According to causalism, actions are events caused in the right way by appropriate mental states. According to responsibilism, attributions of actions are attributions of responsibility. The notion of action is understood as a complement to the notion of non-action, which is in turn delineated by the presence of defeating conditions. I argue that causalism has a problem in answering the title question negatively. The fact that a spasm causes the arm to rise does not compete with a possible additional causal process (with the appropriate mental etiology) that leads to (and overdetermines) the very arm rising.

According to the intentionalist theories of action, actions are events that have a special origin. On the causal theory of action, which is paradigmatic for this approach, actions are those events that have been caused in the right way by appropriate mental states. According to the responsibilist theories (of which H. L. A. Hart’s 1951 theory is an example), to attribute an action is to attribute responsibility for events or states of the world. Such attributions are characteristically defeasible—the notion of action is thus understood as a complement to the notion of non-action, which is in turn delineated by the presence of defeating conditions (e.g. spasms, ticks, etc.).

In this paper, I present an argument for the responsibilist accounts of action that is reminiscent of the logical connection argument. The datum

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for the argument is the immediacy with which we infer that an action of raising an arm, for example, has not occurred given that the agent’s arm was hit by a spasm (which caused the arm to rise). This datum is easily explained by responsibilism, according to which there is a logical connection between undefeated defeating conditions and non-actions. I argue that it cannot be so easily explained by the causal theory of action. In fact, it looks like the causal theorist either needs to buttress his position by the responsibilist account or else has to accept the paradoxically looking claim that one can intentionally raise an arm caused by a spasm.

In §1 I sketch the distinction between the two types of theories and show them to have a common root in Aristotle’s remarks on what is voluntary. In §2 I sketch Hart’s version of responsibilism and point out some advantages of responsibilist theories (§3). In §4, I explain the responsibilist challenge to the causal theorist.

1. Two types of action theories

There are two very general ways of looking at action. According to intentionalism, actions are performances that have a special origin. On the causal theory of action, which could be seen to be paradigmatic for this approach, an action is an event that is caused in the right way by appropriate mental states (Brand 1984; Davidson 1963; 1973; Mele 1992; 2003; Searle 1983). But even many of the challengers to the causal theory share the basic intuition. On the ever more popular agent-causal views (Chisholm 1976; Lowe 2008; O’Connor 2000), an action is an event that also has a special origin—it must be caused by the agent. Volitionist approaches (e.g. Ginet 1990) likewise follow this general line of thinking. What is characteristic about the intentionalist theories is that in order to answer the question whether an agent’s performance is an action, one must investigate, for example, whether it was caused in the right way.

According to responsibilism, by contrast, performances by skilled and competent agents are taken to be actions by default. It is only in special circumstances (when conditions that defeat responsibility attributions are present) that agents are taken off the hook, so to speak, and their performances are not counted as actions. This kind of approach to action has

2. The use of the term ‘performance’ here is theoretical—it is constructed in such a way as to encompass both actions and non-actions—the winkings and the blinkings, the arm raisings and the arm risings, the fallings off the stairs and the runnings down the stairs, etc.
been proposed by H. L. A. Hart (1951), and unfortunately much forgotten since (though see Paprzycka 1997; 2008; Sneddon 2006; Stoecker 2001; 2007).

These two general types of theories of action could be seen to have a source in Aristotle’s remarks on the voluntary. Aristotle says:

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.3

These remarks can be—and have been—taken to support both views. However, there is a tension between these two theories that is already evident in this quotation. Aristotle clearly recognizes 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 or something, etc. Aristotle describes those cases as ones where the agent contributes nothing.

