The Concept of Human Action

Morris Weitz
Brandeis University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/phil_ex

Part of the Aesthetics Commons, Continental Philosophy Commons, Epistemology Commons, Ethics and Political Philosophy Commons, Feminist Philosophy Commons, History of Philosophy Commons, Logic and Foundations of Mathematics Commons, Metaphysics Commons, Philosophy of Mind Commons, and the Philosophy of Science Commons

Repository Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @Brockport. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophic Exchange by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @Brockport. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@brockport.edu.
MORRIS WEITZ

Professor of Philosophy

Brandeis University
THE CONCEPT OF HUMAN ACTION*
(For H. E. K.)

by

Morris Weitz

The assumption that a necessary condition of our intelligible use of the concept of human action is some set of definitive criteria which governs the correct employment of the concept has been effectively exposed and challenged by Hart, Hampshire, and Wittgenstein, among others. The traditional doctrine, first intimated by Plato in the Euthyphro, that in order to know or to state what "human action" means, to have the concept of a human action, to be able to use this term correctly, we must assume that human action has a nature or essence—a definitive set of properties shared by all legitimate members of the class of human actions—is no longer sacrosanct. Nor is it so clear that without a true definition or theory of human action we cannot render meaningful our attribution of moral and legal predicates.

What sort of concept is the concept of human action? This, it seems to me, is the crucial issue in the whole debate now flourishing as a major industry in philosophy, more central than what counts as action as against movement or even Wittgenstein's problem in subtraction. Is the concept closed, i.e., governed by a definitive set of necessary and sufficient criteria which corresponds to a definitive set of necessary and sufficient properties? Or is it open, in Hart's sense of essentially disputable (no undebatable criterion), or Wittgenstein's sense of family resemblance (a disjunctive set of non-necessary, non-sufficient conditions)? It is my claim, which I shall argue for in this essay, that the concept of human action is open in the sense that it has no necessary criteria, only sufficient criteria. Thus, "human action" differs radically from "contract," "moral," and "game," the three paradigms offered by Hart, Hampshire, and Wittgenstein. If I am correct in my reading of the logical grammar of the concept of human action, it follows that philosophical theories of human action are all of them unsuccessful attempts to lay down putatively necessary criteria for a concept whose use precludes such criteria.

To establish the logic of the concept of human action as open in the sense I have specified we must, as we do with other concepts, turn from the individual theories to their disagreements. For it is in the disagreements among the theories that one finds the clue to the specific kind of openness of the concept of human action. How can we explain, we must ask, the range of disagreement about what is a human action? Why is there disagreement not only, for example, about the nature of intention or agency in human action but about whether intention or agency (or anything else) is necessary for or even relevant to human action? Can this disagreement be reduced to true-false claims about what intention or agency is or about whether nothing is an action without the presence of intention or agency?

Philosophical theories of human action are purportedly true statements about

*All future publication rights reserved by the author.
THE CONCEPT OF HUMAN ACTION

the definitive properties of such action. These theories constitute real definitions and determine the corresponding criteria of our correct use of the concept. Hence, in asking whether human action is a closed concept we are in effect asking: Is there a true theory or real definition of human action? My own view, which I share with Hart, Hampshire, and Wittgenstein, is that there is no such theory; there cannot be; and there need not be. But I wish to go further than them to claim that the concept of human action has no necessary condition—hence not even the makings of a theory—but that it does have sufficient conditions; and that these are coterminous with the good reasons for something being a human action.

Charles Taylor, Richard Taylor, Roderick Chisholm, Abe Melden, Arthur Danto, Donald Davidson, among others, in their various writings, have attempted to state certain necessary or necessary and sufficient properties of human actions. For them a theory in the philosophical sense of a real definition is forthcoming. Have they succeeded in their attempts?

I begin with Charles Taylor's *The Explanation of Human Behaviour* (1964), which formulates the complete theory of action and its implications for experimental psychology. In his book Taylor first distinguishes between the inanimate and the animate and, within the animate, between purposive behavior as against mere process or movement. This latter distinction, he claims, is both irreducibly ontological and conceptual. That is, purposive behavior exemplifies a certain category of event and order in the world which is amenable only to a certain kind of teleological explanation. That there is such an order is a coherent and empirically testable doctrine; to which he adds that, because of the available evidence in psychology, it is also a true doctrine. Mechanistic views such as behaviorism, that reduce this doctrine to conceptual absurdity and consequently the issue of teleology versus mechanism to the non-empirical, indeed to the incoherent, rest for him on inadequate causal explanations of purposive behavior. Rather than teleology being incoherent, perhaps it is mechanism—which as a doctrine of science is inherently intentional—that is incoherent. Taylor implies that it is incoherent without, I think, realizing that if it is, there cannot be any empirical issue between mechanism and teleology. In his searching effort to establish the intelligibility of teleology against the attack upon it by mechanism, in order to render the issue between them empirical, he unfortunately reverses the attack so that it becomes not at all clear throughout his argument that the issue between teleology and mechanism is empirical and not just a conceptual muddle.

At any rate for Taylor human actions are a type of purposive behavior. What, then, does he mean by purposive behavior? It is an event which is observable and whose occurrence depends upon its being required for some goal. It is therefore a non-contingent, sufficient condition for that goal. Hence to say of an event that it is a piece of purposive behavior is to place that event in a system of events with its self-imposed order which tends toward a goal. In purposive behavior, then, the behavior is a function not of an antecedent event or of a disposition but of a system of events including its environment. That this behavior is such a function makes it teleological, requiring the formulation of teleological laws.
MORRIS WEITZ

About events non-contingently tending toward certain ends.

Of immediate concern is Taylor’s account of human action. He begins with what he calls the “strong” sense of human action and lays down its set of definitive criteria. For anything to be such an action, it must be goal-directed, in the extended sense of emitting goal-directedness; it must be intended, hence caused by an agent or a person, who is free and is responsible for what he does; it must be intentional in the sense that it involves the idea of the goal desired; and, most important, the intention must be a non-contingent, sufficient condition for the goal, bringing it about.

Behavior that is neither goal-directed nor intended, such as blinking, sneezing, or doodling, may be classified as action, he allows, but only in a loose sense. However, nothing that is not a piece of behavior can be an action for him. Nor, he claims, can behavior that results in a goal but is not intended count as an action. For example, if I kill a man while in a fit, I kill him unintentionally hence, according to Taylor, I did not act, therefore, I did not perform an action. My intention to kill him must be a non-contingent, sufficient condition, required for the achievement of the goal, before my killing him counts as an action.

This claim seems to me mistaken, supported only by a stipulated, restrictive use of “action.” For in this example it certainly accords with ordinary usage to say that because I killed him, I did perform an action—of killing—even though I am not responsible, since I was having a fit when I did it. Perhaps I did not act, for I was acted upon, but I did kill him: perform an action, “Action,” at least if we follow ordinary usage, does not entail “act,” “intention,” or “responsibility.”

Taylor offers another kind of behavior in which there is a goal with no intention: those cases in which one intends goal x but achieves goal z instead. Here we can still talk of actions, though qualified by terms such as “inadvertently,” “unknowingly,” “in ignorance,” etc. For example, Socrates, it was said, intended to teach the youth but corrupted them instead. Here, if we do not deny the corruption altogether (and the action of corruption), we can qualify it by some term of excuse, such as “unknowingly.” However, in so doing, we qualify the intention, not the goal.

Recognizing and accepting then these two exceptions—of non-intentional, non-intentional, non-purposive behavior (e.g., doodling) and of behavior with a differently intended goal (e.g., Socrates corrupting rather than teaching the youth) as limited or as qualified actions—Taylor identifies human action with purposive behavior: behavior intentionally directed toward a goal.

Intention, then for Taylor, is a necessary condition or property of human action. It is also central in that it is a sufficient condition of the goal. This means that intention is not an antecedent cause of the goal. Rather it is a non-contingent requirement, amenable only to teleological explanation. Thus, “I did x because I intended to” is not analyzable into “Intending x was contingently followed by doing x.” For “part of what we mean by ‘intending X’ [is] that, in the absence of interfering factors, it is followed by doing X. I could not be said to intend X if, even with no obstacles or other countervailing factors, I still didn’t do it. Thus my intention is not a causal antecedent of my behaviour.”
THE CONCEPT OF HUMAN ACTION

(p. 33).

Is “‘Intending x’ entails ‘Doing X, unless there are obstacles or other counter
vailing factors’” a conceptual, necessary, a priori truth? It is not. “Intending to
do x” does entail “Doing something”—otherwise we have no criteria for “intend
ing”—but it does not entail “Doing x unless there are obstacles or other counter
vailing factors.” If I do not do x, where there are none of these factors, it does
not follow that I did not intend to do x in the way that it does follow, I think,
that if I do nothing, I did not intend to do x. Moreover, if “I did x because I
intended to” is a conceptual, non-contingent truth, then so is “I did x because I
had to.” For it is conceptually impossible for me to have had to do x without
doing x. Mechanistic Determinism can therefore also serve as a paradigm of
Taylor’s teleological explanation!

For Taylor then the concept of a human action is one that characterizes a
class of purposive behavior. The concept is governed by a set of necessary
criteria: goal-directedness, intention, intention bringing about the goal, agency,
responsibility, and intentionality. These reduce to the overall criterion of an
intention, in a non-contingent way, bringing about a goal. Because these criteria
are all there are, they function as necessary and sufficient—definitive—for some
ting being a human action.

That human action is necessarily purposive; that it is necessarily intentionally
goal-directed; and that intentional behavior is irreducibly teleological, as I have
suggested and as others have argued, are challengeable. Even our ordinary use of
action concepts, hence of the concept of action, covers cases of action which
satisfy none of Taylor’s criteria. Killing a man in a fit is one example. So perhaps
is falling in love, which is not a movement like making love, nor a state like being
married, nor a condition like catching or having the measles. Falling in love, even
if we have not read Proust, is at least sometimes, to some people, something one
does. It is an act that issues in an action which need not be either intenc
on or goal-directed. It may not be a strong case of action like getting married but it
is not obviously a loose case or no case either. It seems to me to be one of the
clear cases, of which killing a man in a fit is another, where intention or goal
simply drops out. It may even be a case of a human action where there are not
statable criteria of action, as there are such criteria for falling in love, and there
fore an action for which no good reasons are possible or to be expected.

In his definition of the class of strong actions, I think Taylor provides at best
only sufficient criteria for something being an action. That something is inten
tional or goal-directed is a good reason for its being or being called an action.
But that intention and goal-directedness are irreducibly teleological, or that
Taylor’s core concept of strong actions is coextensive with the class of clear
cases of human actions, or that the class of clear cases coincides with Taylor’s
strong actions plus the one exception of qualified action he allows, is, if not a
stipulation, extremely questionable.

For Richard Taylor, in his book, Action and Purpose (1966), the concept of
human action is indefinable. It cannot be defined because it cannot be analyzed.
That is, no statement about a human action can be shown to be equivalent to a
statement about anything other than the action. Human action, however, can be
described and in this way be distinguished from everything else. Further, although indefinable, the concept of a human action is absolutely clear and basic, one that all of us possess as we reflect upon human experience. In the spirit of G. E. Moore, he says that all of us know what human action is—that we act and are not only acted upon—even though we are not able to say what it is or how we know that we act. Philosophical reflection—not introspection, observation, or speculation—reveals action as an ultimate category of human experience.

Richard Taylor's basic dichotomy within the animate is that of action versus process, not (as it is for Charles Taylor) of purposive behavior versus movement. The former dichotomy and not the latter is basic, he argues, because some acts can be purposeless, though no purposive behavior can be without an act. I can, he points out, wiggle my finger with no purpose or goal: what I do may be pointless but I can and may do it; therefore it is an act.

Action, act, activity—these seem to function as synonyms for R. Taylor—are uniquely human. Process, movement, event characterize man, the animals, and the inanimate. The main philosophical problem of action is to supply "... the difference between mere bodily motions and those that represent acts" (p. 89).

