

**ACTIONS AND DESCRIPTIONS OF ACTIONS: CAN THE  
SAME ACTIONS HAVE MANY DIFFERENT DESCRIPTIONS?**

by

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## INTRODUCTION

One of the questions which has been debated in recent philosophical literature is "Can the same action be described correctly in many ways?" Many philosophers have believed that an action can have many different descriptions;<sup>1</sup> and some have argued that it can.<sup>2</sup> Donald Davidson has said that unless we can give many different descriptions of the same action we cannot have a theory of human action.<sup>3</sup> Recently, however, Arthur Cody has argued that the same action can have only one correct description.<sup>4</sup> Although I agree with the majority of philosophers in believing that an action can have many different descriptions, I think that the question itself has sometimes been misunderstood, and consequently has given rise to a myriad of problems and confusions.

In this thesis I will show that the question of whether an action can be described in many ways is only an issue because certain philosophers, notably Donald Davidson and Arthur Cody, have believed that to say that an action can have many different descriptions implies a certain notion or picture of what an action is. I believe that this picture of an action

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<sup>1</sup>See Stuart Hampshire, Thought and Action, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1959), p. 169; and John Austin, "A Plea for Excuses," Philosophical Review, ed. G. Warnock and J. O. Urmson, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), p. 148.

<sup>2</sup>Eric D'Arcy, Human Acts, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), p. 10.

<sup>3</sup>Donald Davidson, "Actions, Reasons and Causes," The Journal of Philosophy 60 (November, 1963): 698.

<sup>4</sup>Arthur Cody, "Can A Single Action Have Many Different Descriptions?," Inquiry 10 (Summer, 1967).

is faulty, and that if we reject the picture the question will take on a very ordinary aspect, and will allow an affirmative answer.

The concept of action, or as Cody has called it, the "metaphysical picture" of action which saying that the same action can have different descriptions implies is:

There is in the world a thing, or something like a thing, which we may call an action. It is the given. The given is contrastable with our understanding of it. We understand it by being able to give a description of it. But there is not just one description of it that is true; there are many. Because there is no way of putting together all of what we can understand of the given, we might say there is no way of understanding the given just as it is, unitary and complete.<sup>5</sup>

An action is a thing in the world which we understand by descriptions of it. The given is a sort of "bare particular" and "descriptions" are predicates which refer to the action. Whenever more than one description is predicated of the action the action is described in many ways. This is what it means to say that an action can have many different descriptions according to the metaphysical picture.

Cody says that although he is "strongly attracted to the assertion" in this metaphysical sense, he cannot accept it because, he argues, to say that an action can have many different descriptions implies that we can "fix our attention on the action independently of any description of it." In "Can A Single Action Have Many Different Descriptions" he gives some examples which he believes show that it is impossible to do this. So he concludes that "actions are what descriptions

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<sup>5</sup>Cody, "A Single Action," p. 165.

of actions describe, and different descriptions describe different actions."<sup>6</sup>

Donald Davidson has written that unless we can describe the same action in many ways we cannot have a theory of human action. He also holds the concept of action given in the picture. Descriptions are treated as predicates which refer to an "object," "theory," "event" i.e., the action, whenever different descriptions refer to the same action we are said to describe the action in many ways. One of the outcomes of this picture, and one which Davidson accepts, is that to speak of "the same action" must mean that we are talking of a single, unique thing in the world, since one type of "description" which can be given involves stating the location and time of the happening, and of course, no two events can share this same description. This is a familiar notion of identity<sup>7</sup> which is either trivial or nonsensical and it is shared by Davidson: "no two events are ever identical, and the same event is always identical with itself."<sup>8</sup>

In what follows I will argue that one of the necessary features of "description" is that we can identify what we are describing; and that according to the picture this is impossible. I therefore conclude that according to the picture

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 167.

<sup>7</sup>For example, David Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1888), pp. 251-262.

<sup>8</sup>Donald Davidson, "The Individuation of Events," Essays in Honor of Carl G. Hempel, ed. Nicholas Rescher et al. (Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel Publishing Co., 1970), p. 216.

we cannot give an intelligible use for "description." I will further argue that because we cannot identify the action which is "described" we cannot give an intelligible sense to "the same action." This in turn will mean that "the same action under many different descriptions" is also unintelligible.

Cody also concludes that it is impossible to identify the action on the premises of the picture. However, he concludes from this that "different descriptions describe different actions." It is this conclusion which I find difficult to understand, or rather I do not understand why (since I believe Cody's criticism is correct) he has found it necessary to make such a conclusion at all. It seems to me that Cody has misconstrued his own argument. He has disposed of the picture by his argument, and then assumed its intelligibility by his conclusion. I will argue that Cody's one-action-one-description formulation assumes that the picture is intelligible and is therefore untenable. Also, he has neglected to make the meaning of his conclusion clear which seems to involve him in some form of circularity. Furthermore, Cody does not notice the difference between a description of an action, and identification or evaluation of an action, and something predicated of the action.

I will then show how we can, and do, identify actions, and that once this is seen we will have no problem in saying that the same action can have many different descriptions. My suggestions of how we identify actions will not involve the production of a new metaphysical picture. Rather they

will be in the form of reminders of how we in fact identify and describe actions using such things as the knowledge of someone's intentions, plans, motives, and habits together with the context in which we are interested in determining what someone is doing. None of this will involve any metaphysical concepts, and I hope that my suggestions will be very commonplace, for I believe that if they sound strange, or difficult to grasp, that I too will have become ensnared by the picture of which I hope to dispose, or worse, have produced a new one.

This discussion may be of use to those working on certain ethical questions. For example, one of the problems encountered with Kant's theory of the universalization of moral rules is how we are to describe the moral rule we wish to universalize. For instance, it may be clear that we should follow the rule "Always keep a promise;" if however we are in a situation where we are being threatened it is not so clear that we should "Always keep a promise under threat of our life." That latter puts the matter in a different light, and it becomes important how we describe the maxim of action we are to follow. It has even been argued that every action is unique because it can always be given a unique description. This creates problems with the whole notion that we can act by moral rules.

In the first chapter of this thesis I will try to give a fairly detailed account of the metaphysical picture in question; what it implies about our use of "same action" and "different action," and how it produces the conclusion that an action can have many different descriptions. The main points are that an

action is a type of event, whatever is predicated of the "action" refers to it and is a description of the action, whenever more than one "description" refers to the same "action" it is the case that the action has many different descriptions.

In the second chapter I will argue that one of the necessary features of our use of "descriptions" is that we can identify what is being described, and that according to the picture we cannot do this, and so we cannot be said to describe that action. I will also argue that the picture cannot give an intelligible use of the "same action."

The third chapter will show that although Cody argues correctly in saying that the picture cannot produce an identifiable action; his conclusion that an action has only one correct description is based on the intelligibility of the picture. It is argued that what is needed is not a new conclusion but a rejection of the picture.

The last chapter illustrates how we do in fact identify actions, and how we therefore have no trouble saying that the same action can have many different descriptions.

## CHAPTER ONE

It is the purpose of this first chapter to explain the metaphysical picture outlined by Cody. This is the picture which Cody believes gives sense to the proposition that an action can be described in many different ways, although he rejects this conclusion. Donald Davidson believes that we can describe the same action in many different ways, and although he does not elucidate the picture, it is clear that he is working under its premises. I will be concerned, then, mainly with his views.

