

## HUMAN ACTION AND THE CONSCIOUS BODY

### PART-I

In this essay, I want to show that the concept of human action implies man's being a *conscious body*. Man, that is, as an active being, is a conscious body. This essay, thus, may be taken as an attack upon those who try to reduce the essence of man either to a purely mechanical whole, or to pure spirituality. This essay, again, for obvious reasons, may be taken to lend a support to those who regard man as a person or an embodied mind. I shall not, however, go into any discussion of any of these theories, since my fundamental purpose in this essay is neither to criticise nor to defend any other thesis, but to present my own.

To begin with, two points I shall take for granted, rather dogmatically : (1) that human action is intentional in nature, and (2) that unless the agent makes an authentic attempt to realise his intention, the intention would not be regarded as a genuine one, and for that matter, would be treated as non-existent. These two points I shall, it is needless to mention, surely try to justify in what follows. Now, these two points imply the following : When a person is said to perform a piece of action, at least two things are meant : (a) that he *intends* to bring about certain changes in the world of affairs, and (b) that he sincerely tries to *realise* his intention. The former feature of human action points at the *consciousness* of the agent, while the latter requires that the agent should be an *embodied* being. I shall try to explain these points in the following.

### PART—II

The point that consciousness of the agent follows from the intentional character of human action may be demonstrated in the following argument :

Premise 1 : Human action is intentional.

Premise 2 : Being intentional implies the agent's being conscious.

Conclusion : The agent is a conscious being. This argument

is valid, since it would be self-contradictory to assert the premises but to deny the conclusion. But the validity of the *argument* does not justify any of its premises *taken by itself*. So, we must attempt to show *independently* that *any* action of man, in order to be so, must require that the agent *intends* his action, *and* also that *to intend* necessarily implies the element of consciousness in the agent. And only after thus showing the correctness of each of the premise-statements, we would be entitled to claim that the agent, i. e., an active person, is a conscious being.

To begin with, I shall make a point which may appear trivial, though it is vital to my whole thesis : My thesis is concerned *not* with *action as such* but *only* with *action of man*, i. e., the action which is distinctively human. And I start my argument with the statement that an action can be regarded as a human action *only when* the subject of the action is the *agent* of the same; I make the further statement that every human action has its *origin* in the intention of the agent. Really speaking, unless the agent *by himself* initiates, i. e., intends, the action, it would be quite difficult to regard him as the *agent* of the action, or, what is the same thing, to regard the action as *his* action in the precise sense. Thus, there is a sense in which a part of human action can be said to be constituted by the agent's intention. There is another sense of the same. The agent performs the action as he thereby wants to accomplish certain intention of his own. Now throughout the whole course of this action, the agent naturally tries to realise his intention; and so he tries to plot and regulate the course of his action in that way which, as he thinks, would be most close to realising his intention. The agent's intention thus affects and determines his course of action. In this sense, the agent's intention is intrinsically knitted into his action. The course of his action is determined largely by his intention. Now, no human action is possible without an agent. But the agent, of necessity, is the person who intends, i. e., by himself initiates, his action, *and* tries to shape his action in such a manner that could with all possibility realise his intention. And it is in these two senses taken together that I call human action intentional (Premise I is shown to be true).

But what is to *intend* ? And to answer this, we turn towards the second premise of our argument. I propose to give two

explanatory senses of the phrase "to intend", and I am inclined to deny that the phrase "to intend" can with no difficulty be forsaken of any of these two senses. The two senses, already intimated above are: (1) to initiate something, in our context a certain course of action, *by oneself*; and (2) to be *pu positive*. And I believe that in either sense the phrase *to intend* implies consciousness on the part of the agent.