What, then, is the difference between an act and a movement? This is Taylor's fundamental question in his attempt to describe, if not to give an analysis of, human action. Both acts and movements are subject to causation, but to causation in a non-Humean sense that ultimately rests on the unanalyzable, yet absolutely clearly understood fact of one thing A making another thing B to occur. "A was the cause of B," applied to both acts and movements, cannot reduce to any set of statements which do not repeat the initial statement in another form, such as "A made B to happen by virtue of his power to do so."

Thus the difference between act and movement does not lie in their different kinds of causation for they are both characterized by necessitation and power: what in traditional terms has been called "efficient causality." The difference between act and movement, then, is that acts are events or movements that are caused—made to happen—by human beings and movements are events that are caused by other events. The concept of human agency does not derive from that of event causality; rather, Taylor says, it is the other way round.

That human actions involve human agency rather than causation among events, and that it is this agency that differentiates act from movement, Taylor purports to prove by the non-reducibility of statements about human agency to statements about events. Can the "can" in "I can move my finger" be interpreted as logically contingent (e.g., "A triangle can be acute"), causally contingent (e.g., "Atoms can swerve from their path"), epistemically contingent (e.g., "This can be the restaurant we ate in last year"), or hypothetically possible (e.g., "This acid can dissolve a piece of zinc")—the four other kinds of possibilities expressed by "can"? It cannot. Taylor claims, for in saying "I can move my finger," I affirm that I have the power to move my finger whether I move it or not. It is up to me, within my power, whether I move it or no. It is this notion, that all of us understand though no one can say what it is, that "... is never embodied in the meaning of 'can' as it is used with reference to physical things; for it never makes sense to say that it is up to a volume of acid
THE CONCEPT OF HUMAN ACTION

whether it dissolves a lump of zinc . . . " (pp. 55-56; italics in original).

Nor is the analysis of “I can move my finger” in terms of a special kind of causal relationship among events, namely, an internal event such as a volition, a desire, a wish, a choice, or an intention, and its external effect, a plausible alternative to the irreducibility of human agency. And the reason it is not plausible, Taylor says, is that it postulates a non-existent entity: that is, there are no such events. Rather the criterion of the truth of any hypothetical of the form, “I can move my finger if I will, want, intend, wish, or choose to,” is the effect itself; i.e., the moving of the finger. Indeed, Taylor adds: “Our entire criterion for saying what he wanted (or tried, or intended, or whatnot) to do, is what he in fact did” (p. 52; italics in original). A want is not the cause of a doing, it is conceptually entailed by that doing.” I did x because I wanted to” may give a reason but it never gives a cause of our actions.

If we turn from human ability to human action, i.e., from “I can move my hand” to “I move my hand,” the same radical distinction between action and event can be drawn. In a situation, for example, in which I make a mark with a pencil, it is true (1) that I move my hand; (2) that my hand moves; and (3) that my hand moves a pencil. (1) entails (2) but (2) does not entail (1); (3) entails (2) but (2) does not entail (3); (1) involves the idea of an active being, (2) involves only the idea of an event, change, or motion, and (3) involves a causal relation, without agency, between two things. But most important, (1), which describes an event as an act, includes an essential, irreducible reference to an active agent who is doing something.

This reference to active agency, rooted in human ability, is, though indefinable, absolutely essential in human action, which is also indefinable. Human acts or actions can be characterized in other ways, e.g., they can be commanded, requested, or forbidden; they may involve change or absence or cessation of change; they need not be overt. But they must embody agent causality. Thus, to describe “. . . anything as an act there must be an essential reference to an agent as the performer or author of that act, not merely in order to know whose act it is, but in order even to know that it is an act” (p. 109).

Taylor’s next point is that the doctrine of human agency—that I am the cause of my actions and that I am not reducible to any series of events—is entirely different from determinism or its denial. For both entail the distinction between act and event. Consider the schema: (1) e occurs; (2) Something makes e occur; (3) A does e; (4) Something makes A do e. Determinism and its denial are theses about (4) and in order to be affirmed or to be true entail (3). Moreover, this schema, in which entailment proceeds from (4) to (1) but not from (1) to (4), illustrates once again Taylor’s central claim about “the absolute difference between bodily motions which are and those which are not acts” (p. 124), since all four statements are about the same finger motion, yet different in their meanings, as their entailments demonstrate. (1) and (2) need not refer to acts. But (3) and (4) must, with an essential reference to an agent as the cause of the act.

Human action, thus for Taylor, is necessarily something done that is produced by an agent. All he allows this to mean is that a human being—not a self,
MORRIS WEITZ

an ego, or a mind—makes something happen because he has the power to do so. Human action is man as efficient cause and not some event or set of events which are correlated with others.

Human beings act. For Taylor they are the causes of what they do. Sometimes they act in order to do or to get something else: to achieve a certain goal or to realize an aim or a purpose. Here action is purposive. And for him all purposive behavior is action, though not all action is purposive behavior. Only human beings, he says, act and are purposive. In their goal-directedness they initiate the direction. Machines that are goal-directed are so merely in a derivative sense in that they are designed by humans to aim at certain targets or goals: but machines do not act or initiate anything. Even so there are no behavioral or observational criteria for distinguishing purposive from non-purposive behavior. This distinction, as in the case of causal agency versus passive movement, is made only by each of us as we reflect upon our actions that are done with some aim or goal in view.

Purpose, therefore, for R. Taylor, is another clear, ultimate category of human experience, understood by all, even though no one can say what it is or how we know it. Furthermore, the concept of purpose, which all of us are able to use to characterize purposive behavior, is also indefinable, incapable of further analysis. Along with agency, it is fundamental in any true philosophy of human nature. Although purpose is an indefinable concept, he adds, we can nevertheless attribute purposeful behavior to human beings as acting for the sake of certain goals. Hence it is to be conceived of as a means-end or teleological relation. Thus I act when I do something. I act purposively when I do something in order to get something else.

This purposive behavior, he argues, also cannot be reduced to a causal relation among events, specifically, internal events or states, such as purposes, aims, or desires, together with certain beliefs about how to realize them and their effects. For, as he does with wants, choices, wishes, etc., in dealing with agent causality, he denies that there are such internal events.

But he also argues here that the causal explanation of purposive behavior radically confuses reasons with causes. Purposive explanation of purposive behavior which, he insists, is explanation because it renders intelligible this behavior by citing reasons—goals, aims, purposes—differs completely from causal explanation. Statements such as “Jones went to the pantry to get some salami” are teleological in that they refer to ends and are true or false independently of there being these ends. On the other hand, statements such as “Jones fell because he slipped” are genuinely causal and are true or false dependently on there being these causes.

Taylor’s schema also implies the irreducibility of reasons to causes. If, for example, I do e in order to get f (Taylor’s 3), it may or may not be true that something made me do e in order to get f (Taylor’s 4). If (4) is true, a causal explanation is forthcoming; if (4) is false, it is not. But in either case, (4) differs from (3) and (3) does not entail (4). To affirm that (3) is a causal relation between events is to confuse (3) with (4) or, worse, to assume falsely that (3) entails (4). The reasons cited for (3), therefore, are not like the causes given for
THE CONCEPT OF HUMAN ACTION

(4). Taylor thus draws a fundamental, irreducible distinction between reasons and causes in the explanation of human behavior. Causal explanation of movements has its place, but it can accommodate neither the agency nor the purposiveness of uniquely human actions.

Before we consider other theories of human action, perhaps a summary of agreements and disagreements in C. and R. Taylor would be helpful. First, it is important to validate my claim that R. Taylor, in spite of his thesis of the unanalyzable, indefinable character of human action, offers a theory, or at least the beginnings of a theory in the sense of a necessary property without which nothing is a human action. It is certainly true that he rejects the analyzability of human action or of its corresponding concept. However, the reasons he offers—that causal agency is central to both action and purposive behavior, that purpose also is central to the latter, that neither agency nor purpose can be further analyzed, and that criteria cannot be given for the understanding of agency and purpose—do not show that human action has no distinguishable necessary property or that the concept has no recognizable criteria. Indeed, if it did show this, Taylor would have no human action to describe. What he does show—if his thesis about human action is true—is that it is an absolutely necessary property of all human actions that they are caused by a human being and that this agent causality is not reducible to event causality. Given his thesis, he cannot deny that agent causality is a necessary feature of all actions, distinguishing them from movements; what he can and does deny is that this causality is definable. Consequently, I take R. Taylor to affirm as his basic claim about human actions that they are necessarily caused by an agent and when these actions are purposive, they possess two necessary properties, both unanalyzable and indefinable, namely, agency and purpose.

How, now, does his thesis compare with C. Taylor’s? For the latter, human action is necessarily more than being caused by an agent. It must also have intention as the factor that brings about a certain goal. Here, then, is one major disagreement: C. Taylor says that intention is a necessary feature of human action; R. Taylor denies that it is, claiming that causal agency alone is necessary, although both are necessary for purposive behavior. For C. Taylor, no action can lack intention and purpose; for R. Taylor, some actions have neither. For the second, killing a man intentionally is still an action, as is wiggling one’s finger with no point whatever. For the first, neither is an action, because it lacks intention.

What kind of disagreement is this? Is it ontological—about what is a common denominator of all members of the class of human actions? Is it conceptual—about what is a necessary criterion of the concept of a human action? Or is it, as some philosophers maintain, a verbal wrangle about different stipulated uses of the term, “human action”? If it is the latter, C. and R. Taylor do not disagree about action; they simply differ in how they wish to use a word, the one choosing to restrict it to purposive behavior, the other, to extend it to all cases of human agency, regardless of purpose. This is a basic question. I shall return to it when we have the full range of disagreement among philosophers about what is necessary in human action. However, the particular disagreement between C.
and R. Taylor—whether there are or can be acts without intention or purpose—seems, at least on its face, to be more about the correct criteria of the concept of a human action than it does about mere differences of criteria for two different concepts that unfortunately are denoted by the same word.

There are other disagreements as well as agreements between C. and R. Taylor. Both distinguish sharply between action and movement, though C. Taylor allows that this cleavage applies to some non-humans as well. For him, dogs and cats can act intentionally; for R. Taylor, they can neither act intentionally nor act, only human beings can. Both insist on the irreducible, teleological character of human action, although R. Taylor confines the teleological to one kind of human action—the purposive. Moreover, for C. Taylor, teleological behavior is observable (I see you shake hands just as I see your hands moving) and it is to be interpreted as a non-contingent requirement for some goal. It is also explicable in terms of teleological laws. Whereas for R. Taylor, it is not observable; rather teleological behavior is imputed to what we do as a means to some end. We can cite reasons in explaining what we do, and in this sense explain our actions as purposeful; but we cannot formulate laws about non-contingent events. They differ consequently on the issue of mechanism versus teleology. For C. Taylor this issue revolves round the reducibility of non-contingent purposive behavior to contingently related movements; for R. Taylor the reduction of acts to events is logically impossible for, according to his schema, “I did event e” (3) is not equivalent to or entailed by “Event e occurred” or “Some event d made event e to occur” (1) and (2). Indeed, he transforms this issue of mechanism versus teleology into that of determinism versus libertarianism, both of which doctrines entail the cogency of action statements. Of course he also agrees with C. Taylor that a causal account, without agency, of purposive behavior, is impossible; consequently, if the mechanism-teleology issue is conceived of as one about a competing causal account of “I did e” (3), both agree that mechanism is incoherent and that teleology is true, though they give entirely different reasons for their claims.

There is one issue R. Taylor raises which is not discussed by C. Taylor but is debated by other philosophers: that reasons for our purposive actions are never causes of these actions. We shall come to it presently.

Finally, in our initial summary, it should be noted once again that whatever is stated as a necessary condition or criterion for a human action—whether it really is necessary or not—must be able to serve as a condition or criterion. It is no good saying that intention, goal-directedness, or agency is necessary for human action unless we are told what it is. In this regard, C. Taylor does clarify his notion of intention; and whether we agree with him or not that it is necessary for human action, at least we know what he means by it.

