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# Introduction

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## 1 Philosophy of action

This volume contains a set of cutting-edge essays by younger philosophers on various topics in what can broadly be characterized as the philosophy of action. Some of the essays are about the metaphysics of action and agency; some consider the nature of autonomy and free agency; some explore conceptual and normative issues; some draw on data from psychology and psychopathology. But what all of them have in common is that they address some problem related to our existence as human agents.

The range of topics covered in this collection is broad. This is intentional. Rather than focus on one narrow topic, we have chosen to collect papers that, taken together, introduce readers to some key debates in contemporary philosophy of action. Of course, exactly how broad a range of issues one will expect to find in such a volume will depend on how one characterizes the field of philosophy of action, and we shall begin by saying something about how we characterize it.

So what is the philosophy of action? One view treats it as either a narrow sub-discipline of philosophy or as a proper part of another sub-discipline or set of sub-disciplines, primarily metaphysics and the philosophy of mind. On this view, philosophy of action is focused on the conceptual, epistemological, and metaphysical issues surrounding the nature of action and its explanation (action-individuation, the nature of intentions and their role in intentional action, the nature of the will, reasons and their role in explaining action, and so on).

A problem with this characterization is that it winds up separating a host of closely related issues, excluding certain problems (for example, *akrasia* and *enkrasia*, free will, motivation) from the field simply because they do not concern foundational issues about the nature and explanation of human action. To illustrate what is wrong with this approach, we may make a comparison with epistemology. Much of the work on topics such as epistemic *akrasia*, epistemic virtue, and reasonable disagreements does

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not bear directly on questions about the nature of knowledge itself. (For example, one can theorize about the epistemic virtues but endorse a theory of knowledge that dispenses with any role whatsoever for epistemic virtues.) Do these topics belong outside epistemology? Since they all bear on issues related to the broader interests of epistemologists, including the nature of epistemic evaluations, they belong in epistemology. Something similar is the case with respect to the philosophy of action, where it is hard to make a clean separation between foundational issues about intentional action and wider issues about, for example, the nature of free agency. Indeed, one's view about a foundational issue may directly affect how one thinks about a non-foundational issue, and vice versa.

Another way of characterizing the philosophy of action is as a broad sub-discipline of philosophy. On this view, which is the one taken in this volume, the philosophy of action is a wide field that overlaps with other areas in important ways, but has its own distinctive set of questions and problems, all of which are *broadly* related to questions about the nature, explanation, and scope of our agency and action. So conceived, philosophy of action embraces not only traditional concerns about the nature and explanation of intentional action, but also a host of other issues, including, among others, the problems of *akrasia* and *enkrasia*, free will and moral responsibility, mental agency, motivation, omissions, practical reason, and social action. Of course, philosophy of action is closely related to other philosophical sub-disciplines. For instance, philosophy of mind and philosophy of action both address questions about mental action, mental causation, and reasons-explanations. This should not be surprising, however. As in other areas of philosophy, the boundaries between the various sub-disciplines are vague, relating to each other like the intersecting circles of a Venn diagram.

One objection to this view of the field is that the philosophy of action lies at the intersection of so many disparate sub-disciplines that there is very little glue to hold it together, so to speak. After all, in the course of their career, a philosopher may become an expert on the ontological issues in the philosophy of action without developing the same sophisticated understanding of the normative debates (which require a level of expertise in ethics that an ontologist may lack). Indeed, very few philosophers (Alfred Mele being a rare example) have proved able to move with ease among the various topics gathered under the banner of philosophy of action. So perhaps we should reject the idea that there is a unified sub-discipline identifiable as the philosophy of action. Rather, there are just problems about action and agency in the myriad sub-disciplines of philosophy that bear a family resemblance to each other. And—the objection goes—such a family resemblance is not enough to constitute the philosophy of action as a distinct sub-discipline in its own right.

However, this objection ignores the fact that, once again, philosophy of action is not unique in this respect. Compare the philosophy of mind.

Here, too, a philosopher may spend most of their career focusing on a narrow set of issues that do not bear directly on debates elsewhere in the field. One researcher might work on the problem of mental causation while another focuses almost entirely on the nature of phenomenal consciousness. Although there is some overlap between these two areas, the two researchers would need to undertake substantial retraining and scholarship if they suddenly decided to swap topics. The point is that philosophy of mind is not defined by a core body of knowledge and expertise shared by all practitioners. Rather, it is constituted by a set of linked problems, to which *different* bodies of knowledge and expertise need to be applied. In short, philosophy of mind, too, is unified only by a family resemblance among the various problems it encompasses—and is none the worse for that.

