

## INTENTION AND ACTION

Actions are what we do. Signing a letter, hitting the enemy's nose, repairing a broken chair, telling a truth, drawing an inference, etc. are some of the examples of actions. It is very easy to give examples of actions, since we are well acquainted with them in normal, day to day, experience. Every normal person has a first-hand experience of what an action is, since he himself is an actor—since he himself does innumerable actions. It does not however mean that every person can explicate the logic of the concept of action. It is one thing to do an action and to be able to mention examples of actions, but a very different thing to say what does it mean to say that something is an action.

The word 'action' is not completely unambiguous. Even philosophers have used it in several senses. Macmurray, for example, claims that "to act is to effect a change in the external world....Action proceeds from the self to the world. It terminates in things, not in ideas".<sup>1</sup> This means that unless I effect a change in the external world, what I do cannot, by definition, be called an action. It is true that such effected changes are called actions, but I do not see any reason for restricting the application of 'action' to external changes. When I effect a change in my mental mood or attitude, control my anger or infatuation, etc., even without effecting a change in the external world, I *do* something; act. Therefore, in this paper I am using 'action' to denote both types of actions, namely those whose effects are changes in the external world and those whose effects are limited to the inner life of the actor.

Sometimes by 'action' is meant only such of our doings which can be objects of moral evaluation, and sometimes anything we do, without caring whether or not it can be morally evaluated. In this paper I am concerned with actions in the former sense, and

therefore the analysis of the concept of action presented here is an analysis of morally evaluable actions only. The sense of the term is its primary sense, and the wider sense in which a doing is called an action even if not so evaluable can be explained in terms of the primary sense or as a degenerate use of the term in its primary sense.

Actions are done by somebody, and being done by somebody is one of their most essential features. That is, if we cannot say of  $x$  that it was done by somebody or ask, who did it, then  $x$  cannot be an action. It may not be possible to determine the doer of a certain action, but in point of logic it must be an action done by somebody, otherwise it will not be an action. In this sense actions are not events; events happen, whereas actions are done. The theist who regards every event as a deed of God makes the class of events null. For him there is nothing called an event, what we call an event is also an action, an action done by God. Therefore, it is not that he reduces all events to actions, that he cannot do, since events and actions are categorically different. What he does amounts to denying the fact that any event ever takes place, and what we consider to be events, say an earthquake, are for him genuine actions.

The distinction between actions and events can be made only by an agent, by one who has the experience of action. In the experience of acting there is an inseparable feeling of my doing it. This feeling implies that I am aware of my initiating or originating a change intentionally or purposely. Since I do it, I am responsible for it. To say that  $A$  is responsible for the action  $x$  may mean either that  $A$  is the author of  $x$ , or that  $A$  is to be blamed for  $x$ , in case  $x$  is a blame-worthy action. To do an action is to be responsible for it in both the senses. To summarize what has been said above, to say that I did  $x$  but did not intend to do it, or that I did  $x$  but I am not responsible for doing it, are logically odd.

It may be urged here that we do use such expressions as 'unintentional action' and when we do, we are understood; the expression is not self-contradictory. I tell a humorous story about a miser and you feel offended. I pacify you by saying I did not intend to offend you I heartily pat you on the back, and your back starts aching. I say my intention was not to make you suffer from backache. I walk over the cap of your pen and the cap is smashed to pieces. Though I may be willing to buy a fresh cap for you, I plead that I am not to be blamed for breaking your cap, since I did not intentionally walk over it. In all such cases, if we look to the contexts in which we use the expression 'I did not intend to . . .', it is not that we are denying intention as such. Rather, we are denying a specific intention, or the intention to have effected a particular change. When I say that I did not intend to offend you by telling the story about a miser, what I say does not mean that I offended you but unintentionally. What I mean is that my intention was not to offend, but to amuse you. In fact, I *did* not offend you. You got offended as a result of my telling the story, though it was not told with the intention to offend you. It is quite possible that an action done with one intention, the intention to amuse, may produce a result which frustrates that intention, or one which could have been, or normally is, the result of an action done with a contrary intention. This is possible since the actual consequences of an action are not completely determined by the intention or intentions of its doing. But, if, in fact, I *offended* you, I cannot say that I did not intend to, since that would amount to my denying that I did the act of offending you. Similarly, with the case of the breaking of the pen's cap. If I wanted to defend myself, I could have said: I did not actually walk over your cap; it came under the heel of my right shoe, and got broken." Here breaking of the cap is really an event, and not an action. In all such cases, where we say 'x was unintentionally done', what we say is elliptically equivalent either to 'x was not an action, but an event', or to 'what was intended to

