabody’s own example of the thirsty couple. Martin can be said, in accordance with Peabody’s account TH, to voluntarily pour orange juice into Kerstin’s glass. This is in the sense that nothing, or no one forces him so to act, there is no doubt as to whether it is his body that’s pulling of this particular action. And Martin doesn’t refuse the claim that he is the one that poured orange juice when asked about the performance afterwards. On the other hand, we may have an interpretation that is not reflected in TH, it seems reasonable to say that there is some sense in which Martin involuntarily pours orange juice into Kerstin’s glass. It is even quite intuitive that this is so if we add the fact that Martin knows that Kerstin is highly allergic to citrus’ fruits and he gave her fluid that could have made her really ill. On this reading even though Martin tries^a to pour orange juice and his trying^a causes (in the right way) his body to pour orange juice which satisfies Peabody’s criterion of the voluntary, we have found a sense in which the performance was involuntary. An objection here is that my claim fails to reject Peabody’s view because she wants to cut the connection to the mental, and my suggestion adds a mental element. Well, my answer to this is that the voluntary simply *is* a mental element. Furthermore, there is some sense in which we may say that we don’t voluntarily slip. This is simply so because although the performance in question is not one we are forced to do, nor is it one we want to perform, that is – we don’t see anything attractive in performing the slip. Quite the contrary, I would say. When we slip we are often annoyed with ourselves because we did not bring about the desired effect. This is even clearer in cases where the slip happens to be a trait of our character, that is, if it is a kind of slip we repeatedly do. Would we like to say that the absent minded person who performs rather extreme slips very often (and really detests this side of himself) slips voluntarily? Certainly not. Maybe this person, imagine his name is Bernhard, wakes up and says to himself every morning: ‘I shall not do any slips today’. Analogously a smoker may say to himself: ‘Today I want to stop smoking’, just as the overweight person may think: ‘I shall not eat too much today’, but we all know that these tasks are far from easy to accomplish. As the smoker voluntarily smokes his cigarettes, somehow he feels that he acts involuntarily – he just can’t refrain from smoking. Bernhard is not an addict, he is a man of many slips that wants to quit slipping, but unfortunately, absent minded as he is, he puts his socks into the toilet instead of into the bin of dirty laundry standing next to the toilet. Did Bernhard voluntarily put his socks into the toilet? Peabody would say that certainly, Bernhard’s action is voluntary under the description ‘put socks into toilet’ because

he tried^a to put his socks into the toilet. Would Bernhard easily accept this if we told him that this is how it all hangs together? I think not. Thinking about it, doesn't Peabody's view make Bernhard sound more like a machine than an agent? The question that naturally comes out of this is: How happy are we with an answer to the question 'What are actions' that cuts off the connection to the mental aetiology?

8.4 Actions Done for No Reason

Reasons are the mark of intentional action. When an agent acts for reasons he acts intentionally. As agents we possess both the ability to give, apply and receive reasons. This is the important insight of Anscombe's why-question. However, she does accept that there are incidents where one can meaningfully ask the why question without there being any reason for the act, the answer, truthfully, just is 'For no reason'. Peabody introduces her article by saying that she wants "to offer the case of slips as a company to the case of actions done for no reason"¹⁷¹ It is not entirely clear what she means by this 'company' between cases of slips and cases of no reason, but it is a plausible option to take it that her point is the fact that the actions Anscombe thinks of as done for no reason can be interpreted as actions according to (β), but not to (α), and so can slips, hence they belong to the same company.¹⁷² It is (among other things) this feature of accepting actions done for *absolutely* no reason, none whatsoever, on Anscombe's account that makes Peabody prefer hers over Davidson's. To make this utterly clear, according to Anscombe an instance of action is intentional iff it is one "to which a certain sense of the question 'why?' is given application; the sense is of course that in which the answer, if positive, gives a reason for acting". (Anscombe, 2000: 9). Elsewhere in *Intention* Anscombe writes that "The question is not refused application because the answer to it is that there is *no* reason."¹⁷³ This means that there are incidents where one may meaningfully ask the question why even though the answer to the question is 'no reason'. Davidson, in contrast, holds that intentional action just *is* actions done for reasons. So, we have two positions here, one that denies the option of acting for 'no reason', and another who accepts that there may be no reason for what we intentionally do. The latter cases are not refused application on Anscombe's account. But in Davidson's view it is not to be taken literally that there are no reason for the action if someone says that there are no reason for what he does. There is always *some* reason for what he does, on Davidson's account:

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 175.

