Learnable Control

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The main question that is the subject of this paper is: What is the genus of human action? Formally, an answer to that question might point to paradigm cases of human action by reference to which the broader genus should be understood, and/or provide a list of necessary and sufficient conditions for something to count as a human action. This paper analyzes one dominant way of identifying the genus of human action in contemporary action theory literature (which can for ease of reference be called the *Consciousness* view), provides reasons for rejecting it and offers an alternative.

According to the *Consciousness* view paradigmatic species of human action are intentional, conscious actions, i.e. those to which the special sense of G.E.M. Anscombe's famous question 'Why?' has application. Actions are paradigmatically understood as events that are materially connected to the agent and which the agent is necessarily conscious of as her actions. The *Consciousness* view can acknowledge that there are other action-like events, which lack the element of consciousness, and understand them as deficient or derivatively intelligible phenomena - as pseudo-actions (i.e. as something which has some of the features of the paradigm case, but lacks some other crucial features.).

The *Consciousness* view is problematic for two reasons. First, the criteria espoused by the *Consciousness* view are insufficient. An event can be causally downstream of an agent and the agent could have the conscious belief that this event is her action and yet the connection between the agent and the event may be too accidental, too much of a matter of luck in order for others to genuinely attribute the action to her. Consider the following example: a (flashy) gambler exhales onto the dice as he throws them, disturbing their trajectory somewhat. If he could only answer at the moment he does this he would say "I am blowing the dice double-six-wards". Imagine further that the dice do land on a double-six, and that the contraction of both his diaphragm and cheeks, the shape of his tongue, the direction, and force of the puff of air thereby propelled towards the dice all played a causal role in their flight path, which in turn played a role in their tumbling, which settled on a double-six. In other words, blowing on the dice was materially efficacious in the causal history of two dice landing double six. My contention is that "blowing the dice double-six-wards" is not in fact an action that the gambler is performing, though we might call it a pseudo-action.

Second, consciousness is not necessary for it being an action. Not only do we frequently take one another to be performing actions unconsciously, some actions are arguably performed best when agents lack consciousness of them. Consider the following example of self-deception: A is asking B for forgiveness, thinking to herself "I am asking for forgiveness. I am trying to reestablish a good relationship between us. I am a good person." But A's request for forgiveness shows some defects: A is low on detail about what she has done wrong, she is quick to come up with vague excuses that minimize her wrongdoing, she is impatient about listening to B's side of the story etc. Is she really asking for forgiveness or merely saying the words, while trying to escape an uneasy situation? In some situations we might plausibly think it's the latter, even if the possibility is not on A's mind. This is a banal example of a case where one pursues something shameful and so masks the action from

oneself in order to be able to pursue it. According to the *Consciousness* view, the action just described is not a real action, it is at best a pseudo-action, whereas I would contend that this is a proper action.

According to the alternative view we should understand actions as exercises of *learnable control*. I propose to view action as a unity of attitudinal, material and modal aspects: an embodied imperative attitude with modal properties. On the attitudinal side, to act is to have a commitment to some standard of success, which can be incorporated into the form of a practical argument. This attitude could have been consciously or unconsciously computed by the agent. On the material side, there is a material process causally connected to the agent. On the modal side, certain counterfactuals are true of the agent. These come into view when we consider that an action is an exercise of learnable control and as such has the following two properties:

(i) *Degree of control*: The degree of control can be understood as a ratio of successes over attempts within a set of parameters. In other words, attributing an action (e.g. B-ing) to an agent we judge that in a number of counterfactual scenarios she will take (potentially corrective) measures to successfully accomplish B.

(ii) Learnability: The degree of control must be improvable through a category of actions called learning. I distinguish between two main kinds of learning, the potential for which is necessary for control: first, brute-force, trial and error, learning through repetition (a human kind of machine-learning); and second, learning by means of symbolic representation.

This view can accommodate unconscious actions, such as the self-deception case, described above. Self-deception is something that human beings can learn to get better at. For the most part this skill is acquired in a non-symbolically mediated way, but rather through brute-force trial and error, as well as by osmosis. This view also explains why "blowing the dice double-six-wards" is not a proper action. Throwing a six is not an action, since you cannot increase your control over throwing a six above 16.7%. It can however be understood as a pseudo-action.

The model of action as learnable control is something that I think is implicit in common competent talk about action, though it has not so far been made explicit as a theory. In my view the *Consciousness* model is a useful idealization, which works well enough most of the time and may even be practically indispensable in certain contexts. Action interpretation, especially when it involves suspicious analysis requires time, effort, emotional resources etc. It may simply be unconducive for a variety of purposes. Nevertheless, the *Consciousness* model is severely limited. The model of action as learnable control helps make explicit the *non-accidental* nature of human action and can facilitate more intelligent discourse about a greater variety of actions.