The picture is not difficult to grasp. Its main points are: 1) actions are "entities," "events," "happenings in the world," "bare particulars," or "objects;" (2) whatever is predicated of the action refers to it and is a description of it; and 3) whenever, many descriptions refer to the action the action is described in many ways.

Davidson writes that "an action is a species of event," and an event is something which is situated in time and space, has causes and produces effects, and may involve changes in substance.<sup>9</sup> The latter characteristic I take to mean nothing more than perhaps the melting of snow. But although his characterization of events is unclear, he gives us numerous examples of events: taking a stroll, deaths, avalanches, poisoning an astronaut, a catastrophe, an apology, water dripping, performances of an opera, and dominoes falling, among

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<sup>9</sup>Davidson, "Individuation of Events," p. 225-32.

others. There are also things which he calls "mental events": pains, itches, and rememberings.

Some of his examples are of events which involve or could involve, human beings, such as performances of the opera, taking a stroll, poisoning an astronaut, alerting a prowler, deaths, and sneezes. Some of the examples are also things which people could plan or try to do: taking a stroll, deliberately stabbing someone, making an apology. It is these sorts of things which Davidson calls actions. He writes "I follow a useful philosophical practice in calling anything an agent does intentionally an action; including intentional omissions."<sup>10</sup> In taking a stroll, stabbing someone, and writing are things which it is possible for one to intend to do.

From the variety of examples he gives we can get a good understanding of what he means when he says that an action is a species of event. "Event" is used to cover roughly all happenings in space and time, which have causes and produce effects. Some of these will involve human beings (eating, tripping on a table), and some of these will involve the intentional doings of people (apologizing, stabbing). "Event" is the genus and "action" is the species. All actions are events, but not all events are actions. Davidson often mistakenly uses the words interchangeably, sometimes referring to such things as "Sebastian took a stroll" as an event, sometimes as an action.

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<sup>10</sup> Davidson, "Actions, Reasons and Causes," note to page 686.

A characteristic which events have (and consequently actions) is that it is possible to quantify over them. Thus, we can speak of events in logical terms. There is an  $x$  such that  $x$  is a stroll. Or there is an  $x$  such that Sebastian strolled  $x$ . The event may take any number of predicates of this sort: it was a stroll, at 2 a.m., through the park, by Sebastian. Davidson sometimes calls the referent of these predicates an "event-object," to show that we may give predicates to and refer to events (and so to actions) in the way we can predicate characteristics of objects.<sup>11</sup> For example, there is an  $x$  such that  $x$  is an apple; or there is an  $x$  such that  $x$  is round, red, edible, etc. Each of these predicates Davidson calls a descriptions of the event, and these "descriptions" refer to the event. For example, in his discussion of how reasons explain actions he cites "I turn on the light," and "I wanted to turn on the light" as descriptions of events: "The first clearly refers to a particular event, so we conclude [wrongly, he believes] that the second has this same event as its object," but "if the referent were the same in both cases, the second would entail the first; but in fact the sentences are logically independent."<sup>12</sup> I assume they do not refer to the same event because "wanting" refers to a mental event whereas "turning on the light" refers to a "physical" event. Along the same lines he says that "Doris capsized the canoe yesterday" is a description of an event, but that it does

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<sup>11</sup>Davidson, "Individuation of Events," p. 219.

<sup>12</sup>Davidson, "Actions, Reasons and Causes," p. 687.

not refer to a particular action, since "Doris may have capsized the canoe more than once."

As noted in the introduction some of the sentences which Davidson considers descriptions perhaps should not be classified as such. Many would be considered as identifying the action, others as evaluations, explanations, or comments about how one views the world (bringing about the Kingdom of Heaven, for example). However, in order to present the position I wish to attack I will go along with this use of "description."

The above considerations give a better idea of what Cody meant, according to Davidson, by saying that an action is a thing in the world which is the given, and to which we refer when we try to describe and understand the action. And these examples bring up an important question. How does Davidson determine when descriptions refer to the same event or action? For if we are to understand how Davidson reaches the conclusion that an action can have many descriptions, we must understand what it means to say that descriptions refer to the same action.

According to the picture actions are things in the world to which descriptions refer. Therefore, when we have different descriptions of the same action this must mean that these descriptions refer to the same happening in time and space, i.e., the same event or action. But how are we to tell when events are the same, and when are they different? The peculiar answer to that is that each event is unique since it happens at a particular time in a particular place and no other event can have that characteristic. Davidson accepts

this conclusion. He writes, "no event is ever identical with another," and the same event is always identical with itself. This is the old and familiar notion of identity. According to the picture of action we are dealing with each action is unique because each event has its own location in space and time, and actions are events.

This notion of "the same action" is certainly peculiar, and I would like to show more clearly what Davidson has in mind, or actually to show that this is what he has in mind, and that this is one of the conclusions we must draw from the picture. The examples should also help in showing how this scheme of actions works.

Davidson says of a man who, after walking into a room, flips the light switch, turns on the light, illuminates the room, and alerts a prowler, that the man does not do four things, but only one of which four descriptions have been given. That is to say, all four descriptions refer to the same single action.<sup>13</sup> This seems to mean something like, the man does not walk into the room four different times, on the first occasion flipping the switch, on the second occasion turning on the light, and so on. We see him do only what he does, and that is a single event. What we see when we see him turn on the light is the same thing we see when we see him flip the switch. Only one event takes place which we describe in four different ways. This is different from the case in which we describe some event as "tying his shoe,"

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 686.

and some other event as "flipping the switch." Here we must be talking about two different events because what takes place when one ties his shoe is different from what takes place when one flips the switch. But, in Davidson's example, what takes place when one flips the switch is just what takes place when one turns on the light. To use another of Davidson's examples, he says of a man who mistakenly burns a valuable document thinking that it is only a piece of scrap paper that "he burned the valuable document" and "he burned a piece of paper" are about the same event. Again, he means that both descriptions refer to a single happening.

In the above example, the man who flips the switch, turns on the light, etc. does one thing of which four descriptions have been given. In the other example the man does one thing of which two descriptions are given. How many descriptions are possible of a single event? Let us consider the first example and fill in some details.

In the example the man walks into the room and flips the switch. The light goes on and the room is illuminated. A prowler who was lurking in the back yard, and who was getting ready to break into the house is alerted to the man's presence; he flees. Now all four of the descriptions cited by Davidson are true. However, it is also true that the man moved his arm when he turned on the switch, so "he moved his arm" will be a true description of the man's act. In doing what he did the man also disturbed the air molecules and so "he disturbed the air molecules" will be a true description. If the switch was dirty it will be true that the man dirtied his hands,

and so that will be a true description. He also "caused the prowler to flee," "produced some chemicals in his muscle fibers," and "increased his electric bill." Of course, not all of these things were things that he intended to do, some are actions and some are not, but all are events, and they all do refer to the same single event that "flipping the switch," "turning on the light," "illuminating the room," and "alerting the prowler" do, although "alerting the prowler," and "increasing the light bill" are consequences of his turning on the light. We can add to the list indefinitely. There is no end to the descriptions which can be given, and which refer to the event.

It is this fact which Cody had in mind when he said that on the metaphysical picture which is evoked by saying that an action can be described in many ways there is no way to understand the action unitary and complete. There is always something more to be said. He cites a similar example to show this aspect of the picture. The example he uses is one made up by G. E. M. Anscombe in Intention. Anscombe asks us to consider the case of a man who is pumping poisoned water into a house to be used by some men inside. As examples of what the man could be doing, i.e., true descriptions of the event, she cites "earning wages," "supporting a family," "wearing away his shoe soles," "making a disturbance in the air," "sweating," "pumping," "beating out a curious rhythm," "poisoning the men," and a host of others.<sup>14</sup> From this it seems that there is nothing which we could identify as the description of the action. There are

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<sup>14</sup>G. E. M. Anscombe, Intention (Ithica, New York: Cornell University Press, 1957), p. 37.

only partial descriptions, none of which is complete. For Cody this means that we cannot understand the action as "unitary and complete." And on the scheme of actions under which Davidson and Cody are working each of these descriptions are about the same action.

The above gives a fairly detailed account of the metaphysical model which Cody says is evoked when we say that an action can be described in many different ways. That picture can be summarized as follows: Actions are things, entities, events, bare particulars, locatable in time and space, and involving persons. We describe actions by referring to them, and whatever is predicated of the action is said to be a description of the action: Whenever, two or more "descriptions" refer to the same "action" we have described the action in many ways.

With this elucidation of the metaphysical picture under which Davidson and Cody are working we are ready to try to understand some of the problems involved in holding that an action can have many different descriptions or only one. The next two chapters will be devoted to bringing some of these problems to light.

## CHAPTER TWO

The preceeding chapter presents the picture which Davidson and Cody believe supports the proposition that an action can be described in more than one way. In this chapter I wish to find out if this picture can support that proposition. I believe that it cannot. I will show that one of the necessary features for the use of "description" is that we can identify what it is we are describing. The picture, of necessity, cannot produce an identifiable action, and therefore the purported use of "description" is unintelligible. Furthermore, I will show that the picture's account of "the same action" is incorrect by showing that we normally do not mean by "the same action" what the picture (and Davidson) would have us believe. This is to say that the assumptions of the picture are incompatible with the conclusion that the same action can be described in many ways, and therefore, that the picture should be discarded as unintelligible.

Davidson is working on the assumption that there are things in the world called events or actions. They are located in space and time, and they have causes and produce effects. Under certain descriptions the happening in space and time will be an event, under another description it will be an action. We describe this thing when we refer to it, and all references to the event are descriptions of the event. To use certain jargon, the event or action is a "bare particular"; descriptions are predicated of it and tell what it is. Thus, "flipping the switch," "turning on the light," "moving his arm," and

"dirtying his hands" are all descriptions of the thing, and so we have many different descriptions of the same action. Let us see if this will do by first noting something of our use of "description."

Suppose that two people are looking at a painting. One says that it is merely a mass of blues and greens, but the other says that it is a forest. Now, "mass of blues and greens" is of the same thing that the description "is a forest" is of, the painting. Similarly, one person may describe a painting as representing pathos, another as sympathy; both descriptions are of the same thing. A telephone may be described as a "modern electronic miracle," or as "an ugly black eye-sore." Both descriptions are of the telephone. We can describe objects like telephones, chairs, cars, and houses, and it makes sense to say that the descriptions refer to the objects of which they are descriptions, e.g., "an ugly black eye-sore" and "an electronic miracle" refer to the telephone.

We can also describe events like avalanches, tornadoes, cell divisions, molecular movement, eclipses of the sun, and football games in much the same way. An avalanche may be referred to as a "massive snow slide," "an awe inspiring spectacle," or "a catastrophe." These descriptions could be given of avalanches in general, or we could say them of a particular avalanche. For instance, a newspaper story might refer to a particular avalanche which occurred the day before in these ways. Of course, all these descriptions will be of the same event, the avalanche which occurred the day before.

Besides describing objects and events we can also describe the actions of people. For instance, we can describe Brutus' killing of Caesar as "an abominable act," "a politically motivated murder," or a "treacherous act." And these descriptions will all be of the same action, viz., Brutus' killing Caesar. Or, to use Anscombe's example: If the man who was pumping the poisoned water did not know that the men would drink the water, or did not know that the water was poisoned we could say that his poisoning of the men was "an unintentional killing," or "a case of negligence." These descriptions would be of a man's pumping poisoned water into the house. If the man was aware that the water would be drunk by the men we could call his pumping poisoned water into the house murder; he murdered the men by pumping poisoned water into the house. He could also describe the pumping as "an abominable act," "as bringing about the Kingdom of Heaven on earth," "the act of a mad man," "an act of courage," etc.

These examples, I believe are all cases in which we can be said to be describing objects, events, and actions, respectively. And the descriptions are of the same thing. But, it should be noted that in all these cases we could say what was being described: "an ugly black eye-sore," and "an electronic miracle" were of a telephone; "an awe inspiring sight," and "a catastrophe" were of the avalanche; and "a politically motivated act," and "an act of treason" were of Brutus' killing of Caesar. Descriptions of telephones are of telephones; descriptions of chairs are of chairs, and a

description of a particular chair (the one in the corner) is of a particular chair. Similarly in the case of events: descriptions of avalanches, football games, cell divisions, and water dripping. And descriptions of a particular avalanche, or football game are of a particular avalanche (the one on the north slope of Mount Jefferson), or football game (last year's Sugar Bowl game). The case is the same with actions. Descriptions of murder are of murder, and descriptions of someone's going to the store or selling their car are of someone's going to the store and someone's selling a car.

All this sounds tedious, but the point of these examples is that we do not just describe we always describe something--whether the something be a type of event, a particular event, type of object or particular object, type of action or particular action. This is not an empirical truth but a grammatical one; descriptions are of something. And the object, event, or action must be identifiable; this telephone, a telephone, an avalanche, this killing, John's going to the store, the division of cells, his selling of the car, poisoning the water, etc.

Now, what this means is that when we are said to be describing the question "What is being described?" is always a sensible question and it must be possible to answer by identifying what is being described.

When Davidson says that "turning on the light," "illuminating the room," and "flipping the switch" are all descriptions, we can ask "Of what are these all descriptions?" And according to the picture under which Davidson is working the answer is

that these are all descriptions of the action which is located in space and time--that entity which is referred to by these descriptions. And it is true that descriptions of actions are of actions, just as it is true that descriptions of events are of events and descriptions of objects are of objects. But "object" covers a wide variety of things: tables, chairs, telephones, stars, etc. "Event" also covers a wide variety of happenings involving men, beasts, and stones. We can still ask which event or which object is being described, and we should be able to get an answer. Neither order tells us what we are supposed to answer. We need to know which event or which object we are being asked to describe, i.e., the event or object must be identified just as we could identify what the descriptions "an ugly black eye-sore" and "an electronic miracle" were of: the telephone. "Event" or "object" cannot be used to identify what particular thing we are describing. Similarly, "action" does not identify what particular thing we are talking about (although Brutus' killing of Caesar does). It only tells us that we are describing a certain type of thing, something which people do as opposed to an event, say.