One may be tempted to dismiss rather hurriedly the first explanatory sense of the phrase "to intend" on the instance of "involuntary action". But I ask the critic to pause here and consider whether or not the case of the so-called involuntary action can at all be regarded as a genuine instance of human action. Can, let us ask, a bit of performance *P* be strictly regarded as my action, if *P* follows from me in *nothing but a physical way*? In other words can I be, in any fundamental sense, regarded as the *agent* of *P*, if I am nowhere near sanctioning *P* prior to its being there? I wonder. But the critic might press that, after all, there *is* a use of such expressions as "He did it involuntarily". Yes, there is. But the question is, can we drop the adverbial term "involuntarily" altogether from the alleged expression and still retain the identical sense? Perhaps not, and this is because the unqualified "He did it" contains the standard sense of "doing", which the adverbial term "involuntarily" frustrates. The role of such adverbial terms, be it noted, is not to contribute some further *continuous* feature to the description of the performance that is a straight forward case of (human) action, but to withdraw or destroy the standard feature of the action-performance. Thus, the adverbial terms like "involuntarily" do not justify a bit of performance as an instance of human action; on the contrary by attaching an untoward *qualification* to the bare "He did it", such adverbial terms rather make it unjustifiable to regard the performance as a genuine case of human action. All this shows that the nucleus of human action does not immediately, or rather consistently, include the element of involuntariness. This is so as in every case of human action, the question of whether or not to do that thing which in fact the agent does, must have to arise for the agent; it is this question by considering which the agent gets the licence of having the agency in regard to what he does. If the agent is completely debarred from the consideration of the question of whether or not to do *X*, it would be too much

to regard *X* as *his* action in the proper sense, although *X* does bodily, and, we should note, only bodily, follow from him. If so, it clearly follows that action in the human discourse essentially implies a sort of primary self-initiation pointing at a kind of freedom on the part of the agent. And herein enters the element of *decision* in human action.

To say that agent has a kind of self-initiation with regard to his action is another way of saying that the agent *decides* his action. To state meaningfully that the agent initiates a particular course of action *by himself* involves stating that the agent has *resolved* to act in that particular way; and this explicitly indicates the agent's *deciding* to act in that way.

Now, to decide to do *W* is to *choose* *W* from amongst certain alternatives limited in number, *X*, *Y* and *Z*. But here someone might argue that *deciding* to do *W* does not essentially imply *choosing* *W* from amongst some alternatives, *X*, *Y*, *Z*. Maybe in the case of decision the agent does not have to consider some alternatives positively distinct from what he in fact decides, and maybe this is the crucial difference between deciding and choosing. But all this does not imply that *deciding*, involves, on the part of the agent, no set of alternatives whatsoever, since in order to say that the agent, *decided* to do *W*, it must be admitted that the question of whether or not to do *W* did arise for him. And *to do W* and *not to do W* constitute here the alternatives for the agent. So, for our purpose, no difference between deciding and choosing, the relevant point being whether or not the agent has to consider certain alternatives in the action-situation. Now, if the agent, in order to do *W*, must have to *consider* a set of alternatives, it follows that the agent is to be a *conscious* being in the action-situation. To *consider* certain alternatives, the agent has not merely to be aware of each of them, but has to *judge* the nature and the possible consequences of each of them so as to find out the most preferable one. And to regard the agent as capable of *judging* is to endow him with the element of consciousness.

That my *deciding* or *choosing*, and hence my action, implies my being conscious, may be shown also in the following way : For deciding or choosing to do *W*, I must firmly believe that I am able to do *W*. If at a particular time I believe that I am unable to do *W* or just do not know whether or not I am able to do *W*, then I

cannot possibly *decide* or *choose* to do *W*. Thus my *deciding* or *choosing* to do *W* at a given moment depends on the state of my conviction in this regard at that moment. This is another way of saying that I must be *conscious* of what I decide or choose to do, for otherwise how could I meaningfully be said to have a conviction *of my own* that I am able to do what I decide or choose to do ?

