

INTRODUCTION

The concept of action, as opposed to mere happening, lies at the intersection of two areas of philosophical interests: ethics and philosophy of mind. Moral philosophers, in particular those interested in questions of moral responsibility, use the concept of action as a given. It is the job of philosophers of mind to analyze the concept for among others such uses. The dissertation proposes such an analysis. It offers a systematic answer to Wittgenstein's question. What is the difference between my raising my arm (an action) and my arm rising on its own (a mere happening)?

1. Action as a Unit of Conduct

Perhaps the most fundamental difficulty in analyzing the concept of action is the fact that it plays a significant role in a number of disciplines as diverse as physics, biology, psychology and sociology. As a result the concept has coalesced a great variety of intuitions. It is thus important to at least try to distinguish some ways in which the concept can be applied.¹

(i) There is a concept of *inanimate* action. When a billiard ball thrusts into another billiard ball it acts on the other. To its action, by Newton's third law, there corresponds an appropriate reaction of the other ball. At this stage, teleological concepts apply only derivatively. For example, we can speak of the purpose or function of a piece of a thermostat, but its purposefulness is derived from its being designed.

(ii) We speak of the actions of various parts of animal bodies. This is the first stage at which non-derivative teleological concepts find application. The liver's

¹ This division is suggested by Harry Frankfurt in "The Problem of Action," in *The Importance of What We Care About* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 69-79. Frankfurt identifies action with intentional movement.

excreting bile, the heart's pumping are examples of what one might call *purposeful* movements or actions.

(iii) The third level is that of *purposive movement* or action. The subjects of our attributions of purposive movements are no longer parts of bodies but rather agents. The movements a spider produces in spinning a web constitute purposive movements. In this sense also, a drug addict's compulsively taking a shot is purposive.² Arguably, sleep-walking, some actions performed under hypnosis, as well as the little movements one performs to alleviate muscle pain in one's sleep are purposive. So are feeding the cat, conversing, looking out of the window, walking through a forest.

(iv) The latter but not the former examples belong to a more restrictive category of *intentional movements*. A movement is intentional just in case there is some description under which it is intentional. The category of intentional movements is an extensional category — it picks out a class of events. As such, it is a very different concept from the concept of intentional action, which does not pick out a class of events.³ Both intentional and unintentional actions, as they are usually understood, are intentional movements in this sense.⁴

It is not uncontroversial to sharply distinguish the category of intentional movements from the category of purposive movements. One might treat the distinction to be one of degree rather than principle. Yet many of the examples relevant here are at least very different from the ones of purposive movement. So when one deliberately goes to a rally, one performs an action of a different sort than if one went there in one's sleep.

It seems uncontroversial that actions of the first two sorts (i) and (ii) do not constitute the subject of interest to philosophers concerned with understanding the

² Ibid., pp. 76-77.

³ The received view is that there is no class of intentional actions (G.E.M. Anscombe, *Intention* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1957]; Donald Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980]). Rather actions are intentional under some descriptions.

⁴ This usage of the term 'intentional movement' is not widespread. (The term is used explicitly by Frankfurt "The Problem of Action," *op. cit.*) It is more usual in the literature to treat the term 'action' in the way I am stipulating to use the term 'intentional movement'. However, since I will advertise a different set of intuitions to coalesce around the term 'action', I shall use the term 'intentional movements' exclusively in the extensional way suggested and contrast it sharply with 'intentional action'.

phenomenon of human action. The examples that have been taken to be paradigmatic examples of action belong to the fourth category of intentional movements. In the present dissertation, our topic will be yet another understanding of the concept of action, action as a unit of our conduct.

