

Actions as Basic

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What happens when I act?

Agent claim: I must exist when I act: there are no ‘unowned actions’.

Change claim: I change things when I act.

Self-change claim: I change when I act.

Active claim: I am the *agent* of the change *whenever I act*.

(What am I? I will assume that I am this human animal. So, this human animal changes when I act.)

Why *self*-change?

I change things when I act

I can only change the *non-me world*, by changing.

So, whenever I act, I change.

Since I am this animal, this animal changes when I act.

N.B. In self-changing I do not stand to myself as I stand to the non-me objects I move “I do not move myself, I myself move.”
(Evans)

But not all changes to this animal are actions

At least three kinds of ‘animal movement’:

- (i) Active self-change: My arm moves up by *my moving it*.
- (ii) Passive self-change: My arm moves up due to a muscle spasm.
- (iii) Non-reflexive change to self: My arm is pushed up by an external force.

Are *active* self-changes just animal movements (reflexive or not) with a particular kind of aetiology, or accompaniment such as: an intention to φ ? a decision to φ , a desire to φ ?
Knowing How to φ ? a trying to φ ?

When I move my arm up, my arm moves up.

What is different in the case in which *I move* from cases in which a movement to the animal I am is brought about?

Two assumptions:

The Identity Assumption: the same ‘external’ thing happens in both cases:

My arm moves up because I move it

My arm moves up because it is blown up/my muscles spasm

The Addition Assumption: The difference is made by the fact that I intend/desire/know how to/try to raise my arm.

A Compositional Model

Action = Intention* PLUS Movement of the animal
PLUS causal (or other relation) between the Intention
and the movement.

A actively φ s iff A intends to φ , $A\varphi$ s, and A satisfies
condition Y w.r.t to $A\varphi$ s

(*More complex psychological conditions may be
offered: Deciding to φ , Desiring to φ , Knowing how to
 φ , Trying to φ , ...)

Circularity Argument against the Compositional Model

Circularity: To know what it is for me to intend to raise my arm *we already need to know what an action is.*

For me to intend to raise my arm is for me to intend the action of raising my arm!

Ditto for desire to, know how to, try to raise my arm.

Insufficiency Argument against the Compositional Model.

Davidson's Climber: Suppose a climber wants to rid himself of the weight and danger of holding another man on rope. Suppose he knows that by loosening his hold he could rid himself of the weight and danger, intends to drop the climber, and tries to do so. But suppose at the moment of trying he becomes so unnerved and shocked by what he is doing that it causes him involuntarily to loosen his hold and drop the other man. Here, he didn't have a choice about loosening his hold, nor did he do it intentionally. You can have all these things going on, but still not have an action.

Maybe we should take actions to be basic?

What are we claiming when we claim basicness?

PPPs (person level psychological phenomenon): desires, beliefs, intentions, perceptions, emotions, suspicions, guesses, judgments, thinkings, deliberatings etc.

- We are denying that actions are a personal level psychological phenomena that are composed of, or analysed in terms of, more basic PPPs, our bodies and their relations.
- We are **NOT** claiming that actions are ultimate basic particulars – it is a relative claim.
- We are **NOT** claiming the actions can be understood independently of other PPPs.
- We are **NOT** claiming that actions are independent of skeletal movements, muscle contractions, neural events, motor commands, chemical and physical facts.

Actions as basic vs Actions as first.

Action as BASIC: Actions are basic psychological phenomena are not to be reduced to, or fully analysed in more basic psychological or personal level terms.

Distinguish from Action as FIRST? Action has a claim to primacy over other practical and psychological phenomena. In particular, action has primacy in explanation over belief, desire, intention.

First positive argument for basicness: Argument from multiple sources.

Prima facie I can φ , where φ -ing is something I actively do, in very, very different ways with different causal histories and different goals.

Suppose I drink a beer.

- I might be drinking from habit,
- I might be drinking from addiction,
- I might be drinking out of thirst,
- I might be drinking out of joy, embarrassment, or nerves.
- I might be drinking out a resolve to drink, despite hating beer, so that I confirm to the desires of my host,
- I might be drinking because I have set myself to drink at least one beer a week to atone for sins.

1. My body moves in a certain way when I drink the beer – the prospects of giving an account of exactly what type of cause makes it an action of drinking beer are slim.
2. The salient thing in common between all these different possible beer drinkings is my *action of drinking the beer*.
3. The aetiologies, and aims, of human action seem to be as *various and unpredictable* as the aetiologies of human belief, desire, and intention. We should, therefore, not expect to find a unique kind of aetiology distinctive of those arm risings that are *actions*, in contrast to those that are *mere movements*.

Second positive argument for basicness: Argument from explanatory role.

Ubiquity of appeal to actions in explanations. How come you are late? I went to buy milk on the way home. Why are house prices going down – because more people are selling their homes due to personal debt. Where has the dog gone? He ran out the gate an hour ago. Are you hungry? No, I ate. Why haven't you sent my your paper? I was writing a referee's report.

To try to do without appeal to actions but only to appeal to intentions, tryings, and bodily movements, will leave us with an explanatory deficit.

I am *angry* with Elmore for making a V-sign at me in public. My anger is not explained by the fact that he intended to flick a V-sign, that eh tried to do a V-sign, that his body moved in a V-signish way, that there is causal relation between them.

Similarly, Elmore is *ashamed* of what he did: make a V-sign at me.

Without a *serious pressure* to give up appealing to actions in our explanations of our interactions with each other – and replace them with intentions and bodily movements - we should not give up the explanatory power that appealing to actions themselves have.

Does that mean we can say nothing about actions?

“It is what it is and not another thing” Is that all we can say?

We can give *normal*, or *necessary*, conditions on actions.

We can clarify the nature and consequences of those conditions.

We can give an account of the relations between actions and other psychological phenomenon.

We can give normal causes, and consequences of actions.

We can learn about what sorts of physiological occurrences realize them.

But aren't intentions more fundamental than actions?

We need to distinguish the case for:

- prior intentions
- intentions in actions

(i) the task of understanding actions and task of understanding intentions should be kept distinct

(ii) actions *are* prior to intentions-in-action, but only because there are no intentions in action

Action theory without prior intentions

We can, and do, act without having a prior intention.

We can have a prior intention without acting.

Project of understanding intentions as a different project from that of understanding action?

Understanding intentions: what it is appropriate for one to intend insofar as one's aim is to have effective, rational and value sustaining intentions, responses to ones reasons.

Understanding actions: how one relates to oneself in order to be able to act in a way that makes actions BASIC.

What about Intentions-in-action?

The ‘conversion’ argument for intentions-in-actions.

Suppose (A): actions are “doings that amount to actions rather than mere behaviour” (Velleman) in virtue of their relation to intentions.

If (A) is true then we need intentions to do the work of making ‘doings amount to actions’.

-As we saw, prior intentions to act will not be enough in many cases: we often act without prior intention.

-There must be intentions-in-action that make the doings that they cause or guide actions.

Redundancy of intentions-in-actions if actions are basic.

If actions are BASIC then actions are not “doings that amount to actions rather than mere behaviour” in virtue of anything except *being actions*.

So, if actions are BASIC (A) is false.

If (A) is false we do not need intentions-in-action to make doings amount to actions.