

Introduction to *Advances in Experimental Philosophy of Action*

Samuel Murray and Paul Henne

Action theory—or the philosophy of action—aims to explain the difference between a wink and a blink (Juarrero 2002). Blinks are complex movements, involving coordination between different muscle groups. But complex and coordinated movement is insufficient for action; instead, there is some special feature that transforms blinks into winks, movements into actions.¹

Action theorists debate what this feature is—and whether there is just one. Some philosophers speculated about whether causation was the key feature that distinguished movements and actions. Davidson, for instance, argued that actions have a distinctive causal connection to an agent's psychology (Davidson 1963). Specifically, actions are events caused by a desire and a belief about how to satisfy that desire. While blinks happen whether you want them to or not, you wink when you *want* to do it. On this view, your wanting to wink and your belief about how to satisfy that desire jointly caused you to wink, so it is an action. Blinks lack a direct causal connection to your desires and beliefs, so they are mere movements.

In contrast, Anscombe held that agents have a special kind of self-knowledge in acting that they lack in merely moving (Anscombe 1958). When acting, an agent knows what they are doing without making any inferences from observing their own behavior. This self-knowledge allows people to state authoritatively what they are doing when they are acting. For example, you understand better than anybody else whether or not you are winking. When merely moving, however, an agent lacks knowledge about what they are doing unless they make inferences from observing their own behavior. Blinking, for example, can happen without any awareness of that movement at all.

Importantly for Anscombe's view, self-knowledge does not *cause* actions. In contrast to the Davidsonian view, the Anscombean view does not require a causal connection between psychological states and behaviors for those behaviors to count as action. It is not the case that self-awareness of the wink, for example, causes the wink; rather, this self-knowledge simply distinguishes actions from movements—winks from blinks. While the Anscombean account is extensively discussed in recent philosophy of action (Paul 2009) and has been revived recently (Ford 2018; Schwenkler 2019), the causalist view outlined by Davidson remains the predominant view among action theorists working in the Anglo-American analytic tradition.

There are, nonetheless, difficulties for causalism. One major problem is that some counterexamples suggest that the causal relation between mental states and behaviors seems insufficient for action: some events have the right kind of causal connection to an agent's psychology but do not count as actions. For example, consider the following case proposed by Davidson himself:

A climber might want to rid himself of the weight and danger of holding another man on a rope, and he might know that by loosening his hold on the rope he could rid himself of the weight and danger. This belief and want might so unnerve him as to cause him to loosen his hold. (Davidson 1980: 79)

The climber wants to injure his companion and believes the best way to do this is to let the rope slip. Ultimately, this belief as well as desire causes the climber to let the rope slip. In this case, the causal influence of the mental states is indirect—or *deviant*: they cause the climber to be nervous, thereby putting him in a state where he nervously drops the rope. The mental states cause the event (without them, the climber would have held the rope tightly), yet the event—letting the rope slip—is not an action. Many action theorists through the 1970s and 1980s debated and proposed solutions to this *problem of causal deviance* (Bishop 1989; Brand 1984; Davidson 1974; Goldman 1971; Mele 2003b; Peacocke 1979; Schlosser 2007; Thalberg 1984; Velleman 1992).

Many philosophers eventually agreed that instances of causal deviance are not actions because the agent's movements do not unfold according to a plan (Bishop 1989; Brand 1984; Mele 2003a; Thalberg 1984).² When actions unfold according to a plan, the content of the intention guides behavior over time. Accordingly, action theorists amended the causalist proposal to say that actions are events that are initiated and guided by relevant mental states (Adams and Mele 1989; Frankfurt 1978). For the most part, action theorists held that the relevant mental states were intentions, a *sui generis* attitude grounded in, but not reducible to, beliefs and desires (Bratman 1987; Mele 1992). Intentions have special desire-like properties—such as a mind-to-world direction of fit (Humberstone 1992)—that explain their role in initiating action (Bratman 1987). They also have belief-like properties—such as representational content—that guide action over time (Brand 1984). This amendment dove-tailed nicely with a separate line of argument developed in Bratman (1987), which showed that intentions provide a distinctive kind of volitional commitment to acting that cannot be explained merely in terms of an individual's beliefs and desires. On this view, the special feature that transforms mere movement into action is an intention.

