



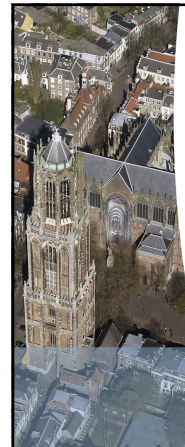
On the Unity of (Group) Action

Niels van Miltenburg &
Jesse M. Mulder

REINS Closing Conference
2019-02-12

niels.vanmiltenburg@uu.nl; j.m.mulder@uu.nl

 Universiteit Utrecht Faculty of Humanities




On the Unity of Action

Niels van Miltenburg &
Jesse M. Mulder

REINS Closing Conference
2019-02-12

niels.vanmiltenburg@uu.nl; j.m.mulder@uu.nl

 Universiteit Utrecht Faculty of Humanities


Outline


Part I: The unity of action
Keywords: temporality, infinite ends, self-consciousness

Part II: Can one formalize action?
Keywords: atemporality, rigidity, implementability

Part III: Reflection: does it matter?

- Philosophical questions
- Technical questions




 Universiteit Utrecht Faculty of Humanities


Disclaimer

Our interest lies in whether formalizations can be *philosophically* illuminating.

Not in whether formalization is useful in the context of practical implementation.

NB: any resemblance between positions and people mentioned in this talk, and actually existing positions and people within the REINS community, is purely coincidental.




 Universiteit Utrecht Faculty of Humanities


The unity of action

Intentional action

- Involves bodily movement ('action')
 - A change 'out there': **the causal order**
 - (We set aside purely 'mental' actions for now)
- Involves awareness of goal ('intentional')
 - Arm rising vs. arm raising
 - A motive 'in here': **the rational order**
 - Acting = answering the question *what to do*

Central question: how do these relate?





 Universiteit Utrecht Faculty of Humanities

The unity of action

Intentional action: causal & rational

- Causal theory of action (CTA):
 - Divide & conquer!
 - Causal: the action is **caused** by the intention
 - Rational: the action is **represented** by the intention
- Problem: does the **causation** happen *because of* the **representation**?
 - No...



 Universiteit Utrecht Faculty of Humanities

Davidson's climber

A climber might **want** to rid himself of the weight and danger of holding another man on a rope, and he might **know** that by loosening his hold on the rope he could rid himself of the weight and danger. The **belief and want** might so unnerve him as to **cause** him to loosen his hold, and yet it might be the case that he never *chose* to loosen his hold, nor did he do it intentionally.... (Davidson 1980, p. 79).



The unity of action

Lessons of 'deviant causal chains'

- CTA **separately** explains the fact that an action is **physical** and the fact that it is **rational**:
 - The action happens because it is **caused**
 - It is rational because it is mentally **represented**
- According to CTA, causation and content are in principle logically independent.
 - (This is true across standard philosophy of mind)
- If representation and causation are independent, then their co-occurrence **can only be** accidental



The unity of action

The unity of **causation** and **representation**

- We need the idea of *practical thought*:
 - The causing *is* the representing
 - The representing *is* the causing
 - Rödl: 'a movement that is a thought'
 - Classical view: action as conclusion of syllogism
 - Action as answering the question *what to do?*
- Compare *forgetting what you were doing*



The unity of action

Practical thought

- Not just *any* representation
- An *order* of representations
 - Acting = answering the question *what to do*
 - Anscombe: the question *Why?*
 - Converse: the question *How?*



The unity of action

Anscombe's 'A-D order':

'Why are you moving your arms?' (A)
'I'm pumping water' (B)

'Why are you pumping water?' (B)
'I'm replenishing the water supply' (C)

'Why are you replenishing the water supply?' (C)
'I'm poisoning the inhabitants' (D)



The unity of action

Anscombe's A-D order: observations

- Redescriptions of the *same* action
 - Or: of phases unified into one action
- Means-end series of representations
- Starting point (A): representation of known skill
 - 'Know-how' = no further 'how'
- End point (D): ???
 - 'Know-why' = no further 'why?'



The unity of action

What is the end of an action?

Why are you doing X?

- **Finite end:** in order to do Y (Anscombe's example)
 - X contributes to Y
 - Y is not yet achieved, but will be (if all goes well)
- **Infinite end:** because X is E
 - X is a *manifestation* of E
 - Many more actions may manifest E

(Terminology comes from Rödl: *Self-Consciousness*, HUP 2007)



The unity of action

Infinite ends: examples

- Health
- 'Because I promised'
- Justice
- Taking care of my stuff
- 'Because it's fun'
- **Observations:**
 - You're never done with E
 - Yet you may already have E



The unity of action

Back to Anscombe's A-D order

- Action = unity of movements/phases etc.
- Means-end series: **finite ends**
- Starting point (A): representation of known skill
 - 'Know-how' = no further 'how'
- End point (D): transition from finite to infinite end
 - 'Know-why' = **infinite end**; no further 'why'



The unity of action

Multitude of infinite ends?

- Unity of action = finite end
- The point of the action = infinite end
- Action = answering the question *what to do*
- Which infinite end determines the answer?
 - Example: I'm holding a book
 - Gift for my niece (treating those dear to you nicely)
 - Return to Jan (keeping my promise)
 - Use as fuel for the fireplace (health)
 - Etc.