The rationale of decision and hence of human action demands, in another way, that the person who decides, i. e., the agent, should be a conscious being. To say that a person *decides* to do *W* rather than to do *not-W*, implies that the person has some reasons of his own for deciding in that way. In other words, in the domain of human actions the agent has certain answer of his own to the question, "Why have you decided to do this?" The agent's reasons for his deciding to do *W* or *not-W* may be inconclusive or vague or ambiguous or very simple; but doubtless the agent, because he is the agent, certainly has some sort of justification of his own for the decision *d* he takes, lest it would be entirely pointless to regard *d* as *his decision*. All this, if true, makes it acceptable that the agent exercises some amount of *thought* over what he decides to do. In other words, the agent in his decision and so in his action, is to be a conscious being.

Now, let us turn towards the second explanatory sense of the phrase "to intend", viz., *to intend is to be purposive*. The assertion that *to intend* means *to be purposive* is one over which there is, so far my knowledge goes, little dispute. *Intentionality* and *purposefulness* are often regarded as synonyms, at least so in the context of human action. Now, I like to contend that human action is purposive; i. e., man acts *on purpose*. It sounds nothing unusual when anybody says that he is going to *do*, say, *W*, *in order to fulfil* some purpose *P*. In other words, it is perfectly alright to ask anybody, "Why are you going to *do* so?" All this shows that the agent wants to fulfil certain purpose through his action. The purpose *P* of any human action does not *mean*, be it noted, the same thing as the *consequence C* of the action. This is not so on the simple ground that, while *P* means what the *agent* wants to realise through his action, its *C* denotes the natural outcome of the *action*. *C* of an action follows from it as its natural result. *P* of an action is what its agent wants to follow from it. In brief *C*, takes place *after* the action is over. *P* is set by the agent *before* he begins

his action. It may, be it noted further, very well be that *P* and *C* of an action become *physically* identical as when the agent recognises that the consequence of his action perfectly fulfils his purpose. And it is obvious that the agent always desires this identity of *C* and *P* in any action-situation. But we must be cautious to note that, in the present context, the *meaning* of purpose is *necessarily* different from that of consequence. *P* of an action *means* that which *the agent sets prior* to the action. *C* of an action is what comes *as a result of the action itself*. This becomes evident when the agent becomes disappointed with the result of his action. The agent has done *W* in order to realise *P*; *W* eventually yields *C* which is different from *P*. *W* thus frustrates *P*, although the agent had begun *W* for getting *P*. Thus—and this is another important point to note—the unfulfilment of the purpose of an action does not show the agent's purposelessness in his action.

It, is, we may further note, not necessary that the purpose of an action is distinct from the action itself. That is, it may be that the agent wants just to do the action *W* itself, and that is his purpose. Here the agent's purpose is to perform *W* and *nothing else*. Thus the purpose of an action may be *physically* identical with the action itself, just as the purpose of an action may be *physically* identical with the consequence of the action.

There may allegedly be an instance of a human action where the agent does *W*, but himself admits that neither *W* nor anything else he has in mind as his *purpose*. And consequently, it may be alleged, human action may be non-purposive. But let me frankly confess that I find no real point in regarding any piece of performance as the agent's *action* (in the sense in which we normally regard ourselves as having performed some action in our daily discourse), wherein the agent has had no purpose whatsoever to be realised—neither the very performance itself, nor anything else. In other words, to me it appears really disparaging to regard any piece of performance *P* as a genuine piece of *human* action if the agent of *P* does perform it with no sort of purpose. Such performances can be regarded as instances of human action only in a trifling sense. (We may, in passing, note that even the acceptance of such non-purposive "actions" does not foil our fundamental thesis) that human action implies the agent's consciousness because when, in the alleged case, the agent confesses that he has done *W*

with no purpose he nevertheless does *not* admit that he has done *W* without the least knowledge of *W*'s being performed by him. In order to claim that *W* is his action, he cannot, as I understand, deny his such awareness altogether.)

From all this, if true, it follows that the agent, in any action-situation sets, by himself a purpose *of his own*, i. e., sets a purpose as *his* purpose. And in order to set a purpose in this way, the agent must have to be a *conscious* being.

