

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
052138818X - On Action - Carl Ginet
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE STUDIES IN PHILOSOPHY

On action

CAMBRIDGE STUDIES IN PHILOSOPHY

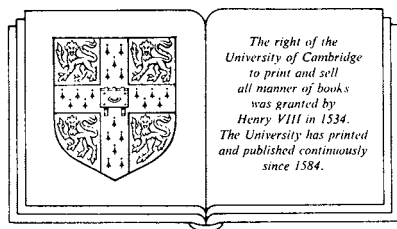
General editor SYDNEY SHOEMAKER

Advisory editors J. E. J. ALTHAM, SIMON BLACKBURN,
 GILBERT HARMAN, MARTIN HOLLIS, FRANK JACKSON,
 JONATHAN LEAR, WILLIAM G. LYCAN, JOHN PERRY,
 BARRY STROUD

- JAMES CARGILE *Paradoxes: a study in form and predication*
 PAUL M. CHURCHLAND *Scientific realism and the plasticity of mind*
 N. M. L. NATHAN *Evidence and assurance*
 WILLIAM LYONS *Emotion*
 PETER SMITH *Realism and the progress of science*
 BRIAN LOAR *Mind and meaning*
 J. F. ROSS *Portraying analogy*
 DAVID HEYD *Supererogation*
 PAUL HORWICH *Probability and evidence*
 ELLERY EELLS *Rational decision and causality*
 HOWARD ROBINSON *Matter and sense*
 E. J. BOND *Reason and value*
 D. M. ARMSTRONG *What is a law of nature?*
 H. E. KYBURG, JR. *Theory and measurement*
 M. ROBINS *Promising, intending and moral autonomy*
 N. J. H. DENT *The moral psychology of the virtues*
 R. A. DUFF *Trials and punishments*
 FLINT SCHIER *Deeper into pictures*
 ANTHONY APPIAH *Assertion and conditionals*
 ROBERT BROWN *Analyzing love*
 ROBERT M. GORDON *The structure of emotions*
 FRANÇOIS RECANATI *Meaning and force*
 WILLIAM G. LYCAN *Judgement and justification*
 GERALD DWORKIN *The theory and practice of autonomy*
 MICHAEL TYE *The metaphysics of mind*
 DAVID O. BRINK *Moral realism and the foundations of ethics*
 W. D. HART *Engines of the soul*
 PAUL K. MOSER *Knowledge and evidence*
 CHRISTOPHER J. MALONEY *The mundane matter of the mental language*
 MARK RICHARD *Propositional attitudes*
 D. M. ARMSTRONG *A combinatorial theory of possibility*

On action

Carl Ginet
Cornell University



Cambridge University Press

Cambridge
New York Port Chester Melbourne Sydney

Cambridge University Press
 052138818X - On Action - Carl Ginet
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
 The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
 40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011, USA
 10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1990

First published 1990

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ginet, Carl.

On action / Carl Ginet.

p. cm. – (Cambridge studies in philosophy)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-521-38124-X. – ISBN 0-521-38818-X (pbk.)

1. Act (Philosophy) 2. Intentionality (Philosophy) 3. Free will
 and determinism. I. Title. II. Series.

B105.A35G56 1990

128'.4–dc20

89–38039

CIP

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Ginet, Carl

On action. – (Cambridge studies in philosophy).

1. Man. Actions. Human actions – Philosophical
 perspectives

I. Title

128'.4

ISBN 0-521-38124-X hard covers

ISBN 0-521-38818-X paperback

Transferred to digital printing 2003

Cambridge University Press
052138818X - On Action - Carl Ginet
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

For Sally

Contents

Preface	page ix
1. THE NATURE OF ACTION	1
<i>Reformulating the question</i>	1
<i>Is to be an action to have a motive cause?</i>	3
<i>Is to act always to cause something?</i>	4
<i>The actish phenomenal quality</i>	11
<i>The definition of action</i>	15
2. VOLUNTARY EXERTION OF THE BODY	23
<i>Picking out volition</i>	23
<i>The nature of volition</i>	30
<i>The content of volition</i>	31
<i>Voluntary exertion of the body</i>	39
<i>The possibility of mismatch between content and effect</i>	42
3. THE INDIVIDUATION OF ACTIONS	45
<i>Action trees and the competing views</i>	46
<i>Three arguments against minimizing</i>	52
<i>The extreme minimizing view</i>	63
<i>Concrete actions</i>	65
<i>Concluding caveat</i>	70
4. INTENTIONAL ACTION	72
<i>Relativity to description</i>	72
<i>Simple actions</i>	73
<i>Complex actions</i>	74
<i>Intentionally doing something requires only the belief component of intending to do it</i>	75
<i>Another requirement: one must not be too lucky</i>	78
<i>Further refinements on the right sort of relation</i>	83
<i>Aggregate actions</i>	86
<i>The final, whole definition</i>	87
<i>Absentminded actions</i>	88

Cambridge University Press
 052138818X - On Action - Carl Ginet
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