(v) The fifth sense of ‘action’ derives from the idea of an agent’s overall conduct. Someone’s conduct includes her intentional and unintentional doings but also intentional and unintentional not-doings (omissions). When we inquire after a person’s conduct during a rally, say, we will be interested in the things the person said and did as well as the things that he omitted to say or do. The concept of action as part of an agent’s conduct has not been at the forefront of philosophers’ concern with agency.⁵ Most of the debate has centered around the concept of action in the sense of purposive and/or intentional movement. This is among, other things, because intelligence and reason are most clearly manifested in our acting intentionally. But the philosophical focus on “intelligent agency”⁶ should not lead one to think that there is nothing interesting about action but for its rational significance. In fact, there are psychological categories that pertain to our conduct rather than merely to our intentional behavior. The most important among them is the concept of character. Character comprises not only agentive voice — active intentional rational excursions into the world — but also idleness, passivity, thoughtlessness, carelessness, forgetfulness — agentive silence, as it were.

I will try to capture the fifth sense of the concept of action in this dissertation. My aim is to acquire a deeper understanding of the sense in which we *do* things when we act intelligently, intentionally, rationally, but also when we act carelessly, when we keep to ourselves, when we *do* not do anything. Henceforth, when I use the word ‘action’, I will mean action in the last sense, action as a unit of our conduct rather than the way in which it is used in most of the literature — as a unit of our intentional or purposive behavior.

⁵ The most obvious exception is H.L.A. Hart who frequently speaks of the “philosophy of conduct,” intending to cover both actions and omissions (including unintentional ones) by the term. See “The Ascription of Responsibility and Rights,” in (ed.) Anthony Flew, *Essays on Logic and Language* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1951), pp. 145-166; *Punishment and Responsibility* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968); *Causation in the Law* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985).

⁶ The phrase is Michael Bratman’s, see his “Moore on Intention and Volition,” *The University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 142 (1994), p. 1708.

This means that one of the immediate criteria of adequacy that are imposed on the account of action here developed is that it apply not only to intentional and unintentional actions (intentional behavior) but also to intentional and unintentional omissions.

Since most philosophers of action do not undertake the task of developing an account of action that would encompass unintentional omissions,⁷ and since accordingly few accounts of action apply to unintentional omissions, I should pause to emphasize the nature of my theoretical intention and of others' omission. It is indisputable that if a theorist of action intends to capture the concept of action (understood as a unit of intentional behavior) then unintentional omissions simply do not belong to that theorist's domain of interest. Given how common it is to understand actions as units of intentional behavior (and there are good reasons for it), we should at least foresee the possibility of the following objection arising. Such a theorist might acknowledge that unintentional omissions can be conceived as part of our conduct, but refuse to allow that there is any sense of the concept of action that would cover such cases.

It is very difficult to answer such an objection in a persuasive way since most of the considerations are pre-conceptual or pre-theoretical. There is certainly no argument that would force us to acknowledge that there is a sense of agency involved in our unintentionally omitting something. There is no argument but there are reasons.

For one the concept of conduct plays a significant role in our psychological understanding of the world. This is evident in at least two ways. First, while our understanding of people's characters does include their intentional behavior, it covers more than just their intentional actions and their unintended consequences. Among

⁷ There are important exceptions. See H.L.A. Hart, "The Ascription of Responsibility and Rights," *op. cit.*; *Punishment and Responsibility*, *op. cit.*; Steven Lee, "Omissions," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 16 (1978), 339-354; Patricia G. Smith (Milanich), "Allowing, Refraining, and Failing. The Structure of Omissions," *Philosophical Studies* 45 (1984), 57-67; "Ethics and Action Theory on Refraining: A Familiar Refrain in Two Parts," *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 20 (1986), 3-17; "Contemplating Failure: The Importance of Unconscious Omission," *Philosophical Studies* 59 (1990), 159-176. There are also theorists of action who are simply uninterested in giving an account not only of unintentional omissions, but also of the less controversial negative actions. Carl Ginet declares at the beginning of his book: "...Among the nonactions are such items as not voting in the election, neglecting to lock the door, omitting to put salt in the batter, and remaining inactive. Such things have been called *negative actions*, largely because they can be the objects of choices and intentions. But they are not actions in the sense I am interested in..." (*On Action* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990], p. 1).

character traits we mention also traits that comprise the agents' tendency to commit omissions (including unintentional omissions). Carelessness, forgetfulness, idleness, reserve are just some of the examples.⁸ Second, we are usually held responsible for the way in which we conduct ourselves, and that includes our being responsible not only for our intentional actions and their unintended consequences but also for our unintentional omissions.⁹ When I stand up a friend of mine because I simply forgot that we were to meet in the library, she will rightly hold me responsible for my failure to show up. The fact that my forgetting was unintentional does not make me any less responsible for wasting my friend's time.