An advantage of characterizing the philosophy of action as a broad sub-discipline is that it puts pressure on philosophers of action to pay attention to work done in other areas of the field, which, they may find, bears directly on their own. To give just one example, if one concludes that there is nothing more to an agent's exercise of executive control than that the right type of mental states non-deviantly cause their behavior, then one may find that certain theories of autonomous control and free agency are no longer viable options. Of course, philosophers of action also need to pay attention to work in other philosophical sub-disciplines and in the relevant sciences. Indeed, recent years have seen increasing collaboration between philosophers, psychologists, and neuroscientists with respect to the study of agency and action, and many philosophers have made it a point to do work that is empirically informed (Myles Brand, Alfred Mele, Fred Adams, and Timothy O'Connor all come to mind). But the importance of such interdisciplinary connections does not weaken the case for treating philosophy of action as a broad sub-discipline within philosophy—the opposite, if anything.

Of course, in this short introduction we can only sketch the case for our view of the philosophy of action, and some readers may be unconvinced. Still, even if the philosophy of action is not an independent sub-discipline, there is no doubt that there are problems about human action and agency to be found in all of the major sub-disciplines of philosophy. The essays in this volume address many of these problems. And, though the coverage is not exhaustive, readers new to the field should come away from the volume with a good sense of current thinking about human action and agency. For their part, established researchers in the field will, we believe, find the essays to be original contributions that substantially advance many debates about action and agency.

## 2 The essays

The essays in this volume are divided between four parts. Those in the first part address issues at the foundation of theorizing about action and agency.

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Those in the second and third parts relate to autonomy and free agency respectively, and those in the final part address issues which in various ways extend the boundaries of traditional philosophy of action.

### 2.1 Foundations of action and agency

The essays in Part I look at foundational issues in the philosophy of action, using both traditional methods and new approaches.

In “Agency, Ownership, and the Standard Theory,” Markus Schlosser defends the Causal Theory of Action (CTA), according to which an agent-involving event counts as an action if it is caused in the right way by appropriate agent-involving mental states. The CTA is considered the standard theory of action, and Schlosser shows why it has retained this status, presenting its main features and arguing that it offers the only viable account of the metaphysics of agency. A major challenge to the CTA is that it is unable to provide an account of the role of the *agent*. On one version of the objection, the CTA reduces activity to mere happenings, and thus fails to capture the phenomenon of agency. On another, weaker, version of the objection, the CTA fails to capture the role played by the human agent in certain higher forms of action. In response, Schlosser argues that the CTA does support a robust notion of agency, especially when fleshed out with a feedback-comparator model of motor control, and that higher kinds of agency can be accounted for by supplementing the CTA in various ways.

In her contribution, “Failing to do the Impossible,” Carolina Sartorio considers the relationship between intentional omissions and alternative possibilities. Specifically, she considers whether an agent’s intentionally omitting to do something requires that the agent could have intentionally acted otherwise. Engaging with related work on moral responsibility and on omissions (including Harry Frankfurt’s work on both), she provides an account of intentional omissions that can handle challenging cases that evoke competing intuitions. She contends that an agent can intentionally omit to act even if it is *impossible* for them to have acted otherwise. While this result may be welcome to those who contend that morally responsible agency does not require the ability to act contrary to how one actually acted, the same people may not welcome Sartorio’s conclusion that there is an important asymmetry between the conditions for intentionally acting and for intentionally omitting to act.

In the final chapter in Part I, “Experimental Philosophy of Action,” Thomas Nadelhoffer surveys work in the experimental philosophy of action. Many philosophers make claims about our everyday “folk” intuitions and judgments, and seek to develop theories that are broadly compatible with them. However, they have traditionally made these claims from the comfort of their armchairs, assuming that their own intuitions coincide with those of folk in general. Philosophers working in the new and rapidly developing field of experimental philosophy aim to correct this by

conducting systematic surveys of people's intuitions on matters relevant to philosophical problems. This experimental approach has been particularly influential within philosophy of action, and Nadelhoffer argues for its importance in exploring the nature of intentional action. He focuses on Joshua Knobe's "side effect" findings, which indicate that our judgments about whether or not an action is intentional are influenced by our moral evaluation of the action's outcome—a view that runs counter to most traditional philosophical accounts of intentional action. Nadelhoffer reviews the key models that have been proposed to explain Knobe's data and introduces some recent work that may shape the debate in the future. His overall aim is to provide the reader with a framework for understanding the field of experimental philosophy of action and encouragement to contribute to it.

## 2.2 Autonomy

In the recent literature on the philosophy of action, a distinction has arisen between two different ways in which agents exercise control over their actions, which François Schroeter has christened *basic executive control* and *autonomous control* respectively (Schroeter, 2004). Basic executive control is manifested whenever an agent exercises whatever sort of guidance is necessary to ensure the successful execution of their actions, and it is arguable that when we theorize about run-of-the-mill intentional action, we are concerned with basic executive control. Autonomous control, on the other hand, is a species of control that manifests our capacity for self-governance ("autonomous" literally means *self-governed*), and many writers claim that basic executive control, while necessary for autonomous control, is not sufficient for it. If that is right, then we shall need to supplement our theories of intentional action in order to get an account of autonomous control and, hence, of what J. David Velleman calls "full-blooded-action" (Velleman, 1992).

