

Introduction

If a hungry, thirsty, itchy person eats some food, or drinks some water, or intentionally scratches an itch, this is *individual* action. That is, it is the intentional behaviour of an ordinary individual human person; other human beings are not necessarily involved.¹ If a person takes a walk down the road by herself for exercise, or eats an ice cream for pleasure, or takes a shower on a hot day, this is also individual action. Such action is not action in cooperation with, or necessarily directed at, other individuals. On the other hand, if an individual kicks or throws a football to a teammate in the course of a game of football, or puts a motion forward at a committee meeting, then this is *social* action. Most human action is in fact at some level, or to some extent, or in some sense, social action. Even these actions of eating, drinking, eating ice cream, individually walking down the road, or having a shower typically *presuppose* social forms or objects, such as farms, ice cream parlours, cups, roads, and shower rooms. But the de facto presupposition of social forms does not of itself vitiate the distinction between individual and social action. More generally, the sociality of most human action does not vitiate the distinction; it merely serves to illustrate the need to develop a more elaborate set of distinctions in this area. There is nothing to be gained from insisting that no actions are individual and/or that all actions are social, just because it might in fact be that all the actions of human beings connect in some way, however indirectly, with the actions of other human beings and with social forms and social objects.

Of course it might be argued that all action is *necessarily* social, because sociality is a *logical* presupposition of action.² But this strong claim is implausible. We need the concept of an action – and specifically that of an individual action – in order to make sense of the concepts of sociality, rather than concepts of sociality to make sense

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of the concept of action. Indeed, this book is an attempt to fashion a particular individualistic concept of human action, and to use it as a building block in the construction of a variety of philosophical conceptions of social action types, including conventional, norm-governed, and institutional action. This process is in two stages.

First, I help myself to an individualistic concept of action for the purpose of developing a philosophical account of a particular species of action, namely, *joint action*, where I understand joint action to be a species of interpersonal action, but not necessarily social action. I will say a good deal more about joint action, but, roughly speaking, a joint action comprises the actions of two or more individuals directed to a shared end. So members of a rowing team are engaged in joint action, as are two men moving a piece of furniture, or a group of thieves robbing a safe. Second, I use this notion of joint action to analyse a range of central kinds of social action, including conventional, norm-governed, and institutional action. In addition, I use the notion of joint action to illuminate some fundamental issues in collective morality, including the issues of collective rights and collective responsibility.

Social actions are the actions of ordinary individual human persons. These include the actions of individuals performed in accordance with conventions, rules and norms, and the actions of individuals qua occupants of social, institutional, and professional roles. Some theorists claim that the category of social actions includes the “doings” of corporate entities such as governments or nations; for example, the United States declaring war on Iraq, or the Australian Federal Government introducing a new tax, such as the goods and services tax. I do not accept this claim. Accordingly, in this book I will, in effect, be concerned only with the actions of ordinary individual human beings.³

Granted that my concern is only with the actions of individual human beings, and that the concept of an individual action is logically prior to that of a social action, there is still a need for distinctions to be made between social action and other sorts of action of a nonsocial (or contingently social) sort and clarification of the concept (or concepts) of social action itself. In what follows I will introduce some intuitive distinctions between what I will term social actions and other sorts of action. The point of this is in large part to

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demarcate my area of concern in this book. I cannot here offer exhaustive defences of these distinctions.

Actions that are not necessarily social include individual actions (as already mentioned). Of these some are what might be termed *natural* actions. A natural action is one that is performed by virtue simply of needs and dispositions that the agent has through being a member of the human species as distinct from, say, some social group. Obvious examples are eating and drinking. Eating and drinking are not actions that logically presuppose, or logically imply, social forms.

Another category of actions that are not necessarily social, or, if you like, that are social in a different sense of social, are what I will term *interpersonal* actions. An interpersonal action is an individual action that is interdependent with the action of some other single person, or is otherwise directed to a single person. Here the action is directed to the other person qua particular person, or qua member of the human species; it is not directed at the other person qua member of a social group or occupant of a social role or the like. So the contrast is with actions that are performed in accordance with a social form, or are directed to a number of other persons qua members of a social group, or actions directed to a single person qua member of some social group or occupant of a social role or the like. Typically, sexual acts or acts of intimate friendship or the behaviour of a newborn infant in relation to his or her mother are predominantly interpersonal actions in this sense, but institutional acts of conferring degrees or conforming to conventions of dress are not. Moreover, some of these natural, interpersonal actions are also moral actions. Consider actions motivated by instinctual feeling of sympathy for a fellow human being qua human being – as opposed to qua fellow member of one's social group.