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

\[
\text{(N\_\_)} \quad \text{The agent’s } \phi \text{ing was a mere happening (non-action) iff “external forces” caused him to } \phi. 
\]

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

\[
\text{(A\_\_)} \quad \text{The agent’s } \phi \text{ing was an action iff “internal forces” caused him to } \phi.
\]

\(\text{(N\_\_)}\) captures the central thought of responsibilism while \(\text{(A\_\_)}\) captures the central thought of intentionalism. The ideas of “internal forces” and “external forces” are treated as metaphors that need to be elaborated more fully.4


4. 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.), and there may be the right kind of outside forces (e.g. when someone helps an old person through the street). See also Frankfurt (1988).
The logical relationship between \( (A_i) \) and \( (N_e) \) is far from clear. It might appear that the claims are equivalent. Closer inspection, however, shows that this is not so—not unless the following claims are true:

\[
\begin{align*}
(A-N) & \text{ a performance is an action just in case it is not a mere happening (non-action),} \\
(i-e) & \text{ “internal forces” caused } \alpha \text{ to } \varphi \text{ iff “external forces” did not cause } \alpha \text{ to } \varphi. 
\end{align*}
\]

The former claim is the least problematic of the two: we can view the concepts of action and non-action as complementary (relative to a class of performances). Given \((A-N)\), we can establish that what follows from \((N_e)\) is:

\[
(A_e) \quad \text{the agent’s } \varphi \text{ing was an action iff it was not caused by “external forces.”}
\]

Analogically, what follows from \((A_i)\) is:

\[
(N_i) \quad \text{the agent’s } \varphi \text{ing was a mere happening iff it was not caused by “internal forces.”}
\]

What is puzzling, however, is whether \((i-e)\) is true. According to \((i-e)\), causation by “internal forces” precludes causation by “external forces.” *Prima facie* it is not clear why these two types of forces should exclude one another. Why could they not jointly cause the performance?

Responsibilism provides an answer to this question. It begins with a substantive account of what it means for “external forces” to cause an agent’s performance \((N_e)\) and then explains what it means for the agent to act by appealing to the absence of such forces \((A_e)\). From its point of view, the idea of “internal forces” causing the performances is a hypos- tatization of the absence of such causation by “external forces.” In other words, the responsibilists take \((i-e)\) to be providing a reductive definition of what it means for the “internal forces” to be in operation. The proper theoretical work is done by the idea of the absence of “external forces.” The notion of action is thus understood as a complement to the notion of non-action (of a mere happening). Non-actions in turn are understood in terms of the presence of defeating conditions (e.g. spasms, ticks, etc.).
Causalism, on the other hand, begins with a substantive account of what it means for “internal forces” to cause an agent’s performance (A). It thus cannot adopt the responsibilist interpretation of (i-e). In accepting the claim (N), that it is the lack of causation by “internal forces” that explains why a performance is a mere happening rather than an action, causalism opens itself to the possibility that an action can be caused by “external forces,” for the performance could be determined by both types of causal processes. This is the core of the responsibilist challenge (§4), to which we will turn after a brief reminder of Hart’s theory of action (§2) and some of its advantages (§3).

2. H. L. A. Hart’s theory of action

Hart argued that the concept of action is essentially a normative and a social concept that presupposes accepted rules of conduct. A good analogy is the concept of property. Just as it does not make sense to think that a statement like “Smith owns this piece of land” is a sentence that is “concerned wholly with an individual” (Hart 1951, 161), so statements like “Smith did it” likewise cannot be understood as being about one individual only. According to Hart, the main thrust of action statements is to attribute (“ascribe” in Hart’s language) responsibility for certain events or states of the world to individuals on the basis of generally accepted rules of conduct.

On Hart’s view, action claims are ascriptive rather than descriptive. They are never true or false; they are appropriate or inappropriate in view of relevant conditions. Transposed from the formal into the material mode, there are no actions in the world. Our distinction between actions and mere happenings is not ontological but normative. It is to be made in terms of the appropriateness of ascribing responsibility for events or states of the world (when we intuitively think of them as actions) and the inappropriateness of ascribing responsibility for

5. It is not exactly clear on Hart’s account what ontological category the variable x ranges over in the expression ‘a is responsible for x’. Some critics (e.g. Pitcher 1960) have charged Hart with the view that the variable ranges over actions, thus rendering Hart’s account circular. But, most of the time (except for a non-committal statement on the first page of his paper), Hart is quite careful not to talk this way. (For details, see Paprzycka 1997, ch. 2. See also Sneddon 2006; Stoecker 2007.)