What about R. Taylor’s notion of causal agency? He says that all of us know what it is, even though no one can say what it is or how we know what it is: each of us just knows and that is the end of the matter.

As attractive as this claim may be that each of us is in this privileged epistemic situation, it is replete with the obvious yet enormous difficulties concerning the learning and the teaching of such a concept which, for Taylor, is both private
THE CONCEPT OF HUMAN ACTION

and has no behavioral, observational criteria. Unlike the concepts of desire, wish, want, choice, decision, and intention that for Taylor denote external, not internal, occurrences, from which they derive their entire meanings. Taylor’s concept of agency seems to function as innately private with no criteria at all. If this is so, it is notoriously difficult, perhaps as some philosophers argue impossible, for agency to be a concept at all. Agency of course may still be a property of human action, perhaps even necessary, but this property cannot serve as a criterion of the concept of human action if agency remains a concept with no criterion of its own.

In “Freedom and Action,” Chisholm lays bare what he designates the descriptive as against the imputative element of the concept of act and action. Like C. and R. Taylor, he affirms that human agency is basic. Man is the immanent cause of his actions, not a transeunt cause which is an event that makes another event happen. If, say, I move my hand, I act, I do something—I move my hand. But in moving my hand I also make something happen in my brain as well as in the surrounding air. In the way in which I do something when I move my hand I do not do anything to or with my brain or to or with the surrounding air. What I do when I move my hand besides move my hand is immanently cause a brain event which transeuntly causes my hand to move that in turn transeuntly cause the air particles to move.

When I move my hand I am the immanent cause of my hand’s moving—of my action—as well as the immanent cause of a cerebral event. Chisholm sees no difficulty here in his concept of an immanent cause that includes both agent-action causality and agent-event causality. Instead he concentrates on the difficulty of distinguishing talk of events that just happen and events that are caused either by an agent or by another event. Thus it is not the distinction between immanent and transeunt causation that is suspect but that of causation versus mere occurrence. Once we grant the latter distinction, which of course is not restricted to the philosophy of human action, and which Chisholm says is unavoidable if we are to persist in talking about causation in the world, “... the only answer that one can give [to what differentiates these two kinds of causation] is this—that in the one case the agent was the cause of A’s happening, and in the other case event B was the cause of A’s happening” (p. 22).

As unclear as the distinction between causation and mere occurrence is, Chisholm immediately adds, the concept of immanent causality is more clear than that of transeunt causality. Indeed the latter is derived from the former. And the former is rooted in our experience of causal efficacy. “... it is only by understanding our own causal efficacy, as agents, that we can grasp the concept of cause at all” (p. 11; italics in original). But now, one may ask of Chisholm: if we are immediately acquainted with causal efficacy, aren’t we immediately acquainted with ourselves as immanent causes, in which case we do know what causation is? Then we are either acquainted with mere happenings as distinct from causation or we are not. If we are, Chisholm’s difficulty about differentiating them vanishes; if we are not, it still vanishes, for now the difference lies in causation which we immediately experience and occurrence which
we do not but infer instead. The new difficulty becomes that of distinguishing between immanent causality with which we are acquainted and transenent causality as against mere occurrence, both of which are inferred. If our concept of cause rests on causal efficacy we do not need the distinction between causation and mere happening to validate immanent causality, at least in its primary form when I do A rather than when I make B (e.g., a cerebral event) to happen. Of course we do need the distinction to validate the concept of transenent causality since that concept presupposes it.

Causal agency is one descriptive element of the concept of an act. This, I take it, is Chisholm's claim that a necessary condition for something being an act or action or for the concept of a human action is (exactly what it is to C. and R. Taylor) an essential reference to an agent or a human being as the cause of what he does. As Chisholm puts it, "at least one of the events that is involved in any act is caused, not by any other event, but by the agent, by the man" (p. 29).

The second descriptive element of the concept of an act is that it is essentially teleological: "Action involves **endeavor or purpose**, one thing occurring in order that some other thing may occur" (p. 29; italics in original).

Like C. and R. Taylor, Chisholm rejects the reduction of teleological or purposive action to action as the effect of antecedent desire and relevant belief about realizing that desire. And like C. Taylor but in major disagreement with R. Taylor, he denies that there can be an action without purpose since, for him, one cannot act at all without endeavor or purpose. The concept of act or action is necessarily intentional: to act is necessarily to endeavor to make happen. R. Taylor's distinction between "I raise my arm" and "I raise my arm in order to get your attention" remains but it is no longer that of action as against purposive action; rather it is of one kind of purposive action, namely, endeavoring to make my arm go up, as against another, namely, endeavoring to make my arm go up for the purpose of getting your attention.

Having stated the two necessary descriptive elements of the concept of an act, Chisholm defines the further descriptive concepts of (1) undertaking or endeavoring to make a certain thing happen, (2) undertaking to make something happen for the purpose of making some other thing happen, and (3) a successful intentional action, each in terms of the undefined locution indicating that the agent is a cause and that the action is purposive or teleological. This is the locution:

There is a state of affairs A and a state of affairs B, such that, at time t, he makes B happen in the endeavor to make A happen.

Or more briefly:

He makes B happen in the endeavor to make A happen.

Or, in symbolic notation:

\[(Ea) \ (Eb) \ M \ (b, a)\].
THE CONCEPT OF HUMAN ACTION

In this locution, "making happen" is a transitive, asymmetrical relation; the states of affairs referred to may be unchanges as well as changes and they may be complex; and the subject term of "makes happen" may designate a state of affairs or a person.

If I raise my arm, Chisholm says, "make happen" applies to my arm going up, certain antecedent events inside my body, and certain subsequent external events, such as the movement of air particles.

"In the endeavor to make A happen" is intentional as well as purposive. That is, one can endeavor to make A happen without thereby actually making A happen. Thus we cannot infer "He made something happen in the endeavor to make B happen" from "He made something happen in the endeavor to make A happen and he did thereby make A happen" and "A is the same concrete event as B:" and if one makes something B happen in the endeavor to make something A happen, he can know immediately or directly that he is making something happen in the endeavor to make A happen, although he may not know that he is making B happen even if A = B.

Action, thus, for Chisholm is describable in terms of making things happen in the endeavor to make other things happen—his undefined locution. When I raise my arm, then, I make something happen in the endeavor to make my arm go up. I do not make something happen in the endeavor to raise my arm. To act is to endeavor to make happen, not to endeavor to act.

What, now, is endeavoring or undertaking to make a certain thing happen? How can this descriptive concept be defined in terms of \((E_a) \land (E_b) \land M (b, a)\)? Let "\(U t a\)" symbolize "He undertakes at \(t\) to make \(A\) happen." Then we have as:

Definition 1: \(U t a = Df. (E_b) \land (b, a)\).

From this definition it follows that the agent in undertaking to make event \(A\) happen, does make \(B\) happen; he knows that he undertakes to make \(A\) happen, though he may not know what \(B\) is or whether he is succeeding in making \(A\) happen; and it may be that he is not succeeding in making \(A\) happen. Moreover, "undertaking" as defined does not imply contract or commitment, exertion or effort, or trial and error. Like other intentional concepts, such as approval or desire, "undertaking" may take a conjunctive state of affairs as an object without thereby taking each of its conjuncts as objects. Thus a pianist who undertakes to play a sonata undertakes to play the entire sonata as well as the first measure without then undertaking to play the last measure. The sonata has constituent measures, \(A, B, C, \ldots N\); the pianist undertakes to play the whole conjunction, including the first of the conjuncts, \(A\), without thereby undertaking the others.

"Undertaking to make something \(B\) happen for the purpose of making something \(A\) happen"—Chisholm's second concept involved in describing actions—can now be defined. Let "\(P t (b, a)\)" symbolize "He undertakes at \(t\) to make \(B\) happen for the purpose of making \(A\) happen" and "bCa" symbolize "\(B\) makes \(A\) happen." Then:
Definition 2: \( P \uparrow (b,a) \equiv \text{Df. } U \uparrow (a \& b \& bCa) \).

According to this definition, we may describe someone as undertaking to make something \( B \) happen for the purpose of making something \( A \) happen without thereby implying either that he makes \( A \) happen or that he makes \( B \) happen. It also rules out as cases of this second kind of action situations in which an agent simply undertakes to make \( B \) make \( A \) happen. Thus to satisfy the definition, the agent must undertake at \( t \) to make \( B \) happen, to make \( A \) happen, and to make \( B \) make \( A \) happen.

Chisholm's third concept—"a completely successful undertaking"—can be defined as follows. Let "\( I \uparrow a \)" symbolize "He made \( A \) happen in the way in which, at \( t \), he intended."

Definition 3: \( I \uparrow a \equiv \text{Df. } M \uparrow (a,a) \& (c) [P \uparrow (c,a) \rightarrow M \uparrow (c,c)]. \)

This definition satisfies the condition that the agent makes happen all of those things which, at \( t \), he undertook for the purpose of making \( A \) happen. Consequently it rules out the extreme cases of inadvertent success or happy failure—symbolizable as "\( M \uparrow (a,a) \)"—which means that the definition applies to the whole class of cases in which the agent makes, at \( t \), \( A \) happen in the endeavor to make \( A \) happen, but does not apply to those cases in which the agent makes, at \( t \), all the things he endeavored to make happen for the purpose of making \( A \) happen. That is, the definition rules out, for example, the case of an assassin who inadvertently runs over his intended victim—an inadvertent success, as well as the case of an assassin whose escaping victim is killed by an unexpected stroke of lightning—a happy failure; since in both cases the assassin may have undertaken without success, say, to shoot his victim.

Chisholm sets out to define the descriptive element of the concept of an act or action. He does this in terms of his undefined locution about an agent making one thing happen in order to make another thing happen. Thus agency and purposiveness, whether themselves undefined or indefinable or neither, function as necessary conditions of the concept of action according to Chisholm. Nothing therefore can be a human action unless it is caused by an agent who endeavors to make something happen. Actions include an agent as immanent cause; at least one event, made to happen by the agent; and the intentional element that the agent made the event to happen in order to make another event happen. This means then that nothing can be an action which does not satisfy Chisholm's first definition: the agent makes \( B \) happen by undertaking at \( t \) to make \( A \) happen. In the way in which something can be an action without the agent undertaking to make something happen for the purpose of making some other thing happen (Definition 2) or without the agent being completely successful in his undertaking (Definition 3), nothing can be an action without undertaking to make a certain thing happen (Definition 1). If this is correct, then for Chisholm the concept of an act or an action contains at least one defined element as well as two undefined elements.

Well, now, is it true, as Chisholm claims, that every human action includes at
THE CONCEPT OF HUMAN ACTION

least one event or state of affairs B that is made to happen by an agent who makes B happen in order to make event or state of affairs A happen? If we grant the intelligibility of his concepts of agency as immanent cause and of making happen, Chisholm’s thesis I think does cover certain unexceptionable examples of the class of human actions. There are indeed many things that we do which include as their constituents things that we make happen in order that other things will happen. In so far as there are good reasons for some things being human actions or being called “human actions,” Chisholm provides at least one good reason, and thereby one sufficient condition of the concept of a human action. But has he also discovered a necessary condition—a common denominator of all human actions? Are there, can there be, human actions without agency, causation, or intentionality?

R. Taylor, we remember, claims that some human actions are not intentional. When I move my hand I make it happen that my hand moves but I do not do something else in the endeavor to move my hand. Of course lots of things may happen or may be made to happen but I do not make them happen.

Other philosophers go further: Some acts or actions, they say, are caused. They are caused by me. But “I am the cause of my act or action” neither is equivalent to nor entails “I make B happen in order to make A happen,” since the first may be true and the second false. If, for example, I unintentionally kill a man, I cause him to die. In Chisholm’s terms, I make happen his death. But is my unintentionally killing a man the same as or does it even entail that I made happen, say, shooting him in his heart (B), in order to make happen his death (A)? I cannot kill him without making something happen. But what I make happen—either the shooting or his death—need not happen in order that something else happens.

