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RESPONSE TO WEITZ*

by

William P. Alston

Professor Weitz contends that there are no necessary conditions for the application of the concept of a human action, though there are a number of distinct sufficient conditions. In arguing for this position he reviews a number of philosophical discussions in which, he supposes, putative necessary conditions are set forth. He argues, in the case of each, that it is not a necessary condition, though he allows that some of them are sufficient conditions.

In criticizing the necessary-condition-claims he has discovered Weitz proceeds in two different ways in two different sorts of cases. With respect to R. Taylor, A. Danto, and A. Goldman, he argues that the putative condition is internally unsuitable to serve as a condition, by reason of ambiguity, obscurity, or "privacy": so that, in a sense, the problem of whether it really is a necessary condition of action never arises. However, the candidates put forward by C. Taylor, Chisholm, Melden, and (he supposes) Davidson, he finds sufficiently intelligible to be worth considering; and he argues, in the case of each of these, that it is not in fact a necessary condition. I should like to focus on his treatment of the second group.

Rather than going into the details of his criticisms of these various theorists, I feel that it would be more fruitful to concentrate on Weitz’s basic strategy of criticism; in doing so, we will be led into questions about the nature of the problem for which Weitz is considering various solutions. Weitz’s line of criticism for the second group is very simple. He maintains that there are clear cases of human action that do not satisfy the necessary condition. He is quite explicit about this procedure. Near the end of his paper, he writes “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 ... we cannot even begin to formulate the criteria of an action unless we have some clear cases before us.” “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 action, none of which can be repudiated without arbitrarily limiting the range of use of the concept of human action?” There follows a long list of putatively clear cases.

Now if our task is that of teasing out the criteria that govern the application of the term ‘human action’, then the general methodological principle just enunciated is surely unexceptionable. However when it comes to putting this
principle into practice, I run into difficulties. In the present instance I find myself disagreeing with Professor Weitz on some of the “clear cases” he proffers. The items on his list I find myself most strongly inclined to reject are ‘forgetting to clear the iced walk’, ‘falling in love’, and ‘missing the target’. How shall we resolve this disagreement. It sounds simple enough. Is or is not falling in love something to which the term ‘human action’ is clearly applicable? If someone tells me that he has fallen in love, is it or is it not clear that what he has reported to me counts as an action? My unhesitating inclination is to say ‘no’. Professor Weitz apparently has the opposite inclination. What else might we try? Well, I might use the “camel’s nose in the tent” technique. If falling in love is an action, then so are coming to hate someone, getting fond of the Rites of Spring, and drifting apart from someone. If forgetting to clear the iced walk is an action, then what about interiding to sweep the porch, remembering to clear the walk, and failing to notice the one-way street sign? What will Weitz’s linguistic intuition tell him about these cases?

So far it may look as if we have just another of those not infrequent cases in which philosophers deliver conflicting linguistic intuitions. However I believe that here the trouble goes deeper. It is not that the putative cases at which I demurred are sharply contrasted with other cases, to which the term is clearly applicable. On the contrary there is something generally fishy about the whole enterprise of looking for cases to which the term ‘human action’ clearly applies in some established sense, where this is supposed to determine the range of cases philosophers are trying to elucidate in their “theories of action”. In other words, it seems to me that one is barking up the wrong tree when one tries to take the applicability of the term ‘human action’ (in any established sense) as a touchstone against which to measure philosophical “theories of action”. Let me elaborate.

How do we tell what are clear cases of human action? The most straightforward tack is to take each putative case in turn, and reflect on whether one would apply the term, ‘human action’ to it. Unfortunately, it would seem that we do not use the term ‘human action’, or ‘action’, as a class predicate often enough (or standardly enough) to set up any definite linguistic dispositions in this regard. We simply do not go around calling things actions, or saying of things that they are actions. Even if we take items that all philosophers will agree on, e.g., opening a door, it still sounds odd to say ‘His opening that door was an action (or was a human action)’. In what sort of context might one say this? Of course, there are other linguistic contexts with respect to which the term ‘human action’ or ‘action’ might get established as a clear term, even if it is not standardly used as a predicate in the bald fashion just considered. Thus we might refer to things as actions, or say of them that they are actions of such and such a sort. But it seems that we do not do any of these things sufficiently often to set up any firm dispositions to apply ‘action’ as a class term to a range of “clear cases”. We simply do not go around saying things like ‘The last action you performed was reprehensible’, ‘Your action of getting into the car was quite neat’, ‘That was a fast action’, ‘Your convening that meeting was sneaky action’, ‘You still haven’t performed that action I told you to perform’. Statements like
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this sound, at best, stilted and unnatural; at worst, unintelligible.