These are some pre-conceptual reasons for believing that the concept of conduct can aspire to capture some of our intuitions about agency. The rest of the dissertation ought to provide additional reasons.

2. Two Main Problems

My primary aim in the dissertation is to give answers to two problems that have concerned philosophers of action. The first problem (discussed in Chapters II–VI) has been called the problem of action,¹⁰ and its force is epitomized in L. Wittgenstein's famous question:

...When 'I raise my arm', my arm goes up. And the problem arises: what is left over if I subtract the fact that my arm goes up from the fact that I raise my arm?¹¹

The central contrast is that between actions and mere happenings: between what the agent does (in an agentively pregnant sense of 'does') and what merely happens to him.

⁸ Of course, there are attempts to understand even such character traits as ultimately resting on intentional actions, e.g. past intentional actions that have led to certain habits on the part of the agent giving rise to relevant character traits. This view is proposed by Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics*. For an interesting dissenting account: Robert Merrihew Adams, "Involuntary Sins," *Philosophical Review* 94 (1985), 3-31.

⁹ There are attempts to reinterpret our practice by arguing that we are not responsible for unintentional omissions but rather for actions that led to the unintentional omission. Proponents of such a view include: Holly Smith, "Culpable Ignorance," *Philosophical Review* 92 (1983), 543-571; Michael Zimmerman, "Negligence and Moral Responsibility," *Nous* 20 (1986), 199-218. Among the dissenters: John C. Hall, "Acts and Omissions," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 39 (1989), 399-408; Steven Sverdlik, "Pure Negligence," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 30 (1993), 137-149.

¹⁰ H.G. Frankfurt, "The Problem of Action," *op. cit.*

¹¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (New York: Macmillan, 1958), §621.

The traditional answer to this question aims to capture the idea of action as intentional movement. And thus the fundamental Anscombe-Davidson approach is to take an event to be an intentional movement (action) just in case there is a description under which it is intentional.¹² Anscombe clarifies the idea of an intentional action by suggesting that a special sense of the question ‘Why?’ applies to it, viz. one to which the proper answer appeals to the agent’s reasons for doing what he did. While Anscombe herself aims to clarify this account further in particular by distinguishing cases where the question is refused application (e.g. if the agent says “I did not know I was doing that”), others have attempted to clarify the understanding of what an intentional action is by appeal to causal concepts. Some have suggested that one can understand what it is for an action to be intentional (under a description *d*) by appealing to the fact that reasons that rationalize the action (under *d*) have caused the actions. This is the central thought of the causal theory of action.¹³ Causal theorists of action aim to ground the distinction between actions and mere happenings by appealing to the idea of reasons causing action. Anscombe, by contrast, offers a non-causal theory of action (she also advances a non-causal teleological theory of action explanation), where the distinction between action and mere happening is ultimately grounded in the ways in which the special sense of the “Why?” question is applied.

The second central problem that will occupy us (partly mentioned in Chapter I and properly addressed in Chapter VII) concerns the force of ordinary action explanations. Ordinary explanations of human action are teleological in nature. We act in order to accomplish goals. In Aristotle’s terms, actions have final causes paradigmatically embodied in their reasons. Reasons explain actions by showing what the agent aimed to do. They explain the action by rationalizing it, by showing what it made sense for the agent to do. Since Aristotle’s distinction of four types of causes

¹² The view has been first proposed by G.E.M. Anscombe in *Intention, op. cit.* It has been taken up by most theorists of action, among them Donald Davidson (“Agency,” in *Essays on Actions and Events, op. cit.*, pp. 43-61).

