ACTION

Authored by
mohammad looti

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Action

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1. Core Definition

The concept of **action** represents a pivotal construct across the behavioral sciences and philosophy, fundamentally denoting a self-initiated and goal-directed sequence of behaviors or processes. Drawing from the core psychological definitions, action is often differentiated from mere reaction, as it typically involves cognitive consideration, planning, and the pursuit of a specific objective. This intentionality implies that actions are not simply reflexive or automatic responses to stimuli, but rather complex, internally generated movements aimed at altering an existing state or achieving a desired outcome. An action, therefore, often comprises an incorporated group of component actions, working synergistically towards a broader strategic goal, distinguishing it from a single, isolated event or involuntary reflex.

In a broader, less psychological context, **action** also describes the sheer occurrence or endurance of a procedure or work, emphasizing the state of being operational or in motion. This definition is frequently employed in fields such as engineering or physics, where the focus is less on conscious intent and more on the exertion of force or the unfolding of dynamic processes over time. When used in this manner, the term highlights productivity and throughput, signifying that something is actively functioning or undergoing change. However, even within this definition, there is an inherent sense of consequentiality; the procedure or work is enduring because it is causing an effect or maintaining a particular state within a system.

The most abstract definition positions **action** as the condition or abstract concept of being active, serving as an antonym to dormancy or passivity. This conceptualization is vital in understanding motivation and engagement, particularly in models of human agency and self-efficacy. To be in a state of action is to possess agency, demonstrating the capacity to initiate change rather than merely waiting for external forces to dictate outcomes. This emphasis on self-start and initiative underscores the philosophical weight placed on action as a cornerstone of human experience and achievement, supporting the premise that the majority of anything one achieves in life will necessarily take effort and deliberate action on their part.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The term **action** derives from the Latin *actio*, meaning 'a doing,' which is rooted in the verb *agere*, 'to do, to drive, to lead.' Historically, the concept has been central to philosophical inquiry since antiquity. Ancient Greek thinkers, particularly Aristotle, rigorously analyzed *praxis* (action or practice) versus *poiesis* (making or production). Aristotle's philosophy of action centered on

voluntary movement informed by reason (*phronesis*), distinguishing genuine ethical action, which is an end in itself, from mere behavior driven by instinct or necessity. This foundational distinction laid the groundwork for centuries of Western philosophical thought on ethics, causality, and moral responsibility, asserting that true action is inextricably linked to rational choice.

During the Enlightenment, the discussion of action became deeply intertwined with the emerging mechanistic worldview and the problem of mind-body dualism, prominently explored by René Descartes. Descartes struggled to reconcile the physical, deterministic actions of the body (*res extensa*) with the non-physical, intentional actions initiated by the mind (*res cogitans*). This period marked a significant intellectual shift toward understanding action through the lens of classical mechanics--specifically Newton's third law, which states that for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction--solidifying the concept's dual identity as both a physical process of force exchange and a psychological process of willful initiation.

The late 19th and early 20th centuries saw the concept integrated into the nascent field of psychology. Behaviorism, led by figures like B.F. Skinner, focused almost exclusively on observable actions and reactions, largely dismissing internal intentionality as unscientific and unnecessary for behavioral prediction. However, the subsequent cognitive revolution reinstated the critical importance of internal mental states, planning, and goal representation in understanding purposeful action. Modern behavioral science now often treats **action** as a complex feedback loop, involving perception, decision-making, execution, and evaluation, linking conscious intent firmly back into the rigorous study of movement and goal-directed behavior.

3. Key Characteristics of Intentional Action

Intentionality and Purpose: Actions are directed toward a specific, pre-determined goal or objective, implying foresight and planning.
Agency and Self-Start: The action must be initiated by the agent (the actor) rather than being a purely reactive or forced response to external stimuli.
Structure and Components: Complex actions are rarely singular reactions but are typically composed of a structured sequence of smaller, interlocking movements or operations.
Volition and Control: The agent maintains a degree of conscious control over the execution, modification, and termination of the action sequence.

One of the defining features distinguishing an action from a mere movement or reflex is its inherent **intentionality**. Intentional action requires that the agent possesses a mental representation of the desired outcome before the movement begins, utilizing cognitive resources to select appropriate means to achieve that end. This goal-directedness is crucial in psychological studies, particularly in models of motor control and executive functioning, where researchers analyze how plans are formulated, prioritized, and converted into specific motor commands. Without an underlying

intention, a physical movement--such as a knee-jerk reflex--is categorized as a reaction, devoid of the cognitive complexity inherent in true action.

Furthermore, the characteristic of **agency and self-start** emphasizes the internal origin of the behavior. An action must be perceived as originating from the individual's will, distinguishing behaviors that are externally compelled or passively experienced from those that represent a genuine exercise of choice. This characteristic is central to attributing moral and legal responsibility; an individual is held accountable for their actions precisely because they are understood to have been the self-starter of that behavioral chain. This sense of personal causality reinforces the psychological concept that personal achievement and progress are direct results of proactive engagement rather than passive receipt of circumstances.

