

## BB READING #2

### A. Actions and Events (Hannah Pitkin)

One of the most striking features of the recent literature [concerning the nature of action]... is the diversity and inconsistency of its terminology. All of the writers want to distinguish something that is special in the conduct of human beings. Many of them call this special something “action,” but there is the greatest variety in how they define the term, what they contrast it with, and how they distinguish actions from other phenomena. Probably the oldest and perhaps most familiar way of drawing the distinction is by contrasting human beings with the rest of nature. Natural phenomena, we are told, are governed by causal laws and hence have no choice about the events in which they are involved; what befalls them is causally determined. But human beings are capable of choice, so that it makes sense to hold them responsible for what they do; they have, as the older tradition would put it, immortal souls; they have, as we continue to say, free will. Of course, human beings are also sometimes subject to events which they cannot control or influence; but sometimes they are able to take action and thereby change the course of events. In short, the capacity for action and thereby change the course of events. In short, the capacity for action is what distinguishes man from the rest of nature. Only human beings can act.

Another, somewhat broader, but also very familiar way of drawing the distinction is between animate beings, including man, and inanimate objects. Objects, clearly, cannot do anything on their own initiative, but merely undergo the course of events. What characterizes living creatures is precisely their capacity to do things, to initiate change, to take action. Or, again, the distinguishing line may be drawn between animate creatures endowed with consciousness, with mind, on the one hand, and all other creatures and objects, on the other. Then what seems essential to the idea of action is having a mind, a will, the capacity to want or choose or decide on an action. ...

Probably the most common suggestion [for distinguishing action from “behavior” or “events”] is that the idea of action is essentially linked to that of an agent. For every action, there must be an agent *whose* action it is. Events which merely happen to you are not actions; an action is something an agent does, rather than merely experiences. The agent is what makes the action happen, causes it, brings it about. He is the “causal factor” the source and the origin of the action; he initiates it.... [As Hannah Arendt, in *The Human Condition*, puts it:] “To act, in its most general sense, means to take an initiative, to begin (as the Greek word *archein*, ‘to begin,’ ‘to lead,’ and eventually ‘to rule,’ indicates), to set something into motion (which is the original meaning of the Latin *agere*)...”

Arendt argues that the agent initiating an action must necessarily be a human one, that action is a distinctively human capacity. Men are to some extent physical objects and to some extent animals, obeying natural causal laws; but only human beings, unlike objects and animals, can also act. “Action cannot even be imagined outside the society of men,” she says, and “neither a beast nor a god is capable of it.” Yet we do sometimes

speak of animals or objects as “acting.” We talk about the effects of a certain chemical “agent,” of the “actions” of water on sandstone cliffs, and the like. No doubt, there are many verbs that we predicate only of human beings (or of what strikes us as like a human being); “act” does not happen to be one of them. But we can decide to use “act” as a general designation, as a stand-in for such verbs. Another way to make this point would be to say, with Richard Taylor (*Action and Purpose*), that actions are the sort of “things which can without any incongruity be commanded, requested or forbidden.” **Then only creatures which understand language can act.**

...Actions differ from events in that they have a purposive character, an intentionality. Action involves “endeavor or purpose”; it involves direction to a goal or end. ... At the same time... actions differ from events by being conventional, or rule-governed; they “conform to social standards and conventions.” An action is a performance and there are right and wrong ways of performing which have to be learned; the action is embedded in conventions and norms which define it, tell us how it is to be performed.... Because action is purposive, involves intention, it can succeed or fail in achieving its purpose or goal. Because action is governed by conventions and rules, it can be done well or badly, performed successfully, or unsuccessfully.

...We want to ask: What exactly is it about man that is supposed to be so special? Why can't animals or even objects act? Do they never surprise us? Is a certain level of brain development a prerequisite? Is that because action is more difficult than behavior? Can intelligent animals, say porpoises or chimpanzees or pigs, act? Almost? What would count as an action on their part? Surely all sorts of animals make choices (which trail to follow, where to sleep); if we say that these are causally determined events unlike our free actions, how do we know that? Certainly a man choosing a banana looks a great deal like a chimpanzee choosing a banana. How do we know that the phenomena are different? ...