According to the model under which Davidson is working, however, anything which refers to the event or action is a description of the event or action, there is no distinction between an identifiable action and its description: e.g., "It was a needless killing." The killing is the action and "needless" describes the killing. And so Davidson must make "event" and "action" do the same kind of job that "telephone,"

"avalanche," "murder," "going to the store," "flipping the switch," "pumping water," etc. do, as if they could be used in the same way. This will not do. "Action" and "event" cannot identify particular actions and events any more than "object" or "thing" can be used to identify particular objects or things. This means that Davidson cannot identify what is being described by "flipping the switch," "turning on the light," "illuminating the room," etc. And if this is true we cannot make sense out of his claim that these are descriptions; there is nothing to describe; there is no possible answer to the question "What is being described?" Because Davidson cannot produce an identifiable action "description" has only the appearance of a use. Therefore, without an action, and without a use for "description" there can be no sense to his claim that an action can have many descriptions. This is what Cody meant when he wrote, "I shall be maintaining that to claim a single action can have many descriptions presupposes that we have a way of fixing our attention upon a single action independently of a description of it."

This criticism, if correct is enough to show that the picture cannot support the claim that an action can have any descriptions whatever, and so should convince us that the picture needs to be rejected. However, as one might expect, the picture's inability to find an indentifiable action creates other problems, notably in the sense given to "the same action."

As mentioned, according to Davidson descriptions refer to the same action when the descriptions refer to the event or

happening in the world, and as we have seen the action cannot be identified; various things can only be predicated of it. To show how this will not do consider some of the examples which have been given. The man who described the painting as "a mass of blues and greens" was describing the same thing as the man who described the painting as "a forest." Also, the descriptions "a massive snow slide," and "an awe inspiring sight" were of the same event, the avalanche. And "an act of treason" and "a politically motivated act" could all be said of Brutus' killing of Caesar. But if we were not told that these latter three descriptions were of Brutus' killing of Caesar how would we know that they were of the same action? These descriptions could fit a number of different actions, the assassination of John Kennedy, for instance. However, in our example we could identify the action which the descriptions were describing. Although the descriptions "an act of treason," and "a politically motivated act" could be of many different actions, the way that we knew that they were about the same act was because we specified the action that they were all said to be about, Brutus' killing of Caesar.

Just by saying that some descriptions are of the same action will not tell us what the action is, neither will it tell us what is to be considered the same action. For example, consider children playing follow the leader. The followers must do the same as the leader. But just by being told, as one of the followers, that we must do the same thing does not tell us what is to count as the same thing. The leader may step on a crack with his right foot. As a follower I may also have to

step on the crack with my right foot if I am to do the same as he. Then again, it may not matter whether I step on the crack with my right foot or with my left. For if what is to count as "doing the same thing" is only that I step on the crack it will not matter which foot I use. Of course, it may be that "doing the same thing" means stepping on the crack with the same foot as the leader used to step on the crack. Or it could be that "doing the same thing" means stepping on the crack with the right foot while holding one's breath, in which case all of these conditions will have to be met before I can be said to do the same thing. But just by saying "Do the same as I" will not tell us what we are to do in order to do the same thing. We must be able to identify the action in order for "the same action" to have a meaningful use. But the picture precludes any such identification.

Davidson's reply to this may be that the example is ill chosen, since, if the leader steps on the crack and I step on the crack, two things were done, and he has already said that no two events can be the same, presumably because they are not the same event in time and space. Davidson is certainly wrong here. This is not the way "the same action" is used. To see this consider one of his examples.

In Davidson's example "flipping the switch," "turning on the light," "illuminating the room," etc. are all about the same event? How did he find this out?--because all these descriptions refer to a particular event in time and space; they are all true descriptions of what the man does, and that

is a single thing. However, in the example in which "an abominable act," "an act of treason," and a "politically motivated act" all could be said to refer to the same action we could identify what the action was, viz., Brutus' killing of Caesar. We could, of course, refer to this action in other ways, "a stabbing," "a cowardly deed," "a foolish act," etc. These descriptions would all refer to Brutus' killing of Caesar. But here we can say what is to count as the same thing. We can say what is to count as the same thing by identifying the action. But Davidson cannot identify the action. The best he can do is say that there is some event which they all refer to, and the event is what guarantees that they are all about the same thing. Let us see how this is supposed to work, and if it will do.

According to Davidson events are identified by reference to the spatial-temporal co-ordinates in which they occur, together with the effects they produce and the events which cause them. So the event which makes "turning on the light," "flipping the switch," etc. refer to the same thing is some event which happened, say, at a particular spot in the living room at 2:05 p.m. on June 28th, 1973. However, this will not guarantee that the descriptions "flipping the switch," "turning on the light," and "illuminating the room" will be true. For the occurrence of the event identified as the event which took place at the above mentioned time will only guarantee that some descriptions could be given. In fact, if that event occurs it may be true that "the man flipped the switch," but if the

light does not go on it will not be true that "the man turned on the light." Thus the occurrence place, and no other event can have those characteristics. For example, the man who flips the switch might do it in a certain spot in his living room at 3:05 p.m. No other event can have these characteristics. I can flip the switch, but it cannot be in that location at the same time. This is true, but so what. This is not what we ordinarily mean by "the same action." If what is to count as the same action is flipping the switch, I can do the same as he, viz., I can flip the switch. It makes no difference that he does it with the index finger of his left hand while standing on one foot, and I do it with the index finger of my right hand while whistling snatches of "There's Nothin' Like a Dame." We still are said to have done the same thing. We have both flipped the switch. Just because there are two events, his flipping of the switch and my flipping of the switch, does not preclude the fact that we both did the same thing. It only depends on what is to count as the same action, or the same thing. If we assume that events are things situated in space and time, and that to be the same to have those same spatial-temporal co-ordinates, then no two events are the same. But this is not what we mean by "the same." In fact, if this were what was meant we never would have need of the term.<sup>15</sup>

I believe that these arguments are convincing in showing that the picture of action under which Davidson is working

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<sup>15</sup>c.f., M. D. Cohen, "The Same Action," Proceedings of the Austotilian Society 70 n.s., (1969-70): 75-90.

leads to some untenable conclusion and should therefore be rejected.

I consider Davidson's views somewhat naive. In the next chapter I will discuss Cody's handling of the problem. Although I will argue against his conclusion that an action cannot have many different descriptions, most of what he says about descriptions of actions, I believe is correct.

### CHAPTER THREE

In the last chapter I argued that the metaphysical scheme could not produce an identifiable action, this led me to conclude that the scheme was unintelligible.

In this chapter I wish to discuss Cody's position on this matter. Cody's handling of the problem is more sophisticated than Davidson's and I agree with much of what he says. He argues that we cannot identify what is being described (we are in agreement on this point). However, he concludes that "actions are what descriptions of acts describe, and different descriptions describe different actions."<sup>16</sup>

In this chapter I wish to explain Cody's position, and give two criticisms of it, one minor and one major. I will argue that although he tries to give a special sense to "different description" he does not make clear what he means, and after examination it seems that his use of "different description" makes his conclusion "different descriptions describe different actions" trivial. In this same vein I suggest that his uses of "different description" and "correct description" are circular. The major criticism I wish to make, however, is that Cody has misunderstood his own criticism. Rather than seeing his criticism as detrimental to the metaphysical picture (as I argued in the last chapter), he believes that we should conclude that it is not possible to describe the same action in many ways. I conclude, therefore, that

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<sup>16</sup>Cody, "A Single Action," p. 180.

although ostensibly he wishes to reject the picture by denying that there is such a thing in the world as the "action in-itself," his argument presupposes the intelligibility of the picture. I will then try to show that he is still under the influence of the model because he has misunderstood the notion of "description."

