

Definition of Action

In trying to understand humanity, philosophers have focused on the mind, and on thought and language, but perhaps the most important part of our lives is action. Two aspects of this attract attention: the mysterious way in which some mental events lead to physical movement, and the important social question of when a person is or is not responsible for their own action. Modern philosophers work towards a 'theory of action', which aims to give a single general account which explains both of these aspects. A good theory needs some way of distinguishing 'actions' from other happenings in the world, and some principles for individuating an action (saying what unites an action, and fixes its start and finish). Two further ingredients must be an account of the motivations which produce a human action, and a picture of the preliminaries which lead up to the action.

We may sometimes talk of the 'action' of wind on a landscape, but it is actions arising from minds which is of more interest. If we ask how many human actions took place in your home yesterday, the problem of **individuating** actions may look hopeless. If you cleaned the kitchen, was that one action or many? Language gives us the freedom to either unify a sweep of behaviour into a single action (the cleaning of the kitchen), or to analyse it into tiny individual actions (the wiping of the sink, or a single hand movement). On the other hand we often have a clear sense of when an action starts or ends, which is a feature of what happens, rather than a linguistic convention. It would be odd to pick out the first half of cleaning the sink as a distinct action (unless it was interrupted).

Three proposals for what intrinsically unifies an action are a distinctive causal sequence, or a psychological focus on intention and effort, or a bodily movement. A **causal theory** says an action is an event which is caused and explained by some appropriate mental stimulus (such as a desire or a reason). Thus sink cleaning is an action because it is a causal sequence initiated by desires and beliefs about hygiene, and it ends when those stimuli are satisfied. Although the causal pattern individuates the action, it only counts as an 'action' because of its distinctive mental stimulus.

The causal theory is neat and simple, and appeals to naturalistic philosophers, who aim for causal explanations of many things, but a few problems arise. We typically distinguish an 'action' from an 'event' by saying that the former must be distinguished by an initial stimulus from a mind or agent. Actions certainly seem to be different from events, because we speak of 'performing' an action, but events just 'happen'. An action (such as holding a door shut) can even be the prevention of an event. The main difficulty is that if the whole causal sequence constitutes the action, we don't seem able to talk about 'the cause' of the action, because that would need a part of the causal sequence to be separate from and prior to the action itself. A particular difficulty is 'deviant causal chains', where some action is successfully completed, but not in the way the agent intended, so that the whole action is explained by its mental cause, but the 'deviant' details are inexplicable.

An even simpler naturalistic proposal is that actions are just distinct **bodily movements**, and we can forget the rest. This seems to fit lots of simple cases, like scrubbing a sink, until you imagine making the same movements, but without holding the scrubbing brush. It is also obvious that two identical movements (such as two hand waves) can be understood as different actions, according to what is intended. Physical actions can also be intermittent (such as pruning a rose), so a reason is needed for why several movements make a single action. And, of course, small casual movements are not seen as actions at all, unless we mention the intention, or the context.

Hence most theories emphasise mental states in order to individuate actions. The easiest view is to say that a sustained **intention** is the hallmark of an action, but it is no good intending an action if you don't do it, and not every act we perform turns out quite as we intended. Since no easy answer is emerging, maybe there are different **types** of action, each individuated in a distinctive way? One suggestion is that different degrees of control, from the barely conscious to the full considered and self-conscious, can distinguish levels of action. We might then individuate the fairly automatic actions in a more causal way, and highly conscious actions in terms of what the mind focuses on. A distinction is also made between 'activity' verbs (where starting to do it is doing it, such as talking), and 'performance' verbs (where only completing it is doing it, such as cleaning).

If an action of substantial length, such as cleaning a kitchen, can be individuated in some way, there is still the question of whether the action has intrinsic stages or parts, and whether there is a criterion for deciding **membership** of the larger action, or for deciding what is irrelevant. One suggestion is that if one action is performed 'by' doing another action (such as cleaning by scrubbing) then the two actions necessarily combine into a unity, because an explanation of the whole must refer to both parts. Any other criterion must presumably involve the mental state of the agent (though a group of agents would be a further complication).

A different simplification said to determine an action is the mental state of '**trying**' to do it. Thus preparing cleaning materials is part of the kitchen cleaning, because it is part of trying to do it, and even a reluctant tea break might be included. Failure to clean unreachable shelves would also seem to qualify as part of the cleaning, and even complete failure to reach a cobweb might count as clearing the cobwebs, so this new proposal may be too inclusive.

The aim of objectively individuating an action may qualify as an illuminating philosophical failure, but it highlights the ingredients of a human action, and these will be invaluable when looking at the motives and preliminary stages of actions. The main theories of action vary according to how concrete or abstract they are, and according to the weight given to mental phenomena. A reductive physicalist view of mind will aim for a similar theory of action, whereas a commitment to the reality of the will, thoughts, concepts, intentions and reasons will make those the foundations of any theory of action. For example, the theory of action known as 'volitionism' says that all action arises from the conscious will, and that choice is the hallmark of action. Alternatively, if we say that all mental events have causal powers (perhaps of a distinct causal type) then a theory of action can be causal in character, but include beliefs, desires and reasons as causes. If we include free will, these initiating mental causes may need no further explanation.