Interpersonal actions presuppose the existence of that relationship that obtains when, so to speak, one mind confronts another mind. Such "confrontations" are everyday occurrences, but paradigmatic examples are situations in which one person is said to look the other in the eye. Here one person is aware of the other person, including being aware that the other person is aware of them. Such mind to mind interactions need to be distinguished from, on the one hand, mind to own mind (introspective) and mind to material

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world (for example, perceptual) interactions, and, on the other hand, from mind to social world (social) interactions. Following C. D. Broad, I will call such mind to mind interactions “extraspective” interactions.⁴

In claiming the existence of extraspective interactions I am not committing myself to any particular analysis or theory of them, nor am I committing myself to the existence of controversial species of extraspective interactions, such as telepathy. Extraspective interactions are a perfectly ordinary phenomenon, albeit one that unfortunately has suffered neglect in recent times by philosophers.⁵ Indeed, most people are more certain of the existence of, and their interaction with, other minds than they are of any other sort of entity or interaction. And there is good reason for this. Extraspective states are not logically posterior to mind to material world interactions. Or at least they are not logically posterior in the manner required by the so-called argument from analogy. The argument from analogy assumes that my knowledge of the external material world (as well as my knowledge of the contents of my own mind) is logically prior to my knowledge of other minds. Accordingly, I must infer the existence of other minds on the basis of this prior knowledge of the external material world (taken in conjunction with my prior knowledge of own mind).

Extraspective interactions are the most basic species of interpersonal interaction. However, interpersonal interactions include interactions that are only *indirectly* extraspective since there are interpersonal interactions between individuals who are not co-present in space and time, for example interactions by telephone or electronic mail. In these latter cases the extraspective interaction is between agents who are spatially and/or temporally distant from one another, and the interaction is mediated by, say, telephone wires.

Indeed, extraspective interactions are so basic that they exist in the subhuman animal world. Dogs, tigers, pigs, and so on engage in extraspective interactions by virtue of their possession of primitive minds; these animals have mental states and a degree of consciousness, or awareness, of the external world and of one another. On the other hand, computers and the like do not have minds and therefore do not engage in extraspective interactions. (I reject the currently popular view – typically based on exclusively causal analy-

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ses of mental states – that computers have beliefs, intentions, and the like.)

I will assume that not all individual human actions directed at other persons qua entities with minds are interpersonal action. For example, if I intentionally hit you in order to harm you, and do so when you are immobilised by a drug (and therefore unable to respond), then this is individual, but not interpersonal, action. Moreover, it is individual action, even if you are aware that I have hit you. This assumption of mine is stipulative, but not unmotivated. It is motivated by the thought that we ought to reserve the term “interpersonal” for cases in which two or more agents actually perform different, but interdependent, actions; or at least for cases in which one agent performs an action with the intention that the other (or others) perform a second action by way of response.

From the point of view of this book the most important species of interpersonal interaction is joint action: action that involves two or more agents performing individual action in the service of a shared end. And, as I will argue, joint actions are not necessarily social actions.

The picture that has emerged thus far comprises the following categories of human action:

- (1) individual actions, that is actions involving mind to material world interactions, and actions involving mind to mind interactions that are not responded to, or not intended to be responded to, or both;
- (2) interpersonal actions, that is actions that involve mind to mind interactions, and are not simply individual actions, such as joint actions;
- (3) natural actions, that is individual or interpersonal actions which are performed by virtue simply of needs and dispositions that the agent (or agents) has through being a member of the human species.

What now of social actions? Roughly speaking, mind to *social world* interactions take place when one or more individual actors interact with, or direct their actions to, other individual actors (who might or might not be co-present), but do so qua parties to a convention or social norm, qua occupants of an institutional role, or qua mem-

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bers of a social group or other social form. In other words, social actions are human actions performed in accordance with social forms such as conventions, social norms, institutions, social groups, and the like. The philosophical analysis of some of the central kinds of social action is the main concern of this book.

