Causation, Explanation, and the Metaphysics of Aspect

Bradford Skow

1 Advertisement

I

"Causation, explanation, okay. But, the metaphysics of aspect? What's that?"

Great question! In honor of the Monty Python boys, I'll start with something completely different. J. L. Austin, in *Sense and Sensibilia*, observed that something can exist without being real, since for example toy ducks certainly exist, even though they are not real ducks. This comment was part of Austin's ordinary-languaging of the word "real," but it sparked in his mind some thoughts about "exist," thoughts that, since they weren't directly relevant to his topic, he confined to a footnote:

> 'Exist', of course, is itself extremely tricky. The word is a verb, but it does not describe something that things do all the time, like breathing, only quieter—ticking over, as it were, in a metaphysical sort of way. (Austin 1962, 68)

This "ticking over" bit is one of the great rhetorical moments in 20th century philosophy, but its greatness makes it easy to overlook what the footnote is missing.

People usually quote Austin approvingly.[1] They agree with his claim. But Austin just asserts it. He doesn't argue for it. Once you realize this, so many questions are immediately urgent: why, exactly, doesn't "exist" describe something things do? What is it to do something anyway? What does *doing something* contrast with, and what can be said, in general, about which things fall on which side of the line?

I'll answer some of these in a minute, but first I want to change the subject one more time. Suppose that I strike a match and it lights, and that the match wouldn't have lit if I hadn't struck it. Now the match also wouldn't have lit if there hadn't been oxygen in the room. But, many want to say—I want to say—that only the striking is a cause of the lightning; the presence of oxygen is instead a "background condition" to the lighting. But then what is the difference between causes and background conditions? What did the striking do, that the presence of oxygen failed to do, that earned the striking the status of a cause? One tempting answer is that causes have to be events. But this answer only has something going for it if the striking of the match is an event and the presence of oxygen is not. Could that be right? This claim is easier to defend if it comes from some systematic theory of events, rather than being just a one-off judgment. So what general criteria could we state for being an event that the striking would satisfy and the presence of oxygen would not?

These two batteries of questions may seem unconnected, but I think that there is a single distinction that can help with both. Perhaps surprisingly, it is a linguistic distinction: the distinction between "stative" and "non-stative" verbs. The right way to draw the "did something" / "didn't do anything" distinction, and the right way to draw the event / non-event distinction, I am going to claim, uses the stative / non-stative distinction. Among other benefits to drawing these distinctions the way I will draw them is that the claims that drove the questions I started with come out true: existing will turn out not to be a way of doing something, and the presence of oxygen, not to be an event.

[1] An example: (van Inwagen 2009, 477). The temptation to make the mistake Austin opposed starts early. My older son asked me the other day "Do you know what I'm doing?" He was lying on the floor waving his hand in the air. "No, what?" "Existing."

The stative / non-stative distinction belongs to what linguists call the study of lexical aspect. The other two distinctions belong to metaphysics. The claim I will make, that the metaphysical distinctions "line up" with the aspectual distinction, is, then, a claim about the "metaphysics" of aspect.

II

This book consists of four essays built around three ideas. Two of the ideas are the ideas about the metaphysics of aspect I just mentioned (ideas I haven't actually stated in any detail yet—I'm about to get to that); the third is an idea about explanation. Each essay builds on the ideas in a different way, so I've written them so that they may be read independently. (This does make for some repetition.) My goal in this chapter is to introduce the ideas and the essays.

Before getting any metaphysics out of the stative / non-stative distinction we need more exposure to the distinction itself. Which verbs are stative, and which are non-stative? One test uses the distinction between a progressive clause, like "Jones was singing," and a non-progressive clause, like "Jones sang" (a distinction belonging to "grammatical" aspect). For the most part, non-stative verbs may appear in the progresive while stative verbs may not. For example "paddle" is non-stative, and may appear in the progressive: "Jones was paddling the boat" is grammatical. "Be" (the "be of predication," as in "Jones is tall") on the other hand, is stative, and may not appear in the progressive: "Jones is being tall" is ungrammatical. This test for stativity is not perfect—stative verbs can sometimes appear in the progressive. Fortunately there are other tests, one of which I'll discuss in a minute.[2]

[2]These are tests for when an English verb is stative. The stative/non-stative contrast exists in other languages too. But I don't know enough to say anything about them. (Sabine Iatridou tells me that the translation of the "be" of predication into some languages can be non-stative, when it bears perfective marking, something it cannot do in English.)

