

ACTION

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1. By an elementary action I understand the effecting, at will, of a change or a not-change in the physical world.

By an elementary change I mean a succession in time of two contradictorily opposed states in the physical world; by an elementary not-change again that a given state remains, stays on over a succession, stretch, in time.

One can distinguish four different kinds of elementary actions, *viz.* productive, destructive, suppressive (preventive), and sustaining ones.

A productive action effects the coming to be of a state which would otherwise, *i.e.* had it not been for the intervention of an agent, have remained absent, for example a change from $-p$ to p . A destructive action effects the vanishing of a state that would otherwise have remained present, for example a change from p to $-p$. Suppressing a state which would otherwise, *i.e.* had it not been for the intervention of an agent, had come to be, means the effecting of its continued absence. Sustaining a state, finally, means effecting its continued presence.

The four types can be reduced to two, noting that the destruction of a state equals the production of its contradictory (state) and that sustaining a state equals suppressing its contradictory.

Instead of saying that action is the effecting of something "at will" I could also have said "intentionally" producing, destroying, preventing or supporting (a state of affairs). Saying that action is, by definition, intentional does not imply, however, that there is an intention "behind" every action. "Intentional" often means the same as "not unintentional" or "not by mistake". Intentional action is, in normal cases, action done for a *reason*. (On the possibility of so called "gratuitous" action, see later, Sect. 7.)

1. An action has two aspects: an outer or performative one and an inner or intentional one.

The outer aspect of an elementary action is an elementary change or not-change *or* it is a sequence of elementary changes and not-changes. The terminal state in its outer aspect is the *result* of the action.

The result tells us *what* the agent did; the entire outer aspect tells us *how* he did it.

By the inner aspect of an action I understand the intentionality of the change(s) or not-change(s) which constitute its outer aspect.

Two examples:

Example 1. The agent is seated in a chair, raises from his seated position, advances towards the closed door of the room, grabs the handle and pushes (or pulls) the door open. The sequence of bodily changes described is the outer or performative aspect of an action of opening a door. Each member in the sequence (link in the chain) is itself the outer aspect of a (possible) intentional action. The terminal state of the last link is the result of the action of door-opening.

Example 2. The agent rushes down the stairs to the cellar, turns the key of a door, reaches out for a bottle of wine, shuts the door, and ascends the stairs with the bottle in his hand. The description is of the outer aspect of the action of fetching a bottle of wine from the cellar.

The inner aspect of the two actions is the intentionality of those links in the two chains of elementary changes of which it is true that the agent effected them *in order to* open the door or to fetch a bottle of wine from the cellar respectively.

The outer aspect of an action is physical, a sequence of changes in the physical world; the inner aspect is something mental. That the inner aspect is mental does not mean that it is what we ordinarily call a "mental state" or "mental process".

The chain of changes and/or not-changes, the intentionality of which constitutes the inner aspect of a certain action, need not be temporally continuous. If I now do something which I yesterday intended to do today, the action need not have lasted the whole time from yesterday to today. The chain of intermediate links comprises only such changes and not-changes which were effected *in order to* produce or safeguard the result of the action.

1. The outer aspect of an action can be causally related to changes (and not-changes) inside or outside the body of the agent which "have nothing to do" with the action itself. "Causally related" then means being a sufficient or necessary condition of those changes. To have "nothing to do" with the action again means that the changes do not belong themselves to its outer aspect. I shall call such changes *side-effects* of the action in question.

Although not themselves belonging to the outer aspect of an action, side-effects are nevertheless often said to be something the agent *did* in doing the action. This is so particularly in cases when the side-effect is something of which we disapprove or which we find disagreeable. We say, perhaps, "look what you have done". If the agent replies that what happened was not intended, perhaps because he did not know that what he did would have this effect we may yet reproach him and say that he *ought to have known* or at least ought to have considered more carefully what might have followed from his action.

For example: Perhaps I opened a window in order better to hear the birds sing — that this was the intended end of what I did. As a consequence, let us assume, the temperature in the room sank and as a further consequence someone in the room caught a cold. Then we may regard what happened as something *I had done* and blame me for my "thoughtlessness". I should have known that this might happen.

How one judges not-intended consequences of an action depends on epistemic and moral considerations which lay "beyond" its outer aspect. Such judgments are extraneous to the action and will not be considered by us here.

1. The outer aspect of an action may also have *causal antecedents* consisting of changes and not-changes in the world. Such antecedents can be either intended or unintended.