...One might be able to achieve a clearer... perspective by focusing on the language of action... Language plays a wholly different role with respect to human actions than it does with respect to animal behavior or physical events. Any of these phenomena can be discussed, described, explained, in language. But language is also *used in the course of* human action, by the actors themselves, as it is not used by animals in their behavior or physical objects in the events that befall them. We use language not merely to talk about action, but to act—to carry on actions, to teach actions, to plan or produce actions, to assess actions done and redress any ways in which they have gone wrong. We do not talk with animals we observe, nor with the material objects on which we work; but we do talk to and with each other.

... We said that action presupposes an agent, and that agent must be human or like a human being. Now we can see why this is so; we ascribe actions only to what is like a human being because the meaning and use of our vocabulary of action derive from language games played in the course of action. Only someone who can talk and understand language can play those games; so only someone who can talk and understand language can act. Action, we might say, is primarily a first- and second-person phenomenon, and only derivatively a third-person phenomenon. As Arendt puts it, “Speechless action would no longer be action, because there would no longer be an actor, and the actor, the doer of deeds, is possible only if he is at the same time the speaker of words.” (*The Human Condition*) More guardedly, the doer of deeds is possible only if he

is at the same time *capable of* speaking and understanding words. Our vocabulary of action is primarily applicable to human beings because its primary use is among human beings speaking to each other about what they are doing; that is why its concepts make sense only of beings capable of speech.... Action presupposes an agent, and an agent differs from the cause of an event because he makes a choice, is responsible, initiates something new rather than just continuing the causal chain.

## B. Language and Action (J. L. Austin)

What I shall have to say here is neither difficult nor contentious; the only merit I should like to claim for it is that of being true, at least in parts. The point I should like to claim for it is that of being true, at least in parts. The phenomenon to be discussed is very widespread and obvious, and it cannot fail to have been already noticed, at least here and there, by others. Yet I have not found attention paid to it specifically.

It was for too long the assumption of philosophers that the business of a 'statement' can only be to 'describe' some state of affairs, or to 'state some fact,' which it must do either truly or falsely. ... No all sentences are (used in making) statements; there are traditionally... also questions and exclamations, and sentences expressing commands or wishes or concessions. ...

Utterances can be found... that do not 'describe' or 'report' anything at all, are not 'true' or 'false,' and the uttering of the sentence is, or is a part of, the doing of an action... Examples:

- A. A. "I do (take this woman to be my lawful wedded wife)—as uttered in the course of the marriage ceremony.
- B. B. "I name this ship the *Queen Elizabeth*—as uttered when smashing the bottle against the stem.
- C. C. "I give and bequeath my watch to my brother"—as occurring in a will.
- D. D. "I bet you sixpence it will rain tomorrow."

In these examples it seems that to utter the sentence (in, of course, the appropriate circumstances) is not to *describe* my doing of what I should be said in so uttering to be doing or to state that I am doing it; it is to do it. None of the utterances cited is either true or false, any more than "damn!" is true or false. ... To name the ship *is* to say (in appropriate circumstances) the words "I name, etc" When I say, before the altar, "I do," I am not reporting on a marriage: I am not reporting on a marriage: I am indulging in it.

What are we to call a sentence or an utterance of this type? I propose to call it a *performative*... The term "performative" is derived from "perform" the usual verb with the noun "action;" it indicates that the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action... Speaking generally, it is always necessary that the *circumstances* in which the words are uttered should be in some way, or ways, *appropriate*, and it is very commonly necessary that either the speaker himself or other persons should *also* perform certain *other* actions, whether "physical" or "mental" actions or even acts of uttering further words. Thus, for naming the ship, it is essential that I should be the person appointed to name her, for (Christian) marrying, it is essential that I should not be already married

with a wife living, san and undivorced, and so on: for a bet to have been made, it is generally necessary for the offer of the bet to have been accepted by the taker (who must have done something, such as say “Done”), and it is hardly a gift if I *say* “I give it you” but never hand it over.

