

## **EVENTS**

*Events are entities like collisions and speeches, as opposed to things like planets and people. Many are changes, e.g. things being first hot and then cold. All lack a thing's full identity over time: either they are instantaneous or they have temporal parts, like a speech's words, which stop them being wholly present at an instant; whereas things, which lack temporal parts, are wholly present throughout their lives.*

*Events may be identified with two types of entity: facts, like the fact that David Hume dies, corresponding to truths like 'Hume dies'; or particulars which, like things, correspond to names, e.g. 'Hume's death'. Which they are taken to be affects the content of many metaphysical theories: e.g. that all particulars are things; that times, or causes and effects, or actions, are events; that mental events are physical.*

### **1 Events and things**

Many kinds of entity, from any cause or effect to everything a spacetime region contains, have been called 'events'. But events usually so-called – deaths, collisions, speeches – form an apparently distinct kind, different from things like people, planets and books (see CONTINUANTS). What is the difference? Many events are changes, e.g. human bodies being first alive and then dead. But this may not define events. For first, we may need events to distinguish intrinsic changes, like dying, from some relational ones, like being orphaned: the latter being mere entailments of the former, which are real events, with contiguous causes and effects (see CHANGE). Second, events that begin or end things, like the Big Bang and other explosions, cannot be changes in them and may not, if nothing precedes or survives them, be changes in anything else.

The difference between things and events, whether changes or not, may be that things keep a full identity over time which events lack. First, some events may be instantaneous and lack any identity over time. Second, temporally extended events are deprived of full identity over time by their temporal parts, like a speech's spoken words, which stop them ever being wholly present at an instant; whereas people and

other things have no temporal parts and are wholly present at every instant of their lives. This full identity over time will then distinguish one thing changing from successive things having different properties, thus explaining why only things can change and why changes, being events, are not things (Mellor 1981).

This difference may be denied by giving things temporal parts by definition, like Hume-in-1739. But these are mere logical constructions from things and times, not independent events like the words in a speech. Some apparent things might indeed be mere strings of contiguous and causally related events (HUME, for example, thinks we are strings of experiences). But not all: e.g. unchanging elementary particles involve no independent events. Moreover, since contiguity and causation can always link one event or thing to two successors, as when a cell divides, they cannot entail a thing's identity over time (see PERSONAL IDENTITY). So what equating us to strings of experiences implies is not that things can be strings of events but that we are not things. Events and things remain distinct types of entity.

## **2 Events and facts**

Assuming there are things, are there also events? That may depend on whether events are facts, corresponding to truths like 'Hume died in 1776', or particulars corresponding to names or descriptions like 'Hume's death' (see FACTS, PARTICULARS). Now changes look like facts, e.g. the fact that a thing is first hot and then cold; and that things start and cease to exist at certain times are also facts. Thus events of both types mentioned above may be facts, and what many authors call 'events' certainly are: e.g. Kim (1976), for whom events are things having properties at times, like Hume being alive in 1775. Events in this sense are real entities if and only if facts are (see FACTS).

This being so, 'event' is best reserved, as by DAVIDSON, for particulars like Hume's death. Their reality is independent of that of facts, but equally contentious: after all, the only particular apparently referred to in 'Hume dies' is Hume. Yet Davidson argues that 'Hume dies' also entails that an event exists which is a death of

Hume. For first, this shows how (e.g.) ‘Hume dies slowly’ entails ‘Hume dies’, since a slow death must be a death. Second, identifying actions with particular events satisfying different descriptions dissolves puzzles about their identity: e.g. my bid can be a purchase even though many bids are not purchases (see ACTION). Similarly, if mental events are particulars, they can also be physical brain events satisfying neurophysiological descriptions (see IDENTITY THEORY OF MIND). This explains, without invoking non-physical causes or effects, how events satisfying mental descriptions, like ‘is a decision to bid’, can have physical causes and effects, like hand movements (see ANOMALOUS MONISM). This explanation assumes moreover that causes and effects are particulars, not facts, and this requires particular events. For only if Hume’s death exists can the effect of whatever caused Hume to die be a particular: otherwise the effect can only be the fact that Hume dies.

All these arguments have been disputed. Events remain more contentious than things, despite having identity criteria: e.g. that a headache is a certain brain event if it has the same causes and effects as that event. Yet since such criteria may only relate particular events to each other, we may still need people and other things to identify some events to start with, as in ‘Hume’s death’ (see STRAWSON). This may explain scepticism about events, but cannot make them less real than things, or less able to be particulars. For to be a particular is just to be of a kind we make true first-order generalizations about (see QUINE); many of which, like Newton’s ‘to every action there is always opposed an equal reaction’, are about events as well as things.

### **References and further reading**

Bennett, J. (1988) *Events and Their Names*, Oxford: Clarendon Press. (An analytic assessment of rival views of events, concluding that they are facts.)

Davidson, D. (1980) *Essays on Actions and Events*, Oxford: Clarendon Press. (A collection of articles arguing for and applying the view that events are particulars.)

\* Kim, J. (1976) ‘Events as property exemplifications’, *Action Theory*, ed. M.

Brand and D. Walton, Dordrecht: Reidel, 159–77. (Referred to in §2. Equates events with things having properties at times.)

Lombard, L. B. (1986) *Events: A Metaphysical Study*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul. (Argues that events are changes.)

\* Mellor, D. H. (1981) *Real Time*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, ch. 7. (Referred to in §1. Argues that events are particulars which differ from things in having temporal parts.)

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