PHILOSOPHY OF ACTION

AN ANTHOLOGY

EDITED BY JONATHAN DANCY AND CONSTANTINE SANDIS

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Philosophy of Action

An Anthology

Edited by

Jonathan Dancy and Constantine Sandis

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The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

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Fred Dretske and Jonathan Lowe died while this volume was in preparation.
It is dedicated to them.

Preface

Though all the great philosophers since Plato have included accounts of action in their philosophical systems, the philosophy of action only began to be conceived of as a discrete topic in philosophy towards the end of the last century. It is only recently that we have begun to find graduate classes devoted entirely to philosophy of action. The work of Wittgenstein has been seminal in this change, and with that in mind we have placed some especially influential passages from this work in Chapter 1, outside the six parts that follow. With this exception, the material in the volume is divided thematically rather than chronologically (though the various parts have been ordered chronologically where doing so makes sense).

While appreciating that readers often dip into anthologies with very specific purposes, we have grouped the papers we reprint here (all except John McDowell's chapter are already in print) into six parts. These are to some extent artificial, and certainly could have been done differently, but our aim was to offer a structure that might help in the design and development of a course on recent philosophy of action. That structure itself has led to some classic papers failing to find a place; most of them are mentioned in the Further Reading at the end of the introduction to each part.

Each part has an introduction designed to give students an overview of the material it contains that will help them navigate through it. The philosophy of action is a fast-growing field that cuts across a large number of philosophical and scientific discourses. We have tried to give a taste of some of the latest research without

prioritizing this over the work that has made the subject what it is.

A number of acknowledgments are due: many thanks to several anonymous referees for helping us with the selection and organization of the material included here. We also received sage advice on these matters from Maria Alvarez and John Hyman; Erasmus Mayr gave us timely and perceptive feedback on all of our introductions.

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1
Philosophical Investigations §§611–628

Ludwig Wittgenstein
Wittgenstein, L. (2009), *Philosophical Investigations* §§611–628 (omitting 626), 4th edn., ed. P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell).

611. "Willing – wanting – too is merely an experience," one would like to say (the 'will' too only 'idea'). It comes when it comes, and I cannot bring it about.

Not bring it about? – Like *what*? What can I bring about, then? What am I comparing it with when I say this?

612. I wouldn't say of the movement of my arm, for example, that it comes when it comes, and so on. And this is the domain in which it makes sense to say that something doesn't simply happen to us, but that we *do* it. "I don't need to wait for my arm to rise – I can raise it." And here I am making a contrast between the movement of my arm and, say, the fact that the violent thudding of my heart will subside.

613. In the sense in which I can ever bring about anything (such as stomach-ache through overeating), I can also bring about wanting. In this sense, I bring about wanting to swim by jumping into the water. I suppose I was trying to say: I can't want to want; that is, it makes no sense to speak of wanting to want. "Wanting" is not the name of an action, and so not of a voluntary one either. And my use of a wrong expression came from the fact that one is inclined to think of wanting as an immediate non-causal bringing

about. But a misleading analogy lies at the root of this idea; the causal nexus seems to be established by a mechanism connecting two parts of a machine. The connection may be disrupted if the mechanism malfunctions. (One thinks only of the normal ways in which a mechanism goes wrong, not, say, of cog-wheels suddenly going soft, or penetrating each other, and so on.)

614. When I raise my arm 'voluntarily', I don't make use of any means to bring the movement about. My wish is not such a means either.

615. "Willing, if it is not to be a sort of wishing, must be the action itself. It mustn't stop anywhere short of the action." If it is the action, then it is so in the ordinary sense of the word; so it is speaking, writing, walking, lifting a thing, imagining something. But it is also striving, trying, making an effort – to speak, to write, to lift a thing, to imagine something, and so on.

616. When I raise my arm, I have *not* wished it to rise. The voluntary action excludes this wish. It is, however, possible to say: "I hope I shall draw the circle faultlessly." And that is to express a wish that one's hand should move in such-and-such a way.