Moreover, *to be purposive* normally *implies* that the person having the purpose must try to fulfil the purpose through the action. So in, any action-situation, the agent would try to direct the course of the action towards the accomplishment of his purpose. In this way, any situation of human action includes the agent's *awareness* of whether or not he is approaching his purpose, i.e., his awareness of whether or not he is following the steps leading to his purpose, and also of whether or not he is avoiding the steps that would lead him away from his purpose. All this betokens the agent's being a *conscious* being in his action-situation.

Now, after having shown that each of the two senses of the phrase "to intend" involves the agent's *consciousness* we, may try to strengthen our thesis a bit more by noting some further characteristics of *intentionality* in general. The rationale of the concept of intention demands that the person who intends (i. e., the agent) *must be able to express immediately and somewhat distinctly* what he intends; i. e., the agent must be *conscious* of his intention. The agent may succeed in distinguishing his intention, or he may make a mistake in describing and putting into words what he intends. But there is a sense in which the agent is unfailingly aware of what he intends to do. There may be occasion where the agent fails to express in words exactly what he intends to do. For example, an actor may be entirely clear in his own mind about how he is going to play a particular scene, even though, he might fail to put in words how he is going to do it. That the actor had a clear awareness of what he was going to do in playing the scene would emerge in the fact that, if he found himself doing something contrary to his intention, he would at once recognise that discrepancy. Thus my failure to put in definite words what I intend to do does not amount to my being unaware of my intention, since I would still be very much clear in my own mind of what I intend. In point of fact, it appears

really awkward to state that someone intends to do something and yet is not himself aware of his intention. In other words, if a person has no idea of what he is going to do, it would be wrong to say that he *intends* the alleged performance. In fact, every *doing* immediately involves the agent's consciousness of it. If I am not conscious in any way of what I am "doing", the case would not be genuine case of doing on my part. "If", as John Macumarray observes, "when acting, we did not know that we were acting, we would not be acting. If any occurrence is to be an act of mine, I must know that I perform it."<sup>1</sup> Take the well-celebrated case of raising one's arm. It would indeed not be wrong to say that one would apprehend oneself whether or not one was raising one's arm in exercise of one's ability to do so at will. If myself cannot at all understand whether or not I am raising my arm, it would scarcely be claimed that I am in fact raising my arm. In other words, if my claim that I am raising my arm is to be a genuine and standard one, it must be admitted that I do apprehend that I am raising my arm. What follows from this is this : Any action of mine, i. e., any performance that I have intended, essentially implies an element of consciousness in me.

Now we may conclude that the two premises of our argument are true. So, since the argument itself is valid, the conclusion also is true. So we may claim that human action involves the agent's consciousness.

### PART-III

In this part, I shall try to show that the fact that *I perform an action* implies that *I am embodied*; i. e., human action involves the agent's possessing a bodily structure of his own.

It is the same *intentional* nature of human action that implies the embodiedness of the agent. The underlying logic of intention demands that the person intending would *of necessity* make an *actual* attempt to *realise* his intention. And it appears evident that in order to make any such attempt the agent is to be embodied.

There may be *three* sorts of objections, as I apprehend, to the above thesis : (1) to say that *intention* implies the agent's embodiedness is not to say that *human action* implies so; (2) to say that the *realisation* of intention implies the agent's embodiedness is not



to say that *intention* itself implies so. (Here one grants that if intention itself implies the agent's embodiedness, then human action being admittedly intentional in nature also implies so); (3) it is not clear how the *realisation* of intention implies the agent's *embodiedness*.

Our answer to the first objection is brief : We have already shown in Part-II that human action is *essentially* intentional in character. If it is really so, one would perfectly be justified in claiming that anything implied by intention would *necessarily* be implied by human action.