This brief overview does not do justice to the complexity and nuance of the philosophy of action. But the story of action theory today is, to a considerable degree, the story of intentions. Today, there are lively debates about the causal properties of intentions, the representational content of intentions, the scope of intentions, and the physical implementation of intentions at the psychological and neural levels. Based on these central concerns, researchers have explored a range of issues. Philosophers have argued about issues of intentional omissions (Sartorio 2009; Shepherd 2014), the nature of agency (Shepherd 2021), the nature of free will (Mele 2017; Sartorio 2016), guidance and acting over time (Buehler 2022; Irving 2016), the individuation of

action (Goldman 1971), animal agency (Steward 2012), practical reasoning and action (Audi 2006), the nature of skill in agency (Cath 2020; Pavese 2021), the possibility and function of partial intentions (Holton 2009), the nature of joint action (Bratman 2013), and much more (Paul 2020). But, despite disagreements over how best to characterize intentions, a significant amount of action theory presumes something like the amended causalist account that takes intentions to be the key feature that distinguishes movements and actions.

Some of the themes of this volume involve discussions about the role of intentions in action. To see this, consider two related issues. First, much of the work on intentions is really a way of thinking about how activities of the mind can endow physical happenings with a special ontological status. Here, we should note familiar questions about mental causation, including questions about the possibility of mental causation within a naturalist worldview (Kim 1990).

But while we can question how intentions interact with the body, we can also question how intentions operate within the broader psychology of agency. People acquire intentions through conscious mental processes like deliberating and deciding, which means that consciousness and higher-order mental processes, broadly construed, cause action—albeit indirectly. This model informs a commonsense picture of agency that assigns a central role to consciousness. We make conscious decisions about what to do and, because of these decisions, act accordingly. However, this commonsense picture seems to clash with the seemingly notable role of unconscious processes and situational factors in decision-making (Doris 2021). Action and higher-order cognition—including consciousness—seem tightly interconnected due to the central role of intentions in producing actions.

Second, some actions are morally significant, and they often serve as the basis for attributions of blame, praise, punishment, and credit. And actions have this moral significance because they bear a special relationship to intentions (Malle, Guglielmo, and Monroe 2014; Scanlon 2010). Recall that intentions mark a special kind of commitment toward acting. People acquire intentions by deliberating and making decisions. And intentions guide behavior over time. Thus, intentions unify the outer world and the inner life of an agent. Intentions reflect what an individual values, wants, and is committed to doing (Hieronymi 2004). For this reason, intentional actions provide distinctive evidence about moral evaluation. For instance, how people evaluate unintentional actions seems to differ from how people evaluate intentional actions (Irving et al. 2020; Malle, Guglielmo, and Monroe 2014; Murray et al. n.d.). Recent metaphors between action and conversation are understandable in this framework: actions, much like words, have *expressive significance* because they are based on what an agent wants and is committed to (McKenna 2012; Tognazzini 2015; Watson 2004). Any study of the expressive significance of actions must situate this significance within the rudiments of intentional psychology.

Any reader of this introduction might now understand that while there is agreement about what studying the nature of action requires, the boundaries of action theory are fuzzy (Paul 2020). There is a wide overlap with different areas of philosophy, including metaphysics, philosophy of mind, ethics, epistemology, and even philosophy of language. The pervasiveness of the philosophy of action reflects, as we have argued

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earlier, the many faces of intention and the questions surrounding their ontological status and moral significance.