Cody begins his discussion of whether an action can be described in many ways by examining what he means by "different description." He says that different descriptions are descriptions which will not combine to form a single description. The descriptions must be "profoundly" different: "Profoundly different descriptions do not combine. They can only be juxtaposed. We could say that what makes one description profoundly different from another is that it is incompatible with the other." They "cannot get along together. Profoundly different descriptions are unintelligible together."<sup>17</sup>

The state of affairs which he claims we must now find is one in which a single action can have many profoundly different descriptions each of which is true. As example of a case which is not of this kind is one cited by Anscombe. When she first claims that an action can have many different descriptions she gives the following descriptions: "sawing a plank," "sawing oak," "sawing one of Smith's planks," "making a squeaky noise," and "making a great deal of sawdust." These descriptions Cody says will combine "to make a fuller description of a man sawing

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 168.

somebody else's oak plank and making a great deal of noise and sawdust doing it." However, Anscombe gives another example which conforms to his reformulation. She gives an example of a man who is pumping poisoned water into a house to be drunk by some men in the house. As the descriptions of what the man is doing she cites "earning wages," "supporting a family," "wearing away his shoe soles," "making a disturbance in the air," "sweating," "generating substances in his nerve fibers," and "helping to bring about the Kingdom of Heaven," among others. "No single descriptions comes to mind . . . which is created by combining all these descriptive sentences," and so this is a case in which supposedly different descriptions are given of a single action.

This is the type of case Cody accepts and he attacks this example by asking how it is possible for us to come to see that these descriptions are of the same action. Using this example and others (his examples are too long to illustrate here, but they are interesting and worth reading) he shows that there is no way to "fix one's attention" on the action. That is to say there is no way to identify the action. Using the assumption that "to claim a single action can have many different descriptions presupposes that we have a way of fixing our attention upon a single action independently of a description of it"<sup>18</sup> he concludes that different descriptions describe different actions.

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 166.

If taken just as stated Cody's conclusion might be misunderstood, and it seems open to some naive criticisms. For example, if each different description is of a different action we could never be said to be mistaken in our descriptions, since to be mistaken implies that the incorrect description is of the same action; it is just wrong. But on a simple reading of Cody's conclusion, to be mistaken would mean that the description is of a different action rather than an incorrect description of the same action.

What Cody actually means here is that incompatible descriptions cannot be correct descriptions of the same action; i.e., if two descriptions are incompatible, either they are of different actions, or one of them is incorrect. At this point there are three comments I wish to make on Cody's conclusion.

First, to say that descriptions are incompatible when they are unintelligible together invites the question "When are descriptions unintelligible together?" It is certainly true that "Jones went to the store," and "Jones did not go to the store" are incompatible. They are contradictory. But what about "Jones went to the store," and "Jones washed his car." Seemingly these will not fit together because it seems difficult or impossible for anyone to wash their car, and also go to the store, whereas it is very easy to visualize a situation in which "Jones sawed wood," and "Jones was sweating" are true descriptions. But what should be noted is that if the descriptions "Jones went to the store," and "Jones did not go to the store" are incompatible (and so, according to Cody, cannot be

of the same action), they are so on logical grounds, one being the denial of the other; whereas the other two pairs of descriptions, if they are incompatible, will be so on empirical grounds. Certainly the descriptions he accepts in Anscombe's examples are not incompatible on logical grounds, but Cody has not told us how we are to determine when descriptions are incompatible, i.e., unintelligible together.

The second point I wish to make against Cody's conclusion that incompatible correct descriptions cannot be of the same actions is that it is trivial. I can think of no reason why anyone would disagree with it. It seems obvious that if it is true that two descriptions are incompatible they cannot both be correct. This would hold true not only of actions, but for objects as well. If a ball is red all over it cannot also be blue. "Red" and "blue" as descriptions of the ball are incompatible, and cannot be both correct if they are descriptions of the same object. Similarly, to say that "tying one's shoe," and "turning on the light," are incompatible descriptions means that they cannot both be correct descriptions of the same action. This seems to follow from the very notion of incompatibility.

Cody may have another problem. He believes that there is no way to "sort out" actions independently of their descriptions. So we can tell that we are talking about different actions when their descriptions are different. And descriptions are different when they are incompatible. But most of the time we need to know the context in which the descriptions are given to tell whether they are incompatible. For example if A's car rolled

down a hill at the bottom of which was the store he could walk along side the car washing it as he went, and go to the store. This is far fetched, but the point is that we must know what A is doing in most cases before we can determine if the descriptions are incompatible. It seems as if, in any case, the application of "different descriptions" will depend on knowing what the action is, and yet Cody claims that we determine that actions are different by their descriptions. Cody may well have a way around this sort of circularity, but it seems to require a better formulation of what he means by descriptions being unintelligible together.

These points, although of interest, are not the main problem with Cody's position. Cody's argument is: That an action can have many different correct descriptions implies that we have a way of fixing our attention upon the action itself; and since it is not possible to identify the action independently of any description, (he concludes that) different descriptions cannot be of the same action, i.e., different descriptions describe different actions. His conclusion follows from these premises.

What I find difficult to understand is why Cody has found it necessary to make such a conclusion. It seems that Cody has misunderstood the thrust of his own argument. We are able to identify the action. In the last chapter I pointed out that "description" can have an intelligible use only if we can identify the action independently of a description of it, and it is only because one is under the influence of the picture

that one says the action is not identifiable. Thus, when Cody argues that we cannot identify the action independently of the description, he is arguing against the metaphysical scheme. He does not see this. Instead he denies the possibility of describing an action in many different ways, and asserts that an action can have only one correct description. There is no need for this conclusion if we admit (as we must) that it is possible to identify the action. So, although Cody wishes to deny the existence of an action in-itself which is juxtaposed with, and independent of, its description, he has presupposed this state of affairs by his conclusion.

The reason that Cody falls into this predicament is that although he sees that he must deny the existence of an action in-itself, he does not see that he must also reject the idea that to give a description of an action is to predicate properties of an action which is the second characteristic of the picture, and which is largely responsible for the attractiveness of the action in-itself business.

According to the model descriptions are predicated of actions. They refer to them. In answer to the question "What is the action which is described?" Davidson could only reply that it is the event, or happening in the world. He tried to make "action" function as a name.

Cody also accepts the notion that descriptions are predicates of the action. However, he denies the existence of the action in-itself and says that actions are what descriptions of actions describe, and there is only one correct description

of the action. This means that the description is the action --there is no "action in-itself." Thus, Cody tries to get the description itself to identify the action. That is to say, what Cody calls a description now serves to identify the action. We might say that the description becomes the name of the action by identifying it.

What Cody has not seen (or perhaps does realize, but does not see it as important to his argument) is that this simple notion of description does not recognize the many different ways in which we use expressions. A certain sentence may be used at one time to give a description, whereas on another occasion it may serve as a report, an identification, a prediction, an explanation, or any number of other uses. Furthermore, both Cody and Davidson use very simple kinds of descriptions, usually limiting themselves to single sentences or even single words. In fact our usual descriptions are often long and involved (consider some of the descriptions Faulkner uses to describe what his characters are doing). It is not that predicates are descriptions which are used to identify (by referring uniquely) actions, as Cody believes; it is rather that the expressions may be used either as a description, or as a name, or serve some other function depending on the context in which they are used. For example, if I am looking out my window and see my neighbor Smith digging for worms I can tell someone what he is doing, "Smith is digging for worms." That is what Smith is doing. If however, a child were to look at Smith without knowing that one gets worms by crawling

around and digging in the ground, "Smith is digging for worms" takes on a different aspect. It serves to describe and make intelligible (along with some explanation about the habits of worms perhaps) Smith's curious (to the child) behavior.

