

Introduction to Philosophy of Action

Harry Alanen
harry.alanen@philosophy.ox.ac.uk

These lectures aim to give students an overview of the central problems and positions in the philosophy of action. More specifically, the aim will be to help students raise critical questions regarding what actions are, and how actions are to be explained, by considering what different theories of action try to achieve.

The lectures are aimed at undergraduates intending to take finals in Philosophy of Mind or Ethics, but those taking Philosophy of Social Sciences or Cognitive Science may also find the lectures helpful overviews of the problems relating to the explanation of action. Graduate students interested in an overview of key positions and developments in philosophy of action are also encouraged to attend.

Each lecture will be followed by an optional Q&A session. A reading list will be provided before the lectures start.

Lecture 1 (Week 5). The problem of explaining human behaviour.

This lecture raises a number of preliminary questions and problems regarding action and agency, such as: how is human behaviour and action best explained? Are the best explanations of actions scientific explanations? If so, what does this mean for our own understanding of our actions and reasons? In connection to these questions the lecture will consider a type causal explanation called the 'covering law'-model of explanation, developed e.g. by Carl Hempel, according to which causes and effects are connected by a law of nature.

Lecture will 2 raise a problem for this kind of causal explanation, and Lecture 3 will consider alternative causal accounts. Lecture 4 will consider whether causal accounts of action are possible at all, or, even if they are, whether or not they should be the starting point for explaining action.

Lecture 2 (Week 6). Anscombe's Intention, and Intentionalist Theories of Action.

This lecture considers some of the chief contributions Anscombe has had on the philosophy of action. Her discussion on the different uses of “intention” will be examined, her notion of acting “under a description”, the relevance of descriptions for the individuation of actions, and the relevance of “why?” questions for explaining actions. We will also consider some intentionalist accounts of action, inspired by Anscombe.

This lecture will provide background for the following lectures: while critical of the 'logical connection'-argument, Davidson was also influenced by Anscombe, and this influence sets his account apart from certain other causal accounts. Lecture 4 will further develop some of Anscombe's views, by considering neo-Anscombian views critical of causal accounts.

Lecture 3 (Week 7). Donald Davidson & Causal Theories of Action.

This lecture discusses the work of Donald Davidson, and the influence his work had for later causal accounts of action, in particular on the so-called “standard story of action” (as developed by e.g. Michael Smith). The lecture will cover Davidson’s use of events to individuate actions, his views on causation, and the relevance his anomalous monism has for his theory of action. This should help show a number of key differences between Davidson’s account of action and the “standard story”.

Lecture 4 (Week 8). Problems for the Causal Theories of Action.

The final lecture will focus on a number of different problems the causal theories of action faces, beginning with the problem of deviant causal chains. Another problem we will consider is whether or not causal accounts leave agents “out” of the account of their actions. Whether or not this constitutes a serious worry will be discussed, as will different ways of responding to it, such as opting for substance or agent causation in favour of event causation. We will also consider an objection according to which a causal account is not possible. By considering these difficulties (many inspired or drawing on the work of Anscombe) the final lecture aims to tie in with the questions raised in Lecture 1: what kind of an account a theory of action should aim at giving. Even if a causal account of action is possible, is it preferable over a non-causal one?

Suggested preliminary reading

Lecture 1.

- Mayr, E. “The Problem of Human Agency” (Chapter 1 from *Understanding Human Agency*, Oxford: OUP, 2011).
- Hempel, C. “The Function of General Laws in History” (in *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 39, 1942, pp. 35-48).
- – “Explanation in Science and in History” (in R. G. Colodney (ed.) *Frontiers of Science and Philosophy*, Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1962).
- – “Rational Action” (in *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, Vol. 35, 1962, pp. 5-23.).
- Hempel, C. & Oppenheim, P. “Studies in the Logic of Explanation” (in *Philosophy of Science*, Vol. 15, 1948, pp. 135-175).
- Stoutland, F. “Three Conceptions of Action” (in H. Stachowiak (ed.) *Pragmatik*. Vol 3, Meiner, 1989).
- – “Anscombe's Intention in Context” (in *Essays on Anscombe's Intention*, HUP, 2011).

Lecture 2.