Finally, there are some acts (“deeds” Chisholm calls them) in which the agent, some philosophers point out, does nothing. Or, perhaps more cautiously, the agent neither makes B happen in order to make A happen nor does he make B happen in order to prevent A from happening. If my walk is iced, I do nothing to clear it, and the postman slips and breaks his leg on my walk, I break the law, and I may even be said to have caused the postman to fall and break his leg. Now, whether I did something or did not, I performed an action—of breaking the law. How odd it sounds to say that I broke the law by making some event B (which event?) happen in order to make another event A (which event?) happen. Whatever actions are, there are in many cases certain redescriptions of events that function as action reports for which the language of making B happen in order to make A happen is very strained indeed. Chisholm’s concept of action consequently plays an important role in the description of some actions; but it has little if any role to play in the redescription of all action.

In his essay, “Freedom and Action,” Chisholm says that his third definition—of a successful undertaking—applies to what A. Danto calls “basic actions.” This cannot be correct since for Danto, if there are actions, there must be basic actions; whereas for Chisholm, if there are actions, there need not be successful undertakings. In Danto’s format, basic action is essential for all actions in exactly the same transitive, asymmetrical way that an agent making B happen in
order to make A happen is essential for all actions according to Chisholm. In fact Chisholm, it seems to me, must reject Danto’s concept of a basic action since the latter is defined as an agent simply performing an action, e.g., moving his arm, without any teleological intent. To introduce teleological intent is to move from basic action to action for Danto: from Danto’s (4) to his (1) in his schema of (1) X\(\psi\)'s by\(\phi\) ing; (2) X\(\psi\)'s because y makes him do so; (3) X\(\psi\)'s because of a nervous disorder; and (4) X (simply)\(\phi\)'s. Danto’s basic action, thus, is more like R. Taylor’s (3) “I move my finger” than it is like Chisholm’s “I raise my arm” as entailing “I endeavor to make my arm go up (A) by making something else (B) happen.” In rejecting R. Taylor’s distinction between action and purposive action, Chisholm denies as well Danto’s notion of a basic action, i.e., an agent-caused, non-teleological action.

Here, then, is another important disagreement; if there are basic actions and Danto says that there are, are they necessarily teleological as well as agent-caused? Danto and R. Taylor claim that basic actions (Taylor calls them “simple”) are not teleological. Chisholm and C. Taylor agree that there are basic actions in Danto’s sense of events caused by an agent without the agent having to do anything else to cause them; but they insist that they are intentional.

This issue whether there are basic actions and what they are is of course tied to the whole problem of what is a human action; I shall consider both in their proper place. Just here, however, Danto’s essay, “Basic Actions,” is relevant because it is yet another attempt to secure the concept of human action in agent causality. For Danto, an agent performs an action if he makes something happen. And there are two ways that he can make something happen: by first making something else happen; or by making something happen without first making anything else happen. Both are actions. However, the latter is basic in that the former entails the latter but the latter does not entail the former. “Basic action,” thus, refers to what we can and do perform without having to perform anything else as the cause of what we do. My moving my foot, but not my foot moving, is a basic action; my kicking a stone or the stone moving is not. Nevertheless I cannot kick the stone without moving my foot. Kicking the stone (or moving it) is the effect of moving my foot. My moving foot causes the stone to move as an effect of the cause. When I move my foot in order to kick the stone, I do not do anything in order to move my foot, I just move it.

A basic action, then, is not uncaused. Rather it is caused—by the agent. In Danto’s schematism, a basic action is an event (e) that is caused by an individual (M) where e is not the effect of an antecedent event as its cause but the effect of an agent.

Danto supports his claim that there are basic actions by a direct appeal to experience: to our human repertoire of these actions. All of us, for example, if we are normal, know how to and how we move our arms. What we cannot do is to explain how it is done, for there is nothing in the explanans which is not already present in the explicandum. Basic actions are simply given.

Danto also supports his claim with an argument that certain descriptions of events yield what he calls a full declension of them while other descriptions do not. Danto separates this argument from the appeal to experience. But it is not
THE CONCEPT OF HUMAN ACTION

clear that the ramifications of this argument do not call into question some of the findings of the appeal to experience. Consider, to begin with, the descriptions, "moving an arm" and "moving a stone." Danto is right in saying that we can decline the first but not the second in the following way:

(1) M causes his arm to move, e.g., by hitting it with his other arm.

(2) Someone or something other than M causes M's arm to move, e.g., by striking it.

(3) M suffers from a nervous disorder, so his arm moves spasmodically.

(4) M moves his arm without suffering from a nervous disorder, without someone or something causing it to move, or without having to do anything to cause it to move.

This full declension of "moving an arm," Danto says, shows that (1) and (2) are actions (because M does e where e is the effect of some other antecedent event), that (3) is not an action (because M does nothing; he is a patient, not an agent), and that (4) is a basic action (because M does e without doing anything else to do e).

It also shows why "moving a stone" differs from "moving an arm;" for (1) and (2) may decline "moving a stone" but (4) cannot. Hence "moving a stone" cannot denote a basic action. Nor can "laughing" yield a full declension. (1), (2), and (3) stand, so that when M laughs by causing himself to laugh by doing something else in order to laugh or by being caused to laugh by some other person or some thing, he performs an action. But that he simply laughs (4), without (1), (2) and of course (3), i.e., because of a nervous disorder, although a possible state of affairs for some abnormal individuals, is not the standard case, like M simply moving his arm. Most of us do not have the true power of laughing as we have the true power of moving our arms. (4) "M laughs," therefore, is not a basic action; but it is not nonsense as is (4) "The stone (simply) moves."

A final example Danto offers is "imaging." "M images I" (where "I" stands for a mental image) is, like "M moves an arm," a locution that does not unambiguously describe an action and, if it does, a basic one. Nevertheless, the full declension works here, too: (1) M causes I, perhaps by taking a drug; (2) Someone or something causes M to have I; (3) M is obsessed by I where I is a symptom of a nervous disorder; and (4) M simply produces I. Consequently, (4) is a basic action, (1) and (2) actions, and (3) no action at all.

It is not clear in his essay that Danto regards full declension of certain descriptive expressions as a necessary, sufficient, or necessary and sufficient criterion of action and basic action. Moving an arm and imaging, he says, can be actions and basic actions; moving a stone can be an action but it is not a basic action; laughing can be an action but only an extraordinary basic action. But, now, what about seeing and sitting? If imaging and moving my arm yield the full declension, so do seeing and sitting. Are seeing (or hearing, smelling, tasting,
feeling) and sitting (or standing, lying down) actions and basic actions? If full declension is a sufficient condition of a basic action, “I see,” “I hear,” “I sit,” “I stand,” etc., where what I do I do (1) without doing anything else to do it, (2) without someone or something making me do what I do, and (3) without suffering from a nervous disorder, but where (1), (2), and (3) as well as (4) are intelligible, as they are, then these expressions also describe basic actions. And if they do, our repertoire of basic actions which all normal people are acquainted with becomes an expanding universe whose members are identifiable through full declension of their corresponding descriptive expressions.

One may object to my examples: “I see,” “I hear,” “I sit,” “I stand,” etc., it might be said, are not descriptive expressions of actions or movements at all. Rather they are incomplete expressions. One does not simply see, he sees something; one does not simply sit, he sits on something, and so on. “I see y (e.g., a tree)” is the proper expression, like Danto’s “I move my arm” or “I image an image” (although the latter sounds fishy). But Danto does allow “M laughs” rather than “M laughs at y (e.g., a joke told by Z)” as a complete description to which he denies (normal) full declension. Consequently, before my examples can be ruled out, we need some criterion for distinguishing expressions which are amenable to declension, full or not, and expressions which are not so amenable. Danto’s mixed bag of expressions—“M moves his arm,” “M images I,” “M laughs,” “M moves a stone,” “moving an arm,” “image,” “laughing,” “moving a stone,” etc.—includes no such criterion; so it remains unclear whether “I see,” “I am seeing” and “I sit,” “I am sitting,” etc., are any more illegitimate expressions for declension than “I laugh” or “I image an image,” or “laughing” or “image.”

There is something peculiar about “I see,” etc., as a report on an action or a basic action or as a report at all. But the peculiarity, it seems to me, is as much with action and basic action as it is with “I see.” Suppose, for example, I say when I see, that what I do is to open my eyes. Now, “I open my eyes” looks analogous to “I move my arm.” Is “I open my eyes” fully declinable? Here I cannot make sense of (1) or (3): that I open my eyes by doing something else in order to open my eyes (i.e., what can I do to open my eyes that is like striking my arm to move it?); or that I am suffered to open my eyes (i.e., what nervous disorder could make my eyes open?). (2) seems all right (e.g., that someone makes me open my eyes, by waking me. (4), that I simply open my eyes, seems impeccable. Is it, therefore, a basic action? Even if the full declension does not work here with “I open my eyes”?

“I open my eyes” (which is an unexceptionably complete expression) is no clearer a description of a basic action or even of an action (since (1) is suspect) than is “I see” (which, for some, is suspect as a description). To be sure, both are things we do without first doing something else. So if one is a basic action, so is the other.

The appeal to a repertoire does not help here either. For I know I can see and do see, can open my eyes and do open them, can sit and do sit, can hear and do hear, can stand and do stand just as I know I can move my arm and do, can conjure up images and do—without knowing how I can and do these things. Are
they all in the repertoire? If they are, full declension is not the clue to the
range of the repertoire. If they are not, what in the appeal to the repertoire
brings them in or rules them out? If the criterion is the givenness of the action in
the sense of doing something without doing something else as an antecedent
causal event, then seeing, opening one's eyes, sitting, standing, hearing, tasting,
lying down, etc., are all basic actions.

I conclude that Danto's concept of a basic action is ill-conceived. He separates
his appeal to our repertoire of basic actions from his argument of full declension
of certain descriptive expressions. Yet the repertoire enlarges and contracts with
the application of the criterion of full declension as necessary, sufficient, or
necessary and sufficient. If full declension is necessary, "M opens his eyes"
drops out as a description of a basic action in the repertoire. If full declension is
sufficient, "M sees, hears, listens, tastes, smells, feels, sits, stands, or lies down"
forces us to enlarge the repertoire.

If the criterion of a basic action shifts to what we can and do without doing
anything else as its antecedent causal event, basic actions become coextensive
with all of our human abilities or powers and their particular manifestations.
Then my seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, sitting, standing, etc., are as
much actions and basic actions as my moving my arm. And if all of these are
basic actions, perhaps Verity's yawning, with which Danto opens his essay, is a
basic action too. And if yawning, why not all of our bodily functions, including
the very basic ones closer to the belly than the mouth?

A final puzzle: "M hurts his finger." This is fully declinable; and it describes
something M can do and sometimes does without necessarily doing anything
else as its antecedent causal event. Does it therefore report an action and a
basic action? Is it rather a report on what M does not do without first doing
something else, hence a report on an action but not on a basic action? Or is it
simply a report on a sensation, hence no action-report at all? As a description,
it is as ambiguous as "M moved a stone" so, as Danto says, it could describe an
action and, if an action, a basic action. Which basic action? M moved his
finger? M kept his finger still? Neither or nothing seems appropriate.

A. I. Melden concludes his early essay "Action" (1956): 6

"... so in the case of the concept of any action the context of practices in
rules are obeyed, criteria employed, policies are observed—a way of thinking
and doing—is essential to the understanding of the difference between such
bodily movements and actions."