Comrie, in his book *Aspect*, discusses both the progressive/non-progressive and

How does the stative / non-stative distinction help with the question of the conditions under which there exists an event? It is easy to give examples of conditions under which there exists an event, harder to produce a principled theory that fits them. If a bomb explodes, then in virtue of this fact an event occurs, namely the explosion of the bomb. By contrast, even though 2 + 2 = 4, it is false that in virtue of this fact an event ("2 plus 2's being 4") occurs. What is the difference between these two cases? More generally, can we say anything useful and informative about which clauses can go in for "S" to make the following true?

If S, then an event occurs in virtue of the fact that S.

I hold that you get a truth from the above schema when you put in for "S" a simple clause whose main verb is non-stative.[3]

stative/non-stative distinction; he also discusses progressive uses of stative verbs (Comrie 1976, 37–39).

[3]The clause must be in the present tense and non-progressive. I also endorse the past tense and the progressive analogues of this schema.

This answer is not mine originally. It is a key plank in the "Neo-Davidsonian" approach to the semantics of natural language. Parsons (1990) defends the approach and discusses its history. It gets its name from some papers by Donald Davidson, collected in (Davidson 2001).

In chapter 5 I end up restricting this claim to exclude non-stative verb phrases headed by raising verbs; since "fail" is a raising verb, with this restriction the theory does not entail that there are "negative events" like failures. See that chapter for my reasons for doing this, and a definition of "raising verb."

It may be that I should make even more restrictions. When Socrates died Xanthippe became a widow. If "become a widow" is non-stative, then my theory says that there was a corresponding event. But many philosophers have thought that while a event (a death) occurred in virtue of the fact that Socrates died, no event occurred in virtue of the fact that Xanthippe became a widow. I'm inclined to agree. My main reason, which I'll discuss later, is that I want a theory of events that complements the thesis that events are things that can cause or be caused. "Xanthippe's becoming a widow" doesn't seem like it can cause anything, or be caused by anything. Now I'm a bit unsure about whether or not "become a widow" is non-stative, but let's suppose it is. Then in outline I want to restrict the true instances of "If S, then an event occurs in virtue of the fact that S" to exclude instances in which what goes in for "S" has as its main verb phrase a verb phrase like "become a widow."

This theory gets the cases right. The verb "explode" is non-stative: "The bomb was exploding" is grammatical. So if a bomb explodes, an event (an explosion) occurs in virtue of this fact, as we want. But the "is" of identity is stative: "2 plus 2 is being 4" is ungrammatical. So no event occurs in virtue of the fact that 2 + 2 = 4. It also gets the examples that motivate the "cause / background condition" distinction right. The theory entails that an event occurred in virtue of the fact that I struck the match, but no event occurred in virtue of the fact that oxygen was present in the room.

If this theory is right, then it is natural to ask whether there are things whose existence "goes with" the truth of sentences with stative verbs in the way that (according to this theory) the existence of events goes with the truth of sentences with non-stative verbs. I say that there are, namely states. If oxygen is present in a room, then in virtue of this fact a state obtains. States, however, are different from events, in a variety of ways; for one thing, only events can cause or be caused. States cannot.[4] (These claims come in for more attention in chapter 5.)

For many non-stative verbs—this is a bit of a digression—there is a noun spelled the same as the present-participle form of that verb, a noun that applies to the corresponding event. "Stab" is non-stative, and the noun "stabbing" (as in "three stabbings") applies to events that happen when something of the form "X stabs Y" is true. So when there is such a noun we can go beyond the bare claim that when "X Ved" is true and V is non-stative then there was a corresponding event;

The problem, of course, is saying which verb phrases those are. I'm afraid I don't know how to do this. (One suggestion is that they are verb phrases that denote mere changes in something's relations to other things. But that can't be right, since—I hold—motion is a mere change in something's relations to other things, yet when something moves there is a corresponding event.) For the most part examples like this won't come up, so for the most part I will ignore this problem.

[4]The word "state" is reminiscent of the phrase "state of affairs," a phrase many philosophers have used to name one kind of thing or another (I'm not sure whether they've always used to name the same kind of thing). But I'm not using "state" to abbreviate "state of affairs," so please don't assume that the properties other philosophers have said states of affairs have are properties I say states have. I realize that this means I say very little about the properties states have. I think I say enough about them for the work I want states to do.

we can say that the event was a Ving. But there is not always such a noun.[5] Still, I will sometimes pretend that there is when I want to state generalizations about facts statable using non-stative verbs and the events that occur in virtue of them. (I'm about to do this in the next sentence.)

