



# Learnable Control



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# What is human action?

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Central question: What is human action?/What is the genus of human action?

An answer might point to **paradigm examples** and/or provide a **definition**, such as a list of necessary and sufficient conditions (or something approaching such a list)



# What are the stakes?

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Categorization has normative implications.

“The philosophical stakes are in fact quite high, and they have to do with the view, shared by (...) many (...) that we are only (directly) morally responsible for our actions.” (Arpaly, *Unprincipled Virtue*)

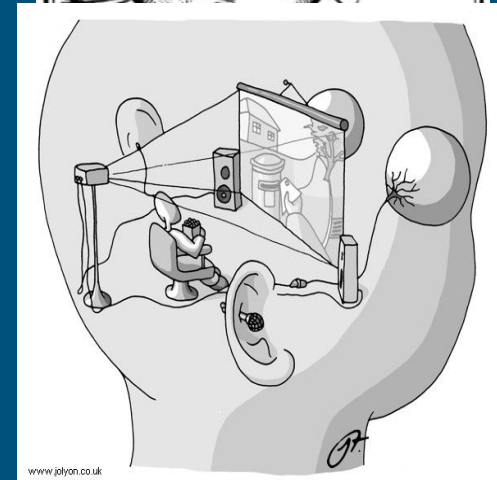
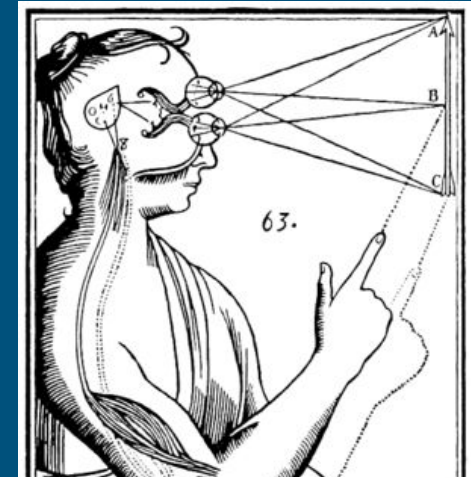
# Presentation plan

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1. Present one dominant way of answering the question: the *Consciousness* view
2. Provide reasons for rejecting the view
3. Sketch an alternative: Action as learnable control

# The *Consciousness* view

- **Intentional actions** are the **paradigmatic species** of human action
- **Intentional actions** are **deliberate, conscious actions**. These are understood as **material processes** to which the special sense of G.E.M. Anscombe's famous question 'Why?' has application.
- The relevant response to the question 'Why?' has the form "I am A-ing in order to B", in other words it rationalizes the action as something the agent has an instrumental (and or a per se) pro-attitude towards and believes to be a means to a further end.



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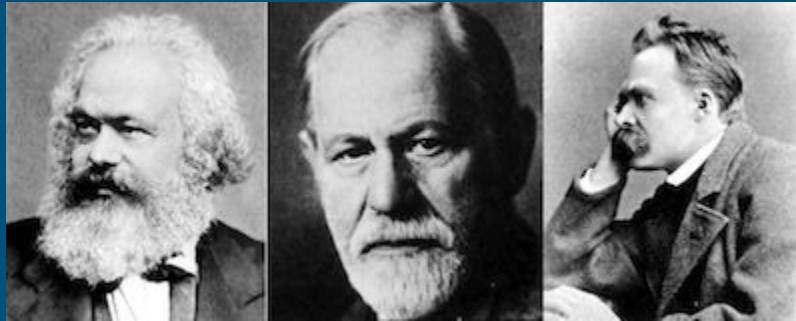
“...what makes (...) the action, the agent’s (...) is his acknowledgment of it as such. (...) The agent’s endorsement of such practical reasoning **may have been explicitly attached to its actual rehearsal as part of an antecedent process of deliberation** leading up to the performance, or it may be **implicit in a disposition to trot it out when challenged** to give reasons for the performance.” (Brandom, Spirit of Trust)

“The chess master’s absorption does not prevent him from knowing what he is doing in an instance of the **self-knowledge that characterizes an agent** (...) he has that self-knowledge, even if it goes unexpressed and even if he does not explicitly think of its content (...) **he can say straight off, without any need for reflection or investigation, what he is doing...**”  
(McDowell, 2013)

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*Consciousness* rules out as non-actions: bodily processes like digestion, tics, reflex kicks etc.

But it also rules out much more than that.



# Consciousness not necessary: “Freudian actions”

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Example : “Suppose that I am convinced that I ought to be a lawyer, but only because I was pressured into it by my parents. As I go through law school, I truly believe that I am suited to this kind of work. I do not respond to the clues that indicate otherwise: the fact that I spend much less time working than my peers; that I often feel tired and lethargic; that I never get very good grades. I would never act on these reasons, as grounds on which to quit. Still I might decide to quit, and be moved to do so, unconsciously, by beliefs that correspond to these facts—finding my own decision both capricious and hard to explain.” (Setiya, Reasons and Rationalism)



**Pseudo-x:** X lacks essential features of its kind, can be understood only by reference to the paradigm case as a deficient version. (“Privative species” Ford, “Action and Generality”)



# Freudian actions as pseudo-actions

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**“We must not be misled, in such a case, by the use of “reason” to mean no more than “cause.”** We can speak of the fact that I wasn’t suited to being a lawyer as the reason why I left law school, just as we speak of the fact that the wind was strong as the reason why the bridge collapsed. **In neither case is the reason acted on by the “agent” involved; it is simply an efficient cause.”** (Setiya, 2007)

“Mere activity is (...) a **partial and imperfect exercise** of the subject’s capacity to make things happen: **in one sense, the subject makes the activity happen; in another, it is made to happen despite him**, or at least without his concurrence.” (Velleman, 2000)

# Explanatory value

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Canny actions: actions that we can only perform or that we can only perform well if we lack awareness of them

Two examples:

- 1) The teleological paradox of esteem (Pettit and Brennan, *Economy of Esteem*, 2004)
- 2) Motivated forgetfulness (Mark Johnston, "Self-Deception and the Nature of the Mind, 1988)

→ Understanding these as pseudo-actions is odd; if anything, contemplating these kinds of examples reveals special agential capacities that agents like us have.

