

The Nature of Human Action

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Human actions are a central subject of social sciences. Philosophical research into the nature of actions, no doubt, cannot but have consequences for our understanding of social sciences themselves.

This article begins by considering the problem of the individuation of a human action: what is an action and what is the difference between the action and bodily movement (or behavior)? I briefly outline and examine Brodbeck and Weber's philosophical responses to this question. I then attempt to integrate our understanding of action with Donald Davidson's view on the causal explanation of human action. The aim of my research is to reveal the nature of human action at the end.

Key Words: human action, bodily movement, Brodbeck, Weber, Davidson, causal explanation

What is it for a person to act? What is the difference between the human action and bodily movement (or behavior)? What sort of thing is an action; namely, how is a human action individuated? What sort of facts can be true of the explanation of an action? I believe that it is an approach to understand the nature of human action by finding the answers for the questions raised above. In this article, I shall focus on Max Weber's "The Interpretive Understanding of Social Action", Donald Davidson's "Actions, Reasons, and Causes", and May Brodbeck's "Meaning and Action"¹ and try to sketch my answers toward these questions. The main purpose of the discussion is to reveal the nature of human action at the end of this article. Human actions are a central subject of social sciences. No doubt, philosophical research into the nature of actions cannot but have consequences for our understanding of social sciences themselves.

There is an intuitive distinction between what people do and what happens to them. Human action is not just what happens to them. A human action, precisely, is what a person does. But are all human doings actions? Wittgenstein reminds us not to forget that: when "I raise my arm" (a sort of human doing), my arm goes up. He then sets the question by asking: "What is left over if I subtract the fact that my arm goes up from the fact that I raise my arm?"² To formulate Wittgenstein's question in terms of our concern here, we can ask if both "my raising my arm" and "my arm going up" are what people do, are they different? If they are, and Wittgenstein may as well think they are, then what is it that makes them different?

However, the answer may not be as clear as it appears. From the first-person view, each of us seems to be able to sense that there is an apparent difference between "I raise my arm" and "my arm goes up". But from the third-person view, it is difficult to identify whether the person is raising his arm or his arm is just going up. Let's consider some situations and make this point clearer:

Situation A: In the class meeting, when I raise my arm, I am intending to ask

¹ The three articles are all collected in the Part One: "The Nature of Human Action" of *Readings in the Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, pp.19-33 and pp.44-78, edited by May Brodbeck, Macmillan, 1969.

² Wittgenstein, L., *Philosophical Investigations*, p.161, #621, Oxford, 1953.

some questions.

Situation B: In Taipei City, I raise my arm in order to call a taxi.

Situation C: In some group, when I raise my arm, it means that I agree with some proposal; but if I don't, it means that I don't agree with it.

Situation D: When I stretch myself, my arms go up naturally.

In situations A, B, and C, I raise my arm for the reason that I intend, desire, or believe something. In situation D, my arm's going up is merely the movement of my body, and I don't have any intention at all.

Most people would be inclined to accept that situations A, B, and C are alleged human actions and situation D is only bodily movement. Following this line of distinction, the next question would naturally be directed to ask the difference between human action and bodily movement. We know that all of the situations A, B, C, and D include bodily movement—that is, “the arm's going up”; what is more for the situations A, B, and C seems to be the thought or intention. In terms of Brodbeck's terminology, the something “left over” that distinguishes a bodily movement from an action is the *meaning* of that movement.³

An action may sometimes be referred to as a “meaningful” movement. According to Brodbeck's claim, there are four senses of “meaning”:

- (1) When, in any context, we know the character or characters that a term is being used to refer to, the term has a reference. A reference can be seen as one kind of meaning for the term, and we may call it meaning 1. (“MA”, 60)
- (2) When, within natural science, the reference of a term is known to be lawfully connected to other things, then the term is also meaningful or significant. We can say that it has meaning 2. (“MA”, 60)
- (3) “Intentional meaning” or meaning 3 is what a mental act intends, means, or is about. To have a thought or to think about is one fact; what this thought intends or means (in the sense of meaning 3) is a different fact. (“MA”, 61)
- (4) Meaning 4 is the psychological meaning which refers to, or means (in the sense

³ See Brodbeck's article “Meaning and Action”, p.58. Hereafter, “MA” for short and followed by the page number.

of meaning 1) certain things, verbal or nonverbal, that a person does upon hearing sounds or seeing certain marks. (“MA”, 65)

For Brodbeck, there is an obvious distinction between an action and a bodily movement, because “the two expressions ‘raising an arm’ and ‘arm going up’ differ in ‘meaning’ in all four senses of ‘meaning’, referentially, intentionally, psychologically, and in significance.” (“MA”, 73)