¹⁷² "Anscombe's actions done for no reason qualify as actions under (β) but not under (α) (Peabody, 2005: 204).

¹⁷³ Anscombe, *Intention*, 25.

When we know some action is intentional, it is easy to answer the question, ‘Why did you do it?’ with, ‘For no reason’, meaning not that there is no reason, but that there is no *further* reason (...) no reason, in other words, besides wanting to do it.¹⁷⁴»

These diverging views divorce Davidson’s account from that of Anscombe. However, as was pointed out in section 4.2, Anscombe was the philosopher who coined the term ‘intentional under a description’. Her actions done for no reason belongs to the fringes of her theory, i.e. they make up exceptions from the rule. As a rule what makes events actions for Anscombe is that they are intentional under a description. Intentions are a fundamental part of human agency, agency doesn’t make much sense without it. It can be difficult sometimes, though, to render an action intentional ‘under a description’, and that was the reason for why Hornsby chose to cast her definition (α) as “An action is a person’s doing something intentionally¹⁷⁵” and *not* as Peabody conceives of it “A performance is an action just in case there is a description under which it is intentional¹⁷⁶” Peabody writes that Hornsby does not “*flatly* reject (α)¹⁷⁷” but what Peabody avoids mentioning is that neither does Hornsby *flatly approve* of (α) in the way it is explicated by Peabody (that is, Hornsby doesn’t necessarily approve of that which Peabody has added in brackets). In her article ‘On What’s Intentionally Done’ (which is the article Peabody refers to in this part of her own paper) Hornsby says explicitly of her version of (α) that:

The simplification I go in for results from eschewing the terminology of ‘intentional under a description. I think that it has led to more confusion than it was intended to eradicate, and that (in any case) if we want to keep track of what we are committed to, we do best to cast our claims in ordinary English as far as possible. In order to theorize about action, one has to speak at a level of generalization which exceeds what is ordinary: hence my recourse, in (α) and elsewhere, to the schematic (or pro-verb) ‘do something; but this seems to me fully intelligible, where ‘do something under a description’ is not.¹⁷⁸

It is not my intention here, however, to defend Hornsby over Peabody. My reason for mentioning this is to make it clear that even Hornsby, who regards her theory as an extension of that of Davidson, accepts that there are complex problems in connection with the notion of

¹⁷⁴ Davidson, “Action, Reasons and Causes”, 6.

¹⁷⁵ Hornsby, *Actions*, 55.

¹⁷⁶ Peabody, “Trying Slips: Can Davidson and Hornsby Account for Mistakes and Slips?” 201.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 201.

¹⁷⁸ Hornsby, *Actions*, 55-56.

‘under a description’ (as Anscombe does – her writing the article ‘Under a Description’ to clarify the notion is an explicit sign to that). However, it is very likely that both Hornsby and Anscombe, to account for slips would prefer to keep some version of (α), though, in a weaker sense:

w(α) Most actions are intentional under some description.¹⁷⁹

I believe that Anscombe could have supported such a proposal. In her ‘Action, Intention and ‘Double Effect’ she criticises Davidson’s account, and writes that she doesn’t herself hold the doctrine he adheres to (that for an event to be an action it must be intentional under some description).¹⁸⁰ As easy as this Anscombe may accept slips as actions without rejecting that in most cases actions are intentional under a description. A gap remains though. The obstacle is to interpret exactly what makes a slip an action, unfortunately, this is left in the blue. Still, I prefer an account that renders slips as actions even though it cannot explain them fully over an account, as that of Peabody, which leaves intentions in the blue. I think we do wise not to cut off the mental aetiology when trying to understand what action is.

