CHAPTER II.

THE CHALLENGE OF HART'S THEORY OF ACTION

In Chapter I, we have seen that according to explanatory individualism explanations in terms of the agent's pro-attitudes are privileged over explanations in terms of others' pro-attitudes toward the agent. This may be thought to support the position that the agent's intentional attitudes ought to be used as the primary categories in understanding the nature of action.[1] We saw that while there are some strong arguments supporting such an interpretation of folk psychology, they do not in fact force it on us. I argued that an alternative nonindividualist understanding of folk psychology can at least be seen as a contender.

The main aim of the present chapter is to prepare some ground for the responsibility-based account of action developed in Chapters III-VI by drawing some lessons from H.L.A. Hart's account of action in terms of responsibility ascriptions. I consider and address in a preliminary way the major objections that have been raised against Hart's theory, and take others as challenges of adequacy for the account to be developed.

Section 1 sketches two traditional strategies that theorists of action can employ to draw the distinction between actions and mere happenings. In section 2, I present the main theses of Hart's theory. The further sections will be devoted to the discussion of the major criticisms of Hart's view. In section 3, I shall consider an objection that might be

---

[1] This transition, which is in effect a transition from a theory of action explanation to a theory of action, is very common. This is to say nothing about its legitimacy. In particular, I do *not* claim that anyone subscribing to individualism about action explanation is thereby *committed* to analyzing the nature of action in terms of the intentional attitudes of the agent. I owe this point to J. McDowell.

thought to undermine a responsibility-based approach in its very foundations. The charge is that a responsibility-based theory of action reverses the proper logical order of the concepts of action and responsibility — responsibility is a concept that is logically secondary to the concept of action (we are responsible *for* actions, after all) and so cannot be thought to precede it. We will see that there are at least three different ways of disarming the objection while acknowledging the thought that underlies it. In section 4, I consider Geach's famous criticism directed against the ascriptivist nature of Hart's theory.

1. Two Kinds of Action Theories

> What comes about by force or because of ignorance seems to be involuntary. What is forced has an external origin, the sort of origin in which the agent or victim contributes nothing — if, e.g. a wind or human beings who control him were to carry him off.[2]

As far back as Aristotle, it has been recognized that there are certain circumstances that interfere with our agency, like being pushed by someone or something, being physically forced to do something by someone, something, or the state of one's own body or mind, etc. Aristotle described those cases as ones where the principle of action is not in the agent.[3]

Aristotle's account is suggestive of a certain natural picture of what it means for a performance to be a mere happening rather than an action:

(e) The agent's φing was a mere happening (non-action) iff external

forces caused him to φ.

This may be thought to generate a corresponding picture of what it means for a performance to be an action:

(i) The agent's φing was an action iff internal forces caused him to φ.

---

[2] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1985), 1110a1-4.

[3] One must remember to avoid simple-minded interpretations here. The distinction is not (as suggested by the form of words Aristotle sometimes uses) between forces outside and inside the agent, for there can be the wrong kind of forces inside the agent (spasms, e.g.). See Harry G. Frankfurt, "The Problem of Action," in *The Importance of What We Care About* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 69-79.

In fact, however, (i) does not follow from (e), nor (e) from (i). What is indisputable is the fact that a performance is an action just in case it is not a mere happening. If so, then what follows from (e) is:

(i^e) The agent's φing was an action iff it was not caused by external

forces.

Analogically, what follows from (i) is

(e^i) The agent's φing was a mere happening iff it was not caused by

internal forces.

This allows us to see at least two strategies a theorist of action can follow. One might begin with the idea of what it means for external forces to cause an agent's performance (e) and then explain what it means for the agent to act by appealing to the absence of such forces (i^e). This is the strategy of responsibility-based accounts of action. From this point of view, the idea of internal forces causing the performances is a hypostatization of the absence of such causation by external forces. Or, alternatively, one might begin with the idea of what it means for internal forces to cause an agent's performance (i) and then explain what it means for the agent's performance to be a mere happening in terms of (e^i). This strategy is typical of explanation-based accounts of action.