In all this, then, one might wonder what the *experimental* approach adds to the philosophy of action. In recent years, experimental philosophers have taken on some issues in the philosophy of action. They have explored intentionality (Buckwalter, Rose, and Turri 2021; Knobe 2003; Nadelhoffer 2004; Uttich and Lombrozo 2010), the relationship between causal judgment and intentionality (Quillien and German 2021), the relationship between knowledge and action (Beebe and Buckwalter 2010), the nature of skill in agency (Bermúdez 2021; Carter, Pritchard, and Shepherd 2019; Nadelhoffer 2005), the nature of joint action (Gomez-Lavin and Rachar 2019), free will (May 2014; Nahmias et al. 2005; Nichols 2011; Nichols and Knobe 2007; Roskies 2006), responsible agency (Murray et al. 2019), attributions of obligations and ability (Henne et al. 2016; Semler and Henne 2019), causation by omission (Clarke et al. 2015; Henne, Pinillos, and De Brigard 2017, 2019; Willemsen 2018; Willemsen and Reuter 2016), and much more (Nadelhoffer 2011). There are, to be sure, general benefits of embedding experimental methodologies in any philosophical sub-field. Experimentation can play an important role in diagnosing the referents of theoretical terms such as “cause” or “know” (Vargas 2017). But experimental methods can also diagnose idiosyncratic or parochial reactions to intuition pumps, which play indispensable roles in philosophical theorizing (Machery 2017; Rose et al. 2019). Unchecked, we risk spinning out theories of phenomena that make no contact with people’s ordinary experiences and psychological categories (Dennett 2006).

Beyond these general benefits, however, we think the experimental approach is distinctively useful for advancing our understanding of action. Conceptions of action and intention play a role in moral judgment and decision-making. As the chapters in this volume indicate, peculiar features of our moral reasoning can be understood better when we see how people reason about action. Moreover, people are familiar with key concepts in the philosophy of action. Unlike technical concepts in metaphysics or epistemology, action-theoretic categories organize domains of everyday experience. Thus, while there is some question as to whether there is a folk notion of metaphysical composition, our practical need for thinking about action suggests that there are real psychological categories to explore here.

This volume includes some empirical approaches to the philosophy of action that are not strictly *experimental*. That is, some chapters neither report new empirical results nor systematize different experimental results into an overarching framework. We include these perspectives in part because we think that research in action theory could benefit from greater sensitivity to advances in the cognitive and social sciences. While a significant amount of work has been dedicated to the psychology and neuroscience of free will and moral responsibility, considerably less has examined other issues in action theory. We hope that, by including discussions of overarching empirical frameworks, philosophers and cognitive scientists can begin to widen their approach to action beyond the domain of free will and moral responsibility to assess different dimensions of action experimentally.

As such, this volume includes articles from authors who are advancing the issues in the philosophy of action by using experimental methods or by relying on empirical

findings to inform the philosophy of action. These chapters advance both the areas of the philosophy of action that have been explored in the literature and the methods that experimental philosophers of action have used previously. We hope that this volume encourages young philosophers to explore further applications of experimental methods to core issues in the philosophy of action.

In Chapter 1, Sytsma and Snater investigate the relationship between phenomenal consciousness, agency, and free will. Some work found that people employ a concept of phenomenal consciousness when attributing mental states (Knobe and Prinz 2008), and some philosophers argue that consciousness is required for free will attributions (Shepherd 2015). Sytsma's earlier work, however, suggests that nonphilosophers do not employ a concept of phenomenal consciousness when making judgments about mental states (Sytsma and Machery 2010). Noting the importance of these findings for the philosophy of action and free will, Sytsma and Snater ran a new study. In this exploratory study using hierarchical cluster analysis, Sytsma and Snater find that people's concept of free will is more related to their concept of non-phenomenal consciousness than to states traditionally assumed to involve phenomenal consciousness. Beyond these interesting results, this chapter makes a compelling case for using qualitative methods to study the structure of different action-theoretic concepts (Chartrand 2022).

In Chapter 2, Mylopoulos discusses what kind of control is necessary for skilled action. After reviewing the work in epistemology and cognitive science on skill and know-how, she argues for a form of cognitivism about skill, under which cognitive control is necessary for skilled action. Uniquely, she argues that cognitivist views are incomplete without metacognition. She then describes how metacognition plays a role in the phenomenology of skilled action. Mylopoulos's chapter not only provides a unique, empirically oriented philosophical argument about skilled action but also expands the domain of what experimental philosophers of action who are interested in skill ought to attend to in their work.