8.5 Conclusion

My worry about Peabody’s theory is that she develops an account of action which is simply too primitive, it is the danger that it ends up a caricature of action instead of painting a realistic picture of agency. One of the problems with it is the strategy of focusing solely on the act, by cutting every connection to the mental aetiology. Furthermore, many features of her account are not clear, for instance, why does she write that try^a ‘causes’ when she wants to give a theory of action and not a theory of action explanation? I realise that there may be facets of Peabody’s account that I have not paid due respect to. I may have overseen features of her account. However, it seems quite clear that a result of her project is an unnatural distinction between agents and actions, it is these two entities everything boils down to in philosophy of action. An action cannot exist independent from an agent, while the converse is not the case – this is trivial, still it seems to me that Peabody’s theory has this strange feature of treating an act as if no agent were there to perform it.

¹⁷⁹ Peabody indicates this solution in a footnote, and she says that what is won by defending such a modified claim is that the person holding it has no principled reason not to accept slips as actions. It is the latter group Peabody targets throughout. See Peabody p. 209 n10. I interpret Anscombe as not holding any such principled reason against accepting slips as actions (what concerns Hornsby I have to admit that I am not quite sure what exactly she is committed to).

¹⁸⁰ See in particular Anscombe’s introductory discussion p. 207-209.

9. Conclusion

A mistake in performance typically involves a person intending to do something, but who fails to correctly execute his intention and ends up doing something else instead, simply by mistake. This occurs without the agent having any mental disorder, he is perfectly capable of performing the intended action that he somehow failed to perform. He just slipped, or fumbled. In this Master's Thesis I have tried to shed some light on this phenomenon and its relevance for a theory of human action. I began, in part 3, by giving an interpretation of the notion of mistake in performance, where my main argument was that a mistake in performance has to be understood as done on the basis of a flawlessly formed intention, so that the mistake in question is seen to lie in the practical execution of the intention, and not in the formation of it. It was seen that it is a real challenge to create an account that does this, that is, that captures cases of mistake in performance without turning them into mistakes of judgment. For, first of all one must then acknowledge the theoretical existence of these cases. In part 4 I tried to show that mistake in performance is a unique phenomenon, mainly through arguing against the thesis put forward by Houlgate that "Miss Anscombe's examples of mistake in performance are nothing but cases of ordinary mistake in judgment."¹⁸¹ In part 5 I provided some theory-independent grounds for why slips should be counted as actions. Part 6 was my presentation of Peabody's argumentation as to why Davidson's account fails to capture slips as actions. This is because that Davidson gives the definition that for an event to be an action it must be intentional under a description. Therefore he cannot account for something being the action of an agent and at the same time not something the agent intended – which are precisely what mistakes in performance are. Peabody holds that Hornsby's theory of action has what is needed to render slips as actions, given some adjustments. I discuss Peabody's attempt at transforming Hornsby's account into one that can see slips as something we *do* in part 7. Unfortunately, Peabody's attempt fails because the notion of trying that she develops on the basis of Hornsby's notion simply cannot do what she hopes for it to do. At least this is what I aim to show in part 8. Additionally, I also try to show in that part, that, as far as I can see, the original theory presented by Anscombe is still the best alternative there is to capture mistake in performance as actions (even though it cannot fully reveal their true nature).

¹⁸¹ Houlgate, "Mistake in Performance", 257.

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It is not a typical trait of people who slip that they suffer from insanity or strange mental conditions. If a person discovers that he has begun to grow wings and decides that he will try using them by flying out of his fifth floor window, he has, with all due probability, a mental disturbance, and this is how we would treat him. But if a person puts his toothbrush in the refrigerator, we would not necessarily believe him to be mad; rather we would think of him that he was likely to have been quite absent-minded before going to bed. We would probably guess that he normally puts his brush where it belongs, and be correct about it to. It seems that we do consider people to be rational even though they slip sometimes, and we also think that people are, somehow, responsible for their slips (a good example of this is that western judicial systems can convict a man of involuntary manslaughter).