The claim that a Ving is happening whenever something is Ving follows from, but is weaker than, the claim that "X is Ving" means the same as "An event that is a Ving by X is happening." Partisans of "Neo-Davidsonian semantics" endorse somthing like this stronger thesis: they hold that non-stative verb phrases, and only non-stative verb phrases, are actually (at the level of "logical form") predicates of events (see Parsons 1990). But you don't need to be a Neo-Davidsonian to think that non-stative verbs go with events. You can hold that "Jones is crossing the street" entails that a crossing is happening without meaning "A crossing of the street by Jones is happening." You could be even more cautious and hold that it entails this only in conjunction with the assumption that there are such things as events.

Okay, I've presented a partial theory of events. It is far from a complete theory. It doesn't say anything about the "identity conditions" of events. If Jones crossed the street slowly, he crossed the street, and since "cross" is non-stative the

[5] "Announce," for example, is non-stative, so if Jones announced that Smith had won, a corresponding event occurred. But this event was not "an announcing that Smith had won"—this phrase is not grammatical. (Of course we do have a noun for this kind of event: it was an announcement.)

Huddleston and Pullum call nouns that share a shape with a present-participle form of a verb a "gerundial noun" (2002, 81–82). In some cases, the gerundial noun derived from a non-stative verb phrase is a mass noun, not a count noun. "Run" is an example (as is any so-called "activity" verb phrase): it's not right to say that when Jones ran, there was a running by Jones. (Mass nouns cannot take determiners like "a" or "three.") I don't know what to make of the fact that some non-statives correspond to count nouns and some to mass nouns. Presumably events are things that can be counted, so it seems that non-statives that correspond to mass nouns do not "go with" events or with states. Mourelatos (1978) claims that non-statives that correspond to mass nouns go with processes rather than events. I still maintain, however, that the stuff that activity verbs go with is in some way "event-like," and so should be grouped with events and not with states. To save space in the main text, but only for this reason, I'll often write as if the gerundial noun derived from a non-stative is always a count noun.

theory says that there was a slow crossing by Jones, and also a crossing by Jones. But the theory doesn't say anything about whether there was just one crossing, or more. The theory also doesn't say anything about the essences of events. It doesn't say whether Jones's crossing is a crossing in every possible world in which it happens. For all the theory says, the property of being a crossing is a property that event has contingently.[6]

While it is far from complete, the theory does make a substantive claim about the conditions under which an event is occurring. So why believe it? It gets the small number of cases I've looked at right. But so do other theories. So does, for example, the theory that an event happens whenever something changes. When a bomb explodes, the bomb changes, but when $2 + 2 = 4$ nothing changes. Yet these are distinct theories: a non-stative verb phrase can apply to you even if you don't change. "Stand still," for example, is non-stative, but someone who is standing still need not be changing.

Why prefer my theory to the theory that "events are changes"? Some may intuit that the claim

> when someone stands still an event occurs in virtue of this fact

is false. I myself don't share that intuition. More importantly, I am interested in arguments for and against my view that don't rest simply on intuitions about when an event does or does not happen. This is because I want a theory of events with the following two features. First, the line it draws between events and states should be a natural one, a "joint in nature." Second, the theory should "play well" with the thesis that events can be causes and effects while states cannot. And whether the theory gets intuitions about when an event happens by and large right does not seem to me to bear very directly on whether the theory has either of these features. I say something in defense of the theory's having these two features in chapters 2

[6]Lots of philosophers have weighed in on the identity conditions and essences of events. For just a few references, Bennett seems to hold that when Jones crossed the street then there was just one crossing, which was slow (Bennett 1988), while Yablo holds that there were at least two crossings, both of them slow, one of them essentially slow, the other not (Yablo 2010).

and 5.[7]

I've said a lot about events; I need to get back to J. L. Austin, "exists," and doing something. He said that "exists" does not describe something things do, but left us asking what demarcates doing something from its contrary. Now it will be useful to have an abbreviation for "X did something," and I will use "X acted" for this purpose. I think this is a perfectly good thing, and a perfectly ordinary thing, to mean by "X acted." But to forestall confusion I should say that this is not the only meaning "acted" has in philosophy. Some philosophers use "X acted" to mean what I mean by "X acted intentionally" or "X acted for a reason"; if Jones sneezed involuntarily he did not act, in the more demanding sense, but did act, in my less demanding sense, since he did something, namely sneeze.[8]

Okay, now as with the event / non-event contrast it is easy to give examples of the act / non-act contrast. If Jones paddled his canoe, he thereby did something. But if Jones was six feet tall, it is false that he thereby did something. What is the difference?

