

Actions and Causes

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Given the difficulties of various head-on approaches to the mind-body problem, some philosophers have opted for a more round-about approach through action theory, which deals with the nature of and explanations for the purposive behavior of agents (Mele 1997, 1). The general hope seems to be that a richer understanding of the relationship between psychology and action will shed light on the relationship between psychology and biology. But what sort of theory of action, we might ask, will illuminate the issues rather than further confuse them?

Action Theory

Speaking generally, action theory is concerned with actions only in the technical sense of the purposive behavior of agents, such as a dog leaping over a fence or a person scratching his ear. As such, one of the central tasks of action theory is to “explicate the contrast between what an agent does and what merely happens to him” (Frankfurt 1988, 69). So we might ask: If the outward movements are identical, how is being knocked over by a strong gust of wind different from deliberately acting out the fall later for friends? How is my wiggling my finger different from a neurologist wiggling my finger by stimulating my motor cortex in just the right way during brain surgery? What, in other words, are the essential differences between actions generated by the self (whether self-consciously or not) and those imposed upon the self (whether from within or without)? Answers to such questions should fulfill the two basic tasks of action theory, namely developing a definition of action and determining the best explanations for actions (Mele 1997, 1).

In contemporary philosophy, theories of action are generally classified as either causalist or noncausalist. Causalism defines and explains actions through the causal antecedents of the movement, such as reasons, desires, intentions, and other mental states. In contrast, noncausalism appeals to aspects of the internal structure of the movements themselves, such as the agent’s guidance of or control over the movement. Although causalism and noncausalism are generally regarded as mutually exclusive, the distinctions separating them are often somewhat fuzzy.

In “The Problem of Action,” Harry Frankfurt broadly critiques causalist theories of action for their inability to differentiate actions from nonactions when the agent becomes disconnected from the movement. He instead argues that the agent’s ongoing guidance of the movement (or capacity to guide the movement) is central to action. Although many of Frankfurt’s arguments are compelling, some aspects of his own theory of action, particularly his concept of passive action, are problematic. Additionally, his views are not necessarily as contrary to causalism as he argues they are.

Causalism and Its Discontents

Looking more closely at causalism for a moment, we find that causalist theories differentiate and explain actions through antecedent mental causes extrinsic to the movement, such as beliefs, desires, and intentions (Mele 1997, 3). The presence or absence of the requisite mental cause determines whether the movement is or is not an action. So under a Davidsonian

model of causes as belief-desire pairs, the swinging of my leg would be an action if caused by my desire to kick the dog and my belief that swinging my leg would accomplish this task. But if an identical movement was instead the result of a doctor testing my patella reflex, then the movement would not be an action in this technical sense.

Such causalist accounts of action certainly seem plausible at first glance. The appeal to internal mental causes seems to capture the basic difference between acts we do ourselves and those done to us. Additionally, causalism is consistent with the time-tested ways people use to explain their own and others' actions, i.e. prior mental states.

However, Frankfurt's critique of causalism in "The Problem of Action" offers strong reasons to doubt the initial plausibility of the causalist understanding of action. Frankfurt begins his analysis of the inadequacy of causalism by noting that causalist theories "imply that actions and mere happenings do not differ essentially in themselves" (Frankfurt 1988, 69). If they did, after all, we could simply use those intrinsic differences to distinguish actions from nonactions (Frankfurt 1988, 70). Consequently, the causalist must suppose that

a person who knows he is in the midst of performing an action cannot have derived this knowledge from any awareness of what is currently happening, but that he must have derived it instead from his understanding of how what is happening was caused to happen by certain earlier conditions (Frankfurt 1988, 69-70).

Such an epistemology of action is quite strange. Many habitual actions (such as scratching an itch or readjusting our glasses) are only noticed in the middle of or after their performance—if at all. But we do not recognize such movements as actions by recollecting earlier beliefs, desires, and intentions, as causalism would seem to require. Rather, we immediately recognize them as "ours" in some way. And of course, any causalist reply that we *must* have the appropriate mental causal antecedents—even if we cannot recollect them—would be ad hoc.