The second objection is based upon a misapprehension of the real nature of intention *in the context of human action*. In the context of human action, an intention in order to be a genuine one *must* involve the agent's actual attempt to realise the intention. In other words, in the context of human action, it is in the very *meaning* of intention that the agent's actual attempt to realise his intention is included. This is clear from the fact that we, in the practical discourse, do not regard a person *intending* so—and so if he admittedly refrains from making the least attempt to realise the alleged intention. If I say, "I intend *X* but I will in no way attempt to realise *X*", then it would be quite improper to accept that I *really* intend *X*. If, to view the case otherwise, I am allowed to have intention which it is not necessary for me to make any attempt to realise the same, then virtually I would be entitled to claim to have any intention whatsoever; and in this way the phrase "I intend" would become vacuous and would lose all its significance. No intention is complete and hence genuine unless the agent makes an attempt to actualise it, i.e., to put his intention into *practice*. A man who with apparent sincerity professed intentions, which were never in fact attempted by him to put into practice, would finally be held not really to intend that which he declared that he intended to do, even if there was no suggestion of deceit.<sup>2</sup> *Pure* intention is a misnomer. If a person merely contemplates that he possesses an intention *X* which he never tries to turn into a real fulfilment, then, I wonder, in what significant sense he could claim to *intend X* ! Thus intention *is* practice-oriented implying necessarily that the agent would make an actual attempt to realise his intention. And this *actual attempt to realise* necessarily requires the agent's embodiedness.

But how ? And here we come to the third objection. To make an *actual* attempt to realise an intention is to try to bring about certain change in the actual state of affairs, to modify the relevant set of conditions of actual discourse, so that the changed state of affairs or the modified set of conditions of actual discourse would help some way or other to the realisation of *X*. But in order to attempt to change or modify the conditions of *actual* discourse, someone must have a bodily structure of his own, for otherwise how could he *really* intervene in the actual concrete state of affairs ? Any attempt to *bring about* some transformation in the concrete existing set of conditions would indeed require that the agent is embodied. The attempt to transform the existing state of affairs presumably would require to yield some *spatio-temporal* change, and we may quickly note that in order to bring about any *spatio-temporal* change the agent is to be spatio-temporally structured, i.e., embodied. Spatio-temporal change signifies some spatio-temporal *movements*. And to generate any such movements, the agent is obviously to be embodied. To generate spatio-temporal movements, the agent has indeed to move himself, and to do so he must be embodied.

So we conclude, the *realisation* of intention implies the agent's embodiedness. And we can further conclude that, therefore, human action implies the agent's embodiedness.

We may put what we have tried to show in Part-III in the form of the following argument :

Premise 1 : Human action is intentional in nature.

Premise 2 : Intention intrinsically contains the agent's actual attempt to realise his intention.

Premise 3 : Any actual attempt to realise an intention necessarily implies the agent's embodiedness.

Conclusion : Human action essentially implies the agent's embodiedness.

That human action implies the agent's embodiedness may be shown in another way. Each action of a person, in order to get *identified as a definite piece of action*, has to consist of certain recognisable change in the state of affairs. That is, identification of any human action as a definite piece of action is possible only in terms of certain recognisable change in the state of affairs. And

as we have already seen, in order to generate any such change, the agent is to be embodied. In this way, human action implies the agents embodiedness.

But, someone might object, cannot a human action be identified as an action *without* including into its body any recognisable change in the state of affairs? Is it necessary, the critic might ask, that every action of mine must, for its being an action at all, involve certain recognisable change in the state of affairs? I venture to answer, Yes, it is so. Really speaking, I for myself do fail to recognise how could I claim to perform an *action* which brings no change whatsoever in the actual state of affairs? The critic might point out that does not the case of *pure thinking* instantiate an action minus the alleged change? I am inclined to answer, No; I find it difficult to regard the case of *mere thinking* as one of action proper. It may be that I am just formulating a thought within myself, i. e. I am engaged into what is called a *reasoning* or *cogitation*, pure and simple. In this case, I am just *thinking*. Pure and simple reasoning is an instance of thinking and not of action. It is only when I try to make an *expression* of my thought, I engage myself into an action. *Doing* is not an equivalent of *thinking*, *doing* embraces something more than *mere thinking*, viz., the agent's attempt to *objectivize* his thought, i. e., his attempt to liberate his thought from the bondage of his "consciousness" and *demonstrate* it (the thought). It is in the attempt to demonstrate my thought that I cross the threshold of thinking and enter the domain of action. In brief, unless *X* consists of some recognisable change in the state of affairs *X* could not be regarded as an action *proper and complete*. "Pure thought" *qua* pure thought admittedly involves no change in the world, and so would be an improper member of the world of *actions*. In the words of Stuart Hampshire: "It would seem unnatural to count my thinking about so-and-so an action. . . because my thinking about so-and-so would not ordinarily be thought of as the bringing about of some recognisable change in the world; and this seems essential to the idea of action."<sup>3</sup> Sometimes it happens that the changes which my action consists include change of my own body. But here one must note that in order to bring about any change of my body I do not require *another* body. There is perhaps no contradiction in maintaining that my action requires a body of my own and that my action may consist of some change of my own body. In fact, in each instance of my actions, I inalienably recognise