[Can’t an act be performed without a performative utterance? Cohabiting may, for example, effect a marriage.] But we may, in objecting, have something totally different, and this time quite mistaken, in mind, especially when we think of some of the more awe-inspiring performatives such as “I promise to...” Surely the words must be spoken “seriously” and so as to be taken “seriously”? This is, though vague, true enough in general—it is an important commonplace in discussing the purport of any utterance whatsoever. I must not be joking, for example, nor writing a poem. But we are apt to have a feeling that their being serious consists in their being uttered as (merely) the outward and invisible sign, for convenience or other record or for information, of an inward and spiritual act: from which it is but a short step to go on to believe or to assume without realizing that for many purposes the outward utterance is a description, *true or false*, of the occurrence of the inward performance...

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## **C. Materialism as a Challenge to Human Agency**

Materialism is the philosophical position according to which human beings are purely and only physical systems. By 'physical system' is meant an input-output mechanism. An input-output mechanism operates according to the physical laws of cause and effect. That is, according to materialism, human beings are causally determined mechanisms not essentially different, except in complexity, from robots or computers. Causally determined input-output physical systems are not capable of responsible action because such systems are not capable of being able to do otherwise than what they are caused to do. Lacking this power to do otherwise, rational and moral appraisal terms cannot meaningfully apply to such systems. (We cannot meaningfully praise or blame a computer for giving us a certain output.) The "behavior" of such a system is a natural event not an act. This "behavior" is no different from any other causally determined natural event. If human beings are nothing more than input-output physical systems, then human beings are not capable of responsible action, that is, not moral agents. Therefore, materialism is a picture of human beings that is inconsistent with common sense, with the way we actually live. We all live as if we were moral agents, and take this capacity as definitive of our humanity. As we might put this, the materialistic theory of human being excludes the possibility of moral freedom. This means that the materialistic theory of human being is incompatible with the fact that human beings live as though they were moral agents. The two propositions, “materialism is true” and “human beings are capable of moral agency” cannot both be true. What do you think the materialism would say to this?

Normally we assume that we are capable of making free choices and that, as a consequence, we can justifiably be held morally responsible for our actions. The assumption that we are free beings (in virtue of our having free will) is central to our conception of ourselves and plays a crucially important role in our dealings with one another. We hold each other morally and legally responsible – we praise and we blame, we reward and we punish. And when we hold people responsible for their actions, we assume, whether implicitly or explicitly, that they could have chosen to act other than as they did. Unfortunately, there are seemingly compelling reasons for

believing that this assumption is mistaken – that free will is a mere illusion and that, accordingly, we must completely rethink our present understanding of ourselves as morally responsible beings.

These reasons are based on the evidence that the world is deterministic, that everything that happens in it happens in accordance with causal laws. If the thesis of causal determinism is true, then every event, whether mental or physical, is caused to occur exactly as it does and, given its cause or causes, could not have been different from what it is. In other words, there are antecedent causal conditions, known or unknown, which determine the entire state of the world at any given time. Given these antecedent conditions, nothing could have differed even in the slightest from what it actually turned out to be. And these antecedent conditions were determined to be exactly what they were by conditions obtaining prior to them which, in turn, were precisely determined by earlier conditions, and so forth indefinitely (or perhaps infinitely) far into the past. If the world is eternal, then these chains of causally determined events had no beginning.

The past was caused to be what it is and is now causally fixed. But so is the future. Even though it has not yet occurred, what it will be is already causally fixed; for it is already predetermined by the causal conditions obtaining now. Since whatever occurs is just the outcome of what happened previously, every event is causally fixed. The time at which it occurs makes no difference.

If the world is deterministic, then whatever happens was bound to happen and thus was unavoidable. For nothing happens unless it is caused to happen, and, as we have seen, the cause (C) of an event (E) is the necessary and sufficient condition of E's occurrence. Since C is necessary for E, E cannot occur without C; and since C is sufficient for E, E *must* occur if C does. Clearly, if E's occurrence (and thus the occurrence of *every* event) is necessitated or rendered inevitable, the implications for our belief in free will look grim indeed.