For example: The bodily movements (of the agent's arms and hands) which effect the opening of a window are caused by efferent nervous signals from a motor centre in the brain to the muscles. These efferent signals may in their turn have been caused ("released") by signals from sense-organs to the brain. These again may be caused by external stimulation of the sense-organs having its source in some event in the material world outside the body of the agent. The chain of effects and their antecedent causes may go far back in the causal nexus of

events — perhaps even to the "beginning of the world", if that idea can be given an intelligible meaning. Of the remoter links in the chain and of how to initiate those links through action the agent himself may have no or next to no idea.

Some links in such a chain may have effects on the body and on bodily movements of the agent which are independent of the intended end of his action. For example jerks or "involuntary" cries in response to an unexpected sound or sight. If such bodily events do not belong to the external aspect of any action of the agent, we regard them as "reflexes" of some sort. But their occurrence may also "instigate" changes in the agent's course of action, or they may lead to new actions (or abstentions). They then become links in the external aspect of these new actions.

1. The successive links in the causal chain anteceding the outer aspect of an action are *not* remote causes of the action itself. They do not answer the question *why* the agent did what he did. (It will be remembered that the outer aspect tells us *how* the agent did what in fact he did (accomplished), and the end of the action *what* he did.) One cannot answer the question, why I opened the window by saying that I did this because some efferent signals from the brain happened to make my muscles contract and relax.

The ground which an agent gives for what he did is often called a cause of the action. There is no harm with this locution as long as we keep clear the conceptual distinction between the changes and not-changes constituting the outer aspect of the agent's action and the intentionality which is its internal aspect.

1. Consider next some typical answers to the Why?-question for actions.

Example one: "Why did you open the window?". "In order better to hear the singing birds". Here it is tacitly understood that opening the window is a means to hearing better the sounds outside. This is a well-known fact which need not be explicitly added to the answer. "But why did you want to hear the birds sing?". "Because I like their song, think it beautiful". "Why?". I may but need not be able to say anything which explains my liking. The play of questions and answers may end here.

Example two: "Why did you rush down to the cellar to fetch a bottle of wine?". "There will be visitors coming for dinner". It is now taken for granted that my interlocutor is familiar with the habit of entertaining visitors with wine at the table. The why?-questions could stop here. But my conversation partner may also be inquisitive and continue: "Why do you expect visitors?". "Because I have invited them". "Why?". "Because they had invited me earlier and it is an act of courtesy to invite them back". "Why?". "How can I know how this custom originated; it just *is so*".

Answering the why?-questions is to give reasons, grounds or motives for an action (or chain of actions). One can draw distinctions between the three concepts mentioned. The term "motive", for instance, is best suited in contexts when the answer to the why?-question is "In order to - - -". For example, hear the birds sing. When the answer is "I am expecting - - -" say visitors, one would rather speak about a reason or ground. In all the cases the answers place the action in a wider context of the agent's likings, undertakings, obligations, habits and wants. The context is assumed to be, if not familiar, at least understandable (intelligible) to the questioner.

1. It sometimes happens that the agent's answer to the why?-question is "for no particular reason" or "I don't know, I just did it". If instead of "I just did it" the agent had answered "it just happened" this means that his bodily movements were not the external aspect of any action but were, as we say, "automatic", "mechanical", "a reflex". The why?-question may still have an answer — but this answer does not give us the *reason* for an action, but the *cause* of a bodily happening. What "looked like" an action was not an action.

But is not the answer "for no particular reason" compatible also with the possibility that what "looked like" an action *was* in fact an action? Can actions be, as we say, "fortuitous" or "gratuitous", done for no reason? This is an intriguing question which has puzzled psychologists and writers of fiction (André Gide). I am not sure about the answer.

The bodily movements performed by an agent can be the external aspect of some action which the agent is able to perform intentionally, for some reason. Now the agent goes through the movements and if we are curious to know why, he may say that he did this just in order to

test or to show that he still mastered them. He had no other reason for what he did. Making some bodily movements was intentional and an action. Was his action fortuitous? I think not.

Suppose, however, that he goes through the same movements but has himself no idea why he did so. Assume he said he felt an irresistible desire to perform the movement, but for no reason. Or he says that he tried to control himself and not perform the movements. In these cases we are inclined to say that his acting was gratuitous.

Would action which is gratuitous in the sense that the agent performs some bodily movements without any ulterior reason, mean that the agent thereby vindicates his *freedom* since his action is not now *determined* by any reason for doing it? To call such action "free" would not agree with normal talk about free action. In order to be free the agent must be able to *account for what he did*, be held *responsible* for it. If the agent cannot say why he did what he did he cannot be held responsible for it either. But we may admonish or reproach him and tell him to restrain or control his body so that he does not let himself be a victim of what happens to him.

1. Another aspect of freedom is the idea that there is or was an *alternative* to what was done. The agent acted freely if we (or he himself) can say truly in retrospect that he "could have acted differently". This locution has two meanings. It can mean that the agent could have abstained from doing what he did, have omitted doing it. Or it means that he could have done something else instead. The first meaning bears directly on the problem of freedom. It means that the being was not constrained or necessitated to act as he did.