6. Hart’s ascriptivism has been a source of additional problems (see e.g. Geach 1960; Paprzycka 1997; Sneddon 2006; Stoecker 2007).
events or states of the world (when we intuitively think of them as mere happenings).

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. When attribute to John the action of breaking the window, the positive conditions might include John's arm moving in such a way that the glass is broken. 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, say, or John's being pushed by someone. When we learn that somebody pushed John and that John smashed the window as a result, we will no longer attribute responsibility to John for breaking the window. It will thus be inappropriate to say that John's breaking the window was his action.

It should be pointed out, however, that defeating conditions can themselves be defeated. Suppose that John ordered, or even coerced, the person to push him so that the window is broken. Such a condition defeats the original defeating condition. As a result, it is reasonable to hold John to be responsible for breaking the window after all. He did it in an unusual way but he did break the window.

This structure allows us to understand the difference between actions and mere happenings or between it being appropriate and it being inappropriate to ascribe 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 (undefeated) defeating condition occurs. It will be appropriate to ascribe responsibility to the agent only if the positive conditions occur and no (undefeated) defeating conditions are present.

Hart's project is to understand the nature of action by getting a better understanding of the structure in particular of the negative (defeating) conditions. He is extremely skeptical about the intentionalist project and suggests that any concept that aspires to distinguishing between actions and mere happenings in fact does so only insofar as it can claim to capture the notorious variety of negative conditions. He says:

These positive-looking words 'intention', etc., if put forward as necessary conditions of all action only succeed in posing as this if in fact they are a comprehensive and misleadingly positive-sounding reference to the absence of one or more of the defences, and are thus only understandable when interpreted in the light of the defences, and not vice versa. Again, when we are
ascribing an action to a person, the question whether a psychological ‘event’ occurred does not come up in this suggested positive form at all, but in the form of an inquiry as to whether any of these extenuating defences cover the case. (1951, 163).

In this passage, Hart gives expression to the characteristic responsibilist view that the concept of “internal force causation” is to be understood in terms of the absence of certain defeating conditions (“defences”). In other words, claim (i-e) is to be taken as a reductive definition of the concept of “internal force causation.”

3. The charm of responsibilism

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to go into the details of responsibilist positions, I want to mention certain immediate advantages of the accounts especially vis a vis intentionalist conceptions of action.

The general structure of responsibilist accounts can be perhaps cast in the following way. Our attributions of actions of φing to agents presuppose that we take the agents to be in control over φing. When α is in control of φing and φ, α's φing is an action.

Normally we take ourselves to be—and indeed are—in control of various ordinary activities (raising arms, moving feet, reaching for glasses, pouring milk, running, writing, etc.). Arguably the range of activities that we are in control of will depend on the individual—some of us can juggle, dance or raise arms in graceful ways, some of us cannot dance, cannot speak French, and may be incapable of raising our arms. However, the very application of the concept of action in our social lives presupposes that the range of activities that we are in control of overlaps quite a bit. The understanding of the idea of what it is to be in control of φing includes at the very least that the agent is capable of reliably fulfilling the task to φ (and the task not to φ).8

7. This is very tentative and vague. I develop some of the concepts mentioned here at a greater length in (Paprzycka 1997). In particular, I argue that the concept of being in control of is to be understood in terms of reasonable normative expectations, and I show how defeating conditions affect the reasonableness of such expectations. However, for one, I do not doubt that there are other ways of developing these thoughts. Moreover, for the purposes of this paper, the development of the whole theoretical machinery would obscure the main argument rather than making it more intelligible.

8. A. Baier (1971) has sketched an approach to action where the idea of a task plays a central role.
Defeating conditions—or Hart’s negative conditions—are conditions that affect the agent’s control over an activity. When someone breaks a leg, she is no longer in control of running or even walking briskly. When someone acquires a tick, he cannot be relied upon to wink as a sign to start a revolt.