Peabody remarks that she doesn't find it surprising that philosophers of action have not cared much about slips "given the fact that we do not think that our mistakes represent us as agents."¹⁸² Now, I cannot say with certainty whether most philosophers of action believes this to be the case or not, but what I can say with a strong measure of certainty is that our view of ourselves (and others) is not as simple as what that. Rather, we seem to intuitively think that a person's slips can reflect his character and his nature as an agent. If a person, say, has clumsy behaviour all the time we might label him absent-minded, if a mother continuously slips around her child (for instance by saying obscenities) we may dub her careless, or if a speaker commits plenty slips of the tongue and other kinds of slips while speaking, we may fasten to think of him as having a nervous character, and so on.¹⁸³ This insight is well-known in fiction literature as well as in real life, as for instance in the *topos* of the absent minded professor and the clumsy teenager. The point here is that there is a clear sense in which we ascribe mistakes in performance to an agent as something the agent does, and that is characteristic of his, or her, behaviour. Which is to say that we, in general, do judge people by their mistakes. When people tend to do the same mistake over and over again, we find it rather easy to blame them instead of bluntly accepting an apology. We blame ourselves in the same manner. What more is, we can also accept some slips as a part of who we are even though we regret doing so. If this is correct it indicates that we are not indifferent towards our slips, they matter to us (for my main treatment of this topic, see section 5.7).

¹⁸² Peabody, "Trying Slips: Can Davidson and Hornsby Account for Mistakes and Slips?" 206-207.

¹⁸³ These examples presuppose, of course, that the person in question does what he does *without* intending to do it (what I say here about judging people's character may be correct also in cases where the behaviour is intentional, but it would not be describable as slips then).

Having come thus far I must say that it is my opinion that Peabody underestimates the importance of her own topic, slips. She both introduces and concludes her paper by saying that slips are a marginal category of performances. “[S]lips are not so central a category as to merit the dismissal of a theory over them¹⁸⁴” and “[S]lips are such a marginal category of our doings that it would border on the outrageous to reject a theory of action for not capturing them.¹⁸⁵” I am not so sure about that. Compare, for instance, accidental cases as wayward causal chains, they are indeed treated seriously by philosophers writing on action even though most of these cases are merely philosopher’s constructs (they are taken seriously because they represent a great threat towards causal theories of action), slips on the other hand, are not even made up – they are everyday occurrences that we are all familiar with. And therefore, I believe, they are very important to understand, if we are to understand the nature of action. To ignore them, is to ignore a part of the empirical field that we set out to explain. Slips are, moreover, definitely taken seriously in the psychological literature dealing with human error, seeing as a large part of human errors are of this character. Is not this fact alone sufficient to raise a theoretical demand that one includes slips in a theory of action philosophy, or at least, is it not enough to convince us to prefer the accounts that are able to account for them? Philosophers have taken great interest in features of human action like irrationality and akrasia, I cannot see why then one should neglect slips. A psychology of human error has existed for a while now (historically this is partly thanks to Freud and James. But there are several names one could mention in contemporary psychology, I do think that Reason and Norman and Shallice should be mentioned in particular).¹⁸⁶ With this in mind, is pleading for a philosophy of human error too much to ask for?

The only attempt at capturing slips as actions that I know of is the one by Peabody described earlier on in the Thesis. Though I appreciate the work she has done, I cannot refrain from saying that I don’t find her proposed way of capturing slips as actions a satisfactorily one. It is, in my view, simply absurd to operate with a theory of action that does not take into account the mental aetiology of actions. The notions of error and intention are thoroughly entwined. It does not make sense to appeal to the term error in action if it is not used to express the fact that a planned performance failed to achieve a desired outcome. Unfortunately, I have not

¹⁸⁴ Peabody, “Trying Slips: Can Davidson and Hornsby Account for Mistakes and Slips?” 182.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 206.

¹⁸⁶ See Reason’s *Human Error*, ch. 3, for an historical overview of studies of human error in the history of psychology.

myself managed to provide an account of the exact status cases of mistake in performance has as actions, I do hope, though, that I have achieved to show that they may be of philosophical interest.

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