¹³ The most explicit recent defense of a causal theory of action (rather than just a causal theory of action explanation) is presented by John Bishop, *Natural Agency. An Essay on the Causal Theory of Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). The causal theory of action ought to be distinguished from the causal theory of action explanation, of which Davidson is a proponent, see p. 7, below.

(among them final and efficient causes), and since the modern day scientific emphasis on efficient causes, the question that notoriously arises is how final and efficient causes are related to one another. This is a problem of the force of teleological explanations in general. The problem has its special application to the domain of human action, and it became the center of discussion in the philosophy of action since Davidson's famous paper "Actions, Reasons, and Causes."¹⁴

Davidson has claimed that teleological notions themselves are not sufficient to capture the force of ordinary action explanations.¹⁵ That this is so is evident from the fact that we make a distinction between an agent's acting and his action being rationalizable by his reason, and the agent's acting *because of* that reason. The distinction is most vividly drawn in a case where the agent has at least two reasons for performing an action,¹⁶ and acts because of one but not because of the other. For example, someone may have a reason not to go to the movies (not to meet his arch-enemy) but not go because he decided to watch TV instead. To coin some terminology, he acts *on* his desire to watch TV but merely *with* (or in the presence of) the desire not to meet the enemy. Davidson's argument for the causal theory of action explanation, according to which reasons must be construed as also causes of actions, takes the form of a challenge. He claims that only the causal theory of action explanation can account for the distinction between acting for and acting with reasons.

It is worthwhile to emphasize a terminological point. There is no consistent usage of the term 'causal theory of action' in the literature. Because of Davidson's contribution in reviving the use of causal concepts in philosophy of action, it is sometimes supposed that 'causal theory of action' is simply synonymous with 'Davidson's theory about action'. The problem with identifying the term with whatever position Davidson holds is that there are in fact two ways in which the idea of reasons as causes can be employed. If

¹⁴ Reprinted in *Essays on Actions and Events*, *op. cit.*, pp. 3-19.

¹⁵ Davidson does not speak of teleological concepts *per se* but rather of relations of rationalization. He is concerned with all the resources (except causal ones) that are available to an interpreter of an agent's action. Some teleologists have in fact criticized Davidson by suggesting that teleological notions are stronger than he supposes (see George M. Wilson, *The Intentionality of Human Action* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989]).

the idea that reasons are causes is used to account for the explanatory force of reasons, it is part of a *causal theory of action explanation*. But the idea can be, and has been, used to account for the distinction between actions and mere happenings.¹⁷ In such a case, it forms a foundation of a *causal theory of action*. To add to the terminological confusion, there are good grounds for believing that Davidson espouses only a causal theory of action explanation but not a causal theory of action. In “Freedom to Act”¹⁸ he seems to denounce the feasibility of offering an analysis of action in causal terms by pointing out cases of wayward causal chains, where actions are caused waywardly by reasons, as a standing counterexample to any such attempt. He concludes that the best one can do is to say that actions are caused by reasons “in the right way.” And that is hardly illuminating as an account of action. We should not, however, be overly impressed by the terminological turmoil. All it shows is that we sometimes misuse the term ‘causal theory of action’ when we suggest that Davidson is its author. Davidson espouses a causal theory of action explanation but not a causal theory of action.¹⁹

3. A Preview

One objective of a theorist of action is to give an answer to the question, What is action? It is rarely appreciated that this task already carries with it an ambiguity. David Velleman has pointed out that we may try to give an answer either to the question what actions really are, or to the question what we ordinarily conceive actions to be.²⁰ The distinction is not well put, however. It is not that there is a distinction between what a phenomenon captured by the term ‘X’ really is and what we conceive Xs to be. This way of putting the distinction either dooms us to cognitive failure or makes the distinction

¹⁶ This is a case where the distinction is most vivid but the core of the explanatory relation between a reason and an action applies equally when only one reason is involved.