With this in mind let us consider a case in which your freedom to choose seems undeniable. At this moment it surely seems to you that you can either close this book, and for example, watch a TV program or continue on reading. Suppose you choose to do the latter. Even though you did not choose to close the book it probably seems as evident to you as anything can be that you *could have* done so. Clearly, this action was within your power, and any theory that implies otherwise must be false. Or so it seems to us, at any rate.

But the determinist thesis *does* imply otherwise; it implies that continuing to read was the only course of action open to you. For this was the course of action that was the inevitable result of the conditions obtaining just prior to it – conditions sufficient for bringing it about. In other words, it was the course of action for which there was a cause. On the other hand, there was no cause for any action contrary to this one, such as our closing the book. That action could not have occurred because there was no cause to bring it about. Though we can easily conceive of either of these actions occurring, only the one that is caused can actually occur. Indeed, it is necessitated by the antecedent conditions, whereas the one that lacks a cause could not have occurred. Thus regardless of how convinced we may be that alternative courses of action were open to you, we must come to acknowledge that, given the antecedent conditions exactly as they were prior to your action, only one course of action was possible for you, namely, the one you actually took.

A determinist could apply this argument to every case in which you believe that different alternative courses of action are open to you. The case we have just considered has no moral significance. But many cases have; sometimes your decision concerns how other people should be treated. A stranger needs assistance. Should you help? You found a lost billfold containing owner identification and a substantial sum of money. Are you obliged to return it? Your

terminally ill friend who wants to die in order to end his/her suffering and helplessness requests your assistance. What should you do? These are obviously morally significant cases. But a determinist would argue that in these cases too, like every other, only one course of action is open to you – the one necessitated by the antecedent conditions. Given precisely those conditions, there was nothing else you could have done.

Suppose, for example, that you decide to keep the lost billfold. The determinist thesis would imply that given the antecedent conditions you could not have done anything else. But if no other course of action were possible, so that you could not help but keep it, then holding you morally responsible for keeping it seems totally unjustifiable. For we do not, or at any rate should not, hold people morally responsible for doing that which they cannot help doing. And what the determinist thesis implies is true of you in this case also extends to every other case of someone appearing to deliberate about what to do. This thesis has universal application; and so it implies that in every case of someone appearing to choose among alternatives, the antecedent conditions permit only one course of action – namely, the one that they predetermine. Thus the person taking that predetermined course of action could not help but take it; his taking it was inevitable and, consequently, unavoidable. Therefore, no one can justifiably be held responsible for anything!

At this point it may seem that the determinist thesis is utterly at odds with our understanding of ourselves and thus *must* be rejected. Any view which implies that our deliberations are totally illusory, that there are no alternative courses of action open to us, that we could not have avoided taking the course of action we actually did take, and that no one is responsible for anything he does seems so counter-intuitive as to be impossible to accept. But the reasons for believing that it is true seem equally powerful. As we have seen, it is nothing more than a thesis of universal causation – the thesis that every event is caused. Considered as such it seems to be implicitly accepted by both science and common sense. We encounter a horrible disease, AIDS, for example. How it comes about is at first a mystery to us. But we subject it to scientific study and eventually learn a good deal about the antecedent conditions that led to it. Knowledge of these causal factors is extremely important – well worth the enormous amount of time and effort expended – because we can remove the disease itself if we can remove its cause. But underlying all of this activity is the assumption that this disease, like everything else, is caused, that it didn't just pop into existence out of nothing, and that removing its cause removes any possibility of its getting into the world. At the outset we were unaware of how it was caused and, one might say, even lacked knowledge that it was caused. Presumably, it could have been causally disconnected to everything else. Although that is a logical possibility, it is surely not one that we take seriously. We assume that such disconnection is not possible in the actual world. It is, we might say, contrary to the natural law of this world or *causally* impossible. But to say this is to embrace the determinist thesis.

Though science and common sense apparently accept (at least implicitly) the thesis of universal causation, they could be mistaken in doing so. But we have reasons for accepting it that are independent of whatever support they provide. For it does seem very hard to believe that something that begins to exist at some time, i.e., is not eternal, should have come into existence without being caused to exist. To assert that it came into existence out of nothing is hardly to provide a sufficient explanation of its existence. And to claim that its coming into existence simply doesn't stand in need to any explanation seems wildly implausible.