This question has several readings. On some ambitious readings, it asks for the features that are definitional of doing something, or for the features that are uniquely essential to doing something (in the sense that they are not also all essential to something else). I wish I had answers to these questions, but I don't. I'm going to answer the question on a less ambitious reading, a reading on which it asks: is there some informative generalization that separates acting from not acting? Is there

[7]Neo-Davidsonians will argue that the theory I've written down follows from their semantic theory, and so any argument that their semantic theory is true is also an argument for the theory I've written down. I won't look a gift horse in the mouth; I'm happy to endorse arguments like that. But I'm not going to be giving any in this book.

[8]Davidson's use of "action" in his work (Davidson 2001), and the literature that engages with it, is related to the more demanding sense of "act": for him, an action is an event that happens when someone acts (that is, does something) intentionally.

It was Kieran Setiya who taught me that action theorists often use "act" to mean "act for reasons," in (Setiya 2009); in that paper he also emphasizes the importance of recognizing the broader sense of "act," and the connection between acts and non-stative verbs. It was reading his work that got me thinking about this connection. That thinking led to this book.

some informative condition that can go on the right-hand side of the following to get a truth?

> If X Ved, then in virtue of this fact X did something if and only if . . .

My answer is that you get a truth if you put " 'V' is non-stative and in the active voice" on the right:

> If X Ved, then in virtue of this fact X did something if and only if "Ved" is a non-stative verb phrase in the active voice.

An argument for this thesis goes like this. The first, and central, premise says that "One thing X did was V" is grammatical iff V is non-stative (and appears in the sentence in its plain form). You can convince yourself of this premise by checking instances. For example, "One thing Jones did was break the window" is grammatical while "One thing Jones did was be tall" is not, and "break" is non-stative while "be tall" is stative. The argument for the right-to-left direction then goes like this: suppose (i) that V is non-stative, (ii) that it occurs in the active voice in "X Ved," and (iii) that it is true that X Ved. Now if "One thing X did was V" is grammatical, then "X Ved" entails it if "Ved" is active.[9] By (i) this is grammatical. By (ii) and (iii) it is true. So one thing X did was V. But obviously "one thing X did was V" entails "X did something." Now since all this reasoning was conducted under the supposition that X Ved, if we discharge the supposition we have that if X Ved, then X did something. I think it clear that it also establishes that if X Ved, then *in virtue of this fact* X did something (though I can't prove this using a theory of the "logic" of this use of "in virtue of"). The argument for the other direction is similar.

This argument is only as strong as its premise, and there is a problem with the premise: I haven't given you a perfectly reliable test for non-stativity. Well I can give you a perfectly reliable test: V is non-stative iff "One thing X did was V"

[9] For example, "stab" is non-stative, and the active "Jones stabbed Smith" entails "One thing Jones did was stab Smith," but the passive "Smith was stabbed by Jones" does not entail "One thing Smith did was be stabbed by Jones" (in fact this last sentence is not grammatical).

is grammatical (when V is put in its plain form).[10] But using this test to support the premise would beg the question.

This problem with the argument is not important. I am in fact happy to dispense with argument and just define "non-stative verb phrase" as "verb phrase that, when put into its plain form and inserted into 'One thing X did was . . . ,' yields a grammatical sentence."[11] My "insight" about aspect now becomes "true by definition." This is okay: in this book what will matter is that it is true that acting goes with non-stative verb phrases, not that this is a "substantive" truth.

One might object that whether someone has acted doesn't in any way depend on language, but that my claim does make it depend on language. In fact that's not so. My claim might be in danger of making whether someone has acted depend on language if it entails that you can't do something without an active non-stative verb phrase being true of you. But it doesn't entail this.[12] If you do something, but the language lacks a verb phrase that describes your situation, then you've done something without there being any non-stative verb phrase that is true of you.

In fact, as my remarks in the previous paragraph suggest, I am tempted by the view that the dependence goes the other way: whether something is a non-stative verb phrase depends on whether it denotes an act. This view answers a question you may have had since I introduced the notion of a non-stative verb phrase. My criteria for being non-stative are all syntactic. Is there a criterion that sorts the stative verbs from the non-stative ones in terms of their meanings? Yes (on this view): the non-stative verbs denote acts.