5. FREE WILL VERSUS DETERMINISM	90
<i>Our impression of freedom does not make us free</i>	90
<i>Determinism</i>	92
<i>The interest of the question</i>	93
<i>Having an action open to one</i>	95
<i>Having it open to one to make something the case</i>	98
<i>The argument for incompatibilism</i>	106
<i>The objection to the fixity of the given past</i>	107
<i>The objection to the inescapability of the laws</i>	111
<i>Approaching an informative analysis of open possibility</i>	117
6. REASONS EXPLANATION OF ACTION	124
<i>The argument from “undetermined” to “not in the agent’s control”</i>	125
<i>The argument from “undetermined” to “has no reasons explanation”</i>	129
<i>Laws governing reasons explanations are not known</i>	131
<i>Anomic sufficient conditions for reasons explanations</i>	136
<i>A noteworthy difference between reasons explanations and deterministic explanations</i>	146
<i>An anomic sufficient condition for a reasons explanation of why that action rather than any other</i>	148
<i>Conclusion</i>	149
References	151
Index	155

Preface

The philosophy of action deals with the notion of action that applies only to beings who have wills. (The words *action* and *act* are, of course, applied to other sorts of entities – we speak of the action of the acid on the metal and of how the pistons act to move the drive shaft – but what *action* and *act* mean in such applications is not a concern here.) We take ourselves, people, to be the paradigms of enwilled agents. That we are beings who act is a fundamental fact about us. It is as important as the fact that we are cognizers, beings who know and believe. (These two aspects are, of course, thoroughly interconnected: The knowledge and beliefs we have and those we want influence our actions, and our actions influence the beliefs we come to have.) Yet, though philosophers in the Western tradition from Socrates on have had much to say about action, it is only in the last three decades or so that the theory of action has come to be thought of as a distinct branch of philosophy, on a par with the theory of knowledge. This may be because there was a tendency to think of action as a subconcern of philosophizing about rationality and morality. And indeed, very important questions about action arise there, such questions as what it is to choose one's actions rationally and what makes it the case that a person is morally responsible for an action. But some fundamental questions about action are prior to those concerned with its moral or prudential dimensions. Just what sort of thing is an action? We like to think of our actions as connected to the past but not made inevitable by it. What must the world be like for our actions to have both of those features? It is this metaphysical sort of question that occupies this book.

Chapter 1 considers what distinguishes the events involving a person that are the person's actions from those that are not actions. Chapter 2 investigates what is necessarily involved in that most important sort of action, voluntary exertion of the body. Chapter 3 considers a further aspect of what sort of thing an action is, namely,

how actions are individuated. Chapter 4 tries to figure out what makes an action intentional (which is connected to what makes a person responsible for an action). Chapter 5 examines what is necessary for an agent to have alternative actions open to her. Finally, Chapter 6 investigates what sorts of facts make true a special sort of explanation of an action, a sort that only actions can have, namely, the explanation that the agent did the action for such-and-such reasons.

There are two main thrusts of the book that are likely to be the most controversial. One is the claim (Chapter 1) that actions are marked off from other events by having at their core a mental event possessing an actish phenomenal quality. The plausibility of this claim depends centrally on my volitional account of voluntary bodily exertion (Chapter 2). The other is the claim that freedom of action is incompatible with determinism (Chapter 5). The defense of this thesis against a common objection – that the thesis entails that a free action cannot have an explanation in terms of the agent's motives for it – involves my account of reasons explanation of action (Chapter 6). (Though that account defends the incompatibilist thesis against that objection, it does not imply incompatibilism and is, I hope, independently interesting and plausible.)

Although special terminology introduced in earlier chapters is used in later ones, the chapters are largely independent of one another in that the arguments in one chapter do not assume the conclusions of another. The principal exception is that the account in Chapter 1 of the nature of action in general depends on the account in Chapter 2 of the nature of voluntary exertion of the body.

Chapter 2 is a close descendant of a paper that appeared in a special issue of *Theory and Decision* 20 (1986) edited by Robert Audi. Chapter 6 is a slightly altered version of a paper that appeared in *Philosophical Perspectives*, Vol. IV, edited by James Tomberlin. I thank those editors and the publishers for permission to use that material here.

This book has grown out of several courses and seminars I have given at Cornell over the last ten years or so and a seminar I conducted at the University of Turku in the spring of 1983. I am greatly indebted to students and other attendees in those courses for stimulus and for help in developing my views. I read earlier versions of Chapter 2 to colloquia at Cornell, the University of Helsinki, the

Cambridge University Press
052138818X - On Action - Carl Ginet
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

University of Uppsala, and the University of Zagreb. An earlier version of Chapter 1 was presented to the Philosophy Colloquium of King's College, University of London, and an earlier version of Chapter 4 was given as a lecture at University College, London. I am grateful for the help provided by the discussions on all those occasions. I thank Robert Audi, Melvin Belzer, and John Bennett, who each volunteered useful written comments on earlier versions of Chapter 2, and I am indebted to Sylvain Bromberger and Christopher Hughes for very helpful written comments and conversations about an earlier version of Chapter 1 and also to Michael Bratman for useful discussions of earlier versions of Chapters 1, 4, and 6. My thinking on the topic of Chapter 5, the incompatibility of free will and determinism, has been much aided by discussions I have had over the years with Peter van Inwagen, with John Martin Fischer, and with Kadri Vihvelin, and by their written work. To David Widerker I owe a large debt of gratitude for many helpful discussions and for extensive written comments on the penultimate draft of the book, which have saved me from several errors and led me to improve the exposition in numerous places. I thank the readers at Cambridge University Press for several helpful suggestions. I am grateful to Cornell University for a year's sabbatical leave in 1987–8, during which I completed the penultimate draft. During the leave I was a visiting scholar at the Center for the Study of Language and Information at Stanford University in the fall and at the Philosophy Department of King's College, University of London, in the spring. Many thanks to the members and staffs of those institutions for providing academic amenities and cordial hospitality.

Ithaca, New York

C.G.