When saying that an agent could have acted differently on some occasion when there was an opportunity of doing and omitting what he did (omitted), we do not mean that *on the same occasion* he could *also* have omitted (done) what in fact he did (omitted). Once he acted, the possibility of omission is no longer there and the action (or omission) is in a sense "necessary". This, I think, is what Aristotle had in mind when he said that "that which is, when it is, is necessary."

On some occasions in the past when there was an opportunity for doing a certain action the agent did it, and on some other occasions he omitted doing it. When challenged, why this alternation, the agent may be able to account for it, giving reasons why he sometimes did and

sometimes omitted the action. Acting differently, depending on some differences in the reasons shows that the agent took the differences into account and acted accordingly. Under such circumstances we call his action "free".

It happens that an agent regularly when there is an opportunity for doing an action, does it independently of whether he has reasons for doing it or not. Then he is not free to do or omit but acts under (psychological) constraint. Such cases we sometimes regard as "pathological". Kleptomania would be an example. In other cases we would simply talk of a "bad habit" or even of a sort of reflex action.

Similarly, there are familiar cases when a person regularly omits doing something when there is an opportunity and he has a reason for doing it. He cannot, as we say, force himself to do it, for example to overcome a strong aversion. Then he is not "free".

An aversion may also be a *reason* for not acting. If so, we would say that the agent was free to do what he omitted doing. But beyond a certain point the agent simply is constrained to abstention by his aversion. Then he is no longer "free".

9. The criteria for judging that a certain change or not-change was produced intentionally or "at will" are behavioural. They include the agent's verbal account of the "meaning" or "aim" of the links in the chain constituting the outer aspect of an action and of which the agent says he did them *in order to* effect the terminal link. The chain "was aiming" at or was "directed" towards the end-state.

Opportunities for action either arise independently of the agent or are created by the agent himself. For example, by opening a window the agent creates a possibility for closing it. Similarly, an agent can also actively create reasons for himself (or for some other agent) to do something. For example, by promising something he creates a reason for himself for doing this thing which reason would perhaps not be there had he not given the promise.

I get up from the chair in order to open the door. A series of bodily movements follows. Each one of them is performed *for the sake* of opening the door. The series terminates in that the door opens — a physical but not a bodily movement. Or the last movement is that the agent pulls or pushes the door but the door does not open. He was then *trying* to open the door. Question: "Why did you open (try to open) the door?". Here the answer must go outside the

opening-situation. "I wanted to - - -" or "I had been ordered to - - -" or "It is my duty to - - -" or "Somebody was knocking". These answers give reasons for my action. "I intended to open" would not be a reason. If given as the reason for my action, the question would immediately arise "Why did you intend it?" And this is but another form of "Why did you do it?"

Reasons are not "purely physical" although they may have a physical aspect or basis. Want, duty, command are not physical phenomena. A knock, for example, is a sound and as such something physical. But what may make it a reason for action is that it has a *meaning* which must be understood by the agent. And the same holds true of traffic-lights. Their "action-producing" power is no natural necessity.

10. The muscular contractions and relaxations which result in what I have called the outer or performative aspect of an action are *caused* by efferent signals from the brain to the spinal cord and from there to the muscles. (Cf. above Sect. 4.) The inner or intentional aspect of the action are the *reasons* which make the action understandable. This duality: causes-reasons constitutes a problem. Since the signals from the brain do not *cause the reasons* and the reasons do not *cause the brain impulses*, how is it that, when we act for reasons, our body goes through the movements which constitute the performative aspect of that very action? Conversely, how is it that, when the movements occur, the agent performs a "corresponding" intentional action?

This "congruence" between reasons and causes may seem problematic, indeed something of a "mystery". It is the merit of Frederick Stoutland to have appreciated its importance to the philosophy of action. I shall here deal with it in my own way, trying to "demystify" the maintained "congruence" between bodily movements and reasons for action.

Consider the following three items:

1. A sequence of movements of an potential agent's arms and hands, constituting the outer or performatory aspect of an action of opening a window.
2. The causes of these movements in signals from the brain to the muscles, effecting the change in *nature* which consists in that the window opens.
3. Some reason which the agent may have for intentionally effecting this change in nature, *i.e.* for performing the *action* of opening the window. The reason could be, for example,

that the agent wants to hear the birds sing in the garden. It is presupposed that the agent *knows* that opening the window will increase the audibility of sounds from outside and also that he *can*, knows how to open the window. This knowledge *cum* ability is something which he has learnt or otherwise acquired in the course of growing up.