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[10] Szabó regards this as the best test for non-stativity (Szabó 1994), though that is compatible with his thinking it not perfectly reliable. In the cited paper he discusses its relation to the "can occur in the progressive" test.

[11] That is, I am happy to do this for the purposes of this book. I think that a non-question-begging argument that this test is perfectly reliable could be given, but that doing so would involve going into more detail about what linguists say about non-stativity than would be fruitful here.

[12] I'm not saying that the theory makes acting depend on language if it *does* entail this. "X did something only if a non-stative verb phrase is true of X" does not by itself entail that whether X did something *depends on* whether a non-stative verb phrase is true of X. But it does leave the path open for this dependence claim to be true.

To wrap things up, we now have an argument where Austin had none: "exist" is a stative verb, so no, it does not describe something things do. After all, if it did, we could say that one thing I did yesterday was exist, when in fact this is not true (or false), because it has a stative verb where only a non-stative verb may go.

III

Back to events: the claim that the occurrence of an event goes with the truth of a clause with a non-stative verb may get various examples right, but it can feel like it comes out of left field. One may hesitate to accept that the claim is true without some answer to the question of why it is true. The connection between non-stativity and acting is a step toward an answer. An obvious consequence of the fact that the truth of a clause with a non-stative verb goes both with the occurrence of an event and with acting is that the occurence of an event goes with acting. The consequence is that if something does something, then in virtue of that fact an event occurs; and if an event occurs, that's so in virtue of the fact that something did something. If this consequence is true then it explains why events go with non-stative verbs. And the consequence is plausible: surely it is plausible that when something does something that's enough for an event to occur.

The other direction is maybe less plausible: if an event happens, must that be in virtue of something's doing something? But it is harder to find counterexamples than you might think. Some have said that raining is an event, but that when it rains, nothing is doing anything. If anything is doing anything when it rains, it must be the thing denoted by "it" in "it is raining"; but "it" is here a "dummy" pronoun, not denoting anything. Right? Well, I'm not so sure (and can't find a consensus among linguists[13]). Anyway, the syntax and semantics of "it is raining" aside, I think that

[13]The wikipedia page for dummy pronouns <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dummy_pronoun> lists some "dissenting views," which include the views of Noam Chomsky.

there is something doing the raining, namely the rain.[14]

IV

I mentioned earlier that the chapters in this book do not constitute a single argument, each building on the last. Instead they share a common starting point, one that comprises the two insights about the metaphysics of aspect—the connection to events, and the connection to acts—and a third insight, about levels of explanation. In any given chapter one or another insight may be closer to the surface and the others more submerged; then in the next chapter the roles might switch. But they're all there in the second chapter, "A Theory of Background Conditions." This chapter is also the place where the two ideas about aspect get their most sustained discussion.

I want to say a bit about where each chapter is heading, but first I need to say what the insight about levels of explanation is. The first thing I want to say is that the insight is really better termed an insight about levels of reasons. What's the difference? An explanation, or, at least, the kind of explanation philosophers have been interested in theorizing about, is just an answer to a why-question. And reasons are the "basic parts" of answers to why-questions, and so are the basic parts of explanations. When someone tells you that "part of why" rents are so high is that it has become harder to get a mortgage, they are telling you one of the reasons why rents are high; when they tell you all of the reasons, they have given you the complete answer to the question of why rents are high.[15]

[14]Unless it's raining cats and dogs. Then it is the cats and dogs that are raining down.

[15]I defended these claims, and the claim about levels of reasons that I am about to make, in *Reasons Why* (Skow 2016). In that book I worked very hard to avoid the word "explanation." I believed, and still believe, that building your theory using that word is apt to lead you down a blind alley, and that you can avoid a lot of trouble just by always speaking instead of why-questions and their answers. But like a chocolate-lover who abstains for just a week and thinks he's proved he can live without it, I've let the word slip back into my writing.

So what do I mean by "levels of reasons"? I have in mind the distinction between the reasons why Q, on the one hand, and the reasons why those facts are reasons why Q, on the other. I call reasons of the first kind, first-level reasons, and reasons of the second kind, second-level reasons. If I strike a match and thereby cause it to light, one reason why the match lit is that I struck it; that I struck the match is a first-level reason with respect to the lighting. Among the second-level reasons is the fact that oxygen was present; this fact is part of the answer to "Why is it that the fact that I struck it is a reason why the match lit?"

