

# Action theory (philosophy)

**Action theory** (or **theory of action**) is an area in [philosophy](#) concerned with [theories](#) about the processes [causing willful human bodily movements](#) of a more or less complex kind. This area of thought involves epistemology, ethics, metaphysics, jurisprudence, and philosophy of mind, and has attracted the strong interest of philosophers ever since [Aristotle's \*Nicomachean Ethics\*](#) (Third Book). With the advent of [psychology](#) and later [neuroscience](#), many theories of action are now subject to empirical testing.

Philosophical action theory, or the **philosophy of action**, should not be confused with [sociological](#) theories of [social action](#), such as the [action theory](#) established by [Talcott Parsons](#). Nor should it be confused with [Activity Theory](#).

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What is left over if I subtract the fact that my arm goes up from the fact that I raise my arm?

[Ludwig Wittgenstein](#), *Philosophical Investigations* §621

## Overview

Basic action theory typically describes [action](#) as behavior caused by an *agent* in a particular *situation*. The agent's *desires* and *beliefs* (e.g. me wanting a glass of water and believing the clear liquid in the cup in front of me is water) lead to bodily behavior (e.g. reaching over for the glass). In the simple theory (see [Donald Davidson](#)), the desire and belief jointly cause the action. [Michael Bratman](#) has raised problems for such a view and argued that we should take the concept of intention as basic and not analyzable into beliefs and desires.

In some theories a desire plus a belief about the means of satisfying that desire are always what is behind an action. Agents aim, in acting, to maximize the satisfaction of their desires. Such a theory of prospective rationality underlies much of economics and other social sciences within the more sophisticated framework of [rational choice](#). However, many theories of action argue that rationality extends far beyond calculating the best means to achieve one's ends. For instance, a belief that I ought to do X, in some theories, can directly cause me to do X without my having to want to do X (i.e. have a desire to do X). Rationality, in such theories, also involves responding correctly to the reasons an agent perceives, not just acting on wants.

While action theorists generally employ the language of [causality](#) in their theories of what the nature of action is, the issue of what causal determination comes to has been central to controversies about the nature of [free will](#).

Conceptual discussions also revolve around a precise definition of [action](#) in philosophy. Scholars may disagree on which bodily movements fall under this category, e.g. whether thinking should be analysed as action, and how complex actions involving several steps to be taken and diverse intended consequences are to be summarised or decomposed.

## Scholars

- [G. E. M. Anscombe](#)
- [Thomas Aquinas](#)
- [Hannah Arendt](#)
- [Aristotle](#)
- [Robert Audi](#)
- [Jonathan Bennett](#)
- [Maurice Blondel](#)
- [Michael Bratman](#)
- [Hector-Neri Castañeda](#)
- [David Charles](#)
- [August Cieszkowski](#)
- [Michel Crozier](#)
- [Jonathan Dancy](#)
- [Donald Davidson](#)
- [Daniel Dennett](#)
- [William H. Dray](#)
- [Fred Dretske](#)
- [Ignacio Ellacuría](#)
- [John Martin Fischer](#)
- [Harry Frankfurt](#)
- [Arnold Gehlen](#)
- [Carl Ginet](#)
- [Alvin I. Goldman](#)
- [Jürgen Habermas](#)
- [Sam Harris](#)
- [Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel](#)
- [Carl Hempel](#)
- [Jennifer Hornsby](#)
- [Rosalind Hursthouse](#)
- [David Hume](#)
- [John Hyman](#)
- [Hans Joas](#)
- [Robert Kane](#)
- [Anthony Kenny](#)
- [Jaegwon Kim](#)
- [Christine Korsgaard](#)
- [Tadeusz Kotarbiński](#)
- [Loet Leydesdorff](#)
- [John McDowell](#)
- [Alfred R. Mele](#)
- [Elijah Millgram](#)
- [Ludwig von Mises](#)
- [Thomas Nagel](#)
- [Friedrich Nietzsche](#)
- [Lucy O'Brien](#)
- [Talcott Parsons](#)
- [Derk Pereboom](#) (philosopher)
- [Juan Antonio Pérez López](#)
- [Brian O'Shaughnessy](#)
- [Joseph Raz](#)
- [Thomas Reid](#)
- [Raymond Reiter](#)
- [Paul Ricoeur](#)
- [Constantine Sandis](#)
- [John Searle](#)
- [Scott Sehon](#)
- [Wilfrid Sellars](#)
- [Michael Smith](#)
- [Baruch Spinoza](#)
- [Galen Strawson](#)
- [Charles Taylor](#)
- [Richard Taylor](#)
- [Irving Thalberg](#)
- [Judith Jarvis Thomson](#)
- [David Velleman](#)
- [Candace Vogler](#)
- [Georg Henrik von Wright](#)
- [R. Jay Wallace](#)
- [Susan Wolf](#)
- [Ludwig Wittgenstein](#)
- [Max Weber](#)
- [Xavier Zubiri](#)

## See also

- Praxeology
- Free will

## Further reading

- Frøde Alfson Bjørdal (2016). *Cubes and Hypercubes of Opposition, with Ethical Ruminations on Inviolability*, in Logica Universalis Volume 10, Issue 2–3, pp. 373–376.
- Maurice Blondel (1893). *L'Action - Essai d'une critique de la vie et d'une science de la pratique*
- G. E. M. Anscombe (1957). *Intention*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford.
- James Sommerville (1968). *Total Commitment, Blondel's L'Action*, Corpus Books.
- Donald Davidson (1980). *Essays on Actions and Events*, Clarendon Press, Oxford.
- Jennifer Hornsby (1980). *Actions*, Routledge, London.
- Lilian O'Brien (2014). *Philosophy of Action*, Palgrave, Basingstoke.
- Christine Korsgaard (2008). *The Constitution of Agency*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Alfred R. Mele (ed.) (1997). *The Philosophy of Action*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- John Hyman & Helen Steward (eds.) (2004). *Agency and Action*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Anton Leist (ed.) (2007). *Action in Context*, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin.
- Peter Šajda et al. (eds.) (2012). *Affectivity, Agency and Intersubjectivity*, L'Harmattan, Paris.
- Timothy O'Connor & Constantine Sandis (eds.) (2010). *A Companion to the Philosophy of Action*, Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford.
- Constantine Sandis (ed.) (2009). *New Essays on the Explanation of Action*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.
- Jonathan Dancy & Constantine Sandis (eds.) (2015). *Philosophy of Action: An anthology*, Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford.
- Crozier, Michel & Friedberg, Erhard. *Actors and Systems* (Chicago: [University of Chicago Press](#), 1980).

## External links

- Zalta, Edward N. (ed.). "Action" (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/action/>). *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.
- The Meaning of Action by Various Authors at PhilosophersAnswer.com ([https://web.archive.org/web/20110824095250/http://philosophersanswer.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=20672:the-meaning-of-action-philosophers-answer&catid=1:philosophers-answer&Itemid=2](https://web.archive.org/web/20110824095250/http://philosophersanswer.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=20672:the-meaning-of-action-philosophers-answer&catid=1:philosophers-answer&Itemid=2))
- "Thomas Reid's Theory of Action" (<http://www.iep.utm.edu/reid-act>). *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

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