Of course, on neither strategy must one begin with the notion of internal forces causing a performance or of external forces causing a performance. A theorist may seek to *explicate* these concepts further. And so, causal theorists of action[4] aim to understand what it means for a performance to be "caused by internal forces" in terms of the idea of being caused by mental states in the right way. Some teleological theorists of action may seek to understand what it means for a performance to be "caused by internal forces" in terms of the performance being suitably teleologically related to the agent's intentions

---

[4] Recall that I use the term to cover those who aim to understand the concept of action in terms of the concept of being caused by mental states, not to cover those who (like Davidson) argue that the force of action explanations is causal. The latter are causal theorists of action explanation, not necessarily causal theorists of action.

and not in causal terms at all.[5] The idea of a performance being "caused by internal forces" is thus taken to be a metaphor that is further explicated. Similarly, for responsibility-based approaches the idea of being "caused by external forces" need not be taken as a given but may be explained further.

The account I will offer is a responsibility-based account. Rather than analyzing the notion of action in terms of its relation, causal or otherwise, to the agent's reasons, I will analyze it ultimately in terms of whether it was reasonable (in a special sense to be explained) to expect a performance of the agent under some description (Chapter VI). As we shall see, the presence of defeating conditions makes it unreasonable to expect of the agent that she perform the action under any description (Chapter V). In the present chapter, we will have a closer look at a responsibility-based account proposed by H.L.A. Hart. I will respond to some of the criticisms launched against it and formulate challenges that the account to be proposed will have to answer.

2. H.L.A. Hart's Theory of Action

It is one of the main criteria of adequacy for any theory of action that it should account for the distinction between actions and mere happenings. This is usually done by conceiving of the distinction in ontological terms. While Hart does not deny that there is a distinction between actions and mere happenings, he proposes to change its status. Rather than thinking about the distinction as pertaining to two kinds of entities (events), he suggests that we ought to think about it as being normative in nature. It is a distinction between two ways in which it is appropriate to treat certain events.

It is customary to interpret a claim like "John broke the glass" as describing an event, a very special kind of event — an action. The special kind of event, the action, is sometimes considered to be ontologically distinct from another kind of event that, on its surface, may appear to be very similar, John's spasmatic movement of the arm breaking

---

[5] An example of a theorist who defends a teleological account of the intentionality of action is George M. Wilson, *The Intentionality of Human Action* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989). It would be inappropriate, however, to take his theory as a theory of action. While Wilson does believe that all action is intentional under some description, this cannot be taken to analyze the concept of action. One structural reason is that his account actually presupposes the distinction between voluntary and involuntary behavior (i.e. in our terminology: action and mere happening).

the glass, for example. The latter is not John's action, it is a mere bodily movement, a mere happening. Hart, by contrast, proposes that claims like "John broke the glass" not be interpreted as describing an action but rather as ascribing responsibility to the agent (here: for the glass breaking). Action claims are ascriptive rather than descriptive. They are never true or false; they may only be appropriate or inappropriate in view of relevant conditions. Their function is to ascribe responsibility to the agent. Transposed from the formal into the material mode, there are no actions among the ontological furniture of the world.

What distinguishes actions from mere happenings, on Hart's view, is not any ontological fact, but rather the appropriateness of ascribing responsibility for events in certain conditions (when we intuitively think of them as actions) and the inappropriateness of ascribing responsibility for events in other conditions (when we intuitively think of them as mere happenings).[6] This is what it means to say that the distinction between actions and mere happenings is normative in nature.[7] But this is not yet to give an account of the distinction. In fact, Hart never does give a complete account of the distinction but rather notes that there are conditions that contribute to it being appropriate or inappropriate to ascribe responsibility to the agent.

The structure of action attribution is characteristically defeasible. First, there are, in Hart's terminology, positive conditions that establish the prima facie applicability of the responsibility attribution. In our example, such conditions include John's arm moving in such a way as to break the glass. Second, there are negative (defeating) conditions that defeat the prima facie appropriateness of ascribing responsibility to the agent. Such conditions include John's arm moving because of a spasm.

This structure allows us to understand the difference between actions and mere happenings or between it being appropriate and it being inappropriate to ascribe

---

[6] He compares Wittgenstein's question "What distinguishes the physical movement of a human body from a human action?" to the question "What is the difference between a piece of earth and a piece of [real] property?" See H.L.A. Hart, "The Ascription of Responsibility and Rights," in (ed.) Anthony Flew, *Essays on Logic and Language* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1951), p. 161.

[7] The characterization of the distinction as normative rather than ontological ought not to indicate that it is impossible for such a distinction to be construed as being both. Hart does appear to be denying, however, that we ought to construe the distinction in ontological terms.

responsibility to an agent. It will be inappropriate to ascribe responsibility to the agent if either no positive conditions are present or while the positive conditions are present some defeating condition occurs. It will be appropriate to ascribe responsibility to the agent if the positive conditions occur and no defeating conditions are present.