The heart of the responsibilist account involves understanding these key concepts, what it is for the agent to be in control of φing and how various conditions can affect this control. Once the responsibilist demonstrates that most agents indeed are in control of φing, where ‘φ’ ranges over “common” action types, he entitles himself to the characteristic feature of responsibilist theories, viz. that such action types lie within the agentive purview by default. With respect to them, we are guilty of being agents until proven innocent, so to speak. According to the responsibilist, one does not need to demonstrate any special origin for a performance to count as action as long as it is a performance of a type that falls within the range of those that are within the agent’s power or control. Of course, such judgments are defeasible—they are sensitive to the occurrence of any circumstances that affect the agent’s control over those types of actions.

It is thus that spontaneous actions (actions done for no reason), for example, present no special problem for the responsibilist. There is no need to find underlying reasons for one’s singing in the shower, no need for momentary desires, no need for intentions-in-action. The agent’s particular state of mind is largely irrelevant. The agent may be engrossed in thoughts about something completely different. He may be singing because it is his habit, or perhaps because he hears a radio playing a tune, or perhaps really for no reason. According to the responsibilist there is nothing wrong in any of these suggestions. If he just happens to be singing in the shower, it is his action unless something untoward happens. If it turns out, for example, that an evil scientist manipulates the agent’s vocal cords in ways that result in the characteristic sounds escaping through the water vapor, that would count as a defeating condition and the characteristic sounds would no longer qualify as something of which the person is an agent. But it is a theoretical mistake to try to postulate metaphysical constructs like “proximal intention,” “intention-in-action,” “volition,” etc. to cover the absence of the defeating conditions. There simply is

9. The thought that some performances acquire the status of actions (indeed intentional actions) by default is present in R. Brandom’s (1994) account (see esp. pp. 257ff). While Brandom officially adheres to a causal account of action, this thought makes him a potential responsibilist.
no need to do it as long as one has a good account of what counts as a non-action.

Likewise wayward causal chain cases do not present any special problems for the responsibilist. Examples such as Davidson’s (1973) mountaineer case fall into the same bag with other non-actions. They do not present any special problem or indeed any special category for the responsibilist. Recall that the nervous mountaineer becomes nervous because he intends to let go of his partner (attached to a rope) but this intention makes him so nervous—his palms begin to sweat, he begins to shake—that the rope slides out of his fingers. The problem for the causalist is that there appears to be the requisite origin for agent’s releasing the rope—its cause appears to be the intention to let go of the rope. The responsibilist will take the releasing of the rope as an action of the mountaineer by default (releasing of ropes as well as holdings on to ropes are the sort of action that it is within the mountaineer’s power to perform). However, in this case there is a defeating condition. The extreme nervousness (palm sweating, hands shaking), never mind what caused it, defeats the prima facie attribution of responsibility to the agent because it shows that he was not in control of such activities after all.

For similar reasons, the responsibilist is open to the idea of letting in as actions cases that are notoriously problematic for the intentionalist because the requisite “internal forces” seem to be missing. This has been claimed to be so in case of arational actions (Hursthouse 1991), habitual actions (Pollard 2003; 2006), nonintentional actions (Chan 1995), unintentional omissions (Smith 1984; 1990), as well as mistakes and slips (Peabody 2005).

4. The responsibilist challenge

So far I have presented some reasons for thinking that a responsibilist account might be worthwhile considering. Let me now turn the tables and suggest that there is a reason to favor responsibilism.

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10. I am only speaking here of the so-called antecedential wayward causal chain cases, of which Davidson mountaineer example is paradigmatic. From a responsibilist perspective, the first question in action theory is the question what the difference between an action and a non-action is. It is only later that the question of what makes some actions intentional is taken up. The antecedential wayward causal chain cases affect the judgment of whether an action was performed. The consequential wayward causal chain cases are cases where the action has been performed but the waywardness affects the issue whether the action has been intentional.
The central thought behind the responsibilist theories is that there is a logical connection between the presence of (undefeated) defeating conditions and mere happenings. When a spasm hits one's arm, the resulting movement is not an arm raising, a voting, or a showing of one's courage; it is simply not an action. This can be couched in a claim drawn from (N):

(1) If a spasm causes an arm to rise, *ceteris paribus* the arm rising is not an action.\(^{11}\)