One of the most popular strategies here is to appeal to "endorsement" or "identification" as the necessary addition to executive control that will deliver autonomous control. According to this view, variants of which have been offered by, among others, Michael Bratman, Harry Frankfurt, and J. David Velleman, an agent exercises autonomous control over an action if the action issues from motivational states with which they identify or which they have endorsed. Although it is not the only strategy for accounting for autonomy, the identification strategy is one of the most popular. Still, there are problems with it, and other accounts of autonomy have been proposed, including ones that take basic executive control to be sufficient for autonomous control. The essays in Part II of the volume adopt varying approaches to autonomy while also exploring other issues.

The first essay, Bill Pollard's "Identification, Psychology and Habits," takes up the search for a theory of identification, which (following Frankfurt) he understands as an account of the difference between motives that are

external to the agent, such as drug cravings or sudden emotional impulses, and internal motives, with which the agent is identified. Pollard notes that existing accounts assume that for a motive to be internal it is necessary that it be suitably related to aspects of the agent's psychology—whether psychological states, such as higher-order desires, or psychological actions, such as decisions or judgments. Pollard rejects these accounts, arguing that they are subject to a regress, and proposes that for a motive to be internal it is sufficient that it expresses one of the agent's *habits*. If this is correct, then a theory of identification need not make reference to the agent's psychological states at all. Pollard also offers a definition of "habit" and defends a conception of agency according to which an agent is partly constituted by their habits.

Yonatan Shemmer's chapter "Mass Perverse Identification: An Argument for a Modest Concept of Autonomy" continues the themes of identification and autonomy. Shemmer notes that many philosophers subscribe to the so-called dependence thesis, according to which an agent performs an action autonomously only if they identify with the desire that motivates it. However, as Shemmer stresses, we very often act in ways that are not in accord with our value judgments—failing to donate to charity, shunning voluntary work, and so on. In such cases, he argues, we do not identify with the desires that motivate our actions, but the actions are autonomous all the same. Shemmer concludes that we must challenge the dependence thesis and accept that an action may be autonomous even if the agent does not identify with it. An action is autonomous, Shemmer proposes, provided it is part of a life that is composed of actions *most of which* the agent identifies with. Thus, ascriptions of autonomy, whether to agents or their actions, are always sensitive to global considerations. Shemmer defends this proposal from objections and argues that it comports with our core intuitions.

In his chapter "Cartesian Reflections on the Autonomy of the Mental," Matthew Soteriou turns to the role of mental agency in autonomy. Taking his lead from remarks in Descartes's *Meditations*, Soteriou focuses on two central but relatively neglected aspects of conscious thinking: *supposition*, in which a proposition that is not believed is temporarily adopted as a premise for the sake of argument, and *bracketing*, in which a proposition that is believed is temporarily excluded from use as a premise for the purpose of its epistemic evaluation. These acts, Soteriou argues, are not one-off events, but function as self-imposed constraints on our future reasoning, and in acknowledging and respecting them we manifest a distinctively human form of agency and autonomy.

### 2.3 Free agency

Part III of the volume is devoted to one of most prominent debates in the philosophy of action, and indeed in philosophy generally: the debate about free agency. There has been a resurgence of interest in this topic in recent years,

which has contributed to a growth of interest in a range of related issues in philosophy of action. In many respects, debates over free agency have proved more tractable than was previously expected, with concessions being made by various parties. What has happened, especially since the 1980s, is that there has been a shift in emphasis from the debate over the question of the compatibility of free will with determinism (although this is still prominent) to debates over competing models of free agency. At the same time, a stronger sense is emerging of how issues about the explanation of action and questions about the nature of free agency hang together, even if not always explicitly acknowledged in the literature.

In the opening essay of Part III, “The Revisionist Turn: A Brief History of Recent Work on Free Will,” Manuel Vargas focuses on the recent history of the free will debate, locating it within the context of metaphilosophical debates among analytic philosophers regarding the methods and goals of philosophical inquiry. In particular, Vargas examines the differences between those who see the free will problem as primarily a metaphysical issue and those whose work on the problem is motivated primarily by ethical concerns. The metaphysicians’ approach has elevated the role of intuitions in theorizing about free agency, whereas the ethicists have been more willing to adopt theories that are counter-intuitive but preferable on other grounds. Vargas sides with the ethicists, arguing that intuitions are a source of data when theorizing about free agency, but are not sacrosanct. Finally, as a way of highlighting some of the methodological challenges and options in theorizing about free agency, Vargas presents his own revisionist, responsibility-centric theory of free agency. He urges greater attention to the methodological matters he takes up in his essay in future theorizing about free will and moral responsibility.