After all this stage-setting, what is the insight? My central thesis about levels of reasons is that *second-level reasons need not also be first-level reasons.* If R is a reason why Q, not every reason why ⟨R is a reason why Q⟩ is also itself a reason why Q. I worked hard in my last book to strip away facts that various philosophers have held were first-level reasons and put them where I think they belong: the place of second-level reasons. For example, Carl Hempel famously held that every explanation must cite a law of nature (Hempel 1965). Translated into the language of reasons his thesis is that whenever there are any reasons why Q, at least one of those reasons is a law of nature. I deny this, at least in the case of reasons why an event happened. For a given event E, no law of nature is a reason why E happened. But laws are still indirectly relevant to why E happened, because some law is a reason why something else (a cause of E for example) is a reason why E happened. If I drop a rock from 1 meter above the ground, and it hits the ground at 4.4 meters per second, one reason why it hit at that speed is that I dropped it from that height. The law that impact speed s is related to drop height d by the equation $s = \sqrt{2dg}$, however, is not a reason why the rock hit the ground at 4.4 m/s.[16] It is, instead, a reason why ⟨that I dropped the rock from 1m up is a reason why it hit the ground at 4.4 m/s⟩.

According to an old proverb, if all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail. The distinction between levels of reasons is my hammer, but when I published *Reasons Why* I didn't appreciate how many nails were lying about. Throughout these chapters I apply the distinction to new areas.

[16]The constant g is the gravitational acceleration near the surface of the earth; the law is valid only when the drop height is small and drag is negligible.

In "A Theory of Background Conditions" (chapter 2) I apply the distinction between levels of reasons to background conditions, and do to them what in *Reasons Why* I did to laws. I argue that a background condition to C's causing E is not both a reason why E happened, and a reason why C's happening is a reason why E happened. Instead it is just a second-level reason. The presence of oxygen, for example, is not both a reason why the match lit, and a reason why my striking the match is a reason why the match lit; it is just a reason why my striking the match is a reason why the match lit.

As a consequence, dispositions also "move up a level." When a fragile glass is struck and breaks, that it was fragile is not a reason why it broke; instead, that it was fragile is a reason why ⟨that it was struck is a reason why it broke⟩. This follows because, as I discuss in the chapter, when something manifests a disposition, that it has the disposition is a background condition to the manifesting of the disposition.

These claims contradict claims I made in *Reasons Why*. There I said that background conditions were reasons of both levels. That was because I couldn't see a difference between causes and background conditions that could justify asserting that causes were first-level reasons (with regard to their effects) while denying that status to background conditions. A common view is that background conditions are "metaphysically" no different from causes, the difference is just pragmatic: background conditions are causes that we are ignoring in our conversation. If that's right, then since on my view all causes (speaking unrestrictedly) are reasons why their effects happen, background conditions too must be reasons why the relevant effects happen.

The problem with this argument is with the common view. It is false. Background conditions *are* metaphysically different from causes: they are states, while causes must be events. So background conditions are not causes, not even unrestrictedly speaking. On my view this prevents them from being reasons why the relevant events happened. Something can be a reason why E happened only by being a cause of E or by being a ground of E's happening (and a background condition to C's causing E is certainly not a ground of E's happening).

Now the idea that background conditions are second-level reasons should not be seen as a convenient place to retreat to, once you've been chased off the appealing

idea that they are first-level reasons. It's a place you'd want to plant your flag to begin with. Why? I am not the first to say that background conditions are states rather than events. But saying this is no more a theory of background conditions than "causes are events not states" is a theory of causation. What does a state have to be like to be a background condition to the occurrence of a given event E? This is the question that needs to be answered, and the correct answer must not make background conditions so much like causes that the distinction between them is metaphysically uninteresting. My idea is what we need: a state is a background condition to E when it is a reason why something else is a cause of E; in this background conditions differ drastically from causes of E, which are in a direct way reasons why E happened.

A second ago I slid from the claim that a background condition to C's causing E is a reason why C's happening is a reason why E happened, to the claim that it is a reason why C is a cause of E. I happen to think that a background condition is both, and that this is not a coincidence; in general, anything that is a reason why C is a cause is also a reason why C is a reason, and is a reason why C is a reason because it is a reason why C is a cause (see Skow 2016, chapter 5). In light of this I'll sometimes blur the line between a reason why something is a reason (a higher-level reason), and a reason why something is a cause.