It is important to bear in mind that Hart's view reverses a natural way of construing the relation between the concept of action and that of responsibility. This is nicely brought out by considering how easy it is to misunderstand Hart's project. George Pitcher's critique, apart from making many valuable points, is a nice and helpful illustration of how not to understand Hart. Hart tells us that we should understand action claims as ascriptions of responsibility. Pitcher asks, But responsibility for what?

> Let us look more closely at Hart's example: we are told that when one says "Smith hit her," he ascribes responsibility to Smith. But for what is Smith supposed to be responsible? …At the beginning of his article, Hart tells us what Smith is responsible for, namely, his action.[8]

And Pitcher cites Hart where he indeed uses this unfortunate form of words.[9] It is telling, however, that Pitcher has to look at the very first page of Hart's article, where Hart describes his venture for the first time. Hart never again speaks of the agent being responsible for an action. Instead he simply speaks of ascriptions of responsibility, and does not really tell us for what the responsibility is ascribed. Since we usually think that one is responsible *for something* Pitcher's query is well justified. However, the suggestion that Hart must mean "responsible for actions" (on the grounds of the non-committal statement on the first page) is a fundamental misunderstanding of Hart's project.[10] In fact, Pitcher and another of Hart's critics, Joel Feinberg, offer as their

---

[8] George Pitcher, "Hart on Action and Responsibility," *The Philosophical Review* 69 (1960), p. 226.

[9] The quote reads: "…sentences of the form 'He did it' have been traditionally regarded as primarily descriptive whereas their principal function is what I venture to call *ascriptive*, being quite literally to ascribe responsibility for actions." (H.L.A. Hart, "The Ascription of Responsibility and Rights," *op. cit.*, p. 145.)

[10] Pitcher's actual objection concerns the fact that Hart is mistaken about what we can be responsible for (namely our actions), and he goes on to argue that we can only be responsible for the consequences of our actions. This position has been challenged by among others Feinberg who claims that we can also be responsible for our actions ("Action and Responsibility," in (ed.) Alan R. White, *The Philosophy of Action* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968], pp. 95-119).

suggestions for an improved account, not an account of action but an account of responsibility for action.

Hart's project is to understand the very idea of action in terms of the idea of responsibility. This reverses the natural way of proceeding. For it is rather natural to think that ascriptions of responsibility are founded on our knowledge whether a person acts or not. Hart's position undercuts this thought. Whether a person acts or not is not a matter of checking whether a particular event that is the agent's action exists. He argues extensively that in the law, the question whether action is intentional or not is settled by appealing to the legal code for ascribing responsibility and defeating prima facie descriptions by appeal to prototype cases. By contrast, Hart proposes to begin with the notion of responsibility and to construct the notion of action from it. It might be helpful to resort to a sketch of the metaphysical structure of his project. At the first stage, let us imagine that there are events or facts. Some of these events or facts will matter for the ascription of responsibility, i.e. for the attribution of action. In order to bring out how they matter for action attribution, we first need to postulate actors (people, firms, etc.). Actors participate in the causal order of the world, their limbs move, their mouths close. They are not yet capable of performing actions, however. It is only when we take them to be embedded in complex normative practices that we are given the tools to understand what actions are. To attribute an action to an agent is to tie the occurrence of a certain event under the presence of some positive conditions (and the absence of defeating conditions) to the agent. The tie in question is normative, it is the responsibility relation. The agent is responsible for a certain state of the world — if appropriate conditions hold. The agent's being responsible for that state of the world just *is* the agent's having performed an action. So it is sloppy language at best for Hart to say that the agent is responsible for his action (at least in his theoretical voice). But as we will remember Hart does not say this in his theoretical voice, he says it only in the introduction to his paper.