Although Brodbeck has tried to distinguish four meanings of “meaning” as clear as she could, it still seems to me that the conclusion made by her about the distinction between human actions and bodily movements doesn’t quite follow as she has intended. As a matter of fact, human action and bodily movement do not really differ in the sense of meaning 1, because they can have the same reference—“the arm going up”, for example, is co-referred to by “my raising an arm” and “my arm going up”. Even so, some might continue to insist that what is left over if I subtract the fact that my arm goes up from the fact that I raise my arm should be the meaning 2, meaning 3, and meaning 4. To use the meanings 2, 3, and 4 to distinguish human action from bodily movement is to presuppose we have no problem of identifying all meanings of human action, and therefore of individuating the action itself. Still, as I have mentioned above, from the case of third-person view, only by identifying the referential meaning (i.e., meaning 1 instead of meaning 2, meaning 3, and meaning 4) can we observe or individuate the so-called human action. We cannot be sure about all the meanings of a single human action except the bodily movement involved. If that is the case, then we cannot be sure about the distinction between the action and the movement either. We are still short of a clear criterion to distinguish human action from bodily movement.

The inference made above can vindicate Max Weber’s claim that “the line between meaningful action and merely reactive behavior to which no subjective meaning is attached, cannot be sharply drawn empirically”⁴. To make Weber’s claim more plausible, we can interpret it in the following way. We may know what we are doing and why we are doing it. Because from the first person perspective, we can

know every subjective meaning we attach to each of our actions, the line between my action and merely reactive behavior could be evident to me. However, we cannot always be sure whether other's behavior is intentional or not, for the causes, from within and from without, of a specific act are frequently complex and even more frequently obscure.

Laird Addis, in his *The Logic of Society*⁵, tries to sketch the idea of the matter as he sees Brodbeck's article. Addis explains that the actions and physical movements can be qualitatively identical, but the actions are enormously different and not just numerically. For him, "an action is a behavior that takes place under certain, specifiable circumstances, perhaps including some earlier and later ones"⁶. He also agrees that in the case of human action at least part of the additional "elements" besides the simple behavior is its meaning which is something in the world and therefore describable. He describes the additional elements or the meaning of an action as the subjective intention, thought, or desire. The whole idea here, in fact, involves a more fundamental question—that is, the question regarding "the individuation of an action". What sort of thing is an action?

According to Brodbeck's and Addis's position, an action consists of the physical movement and the subjective meaning for doing this movement. Let's go back to and consider again situation A raised above. The action in situation A is my raising arm in the class meeting. If Brodbeck and Addis were right, then this action can be individuated by the bodily movement—my arm going up, plus the subjective meaning—my intention to ask a question. But if we take into consideration Davidson's theory about the causal explanation of an action⁷, it is not hard to find the confusion in Brodbeck's individuation of an action. In the causal explanation of an action, the subjective meaning can well be regarded as the cause of the action, so the

⁴ See Weber's "The Interpretive Understanding of Social Action", p.21.

⁵ Laird Addis, *The Logic of Society*, University of Minnesota Press, 1975.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.29.

⁷ Davidson's theory of causal explanation of an action will be dealt with later. I mention this issue here only for the purpose of my criticism.

cause shouldn't be counted as a part (or an additional element) of the action. My intention that I want to ask a question is the cause of my raising my arm in the class meeting. In the causal connection, if A is the cause of B, then A and B are two different events. If there is a causal relation between the subjective intention and the action, then they should be two different things. Thus, this subjective intention should not be part of my action. Following this line of argument, I still wonder if we could sharply draw a line between an action and a bodily movement.

Another theory about the distinction between actions and bodily movements holds that actions, unlike mere behaviors, are by their nature not causally explainable. The theory presented here is closely related to the issue about the explanation of an action. If this theory were justified, then a sharp line between an action and a mere bodily movement could easily be drawn—a bodily movement is causally explainable while an action is not. Although Weber, Brodbeck, and Davidson have quite different views concerning the nature of human actions, their positions about the explanation of an action are to argue against the theory that an action cannot be causally explained. With respect to Brodbeck's position, whatever one takes an action to "include"—thoughts, dispositions, or effects—they are analytically isolable elements in a particular case, thus providing no obstacle in principle to description and explanation. Granted that an action is not just a piece of behavior, nevertheless an action can be described without any special problems in principle and that since this is so we have no reason why actions cannot be given lawful explanations.

Meanwhile, Davidson's position also strongly supports the causal theory for the explanation of an action. He starts his argument by saying that:

A reason rationalizes an action only if it leads us to see something the agent saw, or thought he saw, in his action—some features, consequence, or aspect of the action the agent wanted, desired, prized, held dear, thought dutiful, beneficial, obligatory, or agreeable. We cannot explain why someone did what he did simply by saying the particular action appealed to him; we must indicate what it was

about the action that appealed.⁸

He then proceeds to claim the following two views: (1) For us to understand how a reason of any kind rationalizes an action, it is necessary and sufficient that we see, at least in essential outline, how to construct a primary reason. (2) The primary reason for an action is its cause. An intentional action is an action that is explainable, in appropriate way, by appeal to the agent's reasons for the action. The reasons that explain intentional actions are appropriate pairs of the agent's desires (and other "pro-attitudes") and beliefs. This pair is what Davidson refers to as the primary reason. When one acts for a certain reason an appropriate desire-belief pair causes one's action. Suppose again, in situation A, that I intentionally raise my arm because I want to ask a question in the class meeting and believe raising my arm would be a way of doing this. But the question is: "Is the causal relation between the primary reason and the action same as the causal relation between two physical events?" Even though the explanation of human actions is a species of causal explanation, I wonder if it is the same species as the causal explanation for the physical world.