In Chapter 3, Murray argues against the view that the function of self-control is to resist impulses or temptation. Drawing on recent computational and neurobiological work on cognitive control, Murray claims that the function of self-control is to manage interference that arises from overlapping information-processing pathways. In Murray's view, exercises of self-control manifest an agent's being vigilant. This account has three benefits. It provides a biologically plausible motivational account of self-control limitations that locates the source of these limitations in representational, rather than metabolic or structural, limitations. It also makes sense of the role that personal-level construal plays in self-control insofar as construal alters processes of control allocation. And it explains why self-control is essential for planning agents who engage in complex, temporally extended action.

In Chapter 4, Sinnott-Armstrong raises some questions about how identity and moral responsibility are related. Relying on the critical, new discussions and arguments from Schechter (2018), he focuses on split-brain patients and people with dissociative identity disorder that raise questions about how many agents can be located in one body and the relationship between sub-personal and personal mental processes. Sinnott-Armstrong uses these cases to shed light on how people might be responsible for behavior motivated by implicit attitudes. This discussion exemplifies how empirical

details about brains and behavior can bear on metaphysical and moral questions regarding action.

In Chapter 5, Noordhof and Sullivan-Bissett tackle the complicated subject of irrationality in delusional experience. It seems obvious that delusions are characterized by some kind of irrationality. While some claim that delusions reflect the most severe form of irrationality, Noordhof and Sullivan-Bissett carefully argue that delusional experiences manifest common forms of irrationality, such as wishful thinking or self-deception. Because of this, they argue against the view that philosophers and clinicians must invoke a special form of clinical irrationality to explain delusion. This chapter makes a forceful case for extending action theory into clinical domains to better understand action in both clinical and nonclinical contexts.

In Chapter 6, Turri provides new evidence that answers recent criticisms of his work on the norms of assertion. He provides experimental evidence that there are at least two norms: truths and blamelessness. He provides some evidence that different vocabulary about norms will be more or less apt for expressing these norms. He has a detailed discussion of the related literature and how his results relate to other recent findings. His chapter advances the recent discussion about norms of assertion in experimental philosophy. Furthermore, insofar as these norms inform our sense of rationality and permissibility, they are importantly related to normative dimensions of action.

In Chapter 7, Korman examines a puzzling phenomenon in action explanation. Drawing on intentional systems theory, Korman claims that explanations aim to rationalize what someone is doing in light of their beliefs and desires. However, our explanations rarely mention both mental states. Instead, people cite either what people believe or what they want. Korman provides evidence for her hypothesis that belief-based and desire-based explanations have different pragmatic implications. She shows that people tend to produce more belief-based explanations when confronted with Means-End puzzles, or behavior that seems inconsistent with achieving one's goal. And people tend to produce more desire-based explanations when confronted with Goal-Blocking puzzles, or behavior that is inconsistent with achieving one's overall set of goals. Korman discusses several implications for what these results show about the difference between desire-based and belief-based action explanations.

In Chapter 8, Clark and colleagues review recent, exciting work in the experimental philosophy of free will. They argue that free will is best understood in terms of a capacity to deliberate about perceived alternatives. They suggest that the ability to deliberate depends on the capacity for counterfactual thinking and mental simulation, which enables complex and flexible decision-making. Moreover, Clark and colleagues claim that the widespread belief in free will reflects a cultural adaptation: formal and informal institutions of punishment function better when people believe that they are responsible for their decisions. Ultimately, they suggest that while people may not have a coherent view of free will, the belief in free will and responsibility for one's actions may promote moral decision-making.

In Chapter 9, Machery and colleagues advance a novel view of free will in experimental philosophy and a new experimental paradigm for studying the psychology of free will. Much of the work in the experimental philosophy of free will has focused on people

reasoning about vignette-based stimuli and making a judgment. But Machery and colleagues suggest that people also perceive free will. The authors then propose a new model under this perceptual approach—the agency model, whereby perceptual cues that prompt attributions of agency affect people’s experience of free will. The authors introduce a perception-based paradigm to test this novel view of free will attribution. Using this new paradigm, the authors present new experimental evidence that supports their account. Not only do the authors provide a novel view about free will but they also present a new experimental paradigm for philosophers of action.