have been done was not  $x$ , but something else;  $x$  was the unintended result of an action done with a different intention'.

Every action is different from every other action. Two actions remain different even if the bodily movements involved are different, if the intentions to fulfil by them are different. In fact, it is the intention of the action which determines the identity of an action. If I write my name on a sheet of paper with the intention of testing how soft is the nib, I am not signing the sheet; signing a sheet of paper is done with a different intention or purpose. Similarly, I did not really pat you on the back if my intention was to make your back ache. Patting is an action done with the intention of encouraging or cheering up the person whose back is patted on.

Reference to intention is also necessary in delimiting the boundary of an action. We distinguish between an action and its consequences. In fact, on several occasions, we hold a man responsible for his actions but not for their consequences. The basic teaching of the Gita that one ought to act but ought not to have any attachment for the consequences of his actions presupposes our conceptual ability to distinguish between actions and their consequences.

When a surgeon takes out an infected appendix, his act of taking out the appendix is completed, we delimit the act in time and operation at a certain point keeping in view the intention of the surgeon. If we eliminate the elements of intention and consider only the bodily movements, we will not have any principle for delimiting actions, since bodily movements form an almost unending chain. It will be almost impossible to say when an act ends and its consequences begin.

Intentions or purposes of actions are known from the contexts in which actions are done. It is not necessary to have any special access into the mind of the actor. Every action is done in a certain context, and the context very often provides sufficient clues as to the intention behind the action. One may commit mistakes

in ascertaining the intention, but mistakes can be committed in any epistemic venture.

For every action, it makes sense not only to ask 'who did it?', but also 'why did he do it?' (For a future action, similarly, we can ask: Who is going to do it? and, why is he going to do it?) This is in the logic of actions that the two questions are askable about them. The question 'why did you do x?' can be answered in three different ways: I can state my motive for doing it, or my intention, or say that I considered x a duty. In all these cases, the question will be satisfactorily answered. If I filed a petition to oppose A's promotions, and am asked why did I do that, I can in reply mention my motive, say jealousy, or my intention, to get a clear vacancy for my promotion, or simply say that I considered it a duty to oppose his promotion. In all the three cases I supply a reason for the action I did, and thereby make my action intelligible to the person who asked the question. The purpose of asking the question was to have an explanation why was it done, and by giving him my reason for doing it I supply the explanation.

It seems to me that motive-explanations are reducible to intention. Every motive presupposes an intention or desire for something, and therefore, if the motive explanation is probed into, it will lead to some explanation in terms of intention. I would be jealous of his promotion only if I have a desire to gain something which I am not gaining and he is going to gain in or by the promotion. Hence I oppose his promotion with the intention of nullifying it, or getting for myself the position offered to him, and I am doing all this out of jealousy. Therefore, at the back of a motive explanation there is bound to be an intention explanation.

Explanations in terms of duty, or a moral rule or principle, are independent of intention-explanations. If I consider it a duty to oppose his promotion, it is a sufficient reason for my doing it.

I may, or may not, intend to achieve something by doing it. I may do my duty for the sake of duty. But in such cases my explanation will be convincing only if it is known to the questioner that I generally do what I consider my duties. A duty explanation shows that I have done *x* because I ought to have done it, and therefore it both justifies and explains my doing it, or justifies it more than explains it. An intention-explanation, on the other hand, only explains it.

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