Although Melden argues in this essay that the concept of action is neither
analyzable nor simple, and it is not non-descriptive, he does lay down, it seems
to me, at least one necessary condition for the correct use of the concept: an
implicit reference to rule-governed behavior. It is true that he does not identify
this condition with a necessary property or constituent, such as agent causality,
intentionality, goal-directedness, or teleology that all actions supposedly share.
Rather, this condition functions as an overall presupposition of there being
action terms at all. Actions, thus, for Melden, are coextensive with certain bodily
movements that are described under the general rubric of social practices. For example, signaling a left turn while driving a car without mechanical signals is the raising of one’s arm in the specific context of the prevailing rules of the road. The difference between “X signaled” or even “X raised his arm” and “X’s arm went up”—between action and bodily movement—is not in the components or the psychological accompaniments of the movement but in the circumstances surrounding the movement.

Actions, Melden reminds us, form a large, extremely varied class, ranging from habitual responses to rational decision. Some involve mere wants, without reasons; others involve motives; still others, deliberation, reasons, choices. All of course are done by agents, but not by their unique causal agency. Nor is goal-directedness, intentionality, or teleology always present. Bodily movement is always present but only as an entailed condition and never as a component of action. Thus, it seems, both bodily movement and social practice are necessary for action. Nevertheless for Melden, only social practice is a necessary condition or criterion of the concept of action. If the social context of practices be regarded as a presupposition of the concept of action, perhaps bodily movement can be construed as a precondition of that concept. Thus on Melden’s view, there cannot be actions or true-false action reports unless there are bodily movements; but these actions and their descriptions involve essential reference to social practices and no reference to bodily movement.

To illustrate the difference between bodily movement and action and to illuminate the essentially rule-governed character of the latter, Melden considers chess moves. (He also implies that although it is a highly sophisticated example of action, playing chess is subject to moral review. However, that playing chess, in contrast to doing practically nothing else, is a moral activity, is extremely dubious and to be argued for only by some extended, persuasive definition of morality.)

Suppose, now, a game of chess in progress. X moves his knight; Y then castles. Here there is bodily movement. But what else? Theories according to which these chess moves are combinations or blends of bodily movements (i.e., finger movements) and psychological processes (e.g., volitions followed by movements or deliberations followed by decisions), Melden argues here (as well as more fully in his later book *Free Action*) are not only indefensible in themselves but, more important, fatally indifferent to the essentially contextual, social character of action. “To attempt to understand a move in a game of chess in terms of bodily and psychological processes occurring at the time the agent makes his move is to leave out what is essential to the move—the fact that what transpires in the way of such occurrent processes is a case of following the rules” (p. 534). In their total concern for bodily movements and their psychological causes and accompaniments, these theories in effect fail to elucidate the concept of action—such is Melden’s major criticism of previous analyses or theories of action.

What, then, is the correct elucidation of the concept of action? Following Wittgenstein, Melden reminds us of the varying uses of the concept: the diverse roles of different kinds of action verbs. However, and here he is on his own, essential to all these uses is the condition of following or obeying given rules.
Action concepts, whatever their use, are social in character, “logically connected with the concept of rules” (p. 532).

Rule-governed behavior alone, Melden claims, can explain the distinction between mere movement and action. Thus—to return to our chess game—X cannot move his knight nor can Y castle unless they move their fingers. But reports on X’s and Y’s chess moves are not about their finger movements, only about their rule-governed behavior.

Of course, Melden allows, a child could move a knight from one square to another or move the rook and the king in accordance with the castling rule of chess. But he is not thereby following or obeying the rules. He may perform an action but not that of moving a knight or of castling. Only one who is versed in the practices of chess can do that.

Is Melden correct in his claim, if I have interpreted him rightly, that rule-governed behavior is at least one necessary condition of the concept of action? It seems to me that, like other putative necessary conditions which at best turn out to be among the sufficient conditions of the concept, that rule-governed behavior is also a sufficient condition—a good reason for something being or being said to be an action. “Casting in chess is an action because it involves application of the rules of chess” is as secure a statement about actions as any such statement can be.

But is this condition necessary? R. Taylor, for one, disagrees. “I raise my arm” entails “my arm rises.” Action implies movement, and my raising my arm is an action whether it is described in its social context or not. For Melden, Taylor’s responsible agent who simply raises his arm or wiggles his finger and for whom social practices here are irrelevant—that is, who is not signaling, saluting, exercising, etc.—is not acting. “... In that case, when the individual raises his arm what happens is that a bodily movement, not an action, occurs” (p. 541).

Since Melden admits that it is conceptually possible for an agent to raise his arm independently of a social context, the issue between him and Taylor reduces to whether such an occurrence is an action or not. This issue is analogous to whether there can be and are actions without causal agency, intentionality, goal-directedness, endeavor, or teleology. Consequently, Melden is in basic disagreement about action not only with R. Taylor but with C. Taylor, Chisholm and Danto as well, for all of whom social practice or rule-governed behavior is not essentially or even always relevant to action.

Another difficulty with Melden’s necessary condition is that it does not cover adequately those cases where we act or perform actions without following the given rules or even, for that matter, without being in accordance with any rules, but only in accordance with certain natural regularities or physical laws. The television repair man, for example, fixes the broken set. Like the chess player who castles, he applies the rules and recipes he has learned in his craft. “X fixed the set” as against. “X moved a few tools with his fingers” describes an action in Melden’s sense of rule-governed behavior. But if a child kicks the set or jiggles it, so that it works, do we want to say he merely kicked it or jiggled it but fixed nothing, as we might justly want to say he did not castle by simply moving two chess pieces? Just as an infant can kill a man without murdering him, why
can't a child fix the set without following any rules or without even being in accordance with the rules? What are the rules for television repair? Certain recipes derived from physical laws which govern the behavior of the repairman as he fixes the set. But if the child or you or I fix it by roughing it up, did we perform an action or not? If not, why not? Melden's recourse to doing something in accordance with the rules of repair is an amusing mix-up of rules and laws. Of course if one fixes the set by roughing it up, he must have done something in accordance with the physical laws governing television sets, unless, miraculously, he performed a miracle.

There are thus all kinds of things we do—from breaking things to fixing them—where we follow no rules or what we do is in accordance with no rules—that compete (or the name of action. In spite of his admonition about generalizing from too few cases and his insistence on the class of actions as a family of cases rather than as a core of strong cases with its characteristic marginal cases. Melden in denying these non rule-governed occurrences as action repudiates the philosophical practice he preaches. Elucidation of the concept of action does not yield Melden's necessary condition, any more than traditional analyses do.

In *Free Action* (1961), Melden turns from a primary concern for the elucidation of the concept of action to an investigation of the concepts of volition, intention, and desire, as they relate to action. His central thesis is that neither acts of will, motives as intentions, nor desires or wants are occurrences which function as causal antecedents of actions. Rather, they are either non-occurrences, as in the case of acts of will, or occurrences whose descriptions involve concepts, such as intention and desire, that presuppose the concept of action. Intentions and desires cannot cause actions since they logically imply actions.

Action Melden takes as a primitive concept. It is not thereby indefinable, i.e., unamenable to further analysis; but not because it is simple, rather because analysis is suspect. It is primitive in the sense that it and its correlative—agent—are the starting point in the whole complicated nexus of human actions. If we turn from the denotation of "action" to its meaning or role, we find that "... no account of the concept of action will do that does not attend to the status of a person as a practical being, one who is not only endowed with the primitive ability to move his limbs but who in his complex dealings with others, acts as he does for the very many sorts of reasons that operate in conduct and out of concern with a variety of envisaged goods" (pp. 80-81). Human beings who do things for reasons with proper attention to what they are about: this is where the philosophy of action starts, not with the abstract notion of an action or an agent as such. So the concept of an action is a social one after all. But is the social still essential as it is in his early essay? Melden denies in this book that it is a necessary condition. For example, one can correctly say of a person that he is raising his arm for no reason at all or for no social or moral reason. It is therefore possible, he concedes, to have a conception of a human action without social and moral conventions and rules. Yet, he adds: "to understand the concept of a human action we need to understand the possibilities of descriptions in social and moral terms. . . " (p. 180; italics in
THE CONCEPT OF HUMAN ACTION

original).

Does this mean that the concept of action is essentially social and that some concepts of particular actions describe limiting cases of action, to be understood as actions even without conventions or rules only because we already understand the pervasive social context of action? Such a reading of Melden's view reflects his general observation that although it is true that people sometimes lie, desire something without doing anything to get it, or do nothing with what they want and already have, it is logically impossible that they should always lie, desire something without doing anything to get it, or do nothing with what they want and already have. Consequently, although it is true that sometimes people act without reasons, it is logically impossible that they always do. Hence it is conceptually necessary that action is social, even for its limiting cases. Therefore a necessary condition for saying of anything that it is an action, even of an action without reasons, rules, or conventions, is that it is social, practical rule-governed. Limiting cases, therefore, are abrogations of rules, not examples of non rule-governed behavior.

Action, thus, if my reading of Melden is correct, is for him either following or breaking the regulations and conventions of social practices. In either case, action is still rule-governed. This must be Melden's final position if it is to be saved from self-contradiction: in spite of his admission of counterexamples which for him are counter only because they presuppose examples of action.

That the concept of action is essentially social, involving human beings in transaction with each other, doing things for reasons, of course, applies to humans as agents but not to agents as causes, either in the Humean sense of collections of antecedent events in the causal chain or in the metaphysical sense of centers of power or efficacy. This metaphysical sense, shared by traditional philosophers as well as by C. Taylor, R. Taylor, and Chisholm, Melden rejects as an unnecessary appendage to the concept of action, imposed on it by the implausible doctrine of action as psychologically caused bodily movement. Agents can no more cause actions than desires, intentions, or acts of will for, like these latter, they logically imply, hence cannot cause, actions. For Melden, then, agency—the causal power or efficacy of agents—is not only not a necessary ingredient of action as it is for C. Taylor, R. Taylor and Chisholm; it is not an ingredient at all. Here, then, is another issue among our theorists: Is agency a necessary constituent of human action, indeed, a constituent at all? What kind of disagreement is this?

In Free Action, Melden takes as his fundamental problem the explanation of the distinction between movement and action. As noted, his central claim is that the distinction cannot be explicated in terms of the order of causes. Much of his argument is a sustained refutation of certain views about this order: that action is volition followed by bodily movement; that action is intention making movements happen; that action is desire of certain ends together with beliefs about the means of achieving these ends.

To simplify his argument against the causal theories of action, Melden once again considers the action of signaling while driving a car. In describing what happens we may distinguish between (1) "A signals," (2) "A raises his arm,"
and (3) "A’s muscles are moving." (1) and (2) are different action reports about different actions but they are about the same movement or occurrence—A’s arm rising; (3) differs from (1) and (2) in that it is not a report on an action at all. Further, (1) and (2) relate in a way that (2) and (3) do not: A signals by raising his arm; however, he does not raise his arm by his muscles moving, even though his muscles moving cause his arm to rise. Neither does A move his muscles by raising his arm nor does A raise his arm by moving his muscles. So if we introduce (4) “A moves his muscles,” (2) is not related to (4) as (1) is to (2).

A does not raise his arm by moving his muscles, as A signals by raising his arm. How does A signal? is answered: By raising his arm. How does A raise his arm? has a different kind of answer: He just does—it is a primitive ability he comes to possess independently of any acquired, applied knowledge about muscle movements.

Causal theories of action interpret (1), (2), and (4) as bodily movement caused by antecedent psychological events, such as volitions, intentions, and desires. The gap between the physiological happenings of the arm going up and the muscles moving is filled by the psychological happenings of acts of will, intention, or desire. Melden’s basic argument against this causal bridging of the gap is that it requires the existence of independently identifiable events which cannot be found. However, they cannot be found not because they are empirically undiscoverable but because they are logically impossible. Volitions are logically tied to physical movements: intentions and desires, to actions. Hence the concepts of volition, intention, and desire and their logical implicates of movement and action render impossible any causal account of action in terms of volition, intention, or desire. It is logically impossible, not merely empirically false, that actions are caused by that which implies them.