In Chapter 10, Sifferd explains why moral judgments about wrongdoing that lack publicly observable harms are subject to pernicious biases. She begins with some puzzling moral luck cases, or situations where individuals are judged more or less harshly depending on the outcomes of their actions, even though these outcomes are not under their control. Sifferd, following (Kumar 2019), argues that there are consequentialist grounds for basing our moral judgments on results rather than on intentions. However, for some wrongs, there are no results on which to base our judgments. Sifferd uses the example of rape to illustrate how moral judgments are susceptible to different biases when there are no observable harms to guide judgment. To borrow Sifferd’s phrase, wrongs that lack publicly observable harms sit in a “moral blindspot.” Sifferd’s chapter advances recent work on moral luck and moral judgment in the experimental philosophy of action.

In Chapter 11, Timmons and Byrne build on their previous work (Timmons et al. 2021; Timmons and Byrne 2019) and investigate an issue at the intersection of moral cognition, philosophy of action, and counterfactual thinking. In contrast to much of moral psychology, they explore how people think about *morally good* actions. This new body of work shows that when people think about morally good actions, they think about these much differently than how they think about morally bad actions. When people think of a good action that leads to a bad outcome, they tend to think of alternatives where something better happened by adding some new action. But when people think of a good action that leads to a good outcome, they imagine a world in which something worse happened by removing something from the situation. The authors discuss how this affects people’s intention formation and how future work can explore these issues.

In Chapter 12, Arruda and Povinelli discuss a core issue in comparative psychology that is relevant to the philosophy of action. Oftentimes, researchers presume that nonhuman animal behavior reflects simplified forms of analogous human behavior. Researchers treat nonhuman animal behavior as a model system that explains human behavior. Arruda and Povinelli, however, argue against the assumption that nonhuman animal behavior is always less complex than corresponding human behavior. Their key point is that this assumption is credible only if we accept that human behavior always reflects idealized forms of agency. But—they argue—we have no reason to suppose that humans are ideal agents relative to nonhumans. In the end, Arruda and Povinelli defend *species-specific* models of explanation. Their chapter illustrates how the experimental philosophy of action might usefully extend beyond the study of human action.

This volume includes some critical advances in the experimental philosophy of action. This work pushes the field to explore new experimental paradigms and to

continue challenging and expanding the issues at hand. But the implications of this volume are much wider. Experimental philosophers have recently begun working more systematically on issues in bioethics (Earp et al. 2020) and jurisprudence (Kneer and Bourgeois-Gironde 2017; Sommers 2019, 2021; Tobia 2020). This volume includes methodological and philosophical advances in the experimental philosophy of action that we believe could prove valuable to the continuing development of this new work. We hope that experimental philosophers continue to integrate work both within philosophical subdisciplines and across traditional disciplinary boundaries.

Notes

- 1 Philosophers of action have been mostly concerned with two broad issues: the individuation of—or the ontology of—action (Goldman 1971) and the explanation of action (Mele 1997). The issue of explanation involves questions about what produces, causes, or explains the action. For instance, do reasons to act—or mental states about some action—explain the action? We focus here on the ontology of action: what makes some event an action rather than not? Another dimension of the individuation issue concerns what distinguishes one action from others (Bennett 1998). For example, when I wave my hand to signal a turn, have I performed one action (signaling) or two (waving and signaling)? Recent work has turned toward the relationship between action and nothingness. What, for instance, distinguishes an action from an inaction? What distinguishes omissions and absences (Bernstein 2015; Clarke 2014)?
- 2 This summary elides a number of interesting distinctions in the literature on causal deviance, such as the distinction between basic, consequential, and heteromesial deviance. Properly accounting for the role of intentions in action is insufficient to defuse these different worries about deviance, though intentions do play a major part in those discussions. Interested readers should consider the papers collected in Aguilar, Buckareff, and Frankish (2010).

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