The engine that pushes background conditions up to become second-level reasons is the claim that background conditions must be states. Here is where the idea that states go with stative verbs is important. If you're going to say that background conditions must be states, you're going to need a theory of events and of states that at least says that the presence of oxygen in the room is a state, not an event. Not every theory says this: many philosophers accept theories of events according to which the presence of oxygen is an event. But that's wrong. My theory says the right thing. (In the chapter I say more about what I think is wrong with one competitor to my theory of events, namely the "property instantiation" theory of events.)

The other metaphysical correlate to the stative/non-stative distinction, the distinction between acts and non-acts, takes center stage in "Dispositions: Intrinsicness and Agency" (chapter 3). Launching that chapter is the observation that "X

is disposed to Z" is only grammatical if "Z" is a non-stative verb phrase in the active voice. A disposition, therefore, must be a disposition to act. I use this fact to explore the dispute over whether there can be extrinsic dispositions. Many alleged examples of extrinsic dispositions fail, not because the disposition in the example is actually intrinsic, but because there is no disposition in the example. Jennifer McKitrick suggests, for instance, that the disposition to be seen if looked at is extrinsic (McKitrick 2003); but there is no such disposition, since "be seen" is not a non-stative verb phrase. "Be seen" is not something one can do.

The claim that dispositions must be dispositions to act does not save the thesis that dispositions must be intrinsic from all potential counterexamples. Extrinsic dispositions do exist. But it does suggest a weaker thesis that might be true. If a disposition must be a disposition to act, then a familiar distinction between kinds of acts translates into a distinction between kinds of dispositions. Performances of acts divide into performances of basic acts and of non-basic acts. One does something as a non-basic act when one does it by doing something else; otherwise one does it as a basic act. So then if every disposition is a disposition to act, every disposition is either a disposition to do something as a basic act, or a disposition to do something as a non-basic act. But if I'm disposed to do something as a non-basic act, I can only manifest the disposition by doing something else. Presumably in doing this other thing I also manifest some disposition. Let us say then that a non-basic disposition is a disposition you manifest by manifesting some other disposition, and that a basic disposition is one that is not non-basic.[17] Might the intrinsicness thesis be true of the basic dispositions? After all, it's false that every property is intrinsic, but much more plausible that every basic (that is, fundamental, or perfectly natural) property

[17]Of course there are other distinctions between dispositions that might merit the label "basic/non-basic." Some properties are more fundamental than others, closer to the "metaphysical ground floor"; one might want to use "basic disposition" for the most fundamental dispositions. As long as we keep in mind that we're using the same label for two distinctions we shouldn't get confused. (Also, it is not crazy to think that the distinctions might line up: shouldn't a disposition to do something as a basic act be more fundamental than a disposition to do something as a non-basic act?)

is intrinsic.[18] I end the chapter by discussing this weaker version of the intrinsicness thesis (worded slightly differently), and claiming that it is defensible.

In "Structural Explanation: Garfinkelian Themes" (chapter 4) a moral we may draw from the distinction between levels of reasons is important: sometimes it is important to focus, no on an event's causes, but on the reasons why those causes are causes. In the chapter I take up the question of what a structural explanation is, or might be. Structural explanations are important in the social sciences; they are often said to be better in some respect than "individualistic" explanations. But, I think, there is a lot of unclarity about what structural explanations are. I aim to isolate one kind of structural explanation that deserves more attention, and the notion of a reason why something is a cause will play a central role in my definition.

Now often when structural explanations are said to be superior to individualistic explanations, the two kinds of explanation are seen as competing forms of answer to one and the same why-question. To a single why-question, say the question of why Lisa quit her job while her husband Larry kept his, there is thought to be both an individualistic answer and a structural answer. One interesting feature of the kind of structural explanation I am interested in is that it does not compete with individualistic answers to why-questions. Instead, individualistic answers and structural answer are answers to different questions. In short, my view is this: you have a structural explanation when a structural fact (for example, a fact about the structure of society) is a reason why one thing (or kind of thing) causes another. With respect to Lisa and Larry, an individualistic answer to the question of why she quit and he didn't is correct; she quit and he didn't because they both believed that this was the choice that had the best consequences for the well-being of their family. The structural explanation answers the different question of *why her quitting and his not had certain effects* (in this case, on the well-being of their family). I pursue this theory of structural explanation through a reading of Alan Garfinkel's book *Forms of Explanation* (1981).