617. If we cross our fingers in a special way, we are sometimes unable to move a particular finger when someone tells us to do so, if he only *points* to the finger – merely shows it to the eye. However, if he touches it, we *can* move it. One would like to describe this experience as follows: we are unable to *will* to move the finger. The case is quite different from that in which we are not able to move the finger because someone is, say, holding it. One is now inclined to describe the former case by saying: one can't find any point of application for the will until the finger is touched. Only when one feels the finger can the will know where it is to engage. – But this way of putting it

is misleading. One would like to say: “How am I to know where I am to catch hold with the will, if the feeling does not indicate the place?” But then how do I know to what point I am to direct the will when the feeling *is* there?

It is experience that shows that in this case the finger is, as it were, paralysed until we feel a touch on it; it could not have been known a priori.

618. One imagines the willing subject here as something without any mass (without any inertia), as a motor which has no inertia in itself to overcome. And so it is only mover, not moved. That is: one can say “I will, but my body does not obey me” – but not: “My will does not obey me.” (Augustine)

But in the sense in which I can’t fail to will, I can’t try to will either.

619. And one might say: “It is only inasmuch as I can never try to will that I can always will.”

620. *Doing* itself seems not to have any experiential volume. It seems like an extensionless point, the point of a needle. This point seems to be the real agent – and what happens in the realm of appearances merely consequences of this doing. “I *do*” seems to have a definite sense, independently of any experience.

621. But there is one thing we shouldn’t overlook: when ‘I raise my arm’, my arm rises. And now a problem emerges: what is left over if I subtract the fact that my arm rises from the fact that I raise my arm?

((Are the kinaesthetic sensations my willing?))

622. When I raise my arm, I don’t usually *try* to raise it.

623. “I want to get to that house at all costs.” – But if there is no difficulty about it, *can* I strive at all costs to get to the house?

624. In the laboratory, when subjected to an electric current, for example, someone with his eyes shut says “I am moving my arm up and down” – though his arm is not moving. “So”, we say, “he has the special feeling of making that movement.” – Move your arm to and fro with your eyes shut. And now try, while you do so, to talk yourself into the idea that your arm is staying still and that you are only having certain strange feelings in your muscles and joints!

625. “How do you know that you’ve raised your arm?” – “I feel it.” So what you recognize is the feeling? And are you certain that you recognize it right? – You’re certain that you’ve raised your arm; isn’t this the criterion, the measure, of recognizing?

[…]

627. Consider the following description of a voluntary action: “I form the decision to pull the bell at 5 o’clock; and when it strikes 5, my arm makes this movement.” – Is that the correct description, and not *this* one: “… and when it strikes 5, I raise my arm”? — One would like to supplement the first description: “And lo and behold! my arm goes up when it strikes 5.” And this “lo and behold!” is precisely what doesn’t belong here. I do *not* say “Look, my arm is going up!” when I raise it.

628. So one might say: voluntary movement is marked by the absence of surprise. And now I don’t mean you to ask “But *why* isn’t one surprised here?”

Part I
Action and Agency

Introduction to Part I

1.

Although accounts of action have been central to most philosophical systems from Plato to Kant, it is only in recent years (following the writings of Wittgenstein and Anscombe, Chapters 1 and 11) that philosophy of action has come to be seen as a subject in its own right. We begin this volume with enquiries into what we might call the most basic question in this area of study: what is action?

One obvious suggestion is that action is bodily motion. But not all bodily motion is action; when you jog my arm, the motion of my arm is not an action of mine – I haven't moved my arm – and it isn't an action of yours, either. So what is the difference between those bodily motions that are actions and those that are not? The most popular strategy is to adopt a causal theory, whereby the distinction between actions and other forms of behavior lies in their causal origins; a sneeze, for instance, is typically not going to count as an action, because it has the wrong sort of cause. So which causes are of the right sort? Davidson's influential answer to this question identifies the causes of action with (the onset of) beliefs and pro-attitudes (such as desires, preferences, and values) that *rationalize* the action, that is, show how the action that is their effect made sense to the agent, and so can be thought of as the agent's reasons for doing what he did (see Chapter 19). Most sneezes are not actions, because they are not caused by rationalizing beliefs and desires, but by such things as tickles. Davidson saw this account as an improvement on earlier views which identified the causes in question with inner acts of will. His view is a form of event-causalism