

THEORY OF ACTION

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1. Definition and ascription of action

The concept of action plays a central role in theories about what "thinking beings" do. Examples of events which can be called actions are *running*, *congratulating someone*, *reforming the legal system* or *reflecting on a problem*. In discussing examples such as these, it is useful to distinguish the problem of defining the notion of action from the problem of giving criteria for the linguistic ascription of action terms. A common way of defining action is to define it as a species of behavior in the following way. An instance of behavior is an action if and only if it is associated with an intention making the behavior into a means for some end. Compare, for example, von Wright, 1971.

If we study the four examples of action given above, we see that especially the last two examples are not automatically covered by this definition without some extra explanation. Can any single instance of behavior ever reform the legal system and is reflection really behavior? Nevertheless, the given definition is satisfactory for many theoretical purposes and has often been accepted as a theoretical explication of action.

If we, instead, turn to the problem of giving criteria for the linguistic ascription of action terms, it becomes clear that the definition of action given above provides sufficient but not necessary criteria for such ascriptions. In other words, a definition of this sort is too narrow to capture the actual use of action terms. In Allwood 1978, it is claimed that a broader list of action term ascription criteria would have to involve at least the following types:

- 1) Intention
- 2) Form and convention

- 3) Results and causal consequences
- 4) Context

An interrogative sentence can, for example, in spite of being intended as a rhetorical statement, be called a question in virtue of its conventional form (criterion 2). By criterion 3 – result – a person can be said to have warned another person without having intended to do so and by criterion 4 – context – any utterance following a question in a dialogue can be called a response. The criteria, thus, by themselves, all provide sufficient grounds for action ascription but none of them can be claimed to be necessary. In practice, however, they often mutually reinforce each other.

Two of the difficult problems of action ascriptions are the problems of multifunctionality and contextuality. A given instance of behavior can be ascribed several action descriptions. One of the reasons for this is that actions can be classified as subtypes of other actions (e.g. running is a type of movement), another reason is multifunctionality. An utterance of the word *no* can, for example, be classified as “uttering a word”, “a negation”, “an agreement” or “a lie” if it follows a negated statement like *it is not cold* and the speaker in spite of his/her utterance thinks it is cold. The reason for such multifunctionality is that action descriptions are sensitive to context relations of various types. The consequence of this is that action descriptions probably are best viewed as ascriptions of certain relational properties to an activity.

2. Criteria for action

In the discussion above, we have distinguished definitional criteria of action from ascription criteria of action terms. In the literature, other kinds of criteria for action have also been discussed. Among these are: operational criteria and felicity criteria (cf. Austin 1962). By operational criteria are meant criteria which enable us to determine whether a given event or instance of behavior should be counted as a specific type of action or not. In philosophical and psychological behaviourism, it was common to consider the issue of the operational definition of action as the crucial one leading to a denial of the importance of definitional conceptual issues regarding the status of intentionality.

Felicity criteria (or, as they have sometimes been called, success criteria) are criteria for when an action is felicitous or successful. They differ from definitional and operational criteria in that they do not primarily define the identity of an action or the way in which actions can be identified, but rather explicate additional criteria which the action must meet in order to be felicitous or successful. In other words, an action can occur and be identified without being felicitous or successful. For example, an utterance can be an answer to a question without being a felicitous or successful answer.

3. Other concepts associated with action

One of the reasons that the concept of action is problematic is that it is intimately connected with many other complex concepts.

An action is often made dependent on “**intention**” and through “**intention**” related to notions such as “**purpose**” and “**goal**” on the one hand and to notions such as “**will**”, “**motivation**” and “**reason**” on the other hand. These notions are, in turn, related to notions such as “**cause**”, “**effect**” and “**result**” but also to notions such as “**means**”, “**ends**”, “**rationality**” and “**responsibility**”. So in a paradigmatic case, an action is something done with an intention in order to achieve a purpose or goal based on an act of will, a motive and/or a reason.

Sometimes a causal perspective on action is combined with an intentional perspective. The intention, act of will, motive and reason are all related to causes of the action and the purpose and goal, as well as the intention, are related to effects and consequences of the action. Whether such a combination of a causal and an intentional perspective is possible or desirable has, however, been a subject of much debate.

The intentional perspective is also often combined with the idea that human activity is structured by means-ends relations which are subject to constraints of rationality. Theory of action, in this case, overlaps with theories of rationality.

Action related concepts are further intimately connected with such questions as “freedom of will” versus “determinism” and “responsibility” versus “result of causal influence”. In fact, many

authors want to distinguish an intentionalistic explication of action which is connected with “freedom of will” and “responsibility” from a causal account of behavior which is usually connected with causal determinism (cf. von Wright 1971 and Dilthey 1883).

Finally, there is a connection between the concept of action and the concepts of “agent”, “actor”. “activity and “interaction”. “Agents” are usually thought of as intentional beings instigating or causing action. In the social sciences, the term “actor” is often used in the same meaning.

“Activity” is a wider term than action more easily associated both with collectives and with mental events. “Interaction” requires a set of relations between actions provided by individual agents.

4. Typologies of action

Given what has been said above, it becomes apparent that actions can be classified in many ways, for example, according to the four types of criteria for action ascription discussed above, actions can be intention oriented, form and convention oriented, result oriented or context oriented. They can also be classified according to the type of behavior they are associated with (speech, gesture, etc.), type of instruments (weapons, construction tools, etc.) or types of goals on different levels of abstraction (altruism, egotism or cooperation, conflict, etc.).

Bibliography

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