¹⁷ J. Bishop, *Natural Agency*, *op. cit.* This view has been suggested by some of Davidson’s comments in his early paper “Actions, Reasons, and Causes,” in *Essays on Actions and Events*, *op. cit.*, pp. 3-19.

¹⁸ Reprinted in *Essays on Actions and Events*, *op. cit.*, pp. 63-81.

¹⁹ In his recent book, *Causality, Interpretation and the Mind* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), William Child makes the contrary terminological stipulation: he takes a causal theory of action to be a theory about action explanations rather than about the nature of actions in contradistinction to mere happenings. In his terminology, Davidson is an author of the causal theory of action. In what follows, this usage is shunned.

²⁰ “What Happens When Someone Acts,” in (eds.) John Martin Fischer, Mark Ravizza, *Perspectives on Moral Responsibility* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 188-210.

trivial. On the first horn, it gives the appearance that we could never know what *Xs* really are (because we would always have access only to our conception of them). On the second horn, the distinction seems trivial because there is a sense in which whether the term ‘*X*’ applies to *Xs* or to *Ys* is insignificant.

But there is another way of construing the distinction. We partake in certain practices in which we use some concept *X* in various ways. But we may also have formed a theory about the practices and about *Xs*. The philosopher may then undertake either of two tasks. He may wish to explain and systematize the theory about *Xs* that we have already developed, but make it more sophisticated, cognitively better, more unified, and so on. (This is the task Velleman undertakes.) Alternatively, he may wish to propose a different theory as to the nature of *Xs* that, in the first place, is not guided by the theory we have formed but rather treats that theory merely as part of the data for his new theory. (This is the task I undertake below.) It is important to note here that a theorist undertaking the second approach must offer an answer to the question *why* we have developed the particular theory of *Xs* that we have developed rather than the theory that he proposes. This criterion of adequacy of the second approach is particularly important if the theory of action proposed by the theorist of action were to differ substantially from the theory we have developed. Otherwise, failing such an explanation of why we have come up with the theory we have come up with, the proponent of the second approach is open to the objection that he has simply changed the topic. At the end of Chapter I, I will in fact suggest an explanation why individualist and intentionalist tendencies have been so prevalent in the philosophy of action. I will advocate nonindividualism in the theory of action explanation (Chapter I and VII) and nonintentionalism in the theory of action (Chapters III-VI).

Corresponding to these two general methodological attitudes, we might distinguish two methodological strategies specific to answering the question of the nature of action. Since on the first approach the purpose is primarily to understand our conception of action, the primary data are the practices of our explaining one another’s actions. The reasoning behind such an approach might be reconstructed as follows. The purpose is to understand our concept of action. The best way of doing so is to see how, in ordinary practices, we understand actions. Such an investigation will yield the kinds of

explanatory categories to which we ordinarily appeal, in terms of which we understand actions. The task for the theorist will then be to use these categories in understanding the nature of action. We shall call it the *explanation-based* approach to understanding the nature of action.²¹

One of the main differences between the explanation-based approach and what I shall call the *responsibility-based* approach to understanding the nature of action, is that the former places a much greater faith in the ways in which we conceive of actions.²² On the latter approach, the purpose is to understand not only how we understand actions but also to understand what we treat as actions in our practices. One of the main indicators of our treating an agent as having performed an action is to hold her responsible for it. On the second approach, the theorist tries to understand our concept of action relying primarily on our practices of ascribing responsibility to one another rather than on our practices of explaining each other's actions.²³

Chapters II-VI sketch a version of a responsibility-based approach to the understanding of the nature of action. I will employ a traditional responsibility-based strategy for accounting for the difference between actions and mere happenings. Responsibility-based accounts such as H.L.A. Hart's (discussed in Chapter II) as well as contextualist accounts usually define what counts as a mere happening (and so a non-action) in terms of the presence of certain conditions, henceforth referred to as defeating conditions, e.g.: the agent suffering a spasm, being in a coma, being pushed by the wind, moved by another person, and so on. Actions, as a class, are then defined negatively as