The causalist commitment to the inherent indistinguishability of actions and nonactions becomes even more problematic when combined with the standard causalist commitment to antecedent-only mental causes. In particular, a class of counter-examples seems to emerge in which causalism wrongly classifies mere bodily movements as actions due to the presence of the requisite antecedent mental causes. So for example, my desire to kick the dog might be so overwhelming that my whole body twitches in such a way that my leg kicks the dog, although the movement was not under my control. In such counter-examples, the basic problem is that the same belief-desire pair that explains the mere bodily movement also would explain a genuine action—and thus the belief-desire pair cannot be used to distinguish between the two. These counter-examples, Frankfurt argues, cannot be resolved through minor modifications to causalism:

No matter what kinds of causal antecedents are designed as necessary and sufficient conditions for the occurrence of an action, it is easy to show that causal antecedents of that kind may have as their effect an event that is manifestly not an action but a mere bodily movement (Frankfurt 1988, 70).

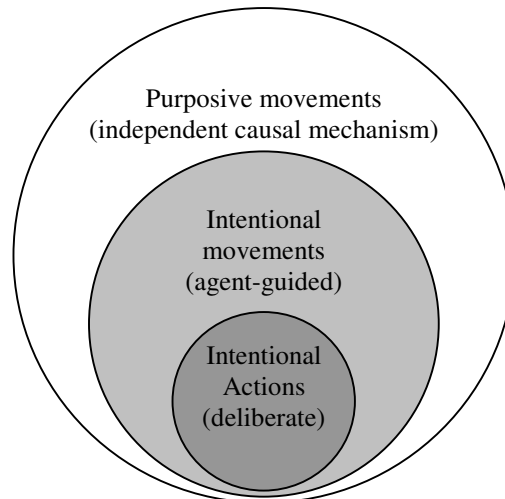
In other words, the devil is not in the details, but rather in the overall theory itself. The general principle at work here is that causalism cannot adequately distinguish actions from nonactions in cases where "a person, whatever his involvement in the events from which his action arises, loses all connection with the movements of his body at the moment when his action begins" (Frankfurt 1988, 71).

Action as Guidance

Frankfurt's alternative to causalism, like all noncausalist theories, defines and explains action in terms of the intrinsic, ongoing structure of the agent's movement. In particular, Frankfurt argues that "whether or not the movements as they occur are *under the person's*

guidance” is what enables us to distinguish actions from mere happenings (Frankfurt 1988, 72). This criterion of action becomes more clear in light of Frankfurt’s distinctions between three categories of behavior: purposive movements, intentional movements, and intentional actions.

The broadest category of behavior is purposive movements. To be purposive, a behavior’s course must be independently “subject to adjustments which compensate for the effects of forces which would otherwise interfere with the course of the behavior” (Frankfurt 1988, 74). Natural biological processes like digestion, pupil dilation, and sweating are all examples of mere purposive movements. Within the category of purposive movements, we then find some movements for which “the guidance is provided by the agent,” such as scratching an itch or reaching for a glass (Frankfurt 1988, 73). These are intentional movements, a.k.a actions. By further distinguishing the even narrower category of “intentional actions,” i.e. “actions undertaken more or less deliberately or self-consciously,” Frankfurt shows that actions need not be consciously intended (Frankfurt 1988, 73). So thinking “Ah, I’d better sit down now” and then sitting down is an action (an intentional one), but so is merely sitting down without such reflection. Thus Frankfurt offers us the following conceptual scheme of behavior:



Although this conceptual layout accords nicely with some general intuitions, Frankfurt fails to clearly draw the line between purposive and intentional movements for his readers. That boundary largely depends upon a theory of agency—one unfortunately left implicit by Frankfurt in this article. So a basic question remains: Given that we are not consciously monitoring (mere) intentional movements, how can we distinguish them from (mere) purposive movements? Frankfurt’s vague characterization of the phenomenology of agency as “nothing more than the way it feels to us when we are somehow in touch with the operation of mechanisms of this kind, by which our movements are guided and their course guaranteed” is less than illuminating (Frankfurt 1988, 75). However, Frankfurt’s theory of passive action seems to offer us a simple and clear answer to this question. It indicates that the agent must be capable of effectively intervening to direct the course of a movement for it to be considered an action (Frankfurt 1988, 75). So if I am unreflectively tapping my toes in time with the music playing, then that movement is an action if and only if I can change the pattern, slow down, speed up, stop altogether, and otherwise regulate my ongoing movements. So by attempting to bring a movement under conscious control, by attempting to transform it into an intentional action, we can test whether it was ever an action at all. Although this appeal to passive action answers

some questions about the boundary between purposive and intentional movements, the notion of passive action creates far more problems than it solves.