Now assume that 1. and 3. both hold true. Since we normally, when acting, have no insight in or awareness of the signals which steer our bodily movements, we think of this as a case when an agent opens a window *in order to* or *because he wanted to* hear the birds sing. The natural event of the window's opening is now the outer aspect of the intentional action of opening a window. There is "congruence" between the mental (intentional) and the bodily (muscular) aspect of the action.

Assume next that 1. is the case but not 3. The subject's arms and hands move in a way which constitutes the performative aspect of an action of window-opening. The window opens — but not as the result of any action. "It just so happened" that the subject's "gesticulation" had this effect. His achievement was "accident", not intended. If we call it action, we would have to say that it was fortuitous. (See Sect. 7.) Depending on circumstances external to the case as we have described it, we would perhaps call his actions compulsory.

Assume, finally, that 3. is the case but that 1. is not. The agent wants to hear the birds sing and has thus a good reason for opening the window. But nothing happens. His body (muscles) "refuse" to obey his "will" (intention). We say perhaps that he cannot conquer an inhibition or overcome an aversion for window-opening which he attributes to some unpleasant or tragic experience in his past.

Such cases as those we just described of compulsory action and forced abstention are familiar and not too uncommon. But they are also in their different ways abnormal cases belonging to what may be called the *psychopathology of action*. They are disturbances in the normal intercourse of people. Therefore we try to eliminate them and reduce their occurrence to a minimum, sometimes by medical treatment but more often by education in an extended sense of the term. With a normal self-controlled subject the two forms of incongruence between muscular activity and intentionality will not occur, or occur only seldom. Congruence will prevail unnotedly. Signals from the brain will steer our muscles and reasons our actions in independent coexistence.

Special mention should be made of the not uncommon case when the agent has a reason for an action which he can do but is temporarily prevented from doing, not because of inhibition but because of external disturbance or interference. The agent is intent on opening the window to hear the birds sing, but someone grabs his arm and keeps it immobile thus preventing him from carrying his intention into effect. Or the agent must postpone acting because of something which happens to him, for example an accident or simply "lack of time". — Such cases are not "abnormal" in the sense that they were "pathological". But they may be annoying or disturbing and we often take measures or precautions to safeguard ourselves against their occurrence.

Another example — well known from the practice of driving a car — is the following:

1. A movement of the driver's leg constituting the outer or performative aspect of the action of breaking and thus stopping a moving car.
2. Efferent signals from the driver's brain to his muscles effecting the event in nature that the car stops moving.
3. A reason which the driver might have for intentionally producing this event. A typical reason would be a traffic light turning red in front of the car. It is then presupposed, not only that the driver *knows* how to break, but also that he *understands* the meaning of traffic-lights. A person from a society with different rules may not understand the signals and remain completely "unmoved" by its appearance.

Now consider again the case when both 1. and 3. prevail. The driver's leg and foot move in a way which constitutes the outer aspect of an action of breaking. These movements are caused by signals from the brain to the driver's muscles. At the same time the driver notices the traffic light turning red and steps on the breaking pedal in order to stop the car (or reduce its speed). The signals caused the muscular activity steering the driver's leg and foot. But they do not cause the driver's intention to stop the car. The red light gave him a reason for stopping but the reason did not cause the signals from the brain. The simultaneous existence of 1. and 3. *ipso facto* means "congruence". One can ask: Why should the appearance of the red light be a reason for stopping? The answer is obvious: Failing to stop may be disastrous. The ultimate reason for breaking, therefore, is that one is anxious to avoid disaster.

Consider next that two cases of incongruence, 1. without 3. and 3. without 1.

The case 1. without 3. happens when the agent, without any reason presses the break, inadvertently, by mistake or under an "irresistible" compulsion. The case 3. without 1. again happens when the subject has every reason for breaking, but the signals from his brain which would move his leg fail to materialize either because the driver is suddenly lamed or psychologically inhibited and thus constrained to passivity.

Both cases are clearly pathological and because they constitute a serious safety-risk for the driver and his passengers, if there are any, they are also highly undesirable and should, if possible, be forestalled or avoided.

Other cases of incongruence are when the agent is under alien compulsion forced to break or prevented from breaking. These cases are exceptional and various safety-devices may be considered to prevent them altogether from occurring.

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I hope I have succeeded to demystify what Stoutland called the "congruence" between the reasons for an action and the bodily movements which constitute its performatory aspect. My approach has been from the point of view of *incongruence*, of which I have tried to show that it is an abnormality due either to some malfunctioning or mental disorder in the agent's actionist life *or* to an exceptional interference from outside with his doing. Such abnormalities are the exception and not the rule and therefore congruence of our bodily movements and reasons for action is a *factual* (and not conceptual) characteristic of human action.