The inherent **structure and components** of most complex actions reflect their strategic nature. For example, the action of "preparing a meal" is not one singular movement but a highly coordinated sequence involving cognitive components (menu planning, sequencing cooking tasks) and motor components (chopping vegetables, regulating heat). These constituent elements must be temporally and spatially integrated, necessitating advanced cognitive mechanisms for sequencing, coordination, and rapid error correction. This hierarchical organization allows for the flexibility necessary for complex human behavior, enabling the agent to adapt the component movements dynamically while maintaining focus on the overarching objective.

4. Psychological Perspectives on Action

In cognitive and behavioral psychology, the study of action falls under several specialized domains, including **motor control** and **motivation theory**. Motor control theories focus on the neural and computational mechanisms by which intentions are translated into coordinated muscle movements, often employing models that delineate between higher-level planning (the decision of what action to perform) and lower-level execution (the specific motor commands necessary to perform it). Research in this area examines the role of structures like the cerebellum and basal ganglia in sequencing and timing actions, ensuring smoothness and efficiency while minimizing physical errors. The efficiency and quality of action execution are often measured by factors such as reaction time, accuracy, and detailed kinematic profiles.

Motivation theories link the initiation and sustenance of action to internal drives, needs, or desired rewards. Concepts such as **self-efficacy** (the belief in one's ability to execute a course of action successfully) and locus of control (the extent to which individuals believe they can control events affecting them) are critical determinants of whether an individual will initiate and persist through a challenging action chain. Psychologists recognize that the persistence or endurance of a procedure or work--the sustained nature of action--is highly dependent on these motivational factors, as effort must be maintained even when immediate reinforcement is absent, reflecting the

complexity required for long-term goal attainment.

Furthermore, clinical and social psychology often examine actions in the context of behavioral change and therapeutic intervention. Techniques such as behavioral modification rely heavily on analyzing action chains, breaking down complex target behaviors into manageable component actions, and utilizing reinforcement schedules to encourage the sustained condition of being active. In therapy, understanding why an individual struggles to initiate or sustain action can reveal underlying psychopathology related to mood disorders, anxiety, or learned helplessness, thereby making the capacity for self-started action a key metric for functional autonomy and mental well-being.

5. Philosophical Theories of Action

The **philosophy of action** is a sub-discipline focused on the metaphysical nature of human activity, specifically addressing what distinguishes an action from a mere happening or physical event. A central debate revolves around whether actions are caused by mental states (desires and beliefs) or whether they are non-causal manifestations of pure volition. The Causal Theory of Action (CTA), often associated with Donald Davidson, posits that actions are events caused by a reason--where the reason is understood as a pair consisting of a primary intention (desire) and a relevant belief. For example, the belief that "using the umbrella will prevent getting wet" coupled with the desire "to stay dry" causes the physical action of opening the umbrella.

Conversely, non-causal theories, such as those rooted in the work of G.E.M. Anscombe, argue that describing an event as an action means understanding it in light of the agent's reason, rather than necessarily finding a preceding psychological cause. For these theorists, the intentionality is inherent in the description of the movement itself, and seeking a distinct causal chain risks reducing human agency to deterministic physical laws. This debate is crucial because it touches upon the nature of practical reasoning: whether reasons for acting are mere psychological antecedents that predict the action, or constitutive elements that justify, explain, and define the action as intentional.

Another major philosophical line of inquiry concerns **basic actions**. A basic action is defined as one that an agent performs directly, without performing another action as a means to achieve it. For example, contracting a specific muscle is typically considered a basic action, whereas dialing a phone number is a non-basic action (it is done by performing a sequence of basic finger movements). Identifying the minimum unit of willed human behavior helps philosophers delineate the boundary between mental willing and physical performance, often leading back to questions of embodiment, highlighting the unique connection between mind and matter that permits the initiation of self-started actions.

6. Significance and Impact

The significance of understanding **action** permeates human endeavor, serving as the crucial bridge between internal cognitive states and observable, world-changing outcomes. In ethics and jurisprudence, the concept is fundamental, as moral praise and blame, as well as legal liability, are predicated upon the attribution of intentional action. A behavior is only morally evaluable if it is deemed a self-started, volitional act; accidents, involuntary movements, or actions resulting from physical coercion, while consequential, fall outside the scope of moral action because they lack the necessary element of agency and conscious intent.

In domains of productivity, organizational theory, and management, the sustained capacity for action is recognized as the engine of efficiency and innovation. Organizational behavior relies heavily on models that incentivize proactive action, often contrasting this vital state with reactive or passive maintenance strategies. Effective leadership is frequently defined by the ability to inspire, coordinate, and sustain collective action toