ANALYTICAL
PHILOSOPHY OF
ACTION

Action seems like a leak from another realm or world into this world – an intervention such as God would bring about were he able to bring about changes in the world without transgressing the laws of nature... We stand within and without Nature!

Brian O’Shaughnessy, ‘Observation and the Will’

Domine, quinque talenta tradisti mihi: ecce alia quinque superlucratus sum.
Matthew 25:20–1
ANALYTICAL
PHILOSOPHY OF
ACTION

BY

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PREFACE

In the middle band of six tableaux, on the north wall of the Arena Chapel in Padua, Giotto has narrated in six episodes the missionary period in the life of Christ. In each panel, the dominating Christ-figure is shown with a raised arm. This invariant disposition of his arm notwithstanding, a different kind of action is performed by means of it from scene to scene, and we must read the identity of the action from the context of its execution.1 Disputing with the elders, the raised arm is admonitory, not to say dogmatic; at the wedding feast of Cana, it is the raised arm of the prestidigitator who has caused water to become wine; at the baptism it is raised in a sign of acceptance; it commands Lazarus; it blesses the people at the Jerusalem gate; it expels the lenders at the temple. Since the raised arm is invariably present, these performative differences must be explained through variations in context, and while it may be true that context alone will not constitute the differences and that we must invoke the Christ’s intentions and purposes, still, we cannot overestimate the extent to which context penetrates purpose. Expulsion at Cana would be as incoherent with Christ’s mission as blessing the money-lenders would be; acceptance at the graveside of Lazarus would not be Christ’s way, and admonition at the gate of Jerusalem would be only puzzling. The identity of the actions is such that were we to imagine, through some artistic catastrophe, that the marvelous pictorial context were washed away in each instance leaving only the Christ-figure with a raised arm, the latter would be neutralized and reduced to an anatomical posture, a mere flexed and angled limb. It will perhaps make the motive of the present study clear if I say that it is just my aim to wash away the contextual factors which convert movements into gestures and vest the disposition of limbs with high spiritual significance. I want to isolate those bare, neutral actions before they are colored by the sorts of meanings they are shown to have on the Arena walls and in common life. The ‘before’ is of course logical, as my enterprise is analytical. One reason for this preoccupation with basic actions, as I shall term them, is to be able to appreciate the points in the logical architecture of action at which those factors enter, through
which the actions are converted into something more human and more social, and taken up into the fabric of communication, and deposited as part of human history.

A parallel preoccupation in the theory of knowledge would demand a similar erasure of the apparatus of interpretation which penetrates and renders significant the objects of perception: say, for convenient if complicated instance, the Arena frescoes at Padua. Imagine not knowing the identity of the characters depicted there, so that the filter and focus provided by the grasped allusions Giotto counted on to achieve his striking artistic economies were obliterated in a kind of cultural aphasia. So that one would see whatever one in fact sees when one knows the stories and iconography, but in a deep sense one would not know what was happening. One’s perception might be stained, if we take aphasia in its pathological sense, with the nagging thought that there was some purposefulness with no discernible purpose, as the aphasic might know that what was before him had a meaning he no longer could eke out. But my interest is only in noting the possibility of a perception invariant to and independent of interpretations, of what Wittgenstein termed ‘seeing as’. Then this sort of perception would be ours if we had no degree of acculturation or if there were no culture, as bare arm movements would be done with no ulterior gestural significance under the same admittedly unrealistic assumptions. Then, as with actions, one might locate where in the logical architecture of perception these differentiating features enter, through which things are seen as what it requires a special education to understand. It is fair, I believe, to say that most of the classical problems of perception arise this side of that point at which perception takes on this crucial coloring and specialization, and a model of my preoccupations with action may be found in the sort of treatment of perception one meets in Locke or Hume.

As the same (sort of) arm-rise might be an admonition or a blessing, an affirmation or a rejection, it is obvious that the description of it as an arm-rise undetermines the description of it as this gesture or that: a description may be given of it which is neutral to its description as a significant bit of behavior. So the predicates which apply to it in this neutral sense are logically independent of and scarcely then definable in terms of the predicates through which it is described in human or cultural terms. Whether in the sphere of perception or of action, philosophers may seek for descriptions of what is perceived or what is
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done in terms which presuppose no special cultural information, and
which may then be counted as universal, being invariant to every pos-
sible coloration history or culture may add. It would in a deep sense
exclude what we regard as characteristically human to seek to eliminate
or reduce these variational descriptions, and it would be futile to pre-
tend that we could possibly explain the most characteristically human
gestures or the contents of our experience in terms so austere and
universal. But as we may be interested in man, both as perceiver and
performer, invariably as to his cultural and historical location, it is in
just such terms that we must conceive him.

This is not, I might add, the only or the most important parallel to
be drawn between action and cognition, and one strain which runs
throughout my book is that these two typical ways of relating to the
world – acting upon and coming to know it – have frequently parallel
structures – that what I here term the ‘logical architecture’ of knowl-
dge and of action are of a piece, or nearly of a piece. A preface is a
place only to announce, not to analyze or speculate upon the philosophi-
cal import of such a claim. Whatever its explanation, I have sought to
use the two concepts of action and of knowledge as guides to each
other’s structure, and so the book is as much a treatise of aspects of
knowledge as it is of aspects of action. I might add, indeed, that this has
in some way limited the topics of which I treat, for I have had very
little concern with those features of the concept of action which are
parochial in the sense that they have no correspondence in the theory of
knowledge.

These parallels, as well as the central concept of this book, that of the
basic action, I first developed in a paper which the exigencies of publica-
tion split in two: ‘Basic Actions’, American Philosophical Quarterly, 11
(1963) and ‘What We Can Do’, Journal of Philosophy, 1x (1963). At
least the idea of basic actions aroused a certain interest, and through a
series of invitations to present my views, the idea has undergone, under
the fire of criticisms, considerable modification. Some of these appeared
in further papers and other contexts, but the present book, for worse or
better, supersedes whatever I have written on this subject. I think very
few words from any of these have entered the present book unaltered.
I presume permission to use those few.

This book, meanwhile, presented the sort of problem painters know,
who must transform a scribbled inspiration from a scrap of paper into
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something formal and on a large scale. Something is always lost, some freshness and speed, but the systematic enlargements and what they reveal are plainly worth the sacrifice. Many of the ideas I thought (and others hoped) would follow naturally from the concept of basic actions did not follow at all, and often only their contraries were even compatible with it. And other ideas I had hoped I might remain neutral towards, in fact demanded a stand, since certain problems could not have been otherwise solved. Thus I became, in the course of writing, a Materialist and a Determinist of sorts.

There have been far too many helpful critics for me to acknowledge all the illuminations I owe them. I am, however, in the special debt of Professor Robert Audi, who read the entire manuscript through and peppered it with questions. Fragments of certain versions were beneficially perused by George Sher, Eric Steinberg, and Toni Vogel Carrie. The American Council of Learned Societies and the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation provided support and encouragement, and liberated enough time for a full if penultimate draft to be completed.

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A.C.D.