# Normalizing alienation

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“... do I necessarily think that I made the decision or that I executed it? Surely, I can believe that the decision, though genuinely motivated by my desires, was thereby **induced in me but not formed by me**; and I can believe that it was genuinely executed in my behavior but **executed (...) without my help. (...) it was my resentment speaking, not I.**” (Velleman, 2000)

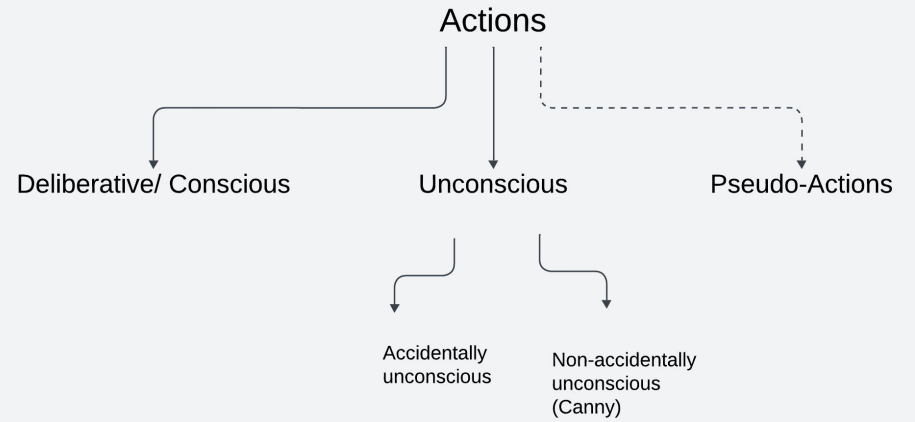
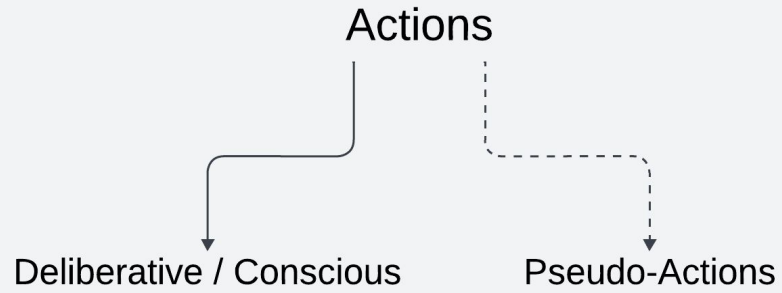
# Consciousness - not sufficient

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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.

Examples: winning the lottery, throwing a double-six





# Learnable Control Action Theory

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Action as a unity of attitudinal, material and modal aspects.

*Material:* When we attribute an action to an agent we identify a material process that is causally connected to the agent.

*Attitudinal:* I largely agree with Anscombe's analysis of the form of the attitude that is attributable to the agent. My suggestion for revisions:

- the attitude can have been consciously or unconsciously computed by the agent.
- alternatively, it could be imputed to the agent by entailment from other action attitudes.

# Imputation

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Belief: If someone states “p” and “if p then q”, we can impute to them the belief that “q”, even if they have not explicitly computed “Therefore q!”

Action: Suppose my conscious mental state is the imperative “raise left arm!”, and there is no such mental state “raise one of the arms”. Still, doing the one counts as a way of doing the other, and so the attitude to doing the other is imputable

What are the rules of imputation in the case of actions?

However we articulate the rules of imputation a key criterion is that only *actions* can be imputed by entailment from other actions, i.e. only exercises of learnable control.



# Learnable Control Action Theory ctd.

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*Modal:* When we attribute an action to an agent we judge there are certain modal statements that are true of the agent. We can distinguish between three relevant kinds of modal statements. These help make explicit what is meant by thinking of an action as an exercise of learnable control.

- (i) Prediction
- (ii) Degree of control
- (iii)

Learnability

# Two kinds of learning

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**L1 learning:** brute force learning through repetition; machine-learning.

**L2 learning:** learning through symbolic representation.

# Application

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Throwing a double-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.

Unconscious actions, such as the motivated forgetfulness case or the unconscious pursuit of esteem, described above. Both are something that human beings can learn to get better at. For the most part this skill is likely acquired in a non-symbolically mediated way, but rather through brute-force trial and error, as well as by osmosis.

# Consciousness model as a useful idealization

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Useful idealization (Vaihinger, *The Philosophy of 'As if'*): An idealization is a conception which we know to be false, either because it involves an internal contradiction (e.g. the square root of a negative number) or because it contradicts or deviates from reality as given (e.g. Adam Smith's assumption that people are rational egoists), but which it is useful to treat as if it is true within specified contexts.

- *Consciousness* is a *useful idealization*, which works well enough a lot of the time. Actions are cognitive processes, which is to say inter alia that actions are essentially *representable*.
- *Consciousness* may be practically indispensable in certain contexts.