At least four further objections can be, and have been, directed against Hart's view. (1) Peter Geach has argued that action claims cannot be construed as having exclusively ascriptive uses. This objection shapes one criterion of adequacy for any responsibility-based account of action: to be able to show that action claims are not precluded from having descriptive uses. I will discuss Geach's objection and point to a

way in which the account of action I will propose avoids it in section 4. (2) A number of critics have complained that Hart says very little about the notion of responsibility involved. It seems clear that the notion of responsibility that is to constitute a foundation for a theory of action must not be the notion of legal responsibility (lest it ground a theory of legal action) or of moral responsibility (lest it ground a theory of moral action). It is thus imperative to develop a notion of practical responsibility. I will clarify such a notion in Chapters III-V. (3) Hart says rather little about both the positive and negative conditions that underlie the propriety of responsibility attributions.[11] The object of Chapter V will be in part to remedy this failing. (4) Last but not least, I must address an objection that can be thought to be fatal to any responsibility-based account of action, viz. that it reverses the logical order of the concepts of responsibility and action. Let us begin with considering just this objection.

3. The Fundamental Problem: The Concept of Action is Prior to the Concept of Responsibility

Although the concept of action is closely connected with the concept of responsibility, the latter is usually not thought of as having the potential to illuminate the former. Indeed, if anything it is the other way around. After all, in most instances, we base our judgments of responsibility on our judgments about actions. To claim that John is responsible for breaking the glass we must know that it is John who broke it, that he *did* it. This conceptual order seems to be also reflected in the very way we use the concept of responsibility: we are paradigmatically responsible for our actions. The problem then is this: How can a person's action be understood in terms of whether it is

---

[11] In a later paper ("Acts of Will and Responsibility," in *Punishment and Responsibility* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968], pp. 90-112), Hart characterizes involuntary movements as those "which occurred although they were not appropriate" (p. 105). He cashes this idea out in terms of whether the movements are "subordinated to the agent's conscious plans of action," whether they occur "as part of anything the agent takes himself to be doing." This is, however, too weak, for the agent can do something involuntarily though it may (by accident) fit what the agent planned to do. I may want to drop a spoon by way of giving an agreed on signal to my partner, but when I set about dropping the spoon, my fingers may tremble and the spoon may fall out by accident. While the falling of the spoon is certainly consistent with my plans, it has nevertheless fallen by accident through no action of mine.

appropriate for her to be held responsible if whether or not it is appropriate for her to be held responsible depends on whether or not she has acted?[12]

There are at least three different (though mutually compatible) ways for a responsibility-based approach to temper the intuitive burden of the objection, two of which I shall endorse. First, one might deny that our judgments of responsibility are based on our judgments about actions. This is the road taken by Hart. On Hart's view, judgments about responsibility are not based on judgments about actions but rather on judgments about the presence of positive and absence of negative (defeating) conditions. In view of the fact that Hart does not say very much about these kinds of conditions, this way of resolving the problem might not seem too inviting. It does, however, show the objection not to be fatal.

But there are at least two other ways of showing that responsibility-based accounts are not based on a fundamental error, while preserving the natural belief that judgments of responsibility are based on judgments regarding actions. The first of these begins with the observation that the concept of responsibility comes in various flavors, three of which I have already mentioned: legal, moral and practical. I have claimed that a responsibility-based theory of action (rather than of legal or moral action) must appeal to the notion of practical (rather than legal or moral) responsibility. If so, then it is no longer clear that the problem is indeed as fundamental as it seems at first sight. There is prima facie nothing incoherent in thinking that our judgments about moral or legal responsibility are in part based on our judgments about actions and that our judgments about actions are based on our judgments about practical responsibility. The one disadvantage of such a response is that the account of practical responsibility would have to be different from (and not modeled on) the account of either moral or legal responsibility. While the latter can presuppose that the agent acts, the former cannot. Chapters III-V are devoted to developing a concept of *practical* responsibility that does not depend on the concept of action.

---

[12] Christopher Cherry formulates a version of this objection directed specifically at Hart's view: "Hart's account is incoherent to the extent that it is framed in terms of ascribing responsibility for *actions* — as it mostly is. For the upshot is that a non-responsible action is a contradiction-in-terms" ("The Limits of Defeasibility," *Analysis* 34, 1974, p. 106).

Third, the concept of responsibility not only comes in various flavors but there are in fact very different senses of the concept. Broadly speaking, there are three different categories of concepts of responsibility: all-encompassing, forward- and backward-looking. The concept of accountability[13] is an all-encompassing responsibility concept. When we speak of normal adults as people who can be held responsible and contrast them to the mentally ill or the minors, we take them to be accountable. The concept of task-responsibility is a forward-looking responsibility concept. The agent who is held task-responsible for the performance of an action is held to the task of performing the action at some future time.[14] For example, a captain is held task-responsible for the safety of the passengers. K. Baier distinguishes three different concepts belonging to the last category of backward-looking responsibility concepts: answerability, culpability and liability. What they all have in common is the fact that they presuppose that there is something the agent has done (or not done) for which she is held responsible. They look back toward the action. The agent is answerable for an action as long as she has performed the action. She is culpable for the performance of the action if she is answerable for it and no excuses apply. If the agent is culpable, she is liable to punishment, condemnation or payment of compensation.

