

ACTIONS AND THEIR ACTORS

EDITORIAL

To study actions means to thematize that which is most common and hidden; by thematizing it, one discloses its non-obviousness. Every theory of action begins by describing a specific conceptual field, one that is characterized by self-understanding and motivation, within the more general, semantic area having to do with movements, processes, and behaviors.

In ordinary life, we are used to thinking that anything that does not *stand* still, uninfluential, and indifferent *acts* or at least can act. We speak of an *agent* in the case of anything that is capable of causing effects, such as atmospheric or chemical agents.

The work of philosophical conceptualization restricts the field and almost always identifies action with the peculiar happening that originates in the presence of a subject capable of intentions and purposes. In this way, actions and motivations are distinguished from movement and cause; likewise, automatized and mechanical processes, which are non-intentional and non-voluntary, become distinct from intentional and finalized processes, to which accountability also applies. An almost perfect equivalence comes to be in place between philosophy of action, practical philosophy, and ethics. The proliferation of questions around the topic of action occurs with respect to the various ethical approaches. Among the questions that arise are freedom, responsibility, creativity, and relations with the other “kingdom,” that is, the kingdom of necessity, causality, or conditionedness.

Action is also the conceptual core of the historical-social sciences. These sciences have in fact carved their own space of autonomy from the natural sciences on the basis of the distinction between action and movement. This distinction has been and is fundamental in order to ask the major methodological questions that have not ceased to interest those concerned with forms of occurrences that entail or may entail motivations but not mechanical causes. Such forms of occurrences require not simply explanation but also understanding, not only observation but also identification with them.

The contemporary debate on action is driven by the question of agency. This question is explored as “quality of an event that turns the event into an action.” The question proposes anew and with precision the linguistic, phenomenological, ethical, sociological, political, and juridical interrogatives that have traditionally characterized action.

The introduction of the term “agency” in addition to “action” is a way of raising the question whether non-human devices such as machines, computers, robots, and so on may also be capable of acting or, conversely, whether human actions are closer to events than we can initially assume.

The questions of group agency, proxy agency, corporate agency, and in general the question of collective agency, its systemic configuration, its relation and opposition to individual’s actions are also widely debated.

Can we say that a collective entity (a firm or business, a political party, a nation) acts as such? Or is it its members or leaders who act? The question *whether* and *when* action is present goes hand in hand with the question concerning *the subject* of action.

Who acts? The impression that it is systems that act and individuals are “acted upon” by systems has gained widespread support; that is, actions (any longer?) rest neither with individuals nor with mid-size organizations. Do we live, then, in an age that has been robbed of action? Can we properly say that we act when we get on or off the subway, take our children to school, go to work, or travel on the weekend? Or are these actions dependent on the systems that are involved?

If it is systems that act, then it comes as no surprise that individuals’ actions appear as unrealistic. In the specifics, actions are discredited when they aim at overcoming legitimacy boundaries, which now strive to appear as natural as if individuals belonged to hierarchically ordered and non-communicating ranks. Each action stage appears as separated from others of a higher or lower rank. One may act on one’s own stage but not on the stage of others. Everyone should stay in his or her place – this is the Boss’ discourse.

At the same time, the dissemination of information makes anyone capable of forming his or her own opinion and thus (potentially) *acting on different stages from the assigned ones*. What occurs is a growing divide between abilities to act and actions, real and imaginary constitution of one’s own sphere of action. The former shrinks (if not absolutely, at least relatively) whereas the latter expands. Actions become increasingly phantasmatic and merely represented.

The so-called anti-political movements are perhaps born out of the disproportion between ability to act and actions, the increasing separation of the action stages, and an imaginary overcoming of the gap separating them.

The (at least virtual) ability to act on various stages together with the impossibility or ban on doing so generates frustration linked to the lack of recognition. Those who could (or at least would like to) act on a wider stage seem to be forever bound to a more limited stage.

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