My suspicion above is based on the problem involved in Davidson's argument. The problem is about the future intention—i.e., intending (or having an intention) now to do something later. In the natural sciences, the concept of causality has a twofold usage. When we hold that A is the cause of B, we can either use the occurrence of A to explain the occurrence of B or use the occurrence of A to predict the occurrence of B. The causal relation between A and B lies in the relation that the occurrence of A necessitates the occurrence of B. But is there this kind of causal relation in the explanation of human action? When I raise my arm in the class meeting, somebody might explain it by the cause that I intend to ask a question and I believe raising my arm is a way of doing it. But, on the other hand, if I intend to ask a question in the class meeting, can anyone predict what action I will perform? If I intend to ask a question and I believe that raising my arm is a way of doing it, can

⁸ Donald Davidson, "Actions, Reasons, and Causes", p.45.

this primary reason (the pair of intention and belief) necessitate the action that I raise my arm? No one can be sure that I will necessarily raise my arm. Even for myself, I might finally change my mind and choose some other action to perform. The situation may not allow me to raise my arm, because it runs out of time. Or I may be too shy to raise my arm. This example of future intention is only a short-term case. If the case is that I want to go shopping tomorrow or I want to go travel to the United States next year, it will be more difficult to predict that these intentions or beliefs can necessitate any action I will perform in the long-term future. This is the reason I don't think that the explanation of human actions and the explanation in the natural sciences should be regarded as the same species of causal explanation, even though I don't deny that we can provide the causal or lawful explanation for human actions.

An intention/belief pair is appropriately related to some bodily movement if and only if the movement is truly describable as "doing-something" and the agent (of this movement), just before the time his body moved, had an intention toward "doing-something" and believed that his movement was or would be a "doing-something". But another question can be raised here. Let's think about the case in situation C. When I raise my arm in some group, it may mean that I agree with some proposal. But if I don't raise my arm, it doesn't mean that I haven't done any action. Most people will agree that although I don't raise my arm, I am still performing some action. Because I don't agree with the proposal in this group, the action I take is to keep my arms down. This kind of action can be called "negative action". This example shows that it is not necessary that every intention/belief pair must be related to a bodily movement. The negative action may be short of some bodily movement, but it is an action because the agent's intention and belief can explain the agent's non-moving. This question also brings a more serious problem for the question of the individuation of an action. If a negative action can be an action, then we shall have more trouble finding out when an action is being performed.

To individuate an action is one thing, to explain it is quite another. It seems to me that knowing something and understanding something are also two quite different things. To have a basis for knowing something, it is necessary that we can individuate it; and if we could provide an exact explanation for something, we must have

understood it very well. The individuation of an action and the distinction between an action and bodily movement, in turn, have their priority, because when we proceed to explain some action, we must have presupposed that it is an action we are explaining. Otherwise, how can we know we are explaining an action and not a mere bodily movement. Brodbeck's proposal and Davidson's causal theory of action do provide a way for the explanation of an action, but they don't provide (or they may have ignored) the solution for the question about the individuation of an action and the distinction between an action and a bodily movement. And I think these questions are more fundamental and more problematic.

I think the problem regarding the nature of an action arises partly because some of us have been ambiguous whether an action is:

- 1) a bodily behavior plus an intention (or reason or whatever), or
- 2) a bodily behavior conceived as related to an intention (or reason or whatever).

The first view makes an action a complex object with two main parts, whereas the second view makes it just the simple behavior though conceived in a certain way, just as to say that the moon is a satellite is to conceive it as a single object but as related in a certain way to some thing else. Probably one should say, as I prefer to hold, that an action just is a bodily behavior but one that is caused in a certain way.

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人類行動的本質

米建國

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“人類行動”是社會科學的一個中心主題；無疑的，人類行動本質的哲學研究，對於社會科學本身的理解有其一定的貢獻。

本文以“什麼是人類行動”這個問題為起點，詳細的考量人類行動與僅僅是身體的移動之間有何差別。針對這個問題，我將扼要的提出布羅貝克(Brodbeck)與韋伯(Weber)的看法，並檢驗他們主張中的優缺點。此外我還將藉著戴維森(Davidson)對人類行動所提出的因果解釋，嘗試著對人類行動做一個比較完整的了解與說明。本文的目的在於，希望透過對於這些問題的探討，得以彰顯人類行動的真正本質。

關鍵字：人類行動，身體移動，因果解釋，布羅貝克，韋伯，戴維森