Given this three-fold classification of responsibility concepts, we can immediately tell that the fundamental problem involves only one of the categories. If we agree that responsibility judgments are based on judgments about actions (and so disagree with Hart's solution to the fundamental problem, see above), we take responsibility in its backward-looking sense. It is thus not open to such a responsibility-based theorist of action to construe the concept of action in terms of any of the backward-looking responsibility concepts. But this is to say nothing about the other kinds of responsibility concepts. The fundamental objection is so much as an objection only for an account that

---

[13] I follow the terminological distinctions made by Kurt Baier in "Moral and Legal Responsibility," in (eds.) Mark Siegler, Stephen Toulmin, Franklin E. Zimring, Kenneth F. Schaffner, *Medical Innovation and Bad Outcomes* (Ann Arbor, MI: Health Administration Press, 1987), pp. 101-129. See also Kurt Baier, "Responsibility and Action," in (eds.) Michael Bradie, Myles Brand, *Action and Responsibility* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Press, 1980), pp. 100-116.

[14] It might be objected that the fundamental problem is merely postponed. After all, what we are task-responsible for is an *action*. In Chapter III, I will show how to circumvent this objection.

understands action in terms of a backward-looking concept of responsibility. In Chapter VI, I shall propose to understand the concept of action in terms of the forward-looking concept of task-responsibility. As such, the objection is no objection to the account to be offered. Nothing will stand in the way of our admitting that ascriptions of moral and legal (backward-looking) responsibility are based on attributions of actions.

Contrary to appearances, the objection that a responsibility-based theory of action is doomed because it reverses the logical order of the concepts need not be fatal. The belief that gives rise to it (denied by Hart's theory) is that our judgments of responsibility for actions are based on whether or not the agent performed the action in question. While Hart's account points out at least a direction of thinking that does not rely on this belief, there are at least two other ways of saving the belief by distinguishing flavors and kinds of responsibility. There is nothing incoherent about the claim that judgments as to whether an agent is morally or legally responsible are based on judgments whether the agent acted or not, which in turn are based on the judgment whether the agent is *practically* responsible. Moreover, the objection does not appreciate that there are many different kinds of concepts of responsibility. As suggested, an account of action that is based on a forward-looking concept of task-responsibility does not stand in conflict with the thought that backward-looking responsibility judgments are based on judgments about actions.

4. Against Ascriptivism

The most piercing, if brief, criticism of Hart's ascriptivism is due to P.T. Geach.[15] Geach argues that whether a claim is ascriptive rather than descriptive is easily settled by appeal to what some authors have since called the Frege-Geach test. The test relies on the distinction between the content of a statement and the force that attaches to the content. Frege noted that there are some contexts where assertoric force attaches to the content, as in free-standing occurrences of a statement, when the statement is asserted. But there are other contexts where the content is stripped of assertoric force, as in the antecedent of a conditional. When one sincerely says "This box weighs 50 kg" one

is asserting the content, claiming it to be true that the box weighs 50 kg. On the other hand, when one sincerely says "If this box weighs 50 kg then I will not be able to carry it alone" what one is asserting or claiming true is the whole conditional not its antecedent. The force that attached to the content "This box weighs 50 kg" when the first assertion is made no longer attaches to it when one asserts the conditional.

Geach's suggestion is that we can check whether a claim is ascriptive or descriptive by seeing not how it behaves in free-standing contexts but how it behaves in embedded contexts. Suppose that action claims indeed do not have any descriptive content but have a purely ascriptive function. Their only role is to express the attitude of the ascriber toward the responsible person. If that were so then the conditions in which they were to play the role of antecedents, for instance, would be senseless. Asserting a conditional like "If she plays the piano, the sky whitens" would be like asserting the conditional "If dfalfkj aldkfajf, the sky whitens." In other words, there ought not to be any meaningful conditionals with action claims in the antecedents. But surely action claims can be embedded. The conditional "If she did it then he did not do it" is perfectly intelligible and important in our practices. Geach observes also that one had better not take the line that a different sense of doing is involved when action claims are embedded in subsentential contexts. For this would lead to the disastrous consequence that one could not apply modus ponens to the conditional without equivocating. And we surely do want to uphold the inference from "If she did it then he did not do it" and "She did it" to "He did not do it."