I do not want to try to get an account of "description" and its use.<sup>19</sup> The only point which is important is that Cody has accepted the notion that descriptions are predicates, and because of this gets involved in the problem of identifying the action. This is a major problem according to the assumptions of the picture; and if we accept the picture, Cody's solution to the problem of making the description of the action identify the action by functioning as a name is perhaps the best move possible. However, as I have argued, Cody's argument should have made him reject the picture. He does not, and so his conclusion must be untenable.

Most of my comments have been directed to problems with the identification of actions because it is the most glaring difficulty with the metaphysical picture. I believe that once we have seen how we do, in fact, identify what someone does we see no difficulty in saying that an action can have many different descriptions. In the next chapter I will discuss how we come to identify and describe someone's action.

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<sup>19</sup>For a detailed discussion of describing see, S. E. Toulmin and K. Baier, "On Describing," *Mind* 61 (1952): 13-38, and W. G. Runciman, "Describing," *Mind* 81 n.s. (July, 1972): 372-88. The Toulmin-Baier article is particularly interesting because in the third section they sketch a history of the use of "describe," and we can see that the way in which the picture assumes the use of the word is tied to logical considerations, and as such is a technical use.

## CHAPTER FOUR

I believe that the preceeding chapters have shown that the metaphysical picture is unintelligible and is unable to support the proposition that an action can have many or only one description. However, the purpose of this paper is not only to show that Davidson and Cody are wrong. It is more important to see what is wrong with the model under which they are working. In the last chapter I pointed out that much of the problem stems from their use of "description." This led to the major difficulty with the picture, i.e., the impossibility of identifying the action.

In this chapter I wish to show that that implicit in the model is a misconception of how we identify actions. The misconception, I will argue, is due to a confusion between certain features of events and objects, and certain features of actions. The confusion stems from the basic characterization of the metaphysical picture: i.e., actions are events or happenings in the world. After pointing out an important difference between our identification of actions I will give an account of how we do identify actions. My account will be in form of reminders and I hope that what I say will be considered, if not mundane, certainly easily understood and involving nothing more than what we already know. This will show that identifying, describing, and understanding actions is not a matter of applying "descriptions" to an action--whether only one or many it is a matter of having certain information of a situation (i.e., a context in which the action

occurs), along with some knowledge of the world and how people behave.

The main problem with Cody's model is that it will not allow for an identification of the action. Implicit in the model is the idea that objects and events are identified in much the same way. But there is at least one important difference. I will try to show what this difference is by introducing the notion of "photographic sameness." In spite of the dangers which go with the introduction of quasi-technical terms, I can think of no clearer way to make the point. I shall say that we see the photographically same thing if photographs of what we are looking at are identical. This means that if A and B are looking in the same direction they will see the photographically same thing, whether they are both looking at objects, events, or human actions. In fact, the notion is introduced especially to deal with objects and events, because photographic sameness or photographic sight will cover each of these categories, whereas in action theory there is already an existing technical term to deal with what I have in mind, viz., bodily movement.

If I am looking at a desk I will see a telephone of the desk if there is a telephone on the desk (under normal conditions of perception). And anyone who looks at the desk will see the same as I, and a photograph of the desk will show a telephone on the desk if there is one there, and will show no telephone on the desk if there is not. The statement "There is a telephone on the desk" will be true if there is one on

the desk, and anyone who looks at the desk will see that there is a telephone on the desk, and he will be able to say "There is a telephone on the desk." Anyone who looks at a photograph of a telephone on the desk will be able to identify it as a photograph of a telephone on the desk. Similarly, with tables in the kitchen, salt shakers on the table, trees in the park, and leaves on the trees: people ordinarily will have no more trouble identifying pictures of these things than they will have identifying the thing themselves. All that is needed is normal sight and a mastery of the language to be able to say, "That is a tree," "there is a salt shaker on the table," and so on.

The situation is the same with events such as cells dividing, eclipses of the sun, rocks falling, and avalanches. If we have normal sight, and know how to apply these terms we will be able to identify these happenings when we see them; and if we saw motion pictures of these events we would have no more trouble identifying the pictures than we do the actual event. If several people were to see an avalanche they would all be able to identify the same (photographically) thing that they saw as an avalanche. Again, they would see the same thing and also say the same thing: "It's an avalanche."

The case with action, however, is different. For example, B is looking out of his window and sees X, his neighbor, crawling around on his hands and knees and poking his fingers in the ground. He calls C over to the window and says, "Look, X must be looking for worms." C replies, "No, he's just crawling

around on the lawn; he gets a kick out of it." Let us suppose that B is correct. X was looking for worms. B was able to say what X was doing because he happens to know that X was interested in trying to find out what was killing his lawn. C, however, said that X was crawling around in the lawn for the fun of it. (We can imagine that X was in the habit of doing this and so C thought "Ah, there he goes again," or some such.) Both B and C see the photographically same thing, yet they give different descriptions<sup>20</sup> of the man's action.

Let us return to Davidson's example of the man who "flips the switch," "turns on the light," and "illuminates the room." We could imagine that there are three people in the room when the man walks in and performs the action which they observe. Let us say that the three observers are part of an experiment and are there just for the purpose of telling what they see the man do. When we ask each what the man did we might get three different replies. The first might say "He flipped the switch," the second, "He turned on the light," and the third could say, "He illuminated the room." Each of them saw the photographically same thing; they each saw the happening in space and time which involved the man; but they each gave different descriptions of what the man did. If we were under the assumption, as Davidson is, that different descriptions of the same action means that the descriptions refer to the same happening in space and time,

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<sup>20</sup>As already mentioned to say that these are descriptions is to use "description" in a quasi-technical sense. "Explanation" seems to be the more natural word to use here.

we can see why he says that an action can have many descriptions. Each person sees the photographically same thing, but they give different descriptions of what they see.

This account, however, makes an assumption which is unwarranted. In each of these examples the observers were seeing the photographically same thing: they saw the same objects situated in the certain spatial relationship that they were in, and the man moved the way he did move, and each person saw this. But to admit this is not the same as admitting that they each saw the same action. In fact, in the first example B had to correct C. C's description was inaccurate; he did not understand what the man was doing, and his answer did not put the man's action in the proper light. He did not see the man's action at all--at least not in the same sense as one sees an object.

This is different from the case in which we identify events or objects. When we identify events or objects all that is needed is normal sight and a mastery of the language. When we are dealing with objects and events we see the photographically same thing, and we identify what we see in the same way: a telephone on the desk, an avalanche, etc. Actions, however, will not conform to this simple pattern of identification. To see the same event and refer to the event by describing it is not necessarily to be able to identify the action. In fact, some of the descriptions Davidson claims refer to the man's action are not descriptions of his actions at all.