My philosophical analysis of each of these social action categories will in each case be a *reductive* analysis of a certain kind. Social actions are reducible to various species of interpersonal action. For example, conventional actions will be analysed in terms of joint actions. However, these reductive analyses will not involve the reduction of social *entities* and the relationships between social entities. So the fact that irreducible social entities might figure in the intentional content of mental states – mental states that are in part constitutive of social and other actions – is in itself not a matter of concern. Indeed, on the conception presented here, it is to be expected. What is a matter of concern is the view held by some theorists, including Peter French and Margaret Gilbert, that social entities are themselves agents that possess mental states and perform actions. For such actions, if they existed, would be social actions, and irreducibly so. I will counter the arguments of these theorists.

Social actions involve a certain kind of *interdependence* of action and of attitude between the members of sets of individuals, and this interdependence in turn creates the possibility of social groups. The existence of social groups, thus understood, in turn enables a certain new kind of social relationship that is not to be identified with interpersonal relationships (in the sense of mere one-to-one relationships between individuals), but rather presupposes them. This new kind of social relationship is a relationship between an individual and “the rest of the group.”⁶ This relation of an individual to the rest of the group arises in the context of interdependence of action and of attitude between all (or most of) the members of the group, including the individual in question. So each individual is separate from, but related to, the rest of the group. Moreover, this social relationship is not in any straightforward way an aggregate of one-to-one relationships obtaining between the members of a set of individuals. In the context of a social group, and of this social relationship between an individual and the rest of the group, the actions of individual persons can be powerfully influenced by social

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attitudes, such as social approval and disapproval. So social phenomena, including social attitudes, do have causal impact on individual and interpersonal action.

I have distinguished between two fundamental species of human action, namely individual and interpersonal action. And I have offered characterisations of natural and social actions. The terms “natural” and “social,” as I use them, are contrasting terms. However, they both presuppose the concept of action, interpersonal as well as individual action. So we have at least three kinds of action: natural individual action; natural interpersonal action; and social interpersonal action (social action). What of social *individual* action?

First order natural individual action and first order natural interpersonal action initially give rise to social action as prior nonsocial action governed by social forms; this social action comes into existence as second order action. Consider convention-governed sexual interaction. There is the further interaction between different (n order) social actions which gives rise to ($n+1$ order) social actions as prior social action governed by higher order social forms. For example, conventions that govern action that is already convention-governed, such as conventions governing one’s linguistic communication at a formal ceremony. Since social action necessarily involves mind to mind interactions it is necessarily interpersonal action. So prior natural individual actions, such as eating, take on an interpersonal, indeed social, aspect once they are regulated by, say, a convention to eat with a knife and fork. However, it is important to note that the prior individual action still exists, so to speak, at the core of the newly existent social action. So it is individual action with a social aspect; it is, so to speak, social individual action. And the same point can be made in relation to prior interpersonal actions that are regulated by social forms; a sexual act still exists at the core of a marital sexual act. So marital sexual actions are social interpersonal actions.

So we have at least four kinds of human action: natural individual action; natural interpersonal action; social interpersonal action; and social individual action. This fourfold distinction reflects the fact that all human actions are in the first instance either individual or interpersonal actions; natural and social are contrasting qualifications of individual and of interpersonal action. However, it can be

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confusing to refer to action as social individual action or as social interpersonal action. So I will refer to the latter two kinds of human action simply as social action.

Someone might want to insist that interpersonal actions per se are a species of social action. I do not have any strong objections to people arguing this, so long as they are not insisting that what I am calling interpersonal action logically presupposes or implies what I am calling social action. In particular, just as mind to material world (for example perceptual) interactions cannot be reduced to social interactions, so mind to mind (extraspective) interactions and natural interpersonal interactions cannot be reduced to social interactions. Indeed, social actions, in my sense, presuppose extraspective interactions, including natural interpersonal interactions (as well as mind to material world interactions). (It is, of course, also true that many mind to material world, and mind to mind, interactions are to an extent socially conditioned.) At any rate, henceforth I will use the term “social action” to designate those actions types that I want to contrast with natural individual actions and with natural interpersonal actions. Accordingly, I assert that not all human action is necessarily social action.