In his essay, “Luck and Free Will,” Neil Levy focuses on the role of the notion of luck in the free will debate. Traditionally, the notion has been invoked in an argument against the libertarian view that free actions are undetermined. It is argued that an undetermined event is a matter of luck, and that actions that are a matter of luck do not manifest control or, consequently, freedom, on the part of the agent. Unlike many working in the field, who treat luck as a primitive notion or provide anemic accounts of it, Levy develops a robust analysis of luck, and he goes on to argue that it poses a challenge for all theories of free agency, be they libertarian or compatibilist.

Another recent development in the free will debate is the application of the methods of experimental philosophy, discussed previously in Thomas Nadelhoffer’s chapter. In their essay for this volume, “Experimental Philosophy on Free Will: An Error Theory for Incompatibilist Intuitions,” Eddy Nahmias and Dylan Murray survey recent work in this area and present a new study of their own. Their results point to an error theory for incompatibilist intuitions among ordinary folk. Laypeople, they argue,

confuse causal determinism with fatalism. In particular, most people who think causal determinism is incompatible with free will do so because they think it involves bypassing the means whereby agents exercise control. People who correctly understand causal determinism tend to regard it as compatible with free will and moral responsibility. This obviously poses a challenge for incompatibilists who hold that the folk are natural incompatibilists.

## 2.4 Action and agency in context

This final part includes three essays which in different ways push the boundaries of traditional philosophy of action and illustrate how issues of action and agency link up with wider concerns in philosophy of mind and cognitive science.

Tim Bayne's paper "Agentive Experiences as Pushmi-pullyu Representations," looks at the experience of agency—a topic that was, until recently, relatively neglected by both philosophers of action and philosophers of mind. In particular, Bayne asks how we should characterize the intentional structure and function of agentive experience. There are two established analyses here, *thetic* and *telic*. On the *thetic* analysis agentive experiences are descriptive, like beliefs; they represent how things are, and serve to track states of the world. On the *telic* analysis they are directive, like desires and intentions; they represent how we want things to be, and serve to direct action. Bayne examines both analyses before going on to propose a third, hybrid account, according to which agentive experiences are "pushmi-pullyu" representations, which have both *thetic* and *telic* structure. Bayne defends this view on empirical grounds, arguing that it best captures our current understanding of the cognitive role of agentive experiences.

In her paper, "Double Bookkeeping in Delusions: Explaining the Gap Between Saying and Doing," Lisa Bortolotti considers the role of psychotic delusions in the guidance of action—an issue that lies at the intersection of philosophy of action and the rapidly developing field of philosophy of psychopathology. The standard view of delusions is that they are instances of belief—a view known as the *doxastic* account. However, delusions sometimes fail to guide action in the way that beliefs do (a phenomenon referred to as "double bookkeeping"), and this suggests that their contents are not objects of genuine belief. Bortolotti defends the *doxastic* account, arguing, first, that many delusions do guide action, at least some of the time; second, that ordinary beliefs, too, sometimes fail to guide action; and, third, that failures to act upon delusions may be due to lack of motivation rather than to lack of commitment to their truth. Thus Bortolotti emphasizes the continuities between normal and abnormal cognition, shedding light on the roles of both belief and delusion.

The final paper in the volume, Sara Rachel Chant's "The Limits of Rationality in Collective Action Explanations," explores the nature of actions

performed by more than one agent. Analyses of such actions traditionally proceed by identifying a set of reasons possessed by each of the participating individuals which justify their taking part in the collective action. Chant agrees that many cases fit this model. However, she also identifies a set of “difficult cases” where, for structural reasons, no such rational choice explanation is available. She explores these cases in detail and suggests that, in order to explain them, we may have to accept that people have an innate propensity to cooperate in certain circumstances. In studying some kinds of collective action, Chant concludes, we may need to adopt a similar approach to that taken in research on anomalous cooperative and altruistic behavior, where rational choice explanations are likewise unavailable.

### 3 Conclusion

As noted earlier, we do not pretend to have collected a group of essays that addresses all the issues in the philosophy of action. In fact, there are prominent perennial debates that are not taken up in any of the essays collected here. To attempt to cover every important debate would require a much larger volume, and one that would not obviously do what this collection is meant to do—namely expose readers to the work of some younger, up-and-coming philosophers of action on both ancient debates and new ones. The contributors to this volume will be leaders in the field for years to come. And this volume will have served its purpose if it allows both those new to the philosophy of action and seasoned veterans in the field to become acquainted with the work of these exceptional philosophers.

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