This same point can be made using another of Davidson's examples. In the example Davidson says that "he burned a scrap

of paper," and "he burned a valuable document" are about the same action. Let us fill in the details of the example. X is a janitor and it is his duty to clean the offices of a building at night. On a particular night he is cleaning the office and two of his fellow janitors are with him, keeping him company. X sees a piece of paper on the floor, and thinking that it was meant to be thrown away, picks it up and puts it with the trash, and burns it in the incinerator. Suppose that one of the other janitors knew that the paper was a document (for some reason he didn't mention the fact). Now, if asked about what the cleaning janitor did, one could say "he burned the piece of scrap paper." However, the other janitor who knew that the paper was a document would say, "he burned the document." According to the view that descriptions of actions refer to events, both descriptions are of the same action. But, although Davidson claims that both these descriptions are of the same action, "he burned the scrap of paper" is not what the man did at all. He burned what he thought was a piece of paper. What he did was burn the document. At this point it may be tempting to say that they were of the same action and only one of the descriptions is incorrect. And here we have to remember that these phrases are not being used as descriptions of the action. We are trying to identify the action. And the man did not burn a piece of scrap paper.

There is another outcome of Davidson's position, one that Davidson also accepts. He gives an example in which a man poisons the water supply of an astronaut on the way to some

planet. The astronaut dies as a result of drinking the poisoned water. The man has killed the astronaut. Davidson reasons that since the man's poisoning the water and killing the astronaut refer to the same event, but since the astronaut dies after the water is poisoned, the poisoner kills the astronaut before he dies. Davidson accepts this conclusion and says that since the reasoning is correct, we must reconcile ourselves to it. This conclusion seems almost to invite parody: I ventilate the room after I open the window, the president is elected before the votes are counted, and we can develop heart-burn before the food gets to our stomachs. Reasoning which leads to such conclusions cannot be right, and I cannot reconcile myself to it; but if one is under the impression that descriptions of actions describe by referring to events, and when several descriptions refer to the same event we have described the action in several ways, perhaps we should admit such conclusions.

So far in this chapter I have tried to point out where the picture and Davidson have gone wrong. Just because several people can describe and refer to the event which occurs does not mean that they have identified the action. I have tried to show what causes the confusion by introducing the notion of "photographic sameness." It seems that sometimes although we see the photographically same thing and yet give different descriptions, and thus, if we accept the claim that descriptions refer to events, it seems that actions can be described in many ways. But this is the wrong way to view the problem of describing actions. In the remainder of the chapter I will

discuss how we identify actions, and how we can understand what actions are being performed without recourse to the notion that descriptions refer to events and actions.

X walks to the store to buy some beer. Does he not also go to the store, walk to the store, walk, prepare for tonight's party, move his arms and legs, make the store keeper richer, etc.? X does many things, it seems, when he walks to the store to buy some beer. How many things does he do?

Consider these cases. Someone is speaking to a friend and lamenting a sudden attack of laziness. He says "I've done only one thing all day. I did my laundry." A mother says to her son, "I want you to do one thing for me before you go out to play. Pick up your toys." Again, an old man is sitting and talking about his life, and he says, "Yes, I've done a couple of things in my life. I've made myself rich, and raised a fine family."

I do not think that we have any problem understanding what is meant in these cases. But consider someone saying to the old man, "Surely you've done more things than that. You've bought a house, eaten ice cream cones, gone to Europe, gotten out of bed many times, gotten married, played golf, etc., etc. Now, do we understand this? What is this man trying to say?

The student who did his laundry said that he did one thing all day. The mother wanted her son to do one thing before he went out to play. The old man said he did two things in his life. We can understand what these people meant. The student meant that he had done only one thing he thought

was his duty, or something which was a necessary task; the mother was interested in the toys being picked up, and she instructed her son accordingly; the old man was talking about two general things he had done which he considered important. Each of these persons picked out certain things that they did, and the number of things that they picked out corresponded to the number of things that they said they did, or wanted done. When they picked out the actions mentioned they had something in mind. They were interested in certain things, and that is what determined the things they picked out. What someone says he has done, or is doing, will depend in part, on what his interest is. He will say that he did x, or y, or z, depending, not on whether it might be true to describe him as doing x, y, or z, but rather on his interest when he is relating what he is doing, or has done. Although it may be true to say of the man who goes to the store that he is preparing for the party that night, walking to the store, or whatever, what he says about what he is doing will depend on what his interest is when he says what he is doing.

Again, consider the case of someone changing the oil in his car. There are certain steps that one goes through to get the job done, and if he was doing the job according to a manual of some kind he would follow these steps. If he is interested in relating the procedure to someone else he may mention each of these steps. On the other hand, if he is merely telling someone how he spent his afternoon he will say he changed the oil in his car. It should be noted that in this example it will

not only be important to consider what the man who is changing the oil considers important, but to whom he is talking, and what he is interested in, as in the case of the novice who wants to know the various steps involved in changing the oil. What is selected as the action(s) will depend on who is interested in the goings-on, and why it is important. However, Davidson has omitted all mention of any context in which we are called upon to describe an action(s). And it is the particular context which will tell us what the parties are interested in.

Davidson has left out all such considerations. And these are the things we use in actual situations to determine what someone is doing. It may be pointed out that the number of things which determine someone's interest is so varied that it is of no assistance to point this out as a determiner of how we describe someone's action. This is true. It may be fruitless to give a general account of how we describe actions considering people's interest, but it is possible to cite particular cases which will make clear the kinds of things which are at work.

It is because Davidson has omitted all such considerations that it appears as if there are a myriad of things we could, and even should say about what someone does. X does something of which "flipping the switch," "turning on the light," "illuminating the room," "alerting the prowler," "doing someone a favor," or "dirtying his hands" might apply. The list is endless. But this is to omit all considerations which might help

us to determine what we should say, or what we do say. The situation is similar to the case in which someone holds up his hand and asks how many things is he holding up. If "thing" means hands he is holding up one; if "thing" means fingers he is holding up four. But could he not also mean fingers and the thumb?--or fingers and the hand? Maybe. We have not been told what is in question, and so neither do we have a way to count. However, in normal situations we merely have to know which are the actions we are interested in and count them to know how many we are talking about: X went to Europe three times, there are five steps in changing the oil, there are three things to look for in a good golf swing, he goes fishing once a week, etc.

These same contextual considerations apply to the application of "doing the same thing." It makes sense to say that George McGovern and Richard Nixon did the same thing only if we specify what it is that they both did. If what we mean is that they both ran for president, then it is true that they both did the same thing, although they gave different speeches, in different cities at different times.

Being able to say that two actions are the same, and being able to say how many actions were performed rests on being able to identify the action. Once we have specified what is to count then we can find out if someone did the same as someone else, and how many times they did that action. And when we are speaking about the actions of people within a specific context we usually do not have any problem. I think that we will find that once we have considered the

context in which an action occurs, together with certain things which we know about the way people act, this question will be shown to be not a theoretical problem (as Davidson and the picture would have us believe), but merely a practical one calling for practical rather than philosophical solutions. To show this I will consider two cases. The first case will be one in which it would be very difficult to understand and describe what someone is doing. The second is a very common case in which we very easily know what is happening and how to describe the actions of the characters involved, a stereotypical western movie.

