Introduction to the Philosophy of Action

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Please note that this is only a selection of some of the literature in philosophy of action. More relevant reading can also be found in the faculty reading lists for Ethics (103) and Philosophy of Mind (104). For further reading on the nature of scientific explanation and the use of scientific laws see also the reading list for Philosophy of Science & Social Science (105 & 106); for questions about agency, free will, and determinism see the faculty reading list for Philosophy of Cognitive Science (125) under “Agency and Free Will”.

* Indicates a particularly helpful, insightful, or central work.

The most useful single introductory volume – covering a whole range of problems, questions, and positions in the philosophy of action – is:


§1 General collections & anthologies:


§3 Elizabeth Anscombe:


§4 Helpful guides and articles on Anscombe:


§5 Donald Davidson:


§6 Discussions and collections on Davidson’s work:

[34] Stoecker, R., “Davidson”, in [1].
[35] * Stoutland, F., “Interpreting Davidson on Intentional Action”, in [33].

§7 Overview of the Development of Philosophy of Action:

§8 Explanation of Action & Behaviour:


See also: [1], [2], [3], [4], [6], [8], [20], [30], [31], [32], [35], [53], [56], [60], [107], [112], [116].

§9 Reasons & Causes:

§9 Basic Actions:

[64] * Sandis, C., “Basic Actions and Individuation”, in [1].

See also: [27], [48], [81], [82], [89], [101], [112].

§10 Deviant Causal Chains:

§11 The “Standard Story” of action & its critics

[73] * Hornsby, J., “Agency and actions”, in [5].
[76] Leist, A. “Introduction: Through Contexts to Action”, in [5].

See also: [35], [48], [63], [101], [102], [107], [120].

§12 Ontology of Actions: events, processes, and alternative views:

[95] Stout, R., “What are you causing in acting?”, in [2].

See also: [16], [30], [60], [106], [112], [117], [119].

§13 Agent & substance causation:

[98] * Clarke, R., “Agent Causation”, in [1].

See also: [66], [83], [92], [113].

§14 Other prominent philosophers & works on action: