BASIC ACTIONS AND DOING ACTIONS BASICALLY

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Abstract:

Writers on action theory have said much about the notion of basic action but little about that of doing an action basically. In my paper I set forth a definition of basic action, then argue that neither it nor the definitions of various other philosophers captures the distinct notion of doing an action basically, and finally propose a definition of this latter notion.
BASIC ACTIONS AND DOING ACTIONS BASICALLY

Writers on action theory have said much about the notion of basic action but little about that of doing an action basically. In this paper I set forth a definition of basic action, then argue that neither it nor the definitions of various other philosophers captures the distinct notion of doing an action basically, and finally propose a definition of this latter notion.

I will make use of the notions of act-type and act-token as set forth by Alvin Goldman in *A Theory of Human Action*.† According to Goldman an act-type is a property of the appropriate sort, and an act-token is the exemplifying of an act-type by a person at a time. Thus, act-types A and B are identical just in case A is the same property as B, and act-tokens C and D are identical just in case both are exemplifications of the same act-type by the same person at the same time. Concerning the latter, for instance, Ford's signing a bill at 3:00 is the same act-token as Nixon's successor's signing a bill at 3:00, but is a different act-token from Ford's writing his name at 3:00.

Making use of these notions we may now define the notion of basic action. Let us say that S's doing act-type A at time t is a basic action if and only if (1) in doing A at t it is S's purpose or part of S's purpose to do A and (2) there is no act-type distinct from A which in doing A at t S does, tries to do or refrains from doing for the purpose of doing A. Thus, S's moving his thumb at 3:00 is a basic action if performed in the usual direct way, but is not a basic action if performed by using the opposite hand; only in the latter case is there an act-type which S does, tries to do or refrains from doing for the purpose of moving his thumb, viz. moving his other hand.

Some remarks concerning the definition are in order. The occurrence of 'which in doing A at t S does, tries to do or refrains from doing' in clause #2 may be shortened to 'which in doing A at t S tries to do or refrains from doing' in clause #2 may be shortened to 'which in doing A at t S tries to do or refrains from doing' in clause #2 may be shortened to

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doing' if, as I am inclined to believe, a person's doing B for the purpose of doing A entails that he tries to do B for the purpose of doing A. But neither 'tries to do' nor 'refrains from doing' can be similarly deleted. In connection with the former, S's doing A at t may be nonbasic not because there is an act-type which S does or refrains from doing for the purpose of doing A but only because there is an act-type which S tries to do for the purpose of doing A. For instance, S may try to move his paralyzed thumb for the purpose of causing the brain events that typically occur when he makes such an attempt. If he succeeds in causing the brain events but fails to move his thumb, the causing of the brain events is not a basic action despite the nonexistence of an act-type which S does or refrains from doing for the purpose of causing the brain events. Similarly, concerning 'refrains from doing,' S's doing A at t may be nonbasic not because of an act-type which S does or tries to do for the purpose of doing A but only because of an act-type that he refrains from doing for the purpose of doing A. Thus, a doctor's murdering a patient may be nonbasic only because there is an act-type which the doctor refrains from for the purpose of committing the murder, e.g. administering medication needed for survival.

The present definition of basic action, however, does not capture the notion of doing an action basically. The reason is simply that a person may perform the same act-token both basically and nonbasically. For example, S may move his thumb in the usual direct way at the same time that he moves it with his other hand. According to my definition, though, S's action is not a basic one, for there is indeed an act-type, viz. moving one's hand, which is distinct from moving one's thumb and which S does for the purpose of moving his thumb. The definition, then, although adequate to the notion of a purely basic action, i.e. an

2Though 'S does A for the purpose of doing B' logically entails 'S tries to do A for the purpose of doing B,' saying that S is trying to do A contextually implies that the speaker believes that there is an obstacle to S's doing A.

3I am assuming that trying to do act-type A and refraining from doing act-type A are not themselves act-types. Thus, refraining from administering the medicine is not an act-type which the doctor does for the purpose of committing the murder.
action done basically but not nonbasically, fails to capture
the notion of simply doing an action basically.

Neither, for the same reason, is the notion captured by
any of the definitions of basic action given by Brand,
Chisholm, Danto and Goldman. Thus, to take only one ex­
ample, according to Chisholm a person S at time t makes it
happen that Q and his doing so is a basic act just in case
at t he intentionally makes it happen that Q, and there is
no state-of-affairs P such that at t he undertakes to make
it happen that P for the purpose of making it happen that Q.
But if S moves his thumb both basically and with his other
hand, then even though he moves it basically there is none­
theless a state-of-affairs P such that S undertakes to make
P happen for the purpose of making Q happen, viz. his other
hand's moving.

How, then, might my definition of basic action be mod­
ified so that it becomes adequate to the concept of doing
an action basically? One idea that does not work is the
introduction of some counterfactual clause. Consider for
example the following definition: S does act-type A
basically at t if and only if (1) in doing A at t it is
S's purpose or part of S's purpose to do A and (2) either
(a) there is no act-type distinct from A which in doing A
at t S does, tries to do or refrains from doing for the

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4 The definitions appear respectively in (i) Myles Brand,
The Nature of Human Action (Glenview Ill., 1970), p. 227,
(ii) Karel Lambert (ed.), The Logical Way of Doing Things
Action," American Philosophical Quarterly, II (April, 1965),

5 The same action likewise counts as nonbasic on the defi­
nitions of Goldman, Danto and Brand. Clause (c) of Goldman's
definition of basic act-token on page 72, op. cit., is not
satisfied in the present instance since S's moving his thumb
is 'level-generated' in the appropriate way by S's moving
his hand. On Danto's definition, page 142, op. cit., the
action is nonbasic because, as Danto uses the word 'cause',
there is an action of S's, viz. his moving his hand, which
causes S's moving his thumb. As for Brand's definition, on
page 227, op. cit., the second clause is not met since S's
moving his thumb has at least two 'event-components,' viz.
the movements of the thumb and hand.
purpose of doing A or (b) there is such an act-type but even had there not been S would still have done A at t. The difficulty is that it is possible, for instance, that both (i) S move his thumb basically as well as with his other hand and (ii) S would not have moved his thumb at all if he had not moved it with his other hand. Such might be the case if, for some strange reason, S always avoids moving his thumb in only a basic way or if, say, someone would have prevented S from moving his thumb had S not moved it with his other hand.

A more successful approach is to talk of ways of doing something. A definition that is almost correct is as follows: S does act-type A basically at t if and only if (1) in doing A at t it is S's purpose or part of S's purpose to do A and (2) in doing A at t S does A in a way other than by doing, trying to do or refraining from doing some act-type distinct from A for the purpose of doing A. Thus, S may move his thumb basically, according to the definition, even though he also moves it with his other hand, for there is a way, viz. basically, in which S moves his thumb which is other than by doing, trying to do or refraining from doing something else for the purpose of moving his thumb.

But the definition is too broad. There are many ways, other than by doing, trying to do or refraining from doing something for the purpose at hand, in which an action which is not done basically may be done, e.g. intentionally, unintentionally, accidentally and slowly. A condition therefore needs to be placed on the way in which S does A. I suggest that the difference between such ways as 'by moving his other hand,' 'by refraining from administering the medicine' and 'basically', on the one hand, and 'intentionally,' 'slowly' and 'accidentally', on the other, is that the former are means to doing something whereas the latter are not. Let me elaborate. The question 'how did S do A' may be used to ask either by what means S did A, such as in asking how Jones opened the safe, or in what manner S did A, as in asking how Jones shook Smith's hand, e.g. firmly or without conviction. A means, as I am using the term, is a way of doing something which it would be appropriate to cite in answer to a how-question of the first sort. Thus, 'with his other hand' and 'basically' are ways which are means, since they are appropriately cited in answer to a question such as 'how did S move his thumb' in its means-asking use, whereas 'slowly' and 'with great pain' are not. The definition may be amended, therefore, by requiring that the way in which S does A be a means to
doing A. The result is the following definition: S does act-type A basically at time t if and only if (1) in doing A at t it is S's purpose or part of S's purpose to do A and (2) in doing A at t S does A in a way which is a means to doing A and which is other than by doing, trying to do or refraining from doing some act-type distinct from A for the purpose of doing A.

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