The unity of action

Which infinite end determines my action?

- Is it 'up to me' to decide on which end I act?
 - On which grounds do I decide? What is my end?
 - Infinite ends cannot be instrumental ('no further why!')
- Ranked infinite ends?
 - Is promise-keeping always more important than health?
- Relation to the question *what to do*
 - Different systems of ends define different such questions
 - The resulting answers will be incommensurable
 - No practical unity within/among agents
 - Revision of infinite ends; criticism of infinite ends



The unity of action

Infinite ends: some observations

- Infinite ends form a *unity*
 - Anscombe: 'helping your neighbors *is* doing well, but killing someone for them is not helping them'
 - Not everything that can be described as 'helping others' is really *helping others*
 - Various infinite ends are various descriptions of the same thing: **living well**
- Infinite ends form an *objective unity*
 - Yet no system of rules for living well can be presented



The unity of action

Unity of action: concluding remarks

- An action is a concrete happening
- An action is answering the question *what to do*
- On the basis of infinite ends = *living well*

Two related points:

- The temporality of action: a *change* which manifests an *infinite end* (Aristotle: *kinesis* and *energeia*)
- Self-consciousness: action = consciousness of action
 - (Including consciousness of (in)finite ends)



Outline

Part I: The unity of action

Keywords: temporality, infinite ends, self-consciousness

Part II: Can one formalize action?

Keywords: atemporality, rigidity, implementability

Part III: Reflection: does it matter?

- Philosophical questions
- Technical questions



Can one formalize action?

Requirements of formalization

- Rigid rules to calculate actions
- Implementability (in a machine)
- Separable temporal phases



Can one formalize action?

Requirements of formalization

1. Rigid rules to calculate actions
2. Implementability (in a machine)
3. Separable temporal phases

Compare our three observations about action:

1. Unity of infinite ends
2. Self-consciousness
3. Temporal unity



Can one formalize action?

Infinite ends vs. rigid rules

- Action: answers the question *what to do*
 - This is no calculation
- Formalization: *calculates* what to do
 - On the basis of given rules
 - (Which rules? This is what is most hotly debated)
 - Rigid ends
 - 'Deep learning'?
 - Intransparent; imitative (based on examples)
 - The end disappears



Can one formalize action?

Self-consciousness vs. implementability

- Self-consciousness:
 - action IS consciousness of action
 - (or: thought IS consciousness of thought)
- Implementability:
 - action is separate from representation
 - This is CTA: recall deviant causal chains!
 - (information is separate from representation of that information)



Can one formalize action?

Self-consciousness vs. implementability

"s knows that s is doing A" (e.g., s STIT A):

- Lack of self-consciousness
 - Niels knows that he* is sliding on ice
 - Niels knows that 'Niels' is sliding* on ice
- Both satisfy the formalization, but lack the unity characteristic of intentional action



Can one formalize action?

Temporal unity vs. temporal separation

- Action = unity of phases
 - Cutting onions in order to cook risotto/spaghetti
 - Identity of phases depends on unity
 - 'Imperfective paradox': s didn't do A, but was doing A
 - Compare: s STIT A
- Formalization: separable phases
 - Independently representable 'building blocks'



Can one formalize action?

Bottom line

- Three *prima facie* conflicts between unity of action and formalization
- Returning characteristic: *divide and conquer*
 - Infinite ends: separated, rigid rules
 - Self-consciousness: separate action from representation
 - Temporality: separately identifiable phases



Can one formalize action?

Bottom line

- Failure of unity? Two possible reactions:
 1. Addition of operators (e.g., 'knowingly STIT' etc.)
 2. Leaving something unanalyzed
- 1. illustrates the 'divide and conquer' strategy
- 2. gives up on philosophical illumination
- From a philosophical perspective, *unity* is crucial
- From a formal perspective, *reductive analysis* is required



Encore on group action

Mutatis mutandis

- Our observations apply to group action as well.
 - *But with a vengeance!*
- Self-consciousness: we know what we do
 - ... who are we?
 - ... do we really have the same knowledge?
- Temporality: *our* action is unified
 - ... Differences among participants?
- Infinite ends: we do A because it exemplifies E
 - ... Can we have different ends?



Outline

Part I: The unity of action

Keywords: temporality, infinite ends, self-consciousness

Part II: Can one formalize action?

Keywords: atemporality, rigidity, implementability

Part III: Reflection: does it matter?

- Philosophical questions
- Technical questions



Reflection: does it matter?

Who cares?

- We need to build a system to run Jan's Tesla
- It needs to work; irrespective of philosophers' scruples

What do we say?



Reflection: does it matter?

Who cares?

- We need to build a system to run Jan's Tesla
- It needs to work; irrespective of philosophers' scruples

What do we say? **Indeed.**



Reflection: does it matter?

Proposal

Perhaps we do good to consider automated systems to be *tools* instead of (full-blown) *agents*.

Then moral decision-making is not in *their* but in *our* hands.



(This slide intentionally left blank.)