On further reflection, I am inclined to think that in its most familiar, comfortable, and readily interpretable employments, ‘action’ is a mass noun, rather than a class term. We speak of ‘a man of action’ (not ‘actions’), we say of a film that ‘there was not much action in it’ (not ‘not many actions’), what the director used to say in the old Hollywood movies about movies was ‘Lights, action, camera’, (not ‘Lights, actions, camera’), we say ‘I finally got some action’ (not ‘some actions’). And so on. It is presumably because of this that it sounds so odd, or worse, to ask questions like ‘How many actions did you perform in driving to work?’ or to respond to the above remark about the film with ‘Well, how many actions did you think there were in it?’, or ‘How many actions does a film have to contain to be satisfactory?’ ‘Action’ simply does not seem to have any established, clearly demarcated use as a class term.1 There are, indeed, contexts in which we use the noun in the plural. Thus we say of a man that he is not responsible for his actions, and it is said that actions speak louder than words. But even here, it would seem that no workable principle of individuation is associated with the word. We would not be prepared to go from the above statements to an enumeration of the actions for which he is not to be held responsible, or to a specification of the number of actions that spoke louder than words in a given instance. Even here we are plagued by the lack of any established pattern for referring to a given action as an action, and for calling something or other an action.

It is to be noted that ‘action’ contrasts sharply with ‘act’ in these respects. We do freely refer to so-and-so’s as acts (of such and such a kind) and we do say of a given so-and-so that it is an act (of such and such a kind). Thus I might call something you did ‘an act of kindness’, ‘an act of mercy’, or ‘an act of supererogation’ (not an ‘action of kindness’). Again there are acts of will, but no actions of will. Philosophers reflect these distinctions in ordinary usage when they speak of ‘mental acts’ rather than ‘mental actions’. It would seem that ‘action’ occupies something of a middle ground between ‘act’ and ‘behavior’, the latter of which is even more unqualifiedly a mass noun than action, though psychologists have bravely attempted to convert it too into a class noun (with much less support from ordinary language), with their talk of, e.g., the “various behaviors involved in anger”. I think that a philosopher of Austinian proclivities might do some useful work in tracing out the contrasts in the established uses of these terms.

These considerations seem to me to show that there is no established use of ‘action’ or ‘human action’, as a class term, which could serve as a basis for resolving questions as to what counts as clear case of a human action. In becoming fluent speakers of the language we simply do not pick up any distinctive dispositions to apply the term to certain kinds of events (or whatevers) rather than other kinds; and so we never develop the sorts of linguistic dispositions, reflection on which might yield a set of clear cases. As a result, the term is highly subject to the theoretical predilections of whatever philosopher happens to be discussing the subject. Given that this term has become current as the preferred category term for the range of things discussed in “the philos-
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ophy of action”, a given philosopher will find that certain controversial items are or are not cases of action, depending on his further philosophical commitments. The lack of any firm pattern of application in ordinary language leaves a vacuum which his philosophical commitments are all too ready to fill. This is my explanation of the persistent disputes over various kinds of controversial cases of action, and this is why I feel that the problems of the philosophy of action are not properly approached by asking about the extension or intension of ‘action’ or ‘human action’. A “philosophy of action” that proceeds in this fashion is built on sand.

There are also less radical objections to supposing the philosophical problem of the nature of “action” to be concerned with the criteria of application of the term ‘action’ (in some established sense); and these would be well worth exploring at some length, were the more radical objections not more decisive. For one thing the ordinary term is much more restrictive in its range of application; it is used to mark much more specific contrasts than the concept which the philosophical theory of action seeks to explicate. For example, ‘action’ is often used in contrast with thinking and talking. A man of action is one who doesn’t just sit around thinking things over and carrying on endless discussion; he goes out and does things. Similarly it would be no criticism of my judgment that there wasn’t much action in the film, to point out that there was a great deal of conversation in it. For the philosopher on the other hand, speech (and perhaps thinking as well) certainly figures among the things he wants his “theory of action” to cover. In the second place, the term does not always stand in the same contrasts; its criteria of application will vary in different contexts. Thus although, as in the above cases, action is sometimes contrasted with speech, in other contexts it will include speech. If I am not responsible for his actions, then I suppose this implies that I am not responsible for what he says, as well as not responsible for his non-verbal behavior. Third, the term extends outside the usual philosophical area of concern, even when applied to human affairs. For example the action that a certain photographer recently brought against Jackie Onassis, would not be taken by most “action theorists” as an example of the sort of thing of which they are trying to construct a theory. Thus, even if all the other objections could be overcome, we would still have to specify the sense of ‘action’ in which it could be claimed that the philosopher is looking for the criteria of application of that term.