With respect to actions that I am now calling social actions, a distinction is often made between actions that are (allegedly) constitutively social, and actions that are social in some other sense or senses. Roughly speaking, a constitutively social action is an action the social dimension of which makes it the action that it is; its social property or properties define it. It is a matter of controversy whether there are any actions that are constitutively social in this sense. Candidates for being constitutively social would be actions performed in highly formalised settings such as wedding ceremonies, debutante balls, law courts, and trophy presentations. I do not want to become embroiled in this controversy beyond making two points. First, I reject the proposition that there is a category of constitutively social actions in the sense of actions that are wholly – as opposed to, in large part, or essentially – constituted by social properties. Second, even if there is a category of constitutively social action, it is not nearly as important a category as the writings of many (including postmodernists and social psychologists) make out.

As I have demonstrated, not all actions are social. Moreover, of those that are social, not all are constitutively social. Obviously the

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above-mentioned nonsocial action types are not constitutively social. However, most concrete actions of these types are social in some other way. What other way might this be? Most actions of eating, drinking, and having sex, for example, are in fact social in some sense, although they are also at some level natural actions.

The most important sense in which an action might be social is that it is socially conditioned. By the term “socially conditioned” I do not mean that the action is necessarily the effect of some deterministic causal process. Nor do I mean that there are supra-individual social entities that causally determine the actions of individual human beings. Rather, I simply mean that the action is performed in accordance with some pre-existing social form, such as a convention, or social norm, or ritual, or social role, or social group, or socially given purpose, or whatever. An action that is social in this sense is not necessarily constituted by its social dimension. Rather, in the case of an action that is socially conditioned (in this sense), a nonsocial action takes on a social aspect. Or, at least, a social action takes on an additional social aspect. But if we remove the social aspect, or aspects, of any given such action and thereby conceive of the action prior to its social conditioning, then ultimately we will come to a nonsocial action.

Some examples might give an intuitive sense of what I have in mind. Eating with one’s mouth closed because of the convention to keep one’s mouth closed while eating is a case of social conditioning. The basic and prior action of eating is not social. However, the action of eating with one’s mouth closed is social in the sense that the way of performing it is governed by a convention, and this convention might serve the social purpose or ends of social facilitation and bonding that conventions of politeness typically serve. In a second example, two members of a particular society having sex involves social conditioning. The basic instinctual action of having sex is not in itself social; rather, it is natural. (It is also typically or often interpersonal rather than individual; it is interpersonal by virtue of the fact that it is directed at another individual person qua particular person and qua member of the male or female gender.) However, when two members of the same social group have sex their action is typically regulated and structured in various ways by the conventions and norms in force in that social group, and by observing these conventions and norms various social purposes or

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ends will no doubt be served. Most actions are social, and of the actions that are social, most are social in the sense that they are conditioned by social forms of one kind or another.

On this conception most actions are in fact social, but natural individual, and natural interpersonal, actions are logically prior to social actions. The social dimension principally consists in the regulation, but not the constitution, of prior individual, natural, and interpersonal actions. Moreover, the interpersonal actions in question include joint actions.

There is a further important point. Many actions governed by social forms are, nevertheless, not fully determined by those forms. For example, the conventions of the English language dictate that strings of English words be ordered in certain ways and not in others. But these conventions do not fully determine which words will be used. Rather, individuals can choose which sentence to utter and choose from an infinity of possible sentences. The set of structures of social forms that constrain, but do not fully determine, human action constitutes a framework. Within this framework individual human beings can perform individual and interpersonal actions of their own choosing; they do so while continuing to comply with the relevant social forms.

I do not claim that the category of mind to material world interactions is logically prior to the category of mind to mind interactions; that is, I do not claim that individual actions are logically prior to interpersonal actions in general. Nevertheless, I do claim that individual actions – including mind to material world and some extrospective interactions – are logically prior to joint actions in particular (joint actions being a species of interpersonal interaction).

Notwithstanding the *logical* priority of individual actions over joint actions, individual ends and interests are not *explanatorily* prior to collective ends and interests. So the existence of collective ends is not necessarily to be explained (causally or rationally) by recourse to prior purely individual ends; nor is the motivation for the performance of joint actions necessarily ultimately to be given by recourse to some purely individual self-interest. Accordingly, I am not an atomist, but rather (in some sense) a holist;⁷ interpersonal interaction – including joint action – and interpersonal relationships exist, so to speak, at the ground level of explanation.