If someone is a professional spy, if he is to continue in his work for very long he must be very good at not letting it be known what he is really doing. Let us say that X is a spy and it is his assignment to observe and photograph some construction work that is going on at a military installation. He is not going to drive up to the installation with four movie cameras and a flock of technicians. Instead, suppose that he pretends to go for a walk past the installation observing it as any curious person might who sees some construction. He might also try to engage some of the soldiers in conversation on some pretense with the hope of extracting some information from them, and in the process take some pictures with a special camera designed for the purpose. Just by observing him we will not know that he is spying, for he takes especial care to conceal that fact. How are we to be able to describe what he is doing as spying rather than taking

a walk, passing the time of day, talking to soldiers, etc.? There are several ways that this might be possible. Perhaps, if I am his superior, I know that he is spying because I was the one who ordered him to undertake the assignment. Or, perhaps an FBI agent knew that he was a spy and watched him; if he thought that he was on an assignment he would suspect that he was going out to spy. Or again, perhaps he acted in such a manner to give himself away, e.g., he may have dropped his camera while talking to the soldier. There are many different ways that we could find out that he was spying, although this would probably be difficult. But none of these things present any kind of theoretical difficulty. It is a matter of obtaining certain types of information about the spy and his activities. If we suspect that he is a spy we will naturally be curious and suspicious if we see him observing a military installation, even if it appears that he is doing nothing out of the ordinary, nothing that any curious person would not do, we still would be suspicious. Perhaps we might stop and search him to see if he has a camera or other evidence which will incriminate him. The knowledge or suspicion, that he is a spy will cause us to view his actions in a certain light, and this will help determine how we describe his actions.

Consider a more common case. Suppose in a movie we see the villain hiding behind a rock as the hero approaches. How do we know that the villain is going to try to murder the hero? First off, how do we know that one of the men is the hero and the other the villain? We might have seen the villain shoot

up the town earlier, kick a dog, snarl a lot, accept money to throw widows and orphans out of their homes, or any number of other things. We could know that the hero was the hero because he wears a white hat, plays a guitar, is engaged to the school teacher, donates money to help the widows and orphans who were thrown out of their homes by the villain, or any number of other things of the sort. There are the things that the writers, directors, and producers put in the movie to help us know what is going on, and these are the sorts of things which enable us to understand that the villain is going to try to murder the hero rather than scare him, play a practical joke on him, or give him stories for his old age.

Let us assume that in the movie what had happened was that some years before the hero had killed the brother of the villain (in self defense). This gives us a good reason to suppose that the villain is going to murder the hero. Why does this give us a good reason to describe the villain's action as an attempt at murder? It is because, 1) we know the killing of one's brother can be a motive for murder, and 2) we know that the villain is the sort of man who would attempt murder for that reason. And we have been given this information in the movie. This is what will enable us to describe the villain's action correctly as a murder attempt.

It is our knowledge of a situation, together with our understanding of the way in which certain people act under certain conditions which enable us to correctly describe actions. These factors, along with events involving people,

which make it possible to describe actions. To make this point in another way consider what might happen if a Martian, who knew nothing about revenge as a motive for murder, saw the movie. How puzzled he would be to see the villain try to kill the hero. We would have to explain to him what revenge is, how it comes about, and that human beings sometimes kill for that reason. Or, consider the example of the man crawling around on his hands and knees, poking in the lawn because he likes it. How odd that sounds; and it sounds odd because that is not one of the things which people usually do for the fun of it. To be told that he enjoys it leaves us in the same position that the Martian was in when he was told that the villain was going to kill the hero because the hero had killed the villain's brother. All the facts are presented, but, for the Martian, there is no connection between being told or knowing that the villain's brother was killed and the villain's action. And it would make it difficult for the Martian to describe the villain's act as an attempt at murder until the villain actually shot at the hero. Even then we can imagine the Martian saying, "How odd," just as after being told that the man is crawling around because he likes it we feel like saying, "How odd." The instance of the man crawling around on the ground seems to be kind of case in which one could watch him doing the same thing time after time and still be curious, hoping for some more understandable explanation. Upon not finding one our last recourse is just to say that the man is eccentric in that particular.

In summary then, besides the happening in space and time involving human beings, we also have a context in which to view the actions of people. The context will help us by providing us with reasons, motives, intentions, and plans. And when we know these things about the person we can identify what he is doing because we know certain things about people and the way that they behave. We know that certain things tend to motivate people, that they do certain things because they enjoy them (and we know what kinds of things most people enjoy) and that different people act differently in certain situations. It is our knowledge of these things, along with the event, and our interest in the situation which will determine how we describe and understand the actions of human beings.

## CONCLUSION

In this thesis I have tried to show that we can and do, identify, understand, and describe human actions without recourse to any metaphysical picture, and that if we try to use a metaphysical model, i.e., start with a model, we create problems which would otherwise not exist.

One of the difficulties with the model is that it will not allow an affirmative answer to the question "Can the same action have many different descriptions?" I have argued that on the picture we cannot identify the action which is said to be "described" and that since one of the features for the intelligible use of "description" is that we can identify the action being described, there is no intelligible use for "description." This makes the whole question unintelligible. It also leads to a very strange notion of what the "same action" is--a single event such that no two events, things, or actions can be said to be the same. This is surely wrong. On this model, then, it is not possible for an action to be "described" in many ways.

Cody has seen this. However, as I have argued, he has misinterpreted his arguments and has reaffirmed the picture by concluding that different descriptions describe different actions. This conclusion, however, has its roots in the mistaken metaphysical picture, furthermore it assumes that descriptions are a very simple kind, being little more than properties of an action. In fact descriptions are sometimes long and complicated. Cody has overlooked this, and so although he argued successfully that on the assumption of the picture we cannot

describe the same action in many different ways he believed that he must deny its possibility. This is merely the influence of the picture, however.

Throughout this thesis I have assumed that it is possible to describe an action in different ways. That we can do so i.e., it makes sense to use this expression, seems so obvious that I believed all that was needed was to look at the way we do describe and identify what people do. I have argued, (or rather just given reminders) that this entails, not the introduction of a picture, but only that we have certain kinds of information about people in general, and about the context in which someone acts. These things are sufficient for us to know what someone is doing, or if they are not, a philosophical picture will not help us.

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ACTIONS AND DESCRIPTIONS OF ACTION: CAN THE  
SAME ACTION HAVE MANY DIFFERENT DESCRIPTIONS?

by

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## ABSTRACT

One of the questions which has been debated in recent philosophical literature is "Can the same action have many different, correct descriptions?" Donald Davidson has said that unless we can give many different descriptions of the same action we cannot have a theory of human action. Recently, however, Arthur Cody has argued that an action can have only one correct description.

In this thesis I will show that the question of whether an action can be described in many ways is only an issue because certain philosophers, notably Davidson and Cody, have believed that to say that an action can have many different descriptions implies a certain notion or picture of what an action is. Briefly the "metaphysical picture" is that an action is a thing in the world, the given (a kind of "bare particular"), and descriptions are predicates which refer to the action. Whenever more than one description is predicated of the action the action is described in many ways.

I will argue that according to the picture we cannot give an intelligible use for "description" because we cannot identify the action which is said to be described. This is the outcome of two mistaken assumptions: that an action is a type of bare event, and that descriptions are merely predicates which refer to the action. Consequently, the metaphysical picture cannot support the one-action-many-descriptions formulation.

We should not conclude, as Cody does that an action can have only one correct description. For this conclusion presupposes

the premises of the picture and assumes its intelligibility. Rather, we must remember how we do, in fact, identify and describe actions. It will be shown that this does not involve any metaphysical picture. We understand and describe actions by having certain kinds of knowledge of how people act, their motives, intentions, plans, and desires. Once we are reminded of this the question of whether an action can have many descriptions takes on a very ordinary aspect and may be answered affirmatively.