If we can’t pinpoint what the philosopher of action is after by saying that he is trying to determine the criteria of application of ‘action’, in some established sense, how can we do so? As may be surmised from what I have said so far, I believe the situation to be much too complex and chaotic to permit any answer of this degree of simplicity. With this caveat I may briefly explain how I conceive the philosophical problem of “the nature of action”. We start with a dimly described distinction between action and passion, between the things a person does and the things that happen to him, and when it is the person (as a whole)
that *does* it rather than some part of his body). Items in the former category seem to give rise to a number of philosophical problems. (Just to mention one of these problems, when I think of an event as a person *doing* something, this seems to carry with it the notion of the person as *agent*, as somehow responsible for the production of some change in a way different from that in which a set of events and/or causal conditions are responsible for their effects. Agents seem to constitute indissoluble knots in the otherwise smooth flow of causality.) Of course it is not as if the ordinary term ‘do’ (or the active voice of the verb) adequately locates the range of cases with which the philosophy of action is concerned, any more than the ordinary term ‘action’ does. (“Taking a nap”) is one of the things I could, in good conscience, say that I had been *doing* today, but most philosophers would not want to count that as one of the things to which they would want their account of the nature of “action” to apply.) However, if we say that what we are concerned with is the distinctive character of what men *do* (as opposed to what happens to them), this is, it seems to me, a better starting point in ordinary language than ‘action’, if for no other reason than because it is not subject to the crippling disabilities that affect ‘action’ by reason of its being primarily a mass noun. We can then try to pin down the range of the concept more precisely by various qualifications (involving bodily movement, doable at will, being the sort of thing for which one might give reasons, etc.); and not all investigators will introduce the same further specifications. Why is this? Or, better, what is the source of these differences? What leads one philosopher to delimit his sphere of inquiry by one qualification, and another philosopher by another? It is this question we must answer (correctly), if we are to achieve a penetrating understanding of the subject matter of the philosophy of action.

The correct answer seems to me to be that what guides the selectivity is the philosophical problem (or range of philosophical problems) with which the philosopher in question is most concerned. We have already alluded to the fact that “what men *do*” is of interest to philosophers, because in attempting to understand men’s doings, and the relations of these doings to a variety of things, one is led into a number of puzzling and challenging questions. These include:

1. The nature of agency. (E.g., can the attribution of certain happenings to an agent as the “doer” of them be analyzed in terms of their causation by certain kinds of events; and if not, how is the operation of an agent to be conceived?) (R. Taylor, R. Chisholm)

2. What differentiates the “voluntary movements” of an organism from its other movements? Is it by the sort of internal processes from which they issue or otherwise?

3. The nature and operation of deliberation, “practical knowledge”, acting for a reason, and reason-giving. (G.E.M. Anscombe)

4. The structure of teleological (purposive) explanation, and the requirements
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of its applicability.

5. What is for a man to be responsible for something he does? Under what conditions is he so responsible? (II.L.A. Hart)

Clearly, if one is primarily concerned to explore problems in one or another of these clusters, he will seek to separate out a class of “doings” to which his particular bag of problems apply. Thus the man primarily interested in (1) will want his class to include all (and presumably only) those facts that (he takes to) involve an attribution to an agent, a “center of agency”. A (2) theorist will focus on the class of “voluntary movements”; our (3) man on the class of doings about which a person might deliberate and/or for which it is appropriate to ask for a certain kind of reason or explanation; (4) will be concerned with the class of things done for some purpose, and (5) with those doings for which a man is, could be, or might conceivably be, held responsible. Of course, the application of some of these criteria is not crystal clear and, in a number of cases, highly controversial. But even allowing for a certain amount of indeterminacy, it is, nevertheless, abundantly clear that the classes so determined will not exactly coincide. For example, (2) will exclude, while presumably all the others will include, (deliberate) abstentions that “involve” no bodily movements. (1) will presumably extend more widely than (4), since there are presumably many idle doings, e.g., idly doodling, pursing one’s lips, or drumming on the table, that are ascribed to oneself as agent, yet are not done for any purpose. (5) will be wider or narrower, depending on the exact form it takes, but presumably it will be the narrowest class of all, since there seem to be doings for which the question of the agent’s responsibility could not possibly arise. Thus the different theorists will presumably be addressing themselves to different ranges of cases. And those among them who go along with philosophical fashion to the extent of supposing that ‘action’ must be the right category term for their subject matter, will presumably find it natural to suppose that their favored criteria demarcate the limits of application of this term; they may well be led into searching for ways of showing that the ordinary use of ‘action’ is governed by such conditions; they may even compound the confusion by accusing their colleagues of distorting, misusing, or misrepresenting the ordinary concept of human action. Thus Richard Taylor (1) will protest, against II.L.A.Hart (5) that it is obvious that there are actions (doings that are clear cases of actions) for which it would make no sense to hold the agent responsible; and Miss Anscombe will lodge a similar complaint against (2) to the effect that there are certainly actions that do not involve bodily movement (e.g., refraining from answering a jibe).