My argument in chapter 2 that a background condition to E is not a reason why E happened depended on that claim that causes are events and background

[18] It is a key plank of David Lewis's metaphysic that perfectly natural properties are intrinsic; see for example (Lewis 1983).

conditions are not. That causes are events is widely-accepted; but why accept it? Why can't states be causes or effects? I take up this question in "Agent Causation Done Right" (chapter 5). I argue there that the most fundamental kind of causation is not causation by events, but causation by *things* (like people and rocks). More specifically, the most fundamental causal locution is "X caused Y to Z by Ving," where terms for things (that are not events) go in for "X" and "Y." Moreover—here comes the metaphysics of aspect again—instances of this schema are only true when the verbs that go in for "Z" and "Ving" are non-stative verbs. This entails that event-causation makes sense, that is, that we can give truth-conditions for sentences of the form "C caused E," where terms for events go in for "C" and "E," using thing-causation. Since events go with non-stative verbs, the event C corresponds to a truth of the form "X Ved," where what goes in for "V" is non-stative; similarly E corresponds to "Y Zed." So "C caused E" is true iff X caused Y to Z by Ving. Since states correspond to stative verbs, no such treatment of state causation is possible. States cannot be causes.

I called the kind of causation involved when X causes Y to Z thing causation to avoid saying too many controversial things at once, but really I prefer to call it "agent" causation. By this I do not mean what "agent causation" has come to mean in the debates over free will and determinism and in the debates over the nature of intentional action. As I use "agent causation" there are things that are "agent-causes," like rocks, that lack free will entirely and are not capable of acting intentionally. I call it agent causation because, if X causes Y to Z by Ving, then (obviously) X Ved, and since what goes in for "V" here is a non-stative verb, by Ving X acted and was thereby an agent. I argue in chapter 5 that there are a variety of puzzles and questions about causation that are easier to solve an answer if agent causation is basic than if event causation is basic.

V

The metaphysical questions about aspect I address in this book, and the problems to

which I apply my answers, are the tip of an iceberg. I hope what I say encourages others to dive in and explore. There is so much more.

Here are just a few natural questions. First some stage setting: some metaphysicians spend a lot of time wondering what the "fundamental language" for describing the world looks like.[19] They regard this not as a silly question about language, but as part of the profound question of what the world is like at the most fundamental level. On their view, you answer the profound question by figuring out which sentences in the fundamental language are true, and to do that, you need to be able to identify which sentences are sentences of that language in the first place.

The menu of questions people have asked about the fundamental language includes entries like, does it contain symbols for both conjunction and disjunction? Does it contain modal operators? Do its monadic predicates apply to things larger than a point of space(time)? But metaphysicians have by and large ignored questions like: are all the verbs (or predicates) in the fundamental language stative? Non-stative? Does the language have verbs of both kinds? But these questions are important. If the fundamental language has only stative verbs, then in a sense "the non-stative reduces to the stative." Every sentence with a non-stative verb can be given truth-conditions in which every verb is stative. Could that be right?

I would guess that these questions has been missed because Quine succeeded to some extent in getting metaphysicians to conduct their debates in formal languages that, like the language of first-order logic, lack a syntactic distinction between stative and non-stative predicates. But it would beg a lot of questions to take this as evidence that metaphysics should ignore the distinction. Maybe the absence of the distinction is a way in those languages are impoverished compared to natural languages, not a way in which they are superior.[20]

[19]The most complete recent treatment of the question is (Sider 2011). Not all schools of meta-metaphysics think this is a good question.

[20]It is worth noting here that Galton, in *The Logic of Aspect* (Galton 1984), argues that standard presentations of tense logic are inadequate exactly because they lack aspectual distinctions.

VI

In "A Plea for Excuses" Austin said something about how he thought one should do philosophy: "we may use the dictionary . . . read the book through, listing all the words that seem relevant" to your question. Anticipating shocked responses, Austin assured us that "this does not take as long as many suppose" (1979, 86). Austin's method is, of course, crazy. Instead, we may use a grammar book. Read the book through. It may take a while but it's worth it. Anyway, if Austin had spent more time with grammar books than with dictionaries he might have had an argument to put in his footnote.[21]

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[21] Okay, I don't actually know anything about how much time Austin spent with the various research materials available to him. Nor do I know if the grammar books he would have read even mention the stative / non-stative distinction. Austin died in 1960, when contemporary thinking about lexical aspect was only just getting started: the two works usually cited as originating that thinking are (Vendler 1957) and (Kenny 1963). For all I know, if the study of lexical aspect had been more advanced when Austin was working he would have had ideas about its philosophical importance that make mine look like left-handed crayon drawings.

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