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Conclusion

How these things end. In Cormac McCarthy's novel *Blood Meridian*, some young recruits in a militia of questionable legality spend an evening drinking and carousing. One of them ends up dead. As they observe the body in the early morning, an old Mennonite whom they had, while carousing, berated, joins the observation. McCarthy has him comment:

There is no such joy in the tavern as upon the road thereto, said the Mennonite. He had been holding his hat in his hands and now he set it upon his head again and turned and went out the gate. (McCarthy 2001: 43)

We're off the road to the tavern now. The book is basically done. One hardly knows whether to let sound the mournful, almost disappointed tones of Pearl Jam's "Long Road"—*but still something's missing... cannot say*—or to play instead the triumphalist conclusion of Haydn's "The Creation":

Vollendet ist das große Werk!

We should take a step back, and consider the various claims and accounts offered in this book in broader context. I began by invoking a contrast one often finds in the philosophy of action, between activity attributable to an agent and a plane of mere passivity. I said I had an aim to explain this metaphor's allure. Agents behave differently than non-agents. Something is unique and special about agents.

I tried to capture this difference—to develop a perspective on the shape of agency—by way of interlinked accounts of key (one might say pivotal) agential phenomena. Three of these are basic building blocks of agency. Two express modes of agential excellence.

The basic building blocks are control, non-deviance, and intentional action.

Control is essentially a matter of an agent disposed, in certain contexts or circumstances, to behave in a certain way. The way the controlled agent

behaves—the way her dispositions manifest in the relevant circumstances—is such that they repeatably and flexibly produce situations (movements, thoughts, or events more broadly) that match their plan for behavior.

The account I offered delved, in different ways, into details that are important for understanding what I mean by talking of repeatable, flexible behavioral approximation to the content of a plan. The notion of a plan state is important. So, too, is the notion of a circumstance-type. For an agent's control cannot be understood in isolation from the circumstances in which she possesses or exercises the control.

Nor can an agent's control be understood in isolation from non-deviant causation. For non-deviance is, in essence, the expression of the control that an agent possesses. In order to understand what happens when non-deviant causation happens, I developed the notion of a comprehensive set of circumstances. This is a set of circumstances that is derived by building a causal model that includes an agent, a plan, and the agent's location in a particular situation. What is special about the model is that it gets the causal parameters of the particular situation right. Non-deviant causation then turns out to be the normal production of behavior that is, for the agent, normal given the plan and across the comprehensive set of circumstances.

After discussing non-deviant causation, I turned to a specification and to a discussion of different varieties of control. For it should be the case that a satisfying account of control has the potential to shed light on different usages of control. I focused on two, and argued that the account of control I offer can be extended to illuminate direct control as well as voluntary control. I also, probably foolhardily, offered an explication of what is “up to” an agent that my friends who think about free will may read, and quickly ignore.

With accounts of control and non-deviance in hand, I offered a new account of intentional action. That chapter may seem, in retrospect, to be particularly rough sledding. But the basic idea is not. Intentional action is, in essence, the exercise of a sufficient degree of control in bringing behavior to approximate a good plan. The relative simplicity of the account should appeal to causalists, and the ability of the account to handle common objections to causalist accounts should dismay anti-causalists. In broader perspective, I think the account locks onto something of importance. The divide between activity and passivity is metaphorical. But the divide between systems incapable and those capable of intentional action is not. This account

locates the elements—namely, control and capacities to form good plans in at least some circumstance-types—that make the divide precise.

After specifying these basic building blocks I articulated a view of agency on which agents contain capacities that warrant the application of behavioral standards—usually, practically rational norms, or practical reasons—and that enable the meeting of at least some of these standards. I did not offer an analysis of agency. In chapter 6, where I discussed the nature of agency, I was deliberately non-committal in a way that I was not in other chapters. What I wanted to do was to lay out a space of different forms of agents that could serve as a hinge on which the book might turn, towards a discussion of modes of agentive excellence.

The modes of excellence I discussed enable the expansion of the space of behavioral standards in some ways, and the meeting of a wide range of standards, in others. Skilled agents structure themselves so that the standards that apply to their performance become very fine-grained. They display excellence so refined that at times it seems skilled behavior is its own reward—excellence for excellence's sake, along whatever dimension of evaluation.

Knowledgeable action is a different mode of excellence. By way of practical reasoning, sophisticated agents use knowledge of what they are doing to find ever better ways of doing it—or, failing that, to find ways to stop doing that and to do something better, or next best, as the case dictates.

I began with a rough contrast one often finds in the philosophy of action, between the activity of an agent and a plane of mere passivity. The metaphor is alluring, I think, because agents contain, to greater or lesser degrees, capacities that enable the transformation of the world by way of standards that the agent sets—by way of plans, and goals embedded in plans. When an agent can do this across even minute differences of circumstance, then it seems the result is due to something stable, something capable of transmuting the flux of stimulus and response into something more than just the ongoing flux of stimulus and response—something that combines reliability and flexibility in a way suggestive of something behind the flux. Something like a mind, or at least a plan. With the exercise of control, the passive becomes active, and plans give rise to intentional action. With the development of skill, capacities for planning and for exercising control and for executing intentional action begin to cover broad differences of circumstance. With the acquisition of knowledge, agents are able to impose their will on parts of the world that their practice may not have adequately prepared

them for. In knowledgeable action, agents exert change in the world in part by figuring out the world they change.

Well, look at me. I'm rambling. The story is becoming excessively metaphorical at this later stage. But, like the Stranger says at the conclusion of *The Big Lebowski* (Coen and Coen 2009), it was a pretty good story, don't you think? It made me laugh to beat the band.

Parts, anyway.