Once we appreciate the points just made, we will see that these controversies are a tempest in a teapot. We will lose the inclination to try to decide whether the class of actions is really demarcated by the boundaries sketched by one of the two Taylors, Hart or Goldman. We will see that “theories of action” are not usefully construed as addressing themselves to any such question, and hence we will be relieved of the necessity of deciding which of them, if any, has answered
it aright. More specifically, once we realize that (a) neither the word ‘action’ nor any other word, phrase, or construction has a standard use such that philosophers who discuss the nature of action could fruitfully be construed as attempting to describe that standard use, and that (b) differences over both the extension and intension of the class of “actions” can be traced to differences in the philosophical problems on which a given philosopher is concentrating, we will see the enormity of the mistake involved in supposing that differences among philosophers as to what counts as an action (and as to what it takes for something to count as an action) are incompatible statements about the nature of some independently specifiable subject matter. Once we appreciate these points we will realize that the subject matter of the “philosophy of action” is not prefigured, pre-ordained, or predetermined by the ordinary use of ‘action’, or of any other term. Since the various action theorists are not disagreeing about the nature, character, criteria for, or extension of, some antecedently fixed subject-matter, called “action”, we are not called upon to decide which of them, if any, is right. (This, of course, is not to say that they may not disagree about a number of other things.) Since each is concerned to discern the lineaments of some class of doings with respect to which certain philosophical puzzles arise (and then, of course, go on to grapple with the puzzles), they are not really competing with each other when each lays out his favored concept and associated class. We may accept (or reject) each of the classes so delineated as one about which interesting and important problems arise; we can view each class as one determined by the problem in question. (No demarcation with problematicity.) We don’t have to choose between them. Let a thousand flowers blossom.

Enough of meta-philosophy! Unfortunately (or fortunately, as the case may be) I would seem to have left myself little time for the real thing. A few brief comments will have to suffice.

It will be apparent from remarks made at the beginning of this paper that I do not feel that Weitz’s list of “clear cases” indicates any philosophically interesting concept, or, indeed, any homogeneous concept with distinct lineaments. And if this is the case, it is hardly surprising that Weitz can make a case for the proposition that there are no (interesting or readily discernible) necessary conditions for the application of the concept so specified, and still less surprising that conditions put forward by various theorists as necessary for the concept of action, should not be necessary for the application of Weitz’s concept. However even if my strictures on the Weitz-concept are justified, Weitz’s claims concerning this concept will still be too extreme. It will not be the case that there are no necessary conditions for its application, even if we put to one side trivial conditions (of the order of “satisfying the same concept as each of the items on list L’). If I have any grasp at all of the concept Weitz has in mind (as indicated by the items on his list), I would suppose that one necessary condition for something’s falling under this concept is that it be an event (or “occurrence”,...
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if you prefer) involving a human being. This condition is by no means trivial; and it rules out many, many sorts of things as not falling under the concept. If Weitz admits that this is indeed a necessary condition, he might go on to say that it is not a very interesting or distinctive necessary condition, that it does not bring out what is distinctive of action, that it is not the sort of thing philosophers have been looking for when they looked for necessary conditions for something's being a human action. And he might well be justified in these contentions. However in that case he will not be able to state his thesis in so simple a fashion; it will become, rather, the thesis that the concept of human action is governed by no necessary conditions that ________; and he will be faced with the task of filling in that blank and justifying the thesis as so qualified.