Having gone this far, it is hard to understand why Melden does not also reject as incoherent the Humean concept of causality. For in the sense in which, say, desire logically implies desire for something which logically implies doing something to get what one desires, cause logically implies effect; so that the very notion of a cause without its effect, i.e., the possibility of identifying a cause independently of its effect, is logically impossible. If the causal theories of action are incoherent, so too, on Melden’s argument that logical implicates cannot be causally related, is the causal theory of events. If cause logically implies effect, nothing can be an antecedent cause of any effect.

Melden’s final point is that explanations of actions involve reasons, not causes. Actions are doings and not making things happen: neither implies the other. Doings have reasons; happenings and makings have causes. Motives, intentions, desires, wants—none either necessary or sufficient for actions, nevertheless all action-tied concepts—mark out reasons for what we do, not the causes of our bodily movements that transmute these movements into actions. The introduction of particular motives, intentions, desires, and wants in our description of an action explains the action by giving its reasons and in this manner clarifies the action and the character of the agent. To insist that such clarification is not explanation because it is not causal is to vitiate the entire distinction between action and movement by reducing all actions to sequences of happenings.
THE CONCEPT OF HUMAN ACTION

In his essay, "Actions, Reasons, and Causes," Donald Davidson shifts from a theory of human action to a theory of the explanation of human action when such explanation involves reasons. Agent A does or did x. Instead of asking what makes x an action, Davidson asks, what is the relation between reason and action when reason explains—"rationalizes"—the action by giving the agent's reason for doing what he did. The relation, he claims, is causal, not logical, as Melden and others say. A does or did x. X is picked out, described or redescribed, and rationalized by naming as its cause A's pro attitude toward actions of type x and/or A's belief about such actions. When the reason given why A did x under a certain description of x consists of A's pro attitude toward actions with a certain property and of A's belief that x so described has that property, the reason is the primary reason why A performed x. Davidson states two theses about primary reasons: (1) that a primary reason is necessary and sufficient for the rationalization of an action; and (2) that it causes the action.

Although Davidson argues for these two theses separately, he does not discuss the relation between them. Nevertheless, if rationalizations are causal explanations, as he contends, then (1) entails (2). That is, there can be no rationalizations of human actions if there are no primary reasons that cause them. Consequently his theory of explanation of actions—of the causal role of reasons in them—rests upon a theory or the makings of a theory of human action. Hence there is no real shift in Davidson's discussion of the problem of the nature of human action at all. For in stating what he regards as necessary and sufficient conditions of the explanation of human action, Davidson implies that pro attitudes and related beliefs—primary reasons—are at least necessary and causal conditions of human actions. His two theses, therefore, reduce to one thesis about human actions: that they are what we do when what we do is caused by our particular pro attitudes and related beliefs. If there are not such causes, both of his theses collapse. Absolutely central and crucial in his whole doctrine of the explanation of action, then, is his supporting evidence for primary reasons as the causes of action.

In supporting his case for reasons as causes, Davidson distinguishes between "Can reasons be causes of actions"? and "Are reasons causes of actions"? although he seems to assume that the truth of the first is evidence for the truth of the second, which it is not. He centers on Melden's paradigm: "A raised his arm because he wanted to signal." Melden says that the "because" clause gives a reason which explains the action in the social context of driving and the rules of the road. As a reason, it is logically tied to the action; and since causes must be logically distinct from their effects, "wanted to signal" cannot name a cause. Indeed, for Melden, "raising one's arm"—the action—is a criterion for "wanting to signal:" this is the logical tie Melden affirms.

Davidson agrees that the "because" clause gives a reason but insists that this reason—"he wanted to signal"—names the cause of the action of the raising of the arm. Confusing, or anyhow so it seems to me, Melden's point that the logical tie is between the action and the want, i.e., that the raising of the arm is a criterion of wanting to signal—a logical tie between the effect and the want—with an entirely different point that there is a logical tie between "wanting to
signal" as a cause and "raising one's arm" as an action, Davidson correctly dismisses this latter logical tie. But this dismissal does not show that reasons are logically independent of actions; all it shows is that actions are logically independent of causes.

Are reasons causes of action? If they are, Davidson agrees with Melden, they are events that precede their effects. Melden then says that there are no such events: no wants or beliefs that can be isolated and identified as causes of our actions. Davidson replies that there are such events: wants and related beliefs—primary reasons—that can be isolated and identified as the causes of our actions. That there are such events and that they are mental, Davidson suggests, has been denied because philosophers have confused observings and noticing—awareness—with what is observed or noticed. Consider again Melden's driver who raises his arm to signal a turn: "But of course there is a mental event; at some moment the driver noticed (or thought he noticed) his turn coming up, and that is the moment he signaled . . . To dignify a driver's awareness that his turn has come by calling it an experience, much less a feeling, is no doubt exaggerated, but whether it deserves a name or not, it had better be the reason why he raises his arm" (p. 74; my italics).

If the driver's awareness that his turn has come is "the reason why" he raises his arm, then surely this awareness, because it is not a pro attitude and belief, cannot be a primary reason; and if it is not a primary reason, it cannot be the cause of the driver's raising his arm, according to Davidson's thesis (2). This example, rather than showing that pro attitudes and related beliefs—primary reasons—are antecedent mental events that cause actions, shows only, if it shows anything at all, that some actions, e.g., raising one's arm or signaling, are caused by a mental event: noticing that one's turn has come. This noticing, rather than a reason functioning as a cause, is a cause that functions as a reason in the explanation of why the driver raised his arm to signal.

It is this distinction between reasons as causes and causes as reasons in the explanation of human actions, and not the presence of awareness, that has been overlooked by philosophers in their discussion of this problem of the role of reason in human action. Both Melden and Davidson conflate this distinction. Melden confuses his denial that reasons are causes with his denial that causes are reasons in the explanation of human action; which is why he restricts causes to bodily movements and reasons to action. Davidson confuses his insight that causes can serve as reasons in an explanation of an action with his claim that reasons are causes of action; which is why he identifies these causes with the reasons for action. Melden has not shown that among the explanatory reasons for an action may be statements about its causes; nor has Davidson shown that among the causes of an action is its primary reason.

Explanation of human action is indeed a complex problem. The distinction between reasons as causes and causes as reasons must enter into any adequate theory of such explanation. Davidson's theory—that all explanation is causal, hence that rationalization (or justification, or giving reasons for) is a species of causal explanation—does not do justice to the distinction. For even if the cause of an action serves as a reason in its explanation, it does not follow that the
reason for the action is its cause, whereas if the reason for an action is its cause, it does follow that the cause of the action is the reason for the action. No causal theory of explanation can account for this asymmetry between causes as reasons and reasons as causes.

Davidson, thus, has showed neither that reasons can be causes of human action nor that they are the causes of human action. Hence he has provided no evidence that a necessary ingredient or condition of a human action is its primary reason—its pro attitude and related belief—which functions as an antecedently identifiable mental event that causes the action. In so far as his theory of explanation rests upon his partial theory of action, he has therefore not shown that all actions share the common property of primary reason or even that they share some other property. What he has shown is that at least some actions have as their causes certain mental events and that these can properly enter into the explanation of these actions. Perhaps citing these causes is telling or explaining why certain actions are performed and can serve as reasons for actions or as terms in the “because” clause. But that this procedure is identical with or is convertible into the citation of primary reasons remains mere speculation.

J. L. Austin’s “A Plea for Excuses” is universally regarded as a seminal essay in contemporary philosophy of human action. It was the first to raise fundamental questions about the criteria of the identity and individuation of actions: “ ... what, indeed, are the rules for the use of ‘the’ action, ‘an’ action, ‘one’ action a ‘part’ or ‘phase’ of an action and the like” (p. 127)? about the distinction between doing and acting: Is sneezing, breathing, or even simply sitting in my chair an action? and about the relation between the language of excuses and of action: Are all actions excusable or only those that are wayward in some clearly statable sense?

What has not been noticed is that Austin’s essay does more than challenge a theory of action—in the sense of a statement about the common, definitive properties of all actions—but, as important, it is the first to suggest that although there are no established necessary conditions of human action, there are sufficient conditions, two of which he states: justification and excuse. For his most fundamental thesis—and his central contribution to the philosophy of action—is that though there are actions, abstractly describable by the dummy expression, “A performs an action,” concretely but variously describable by certain verbs, their adverbs or modifying nouns or prepositions, and that actions form certain sub-classes, actions have only sufficient, not necessary conditions. Thus the concept of action, even as a dummy concept, is governed by sufficient criteria, not necessary ones.

A did or does x. Instead of asking what makes x an action, Austin asks, what does excusing (or justifying) x reveal about x as an action? Not every doing of any x by A is amenable to excuse or justification: x must be (or said to be) bad, wrong, inept, unwelcome—untoward. This rules out excusability and, more surprising, justifiability as a necessary criterion of action. For just as not every act is excusable, so too not every act requires justification. Some acts are neither, since they are not untoward; and though excusability or justifiability is
not essential to action, doing what is regarded as the untoward is necessary for both excusability and justifiability. Austin thus lays down no set of conditions for all actions, only two sufficient conditions for some actions, when these latter actions satisfy the necessary condition of being (or being said to be) untoward.

Moreover, some actions, given certain standards of acceptable behavior, are inexcusable, for example, stepping on a baby’s toes; this is another reason why excusability is not a necessary criterion of action. Nevertheless, a good reason for something being an action or being called an action is that the specified action—when untoward—is open to excuse or to justification.

If excuse and justification serve as sufficient conditions of actions, what, now, about praise or blame? Austin treats blame like excuse: a necessary condition of both is that what is blamed or excused is the untoward. Will this do for praise? Can we praise any action—untoward or not? If we can, praise differs logically from blame, for the necessary condition of the untoward vanishes. Even if we admit that blame, like the attribution of “voluntary” or “involuntary,” is inappropriate to all actions, is it so clear that we applaud actions only when some necessary condition of the unusual or abnormal is satisfied? Of course we do not applaud all actions but we do praise many which are usual and normal in every way. A takes an examination and fails. Here blame, excuse, even justification can come in. But if B—a good student, not just a dubious one—passes, his teacher can praise him without in any way presupposing that B’s performance was abnormal.

Praise, therefore, is also a good reason for something being (or being called) an action. Although it differs from blame in that it has no necessary condition of the wayward, it is like blame in that it too is not a necessary, but rather a sufficient, condition of action. What characterizes excuse, justification, praise, blame, or the voluntary, namely, that though each has its own special conditions of use, none is necessary for human action, applies as well to intention, purpose, and motive. All provide good reasons for something being or being described as an action; but none is necessary. Each is a sufficient condition, marking out a distinguishing feature of the different sub-classes of the class of actions.

Does Austin show that the proffering of an excuse is a sufficient condition or criterion of action? He has certainly shown it is not necessary. But is it always in any situation a good reason, a sufficient reason, for saying of x when A did or does x, that x is an action? Austin suggests that excuses are not only sufficient conditions of actions but also that different kinds of excuses point to different aspects of actions: their stages (the intelligence, appreciation, planning, decision, and execution involved); their phases (e.g., the difference between putting a dab of paint on a canvas and painting the whole picture); and their stretches (smaller as against larger groups of events). Austin does not claim that all actions are or can be rendered complex in this way; once again, all he argues is that some excuses are sufficient both for something being (or being described as) an action as well as for something being (or being parcelled out as) a stage, phase, or stretch of an action. Excuses, consequently, constitute a whole class of different
THE CONCEPT OF HUMAN ACTION

varieties of sufficient conditions. For example, in his famous Regina u. Finney illustration, Austin points out that Finney’s action, whether specified as turning on the wrong tap or as scalding Watkins, is excusable but that the excuse that what he did was inadvertent applies only to one phase of the action, while the excuse that what he did was an accident applies to a different phase.

Now, if we grant, as indeed I think we must, that Austin presents a brilliant case for the varieties of excuses, exemplified in certain verbs and especially their adverbs, as these excuses point to different aspects of actions, must we accept excusability as a sufficient condition of action? Austin admits that excuses play a larger role than he describes, so that the excuse of politeness—“Excuse me, please!”—differs from the excuse of accusation. But he also admits that even in the primary situation (“in general”, p. 123), where someone is accused of or is said to have done the untoward, an excuse can be offered which cancels, not merely mitigates, the responsibility. Here excuse does not qualify the action; it denies the action. To deny the action by an excuse that cancels the responsibility, Austin implies, does not entail that responsibility is necessary for action; all this denial entails is that the absence of responsibility is sufficient for no action.