²¹ In general, a variety of intentionalist approaches belong to the category. See e.g., G.E.M. Anscombe, *Intention*, *op. cit.*; Roderick M. Chisholm, *Person and Object. A Metaphysical Study* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1976); D. Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events*, *op. cit.*; H.G. Frankfurt, "The Problem of Action," *op. cit.*; C. Ginet, *On Action*, *op. cit.*; Alvin I. Goldman, *A Theory of Human Action* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970); Jennifer Hornsby, *Actions* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980); John R. Searle, *Intentionality. An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); J. David Velleman, *Practical Reflection* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989); G.M. Wilson, *The Intentionality of Human Action*, *op. cit.*

²² I am not claiming that the two approaches have to stand in competition. Rather, my claim is that they differ in emphasis. That there need not be a conflict between these two approaches to understanding the nature of action will in fact be evident in that the account of action I will give could be seen as resulting from pursuing both strategies.

those performances that occur in the absence of relevant defeating conditions. The major task that faces a theorist of action following the just outlined route of accounting for the difference between actions and mere happenings, lies in giving an account of the variety of defeating conditions. I develop such an account in Chapters III-VI.

Chapter II discusses H.L.A. Hart's responsibility-based account of action. I assemble objections that have been raised against it and take them to constitute criteria of adequacy for the account to be developed. The major problem concerns the fact that any account of action that would capture not only legal, not only moral, but all actions, must appeal to a notion of responsibility that is appropriately wider than legal or moral responsibility. Chapters III-V clarify such a concept of practical responsibility in terms of reasonable normative expectations. In Chapter VI, I show how an account of practical responsibility developed on these lines helps in giving an account of the distinction between actions and mere happenings. I will argue that an agent's performance is an action just in case there is a description under which it would be reasonable (in a special sense discussed in Chapter V) to expect of the agent that he perform the action.

This is the gist of the answer to the problem of action. One may be concerned, however, that normative expectations at large, with the exception of self-directed expectations perhaps, ought not to enter an account of action in the first place. After all, what kind of connection could another person's expectation of me have with my action? The resistance to this idea reaches very deeply. In the introductory Chapter I, I will try to identify one aspect of what may be seen as troubling. One source of resistance to this notion may derive from an action theorist's adherence to the explanation-based approach to the problem of action. The standard view on the nature of folk-psychological explanations is individualistic: it conceives of actions as being explained by the agent's desires, intentions, beliefs, hopes, etc. (intentional explanations). But this is a simplification of our ordinary practices. We also explain one another's actions in terms of others' requests, commands, wishes, expectations (nonintentional explanations).

²³ Ascriptivist and contextualist theories of action exemplify this strategy: H.L.A. Hart, "The Ascription of Responsibility and Rights," *op. cit.*; A.I. Melden, *Free Action* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961); R.S. Peters, *The Concept of Motivation* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958).

According to explanatory individualism, intentional explanations are privileged over nonintentional explanations: we can only explain an action as done because of another person's desire if the agent acts on some pro-attitude of his own suitably directed toward the other's desire. The bulk of Chapter I is directed toward arguing that there are no conclusive reasons for explanatory individualism. To adopt an explanation-based strategy is thus not to disavow nonindividualism. It does not threaten the use of normative expectations in an account of action.

I pick up the issue of individualism in Chapter VII. There I make the case for explanatory nonindividualism stronger by showing how we can be thought to act because of other people's expectations of us (without thereby acting on our own expectations). In so doing, I respond to Davidson's challenge and show how to account for the distinction between acting for and acting with reasons. An action can further one end (satisfy one reason) as well as another end (satisfy another reason), and yet be done for one reason rather than another. Teleological relations are not sufficient to render the distinction. So, Davidson suggests that we must appeal to the idea that reasons are causes in order to understand the distinction. I show how we can account for the distinction without supposing that reasons are causes, but rather by thinking of reasons as selectional criteria.