Finally I should like to say a few words about Weitz's contention that the various theorists he surveys, or some of them, do succeed in providing sufficient conditions for the application of the term 'human action'. In opposition to this, I maintain that, if we consider any interesting demarcation of the class of human actions, or even if we consider Weitz's putative concept of a human action, none of the candidates he mentions are sufficient conditions in any interesting way. Each of them either fails to be a sufficient condition, or else it succeeds by dint of explicitly containing the concept for which it is supposed to be a sufficient condition.

Weitz tells us that his main thesis in his paper was first suggested to him by John Austin's essay, "A Plea for Excuses"; and he claims that in that essay Austin put forward certain sufficient conditions for something's being an action, viz., "justification, praise, blame, intention, purpose, responsibility, among others". Weitz is not very explicit as to just how the putative sufficient conditions are constituted, but the suggestion I get from his exposition is that (1) something's being praised (or is it praiseworthy?) is a sufficient condition for its being an action, (2) something's being justified is sufficient for its being an action, and so on. Now as so stated this is false. Clearly I can praise things other than actions. I can, e.g., praise a work of art; I can praise a person (and I can praise him for his qualities and abilities rather than for any specific actions). Likewise I can justify proposals, principles, and standards, as well as actions. If these formulations are to escape being blatantly inadequate they will have to be further enriched so as to specify, e.g., not just being praised or capable of being praised, but, more specifically, being praised or praiseworthy in a way that is distinctive of actions; and to escape triviality this will have to be done without explicitly employing the term 'action' or any synonym. Whether or not this can be done, Weitz has not done it, nor has he given any indication of how it can be done. It is noteworthy that his most explicit statement of a necessary condition, in the section on Austin is the following. "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 of justification." (italics added). Well, of course, if a specified action is open to excuse or to justification, that is sufficient for its being an action! But that is hardly illuminating; even if the specified action were not open to excuse or
justification it would still be an action. Being a (specified) action is by itself sufficient for something's being an action!

The other supposed sufficient conditions are subject to similar strictures, though the details will differ from case to case. In the summary list on page 28, we find, for instance, "agent-caused" and "governed by conventions". But clearly things other than actions are "agent-caused"; e.g., when I shut a door, the door's being shut is agent-caused; whenever an agent brings about effects in the "external world" these effects are correctly described as "agent-caused". Again, not only actions are "governed by conventions"; the size and shape of a football field and the duties of a host are likewise governed by convention. Again, to transform these into workable sufficient conditions, we will have to make explicit the distinctive way in which actions and only actions are "agent-caused", and the way in which actions and only actions are "governed by conventions". And again, the trick is to do this without explicitly employing the concept of an action.

FOOTNOTES

1The same thing seems to be true of our talk of inanimate action. We speak of the action of corrosive agents on metal (not actions), and the action of the waves on the cliffs.

2This, of course, is a pervasive phenomenon. Typically the philosopher subjects some ordinary language term to considerable stretching in order to convert it into a broad category term, 'cause', 'mental', and 'moral' are cases in point.

3Not all philosophers who are engaged in exploring problems included on the above list preface their explorations with claims to be demarcating the class of "actions". In general, some of them use more specific terms for the object of their reflections, e.g., 'intentional action', 'purposive action', or 'voluntary movement'. Where this is so, they do not even seem to be presenting competing analyses of, or criteria for, the same concept.

4In this connection the following point should be noted. Whenever one defeats a series of necessary condition claims (for a given term) by indicating, for each putative necessary condition, something to which the term applies but which does not satisfy that condition, the hypothesis of multivocality should be checked out before concluding that we are confronted with a concept that lacks necessary conditions. Otherwise our conclusion is bought at too cheap a price. If I neglected the multivocality possibility, it would be easy for me to prove that there are no necessary conditions of application for the concept of a sound. If someone claims that being audible is a necessary condition, I cite Long Island Sound. If, per contra, being a body of water is cited as a necessary condition, I cite the sound I just heard coming from my back yard. Surely things can't be this easy. Thus, waiving all the other difficulties already mentioned, we must still require of Weitz that he give reason for supposing that the failure of a certain putative necessary condition is due to the fact that we are confronted with a concept that lacks any necessary conditions rather than due to the part that our term expresses several different concepts each of which may well have necessary conditions.

5With the others it is not so clear how to formulate the sufficient condition. Just what sort of relation to intention or purpose is sufficient for something's being an action? Is it that the something must embody purpose or intention? Result from or stem from intention? Or what?