The challenge to the causalist is to explain why (1) holds. The causalist answer will presumably invoke the fact that the arm rising was not caused by an appropriate mental state, proximate intention say (see Mele 1992; 2003; Mele & Moser 1994; for similar views see Brand 1984; Thalberg 1984).\(^{12}\) He might make us look at the spasmodic arm rising and make us acknowledge that no intention is doing the causing (though it is hard to conceive how this could be accomplished while keeping our responsibilist intuitions at bay). But even if we acknowledge this in a particular case, we should worry that the causalist cannot exclude the possibility that the spasm is also caused by an intention after all. An arm rising in a spasm is a causal process: its effect is the rising of the arm, and its cause is a certain neural activation. But the causal effect—the rising of the arm could be *overdetermined*—it could have another cause: the agent’s intention. Since the intentionalist is committed to the claim that actions are actions in virtue of their intentional etiology, he would have to say that the rising of the arm in such an overdetermined case is an action. This is strongly counterintuitive.

Let us consider how Mele and Moser (1994) handle Davidson’s mountaineer case. They suggest that the case presents no problem to the causal account because the mountaineer’s letting go of a rope is not proximally caused by an intention but rather by his state of nervousness. The question that the responsibilists are posing is: on what basis are we excluding causation by an intention?

Granted, it may of course turn out—in the mountaineer case—that after the intention to let go of the rope causes the state of nervousness,

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\(^{11}\) *The ceteris paribus* clause is important, since we need to remember that the logical relations advocated on the responsibilist account are defeasible (see also footnote 14).

\(^{12}\) I am focusing here on a certain version of the causal theory of action. I believe, however, that the challenge is quite general and that it affects most versions of what I have called the intentionalist approach to action.
it expires. Thereafter, the state of nervousness takes over and causes the releasing of the rope and of the partner attached to it (Fig. 1).

* α’s intention to let go of the rope

* α’s state of uncontrollable nervousness

* α’s letting go of the rope

Fig. 1. *The structure of Davidson’s mountaineer case as reconstructed by Mele and Moser (1994)*

However, might it not also happen that the picture be rather different? Rather than expiring the intention may continue to be at work, it may be a little “surprised” by sweaty palms’ cooperation but it may continue to cause the behavior:

* α’s intention to let go of the rope

* α’s state of uncontrollable nervousness

* α’s letting go of the rope

Fig. 2. *An alternative structure of the mountaineer case*

In other words, the intention causes the mountaineer to be so nervous that he uncontrollably lets go of his rope but at the same time the intention causes the letting go of the rope. The effect is causally overdetermined.

In such a case, however, the causalist should say that α’s letting go of the rope is an action since it was proximally caused by the intention. The
fact that it was caused by something else too—even if it was an uncontrollable state of nervousness—is of no consequence.

The responsibilist, by contrast, argues that such a situation is incoherent. We simply cannot even begin to envisage an agent who intentionally performs an action caused by an uncontrollable state of nervousness. There is a logical conflict between the uncontrollable state of nervousness and actionhood (and eo ipso any suggestion of the movement being intentional). \(^{13}\)

Mele and Moser actually consider another case, where they do allow the intention to operate in conjunction with a state of nervousness. Let us consider it too, though it should be clear that the case differs substantially from the Davidsonian mountaineer case. G. M. Wilson (1989) speaks about a weight-lifter whose intention causes a state of nervousness but that very state is in fact necessary for the weight-lifter to do what he intends (to lift a very heavy weight). In Wilson’s case, the agent succeeds in part because the nervous state of his body is conducive to the attainment of his goal. In Davidson’s original case, the state of the agent’s body is also conducive to the attainment of his goal but it is moreover such that the agent completely loses control over what he does. Were he to decide, or were he to be ordered, not to let go of his partner, he would have let go of him anyway. This is not the case in Wilson’s story. The nervousness does not function as a defeating condition, it does not affect the control over the movements in the way it does in the mountaineer case.

Mele and Moser diagnose Wilson’s case differently. They think that the problem in the mountaineer case concerns the fact that there is no direct connection between intention and behavior, while in Wilson’s case there is a connection between intention and behavior.