The Problems of Passive Action

After explaining the basics of his theory of action, Frankfurt pauses for a few paragraphs to discuss whether his theory, given that it explains action “in terms of causal mechanisms,” is actually a form of causalism. He offers two arguments to the contrary. First, he notes that the causal mechanisms in his theory are “not prior to but concurrent with the movements they guide” (Frankfurt 1988, 75). However, in the Introduction to *Action Theory*, Alfred Mele disputes Frankfurt’s characterization of causalism as limited to antecedent causation. Instead, Mele notes, “some causalists have argued that the causal role of the mental items on which they focus (intentions, or beliefs and desires) includes a sustaining and guiding function” (Mele 1997, 10). Thus Frankfurt’s first attempt to differentiate his own views from causalism is not particularly compelling.

Frankfurt’s second argument is that, under his theory, “it is not essential to the purposiveness of a movement that it actually be causally affected by the mechanism under whose guidance the movement proceeds” (Frankfurt 1988, 75). This is, in short, Frankfurt’s theory of passive action. He explains such passive action through the example of a coasting driver:

A driver whose automobile is coasting downhill in virtue of gravitational forces alone may be entirely satisfied with its speed and direction, and so he may never intervene to adjust its movement in any way. This would not show that the movement of the automobile did not happen under his guidance. What counts is that he was prepared to intervene as necessary, and that he was in a position to do so more or less effectively (Frankfurt 1988, 75).

Such passive action, Frankfurt notes, is just as possible with “bodily movement” (Frankfurt 1988, 75). The lesson drawn from passive action vis à vis causalism is that behavior is not purposive in virtue of resulting “from causes of a certain kind” but rather “because it would be affected by certain causes if the accomplishment of its course were to be jeopardized” (Frankfurt 1988, 75). So through his conception of passive active, Frankfurt does seem to successfully separate his views from causalism.

Unfortunately however, incorporating this notion of passive action into Frankfurt’s theory of guidance results in the erroneous classification of autonomic functions like breathing, blinking, and swallowing as actions. Most of the time, these movements are not rightfully considered actions (under any theory), given their autonomic regulation through feedback loops in the brain stem. However, as we all know, people can and do consciously initiate and direct these movements on occasion, thereby acting intentionally. The problem for Frankfurt is that our ability to effectively “intervene as necessary” in the autonomic movements forces us to incorrectly classify those autonomic movements as actions, albeit passive ones (Frankfurt 1988, 75). As such, Frankfurt’s appeal to passive action allows us to critique his theory on the same grounds that he critiqued causalism, namely that it wrongly classifies a certain category of mere bodily movements as actions.

Additionally, Frankfurt’s claim (offered without example) that passive action is possible with “bodily movement” is implausible (Frankfurt 1988, 75). Even the fairly passive action of a child rolling down a hill requires that child to compensate for the centrifugal forces by actively tucking in his arms and pressing his legs together. Generally speaking, unless we exercise active, compensatory control over the movement of our bodies, we seem unlikely to be able to effectively intervene—as required by passive action. And if Frankfurt’s concept of passive

action does not apply to bodily movements, the central cases of action theory, then it seems strange to appeal to it in the case of extended actions like coasting downhill in a car.

Bridging the Gap

Given that Frankfurt uses his idea of passive action to distinguish his views from causalism, the incoherence of that idea suggest that his basic theory of guidance may not be so wholly opposed to causalism after all. In fact, by analyzing Frankfurt's theory of action in terms of efficient and final causes, we see that it implicitly appeals to causalist mental states like intentions.

In developing his conception of action, Frankfurt frequently and explicitly stresses the ongoing efficient causation of an agent guiding his movements. His central notion of guidance, however, also implicitly relies upon final causation, in that the agent must be guiding the movement against countervailing forces toward some end. These final causes, interestingly enough, seem to be nothing more than the mental states (e.g. beliefs, desires, and intentions) featured in causalist theories of action. So my action of scratching the dog's belly requires me to not just actively guide and regulate my movements, but to do so towards the goal of scratching created by my intention. So perhaps any theory of action which appeals only to either the final cause (intention) or the efficient cause (guidance) omits half of the story.

This very preliminary analysis suggests that we might be able to bridge the gap between causalism and noncausalism by explaining actions in terms of a unity of final and efficient causes generated and regulated by the agent. Such a theory might well account for the strong intuitions that make both causalist and noncausalist theories of action compelling. As such, it seems like an option worth exploring.

References

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