- Anscombe, G.E.M. *Intention* (Blackwell, 1957).
- – “Causality and Determinism” (in *Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Mind*, UMP, 1981).
- Hornsby, J. “Actions in Their Circumstances” (in *Essays on Anscombe's Intention*, HUP, 2011).
- Stoutland, F. “The Logical Connection Argument” (in N. Rescher (ed.) *American Philosophical Quarterly Monograph : Studies in the Theory of Knowledge*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1970).
- – “Anscombe's Intention in Context” and “Summary of Anscombe's Intention” (both in *Essays on Anscombe's Intention*, HUP, 2011).
- Teichmann, R. “Anscombe” (in C. Sandis & T. O'Connor (eds.) *Companion to Philosophy of Action*, Wiley, 2010).
- Thompson, M. “Anscombe's *Intention* and Practical Knowledge” (in *Essays on Anscombe's Intention*, HUP, 2011).

Lecture 3.

- Bratman, M. “Reflection, Planning, and Temporally Extended Agency” and “Two Problems about Human Agency” (both in *Structure of Agency*, OUP, 2007).

- Danto, A. “Basic Actions” (in *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol.2, 1965, pp.141-148). Davidson, D. “Actions, Reasons, and Causes” and “The Logical Form of Action Sentences” (both in *Essays on Actions and Events*, OUP, 1980).
- Hempel, C. “Rational Action” (in *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, Vol. 35, 1962, pp. 5-23.).
- C. Sandis “Basic Actions and Individuation” (in C. Sandis & T. O'Connor (eds.) *Companion to Philosophy of Action*, Wiley, 2010).
- Smith, M. “The Humean Theory of Motivation” (in *Mind*, Vol. 96, 1987, pp.36-61).
- – “The Possibility of Philosophy of Action” (in J. Bransen & S.E. Cuypers (eds.) *Human Action, Deliberation and Causation*, London: Kluwer, 1998).
- Stoutland, F. “Oblique Causation and Reasons for Action” (in *Synthese*, Vol.43, 1980, pp.351-367).
- – “Interpreting Davidson on Intentional Action” (in J. Malpas (ed.) *Dialogues with Davidson*, MIT, 2011).
- Velleman, D. “Introduction” and “What Happens When Someone Acts?” (both in *The Possibility of Practical Reason*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2000).

Lecture 4.

- Alvarez, M. and Hyman, J. “Agents and their Actions” (in *Philosophy*, Vol.73, 1998, pp-219-245).
- Boyle, M. & Lavin, D. “Goodness and Desire” (in Tennenbaum, S. (ed.) *Desire, Practical Reason, and the Good*, OUP, 2010).
- Chisholm, R. “Freedom and Action” (in K. Lehrer (ed.) *Freedom and Determinism*, New York: Random House, 1966).
- Frankfurt, H. “The Problem of Action” (in *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 15, 1978, pp.157-162).
- Ford, A. “Action and Generality” (in *Essays on Anscombe's Intention*, HUP, 2011).
- – “Action and Passion” (in *Philosophical Topics*, Vol.42, 2014, pp.13-42).
- Hornsby, J. “Agency and Actions” (in Hyman, J. & Steward, H. (eds.) *Agency and Action*, CUP, 2004).
- – “The Standard Story of Action : An Exchange (2)” (in Aguilar, J.H. & Buckareff, A.A. (eds.) *Causing Human Actions : New Perspectives on the Causal Theory of Action*, MIT, 2010).
- Lavin, D. “Must There be Basic Action?” (in *Noûs*, Vol. 47, 2013, pp.273-301).
- Smith, M. “The Standard Story of Action : An Exchange (1)” (in Aguilar, J.H. & Buckareff, A.A. (eds.) *Causing Human Actions : New Perspectives on the Causal Theory of Action*, MIT, 2010).
- – “Four Objections to the Standard Story (and Four Replies)” (in *Philosophical Issues*, Vol.22, 2012, pp.387-401).
- Stout, R. “Processes” (in *Philosophy*, Vol. 72, 1997, pp.19-27).
- – “Deviant Causal Chains” (in C. Sandis & T. O'Connor (eds.) *Companion to Philosophy of Action*, Wiley, 2010).