For Austin, then, there are some excuses that do not qualify actions; from which it follows that excusability is not a sufficient condition for action. If A did x and is accused of doing x, where both A and his accuser accept x as bad, and A pleads and proves that he was forced to do x or, like Finney, that he scalded Watkins by mistakenly thinking Watkins was out of the tub, which Watkins was able and supposed to be, A’s excuse, in cancelling the responsibility, cancels the act. In Finney’s case, he was not only acquitted of manslaughter by the judge; he is also relieved of his action of scalding through his cancellation of responsibility by Austin. Excuse, therefore, even for Austin, is not a sufficient condition of action. Consequently we must conclude that what Austin shows in “A Plea for Excuses” is not merely that the concept of action has no necessary, only sufficient, criteria but that excuses, unlike justifications, are not members of the class of sufficient criteria. To be able to excuse x when A did or does x may be a reason why we call x an action but it is not a sufficient reason. Justification, praise, blame, intention, purpose, and responsibility, among others, he also allows us to infer, are both good reasons and sufficient criteria for something being or being described as an action. At any rate, this thesis—that the concept of a human action is governed by criteria, some of which are sufficient, but none of which is necessary—first suggested (at least to me) by Austin’s essay, is the thesis I wish to contend best illuminates the logical grammar of that concept. That x is a human action because it is goal-directed, agent-caused, basic or caused by a basic action, intentional, governed by conventions, or done for a reason, each of which functions as a necessary condition in the individual contemporary theories of action already considered, is at best, provided it can first be rendered intelligible as a criterion, a sufficient condition of such action.

What is a human action? Is the class of human actions distinct from the class of human (and other) movements, processes, events? How do we decide whether a particular x is a human action? What counts as a good reason for an x being a
human action: what answers why x is a human action?

These are the main questions our contemporary theories try to answer. Each of these theories, whether it takes human action or its concept to be definable or not, I have tried to show, offers at least a necessary property, feature, condition, or criterion: some proffer necessary and sufficient properties. Presumably, an ideal theory—the theory of human action—would be the one that formulated the definitive set of properties shared by all human actions.

Among these putatively necessary properties, either affirmed or implied by the various theories, are: agency, responsibility, intention, intentionality or goal-directedness (purpose), an agent making one thing happen in the endeavor to make another thing happen, an agent causing things to happen without first causing other things to happen, reason that functions as cause, and convention.

These properties serve as necessary or as definitive criteria of the identity and individuation of a human action in the various theories. They function as basic not only in answering what is a human action but also why is x or whether x is a human action? It is also these properties and criteria that determine the nature and range of good reasons for anything being a human action.

Are there such properties? Are they necessary for human action? The theorists disagree among themselves: for each, some of these properties are nonexistent or, allowing that they do exist, they are not necessary, sufficient, or even relevant to human action. They also disagree about the nature of these properties: what constitutes agency, intention, purpose, or reason in human action. All they agree on is that some of the claims about necessary properties—his opponents—are false? and that at least one of the claims his own—is true.

Is any claim that there is a necessary property of human action true? I have argued that none stated by our theorists is true. Thus, C. Taylor says that human action is intentional behavior. But he does not show that the class of human actions is coextensive with the class of intentional behavior. Nor does he show that the latter class is coextensive with the class of clear cases of human action. What he does is to mark out a class of “strong” cases of human action—those that are intentional—and to give an account of these in terms of non-contingent, irreducibly teleological laws. The concept of human action, consequently for him, becomes a core concept: one that gets its definitive criteria from the shared properties of the “strong” cases. That there are these “strong” cases of intentional behavior—seems indisputable, however debatable his account or his interpretation of them as the core of human action. For his core concept does not cover equally indisputable, clear cases of human action. All that remains intact in his theory is that some indisputable examples of human action are undeniable cases of intentional behavior. “X is a human action because A intended x” gives a (tautologically) necessary reason for x being intentional, but only a sufficient reason for x as intentional being a human action.

R. Taylor implies that agency—the human being as causally efficacious—is a necessary property of all human actions. This, too, is questionable, both as a property and, if a property, as necessary for all action. I have argued that if agency is a property it can be identified, and that to be identified its corresponding name must have some criterion to determine its correct identification.
but that on Taylor's reading of the term, it has no such criterion. "Agency," for Taylor, becomes a word or concept that each of us supposedly learns for himself and teaches others to use with the sole putative criterion of the individual's experience of agency. Such an inner criterion, however, is no criterion at all because it serves to identify nothing. And if it identifies nothing, it is no word or concept either; it plays no role in any language of human action. Taylor's argument against the privacy of "desire" applies equally to his private "agency."

Chisholm also maintains that agency—the agent as immanent cause—is necessary (and, if necessary, certainly intelligible). Like R. Taylor, he rests his claim that there is agency and that it is necessary for all human action on our experience of causal efficacy: "It is only by understanding our own causal efficacy, as agents, that we can grasp the concept of cause at all" ("Freedom and Action," op. cit., p. 22; italics in original). This ultimate appeal to individual inner experience also entails, as it does for R. Taylor, an incoherent doctrine of causality, namely, that causality is ultimately private, consequently that the concept of cause is governed by the necessary and sufficient criterion of one's own experience of causal efficacy.

However irreducible statements about human ability and human action are to other statements about events and their Humean causal regularities, it does not follow from this irreducibility alone that there are centers of power—causal efficacy—or that agents are immanent, not transeunl, causes of events. All that follows is that there are no intensional or extensional equivalents of statements about human abilities and actions. Thus, R. Taylor and Chisholm (and others, too, including Austin) are correct in contending that "I can move my finger" and "I am moving my finger" are not reducible to conditional statements or to statements about events. But that "I" or "can" or "move" in these statements refers to a center of causal efficacy—agency—does not follow from this irreducibility. That these statements do refer to such agency requires a further argument or evidence that there is this unique center which distinguishes action from movement. Neither Taylor nor Chisholm provides this argument or evidence; nor, it seems to me, can they provide it without rendering incoherent the concept of agency. Our talk about human ability and action, it can be argued, presupposes that there are agents or persons—the authors of actions; otherwise we cannot make intelligible an essential part of our ordinary referring use of language. It is also cogent to hypothesize agency as a necessary presupposition of the intelligibility of such talk, in which case agency is conceived of in transcendental, non-empirical terms, perhaps like agents as substances. But that our talk of human ability and action refers to, names, or describes inner agency—man's unique causal efficacy—is no condition, either necessary, sufficient, or even intelligible, of that talk.

Chisholm also affirms that an agent making one thing happen in the endeavor to make another thing happen is a necessary, albeit indefinable, property of all human actions. As we have seen, this criterion also has its difficulties; for example, some of our actions involve making things happen but not in the endeavor to make other things happen. Even so, this criterion is as clear as that of intention—as imprecise as both may be—and can therefore serve as a criterion
of the concept of action, which agency cannot. Consequently, without debating the
criterion, let us accept making B happen in the endeavor to make A happen
as an intelligible property in order to ask whether it is an omnipresent feature of
all human actions?

It seems to me it is not. To be sure, there are many recognized, indisputable
examples of human action in which we do make one thing happen in the
endeavor to make something else happen or to prevent it from happening. Yet,
even if we grant that all descriptions of human actions can be paraphrased into
the terms of making B happen in the endeavor to make A happen, it is simply
not true that all redescriptions of actions can be so paraphrased. To revert to
my previous example: I may clear my walk of ice and snow or not clear it. My
act of clearing it or not can be redescribed as obeying or breaking the law. As
strained as it is to talk of not clearing my walk as making something happen in
the endeavor to make or prevent something else happening, it is very odd indeed
to talk of obeying or breaking the law in these terms. Making B happen in the
endeavor to make A happen may be a criterion of the descriptive use of
“action;” but it is no criterion of the imperative use, hence it is not a necessary
criterion, applicable to all actions.

Danto’s implicit doctrine that all actions include as a necessary ingredient a
basic action, I have argued, does not establish basic action as either necessary
or sufficient. Indeed, as he formulates it, it is difficult to ascertain whether
basic action is a condition at all. Neither declension nor appeal to our reper­
toire of acts provides a necessary or sufficient condition for deciding what is to
count as a basic action. What about his criterion of an agent making event e to
occur without first making event d to occur as the cause of e? In the sense that
we can and do move our arm without first causing something else to do it, for
example, striking it, there are basic acts. But then, on this view, basic acts and
actions include many bodily functions, some very basic indeed, which functions
are usually classified among the processes or movements of nature. Thus, if
there are basic acts or basic actions in Danto’s causal sense, they cannot serve to
distinguish action from movement, consequently they can furnish no answer to
what differentiates action from non-action in human (and animal) behavior.

That all human actions are goal-directed or are conventional—C. Taylor’s and
Melden’s respective doctrines about necessary properties—are exaggerated.
As we have seen from those examples of action that are neither goal-directed nor
governed by conventions, to be rejected as clear cases of human action only by
arbitrary stipulation, these two conditions are not necessary, but sufficient.

The more important issue raised by this appeal to goals or conventions, in
which reasons having to do with these goals or conventions are offered as
answers to why a particular action was done or why a particular x is an action,
is the issue raised by Davidson: that these reasons, when they are introduced
to explain actions, denote the causes of actions.

I have discussed this issue: Davidson, I argued, does not show that reasons
are causes or that they can function as causes of action. Nevertheless, in spite
of his conflation of a mental event as a cause of an action with the primary
reason as the cause, the possibility remains that our pro attitudes and beliefs,
THE CONCEPT OF HUMAN ACTION

our goals and conventions, or our wants and beliefs about realizing them—the reasons for our actions—are causes; and, indeed, so does the possibility he urges, that all action is caused by reasons. If it could be shown that nothing is an action without a reason as the cause of the action, this would secure a necessary property, so strongly desiderated by all the theorists.

The most promising candidate for a reason as the cause is a particular want or desire that one has in conjunction with a related belief about how to satisfy it. In his essay, “Actions, Causes, and Reasons,” Davidson says that although a desire or a belief is dispositional, the onslaught of a desire or a belief is not. The onslaught is a mental event; therefore it can serve as an identifiable antecedent event of an action. “A desire to hurt your feelings may spring up at the moment you anger me; I may start wanting to eat a melon just when I see one; and beliefs may begin at the moment we notice, perceive, learn, or remember something” (op. cit., p. 74). These onslaughts of desires and beliefs, like Melden’s driver who notices (or thinks he notices) his turn coming up, are mental events—awarenesses—not something we are aware of; these, then, are the reasons that cause the respective actions of hurting your feelings, eating a melon, or signaling a turn.

Is, for example, the onslaught of my desire to hurt your feelings at the moment you anger me the primary reason that causes my hurting you? If it is, it must include a related belief; so let that be my belief that I can hurt you by insulting you. Now the mental state is the specific desire and related belief about how to satisfy it. This state is my awareness and it causes my insulting you. “Why did you insult me?” asked by you, is answered by me: “Because you hurt my feelings,” which implies a pro attitude I have about retaliation toward people who hurt my feelings and a belief about how to retaliate in this kind of situation: the primary reason.

Well, now, the primary reason of my action of insulting you is my pro attitude toward retaliation and my belief that insulting you will satisfy this pro attitude. On Davidson’s view, this has to be the cause of the action. But in his example, it is not; the cause of my desire to hurt you is your angering me. Your action of angering me is the cause of my desire to hurt you and of my action of insulting you. Yet for Davidson, your action cannot be the cause of mine because all that can be the cause of mine is my pro attitude and related belief toward actions like yours.

Thus, what Davidson shows by his appeal to the onslaught of a particular desire is that it is caused by something else (e.g., your angering me) and, in turn, is a cause of my action (e.g., insulting you). He does not show that my particular pro attitude toward, for example, retaliation, and my particular related belief, for example, that insulting you is one way to retaliate—the primary reason—is the cause of my action of insulting you. The primary cause of my action is your action; the primary reason of my action is my attitude toward being angered and retaliation. Of course, to repeat what I said before, in explaining my insulting you, among the reasons in the explanation may be statements about some of the causes, for example. “You insulted me;” “I wanted to retaliate;” etc; but the explanation contains no statement about my pro attitude and re-
mated belief as a cause, only as a reason.

Davidson, then, does not show that reason as cause is a necessary constituent of all human actions. Nor does he show that specific desires or their onslaughts are the causes of action. All he shows is that these onslaughts, along with other mental events, are among the causes of action and, as such, can enter into the explanations of actions as reasons. This reminder is important to the philosophy of mind in its assemblage of mental events. Its contribution to the philosophy of action, however, is limited to the range of causes, not extended to reasons as causes.

Are the pro attitudes and related beliefs given as reasons for actions reducible to particular desires and related beliefs? If they are, then the reason for an action is the particular desire and related belief that cause the action. Such is the heroic line taken by some philosophers, most recently by Alvin Goldman in *A Theory of Human Action* (1970). Like Davidson, Goldman construes reason-explanation as a species of causal explanation. 'To explain why A did x, to give the reason for A’s action, is to imply that A had the indicated particular want and belief and that his having this want and belief caused his action. Goldman ties reasons to action-plans and adds a provocative logical entailment between want and action. However, of immediate concern here is his overriding thesis that all the reasons cited in the explanation of actions—all our goals, purposes, attitudes, conventions, and convictions that we specify in answering why we do or did what we do or did—are among the causes of our actions. Our reasons for action are the standing wants that become the occurrent wants which cause the action.

These occurrent wants, he says, are mental events or mental processes: goings-on in consciousness. Each of us has privileged access to his wants and can know, though not with the certainty of one's own, the wants of others. How, then, does one acquire the concept of an occurrent want? Goldman faces this crucial question. His answer is that each of us learns the first person use in two ways: (1) "The child notices the occasions in which adults ascribe [certain] wants to him [e.g., wanting to play with the ball] and correlates their words with the state he is in. He comes to recognize that when he is attracted to playing with the ball . . . , then the adults say he 'wants' to play with the ball . . . . Thus, he learns to say of himself that he wants the ball . . . in the right circumstances" (p. 121; italics in original). (2) The child, having learned to name objects, when he is attracted to the ball and wanting to reach it, says "ball." "Gradually he acquires the idea of making a request . . . . The word 'want' is taught to him (or simply learned by him) as part of request behavior. Thus, he learns to say 'I want the ball' . . . , instead of simply 'ball' . . . . Although he has these mental events, he has not yet reflected upon his consciousness to notice them as mental events. Later, however, he comes to recognize that his reaching for the ball, or his asking someone to give him the ball, results from a fell attraction for the ball. At this stage he recognizes wanting as a mental event that tends to cause his behavior" (ibid; italics in original). The child's learning of the third person use parallels his learning of the first person use. In either case, when the child fully understands the term, Goldman concludes, " . . . 'want' is seen to apply in the same sense both to himself and to others—viz., to a mental event which tends to
THE CONCEPT OF HUMAN ACTION

lead to action" *(ibid.)*.

This reading of the concept of want, on which Goldman rests his theory of human action, including the doctrine that the reasons for action are the desires that cause action, entails the indefensible thesis that since the word ‘what’ names an inner, private event or process—which we are brought to recognize by teaching and learning how to use ‘want’ in external circumstances but where this teaching and learning are only preparatory to grasping the meaning of the word—the sole necessary and sufficient criterion for the understanding (not the teaching and learning) of the concept of want is the innately private experience of wanting. Whatever can be said about such an experience, it cannot be said of it that it is a criterion, sole or not, necessary, sufficient, or not, because it cannot function as a criterion at all. Thus, it seems to me that Goldman’s attempt to affirm reason as cause a necessary property of all human actions, depending as it does on his doctrine of wants as causes of action which doctrine in turn rests entirely upon his misreading of the concept of want as criterionless, does not succeed either.

None of our theories establishes a necessary property of human actions. This leaves open the possibility that other theories may succeed where these fail. To foreclose on this possibility and indirectly to rationalize my omission of other theories, past and present, I want now to argue that such a pursuit is not feasible. I do not mean to suggest that it is self-contradictory; rather that the attempt to do so is logically misbegotten in that it lays down necessary criteria for a concept whose use and conditions of use preclude such criteria.

In his essay, “Action,” Melden writes:

It is the enormous variety of cases that defeats any attempt to provide a summary account of the nature of action in bodily and psychological factors. Some of my actions are deliberate. I weigh alternatives and choose. Some of my actions are done with a motive but without deliberation and choice . . . Some things I do without any motive . . . Some things I do simply because I want to, or on the spur of the moment, and for no reason at all. If we consider the mental processes attending the relevant bodily movements, we find an enormous variation in what transpires. The cases range from those in which nothing that seems at all relevant happens except the occurrence of the bodily movement—one responds to the situation in which one finds oneself almost automatically, guided as it were by habit and the whole accumulation of past experience—to the cases in which force of mind, great effort, or internal struggles are involved as habit is resisted or passions and temptations conquered . . . . The characteristic philosophic vice of generalizing from special cases is involved in the familiar summary explanation of the concept of action in terms of various psychological factors or processes *(op. cit., p. 526)*.

Melden limits his criticism of theories of action to the causal ones because he wishes to counter them with his own, non-causal, conventional theory. But the reason he gives for the defeat of the causal theories—the vast variety of cases of
human action—defeats all theories: all statements of the necessary and sufficient properties of human action and, as important, all claims about their necessary properties.

That there is this vast variety of cases of human action, ranging from habitual behavior to the deliberation, decision, and execution involved in a complicated plan of action, is indisputable. It is this variety, encompassing actions with or without desires, intentions, motives, causes, mental events, purposes, goals, reasons, and even with or without any ordinary acts or doings, as in certain in-actions which we and the law regard as actions, that an elucidation of the concept of a human action must hold constant.

Thus, it is no good starting with a class of core cases, for example, C. Taylor’s “strong” cases of intentional behavior, working out a theory of these, and then situating the others on the margins (his “loose” cases), or throwing them out of the class altogether. For a marginal case of one theorist becomes a core case for another (e.g., wiggling one’s finger for no reason at all) or a non-action for one theorist becomes a core case for another theorist (e.g., killing a man unintentionally).

Instead of talking of core or strong cases of human action, we must talk of undeniable or clear cases. If we do not, we foreclose on the vast variety of cases which it is the philosopher’s assigned and accepted task to illuminate. Of course there are enormous and notorious difficulties surrounding the criteria of the identity and individuation of an action: but it does not seem to me that we cannot talk of clear cases of human action until we can solve these difficulties. Quite the contrary: we cannot even begin to formulate the criteria of an action unless we have some clear cases before us. Indeed, it is because of the clarity of the cases of flipping the switch, turning on the light, illuminating the room, and alerting the prowler, that philosophers such as Davidson, Anscombe, Goldman, and others, can raise questions about the identity and individuation of these actions: whether they are the same action with different descriptions of it or whether they are different actions with correspondingly different descriptions? Whatever the correct answers to these questions are and however tied these answers are to the quest for necessary properties of human actions, philosophers can concentrate on this search without first settling the problems of identity and individuation since answers to these problems derive from what theorists take to be the necessary (or necessary and sufficient) properties of human action or, if there are no such properties, can be resolved in other ways.

Now, if we keep before us as many of the clear, undeniable cases of human action as we can, it does look as if their vast variety does defeat any putatively necessary property. What, one must ask, is the common denominator of the following haphazard list of actions, none of which can be repudiated without arbitrarily limiting the range of use of the concept of human action? Moving one’s finger for no reason at all; putting on the left shoe before the right; driving to work; raising one’s arm to signal; polluting the atmosphere by driving; forgetting to clear the iced walk; refusing to vote on polling day; stopping at the store for some tobacco; convening an important meeting; reading a report with the assigned task of making a recommendation regarding future action, with the
THE CONCEPT OF HUMAN ACTION

intention of sorting out all the issues, painful or not, with the motive of enhancing the welfare of the institution, and with the goal of making a better university: getting married; filing for a divorce; falling in love; resigning one’s job; writing a letter of resignation; quitting one’s job; turning on the wrong tap; scalding Watkins; killing a man unintentionally, impulsively, by accident, mistakenly, or inadvertently; stalking a bird; hunting a lion; shooting a rabbit; missing the target; looking for a needle in a haystack; finding a needle in a haystack with or without looking for it; shaking hands; brushing elbows; greeting one’s friend; murdering someone, etc., etc., etc.

The theorists, of course, do not accept all of these as cases of action; nor do they offer the same reasons for the ones they agree are actions. Even so, it remains a fact that each of these examples is a legitimate member of the class of human actions for one of our theorists or another. The concept of human action accommodates all these cases, in spite of all the disagreements over whether they are cases or not.

If we turn from this vast variety of cases to those disagreements among the theorists about what counts as an action—their action-giving-reasons—we find the clue to the concept of human action as well as to the impossibility of any necessary criterion of that concept. For it is in their disagreements about why x is an action or whether x is an action that the logic of the criteria of the concept can be discerned. What is at issue in these disagreements is not the application of agreed-upon criteria but a debate over the criteria themselves.

The concept of a human action, even as it is employed by the theorists, has many criteria, all manifested in the diverse properties of the vast variety of cases of human action. None of these criteria covers all the cases; each is applicable only to some of the cases. The theorist—in his quest for a common property—opts for at least one among all the extant criteria as a necessary criterion; which then serves as his main action-giving-reason in answering why or whether x is an action. In effect, he proffers a necessary criterion of a concept whose use and conditions of use, as these conditions are embodied in their and our collective talk about the vast variety of cases, reveal that the concept has no such criterion. To persist that it does have a necessary criterion is to violate the logic of a concept which can perform its assigned role only under the second-order condition that it is governed by a multiple, diverse set of first-order criteria, some of which are sufficient, but none of which is necessary.

What sort of concept, then, is the concept of a human action? It illuminates nothing to characterize or castigate it as ambiguous, vague, fishy, purely stipulative, or even dummy. For as it is applied to the vast variety of cases of human action, it is predominately none of these. Rather, as I have tried to show—mainly by pitting the theorists against each other—it is open in the precise sense of having sufficient but no necessary criteria. If this is correct, the concept of a human action is not closed, defeasible, essentially disputable, or a family resemblance concept. Moreover, the sufficient criteria of the concept of a human action are coextensive with the good reasons—the action-giving-reasons—for something being a human action. Because these action-giving-reasons differ from those good reasons that are coextensive with definitive criteria, necessary
criteria, disjunctive sets of non-necessary, non-sufficient criteria, the concept of action is not closed, like that of triangle; or open in Hart’s sense of necessary but no sufficient criteria, like that of contract; or open in Hampshire’s sense of no undeniable criterion, like that of moral or tragic (what I call “perennially debatable”); or open in Wittgenstein’s sense of no necessary, no sufficient, but some unrejectable criteria, like that of game or drama (what I call “perennially flexible”). Its openness of sufficient but no necessary criteria can be assimilated to none of these. However, although it cannot be modeled on any of the above concepts, it may nevertheless serve as a model for our philosophical elucidation of other concepts, especially in psychology, where the quest for the common properties of the various bits of human behavior continues unabated and unchallenged.

FOOTNOTES

6A. J. Melden, “Action,” *The Philosophical Review*, LXV (October, 1956), 523-541. The first quotation is from p. 538; subsequent page references are to this publication.
9John L. Austin, “A Plea for Excuses;” the page references are to the reprinting in *Philosophical Papers*.