Geach's argument is simple and persuasive. I will not launch a full defense of Hart, though such a defense might be called for if only for historical reasons since Hart does occasionally mention that there are descriptive uses of action claims. He does not, however, tell us how we are to understand them.[16]

---

[15] "Ascriptivism," in *Logic Matters* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), pp. 250-254.

[16] J. Feinberg ("Action and Responsibility," *op. cit.*, see in particular pp. 110–117) attempts to rescue Hart's insights by suggesting that there is a sense of 'ascriptive' in which action claims are ascriptive, but at the cost of abandoning the connection with responsibility. Feinberg suggests that the feature of ascripitivity that Hart really intended to capture had to do with the fact that there is a certain degree of discretion in making the judgment: the action claim is not forced by facts. Feinberg then goes on to propose that one finds a great deal of discretion in making causal judgments, in singling out the causes of an event that

One possibility of developing Hart's view might be to suggest that the descriptive uses of action claims correspond to assertions of propriety of responsibility ascriptions. On such a view, a speech act of the form "α φed" serves to ascribe responsibility for φing to α. To say that "α φed" is ascriptive rather than descriptive is *inter alia* to say that it cannot be true or false, and as such it cannot enter into embedded contexts. However, while attributions of actions understood as ascriptions of responsibility cannot be true or false they can be appropriate or inappropriate (depending on the presence or absence of positive and negative conditions). If so, then it is open to Hart to propose that action claims have a derivative descriptive content. The force of an action claim of the form "α φed" is to ascribe to α responsibility for φing in circumstances C. The derivative content of that action claim could be paraphrased as "It is appropriate to ascribe to α responsibility for φing in circumstances C." It is thus possible to paraphrase conditionals such as "If she did it then he did not do it" as "If it is appropriate to ascribe responsibility to her in circumstances C then it is inappropriate to ascribe responsibility to him in circumstances C'."

Such a supplementation of Hart's view seems to solve the problem without compromising the spirit of Hart's account. It preserves Hart's rejection of the ontological division into events that are actions and events that are not. The descriptive content of action claims does not describe actions but describes the propriety of responsibility attributions.

We have seen that while Geach's objection is powerful, there is at least a direction which if followed could save Hart's account. But responsibility-based theories of action need not be ascriptivist. In what follows, I will develop an approach that is not ascriptivist in aspiration, and as such is immune to Geach's objection.

---

contributed more and less to its occurrence, and in this (causal) way salvages Hart's insight. Aside from the fact that it is most certainly not true to Hart's intention, it seems like a rather far-fetched extension of Hart's view. Moreover, from our standpoint it misses the virtue of Hart's view — the tie of action to responsibility.

• •

In this chapter, I have discussed H.L.A. Hart's view according to which attributions of actions can be understood in terms of appropriate responsibility ascriptions. This discussion, in particular the consideration of the criticisms of Hart's account, allowed us to formulate some criteria of adequacy for any responsibility-based account of action.

In section 3, I have shown how a responsibility-based account of action can avoid the objection that it is based on a fundamental error because the concept of action is prior to the concept of responsibility. We have seen that a responsibility-based account of the notion of action is quite compatible with the thought that whether or not we are to be held responsible (in a backward-looking sense) for actions is to be determined in part by appeal to whether we have acted or not. In Chapters III-V, I will develop a forward-looking concept of practical task-responsibility, which is immune to the fundamental objection. The ascription of moral culpability does not settle the ascription of practical task-responsibility; in fact, the dependence goes in the other direction.

As Peter Geach has argued, an account of action must allow for action claims to have descriptive uses. In section 4, I have argued that responsibility-based accounts of action are not committed to being ascriptivist. In fact, on the account that will be developed the primary uses of action claims are descriptive. I will argue (Chapter VI) that to say that an action has been performed is to say that a practical task-responsibility has been discharged.

Three major tasks lie ahead. First, the notion of practical task-responsibility needs to be clarified in such a way as to prevent the account from being subject to the fundamental objection (Chapters III-V). Second, this involves giving an account of defeating conditions (Chapter V). Third, the notion of practical responsibility that I shall develop must then be shown to help in understanding the nature of action, in particular in rendering the distinction between actions and mere happenings (Chapter VI).