my embodiedness. Whenever I acknowledge myself performing a course of action, I do so primarily in terms of certain bodily movements of mine. If no bodily movement is at all there, not only others but I too would possibly fail to ascertain myself as performing an action. "It," to quote D. G. Brown, "seems to be . . . . . necessary condition for a person's doing to be action there be some externally observable behaviour, some participation of the motor functions of his body, which is . . . essential to doing that thing."<sup>4</sup> This becomes clear from the fact that, unless there be any bodily movement whatsoever on my part I am *not* normally said to perform any action. It may be that I have the ability to do *X*. But merely possessing the ability to do *X* does in no way amount to performing *X*. Only *doing X* would amount to an action. To quote Prof. Macmurray, "An action is not the concomitance of an intention in the mind and an occurrence in the physical world : it is the *producing* of the occurrence by the Self, the *making* of a change in the external world, the *doing* of a deed."<sup>5</sup> And it is obvious that the *doing* of a deed evidently requires the embodiedness of the agent. In saying this, my intention is by no means to *reduce* a human action to a set of bodily movements of the agent. Certainly my action includes a set of bodily movements of mine; but it must be remembered that only when I would by myself initiate the relevant bodily movements, the "movements" could properly be regarded as forming *my action*. No piece of human action belongs to the *sheer* body of the agent but to the agent as a *person*. In the discourse of human action, my bodily movements are not the movements of the *body* of mine but of *mine*. My action is to be attributed not to my *body* but to *me*. And it is only when any movements of my body could be attributed to me in this way, the alleged set of movements would be an instance of my action. In my action, it is not that my *body* moves but I move. Precisely for this reason, the sheer movement of my head is not my action. It is only when I nod my head that I perform an action.

My embodiedness in regard to my action can be recognised also from the limit that my body puts to me in an action-situation. Whether or not something could be related to me in the sense of being my action, is determined to an extent by the nature of my bodily structure. This is so because my body is a determining factor of my entertaining the question of whether or not to do something. If, for *X*, I am altogether unable to consider the question

of whether to do it or not, *X* could not possibly be included within the world of my actions. Now my body largely determines my ability to consider the question of whether or not to do something. Thus my body is a *constituting* factor of my actions. In this sense, my action requires my embodiedness.

#### PART-IV

This, then, is our thesis : Human action essentially requires that the agent is to be conscious *and* embodied. Indeed, it is his *conscious body* that gives the agent that identity by virtue of which he can intelligibly be recognised as the *agent* of his action. For, first, unless he *consciously* performs an action, it would be difficult to say that *he* performs it; and secondly, unless he is embodied, he could not possibly *perform* an action as an action.

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#### NOTES

1. John Macmurray, *The Self as Agent*, Faber and Faber, Ltd, London, 1956, p. 90.
2. Stuart Hampshire, *Thought and Action*, Chatto and Windus, London, 1965, P. 159.
3. *Ibid*, p. 154.
4. D. G. Brown, *Action*, George Allen and Unwin Ltd., London, 1968, p. 118.
5. Prof. Macmurray, *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume XVII*, 1938.