This, however, does not alleviate the worry as we posed it. Since it is possible for an intention to do the causal work together with a state of nervousness, on what grounds are we excluding a case where an agent intentionally performs a movement caused by an uncontrollable spasm? \(^{14}\)

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13. In his (2003) book, Mele considers a number of variations on the mountaineer case that differ from one another in the extent to which the movement (the letting go of the rope) is caused by the intention and by the nervousness. But in all of the cases, the uncontrollable nervousness is seen to stand in conflict and so to exclude the intention. Here is a representative illustration, where Mele speaks of an agent, Clem, who is not performing an action of loosening his grip on the rope because “no intention of his is playing this role; Clem’s nervousness prevents that by temporarily depriving him of control over the motions of his hands” (p. 60).

14. But might a spastic movement (arm rising) not be an agent’s action after all? Suppose that an amicable neuroscientist identifies just the neural activation required for the production
The responsibilist puts forward the following question to the causalist: Is it possible for an intention to cause an arm rising in a spasm? If the causalist gives a negative answer then the responsibilist triumphs because she will argue that the causalist must appeal to the responsibilist conceptual resources in order to substantiate the impossibility claim. If the causalist gives a positive answer then the responsibilist triumphs again because the causalist account is thus shown to lead to the acceptance of an incoherent case as an example of an action by the agent.

5. Conclusion

We started with a datum: when an arm rises because of a spasm, we immediately infer that the arm rising is not an action. This datum is easily explained by responsibilism, according to which there is a logical connection between (undefeated) defeating conditions and non-actions. It is much more problematic to explain the datum on the causal theory of action. The fact that a spasm causes the arm to rise *prima facie* does not compete with a possible additional causal process that leads to (and overdetermines) the very arm rising. This additional process could after all have the appropriate sort of mental etiology. If that were so then the causal theorist should conceive it as a possibility that a spasm cause an action, which seems to contradict the datum.

While the challenge as presented is directed at the causal theory of action, it can be extended to intentionalist theories of action more generally. The challenge is to use the resources of the theory in question—individually of the responsibilist ones—to explain why the occurrence of a defeating condition (such as a spasm) precludes a performance from counting as an action.

of a spasmatric arm rising. He constructs a little apparatus wired up to an agent, John, in such a way that when a red button is pressed, the appropriate neurons are activated, causing a sudden arm rising. John being a curious person he is, upon learning about the functioning of the button, immediately wants to try it out. He presses the button, causing a jerky rising of his own arm. Is this an action of John’s? The responsibilist will answer positively. This is because the defeating power of the defeating condition (the spasm) has now been defeated. John is in control over that condition. The details of the case are not as important now as the realization that the structure of such a case is very different from the cases we have been considering so far. Moreover, such cases are in fact problematic for the causalist because they appear to resemble their diagnosis of the original mountaineer case. The intention causes the button depression but is no longer doing any work from then onwards.
My suspicion is that the problem can be put to rest once causalist
(and, more generally, intentionalist) theories recognize their place in the
conceptual space of action theory. They are best thought of as theories
designed to answer not the problem of action (what is the difference
between an action and a mere happening?) but rather the problem of the
intentionality of action (when is an action intentional?). The thought
that the notion of intentional action is the key in particular to the under-
standing of the notion of action has been an unfortunate dogma in con-
temporary action theory and has rightly come under fire. In fact, much
of the theoretical pressure on the concept of intentional action derives
from the perceived need for the concept of intentional action to ground
the concept of action. It is useful in this context to remind oneself of
Austin's remark:

I sit in my chair, in the usual way—I am not in a daze or influenced by threats
or the like: here it will not do to say either that I sat in it intentionally or that
I did not sit in it intentionally… (Austin 1961, p. 190)

In contrast to causalism (and intentionalism more generally), responsibil-
ism is designed first and foremost to answer the problem of action. By
showing that the concept of action can be understood independently of
the concept of intentional action, responsibilism offers a good background
for work on the concept of intentional action, which should be devoid of
pressures to stretch the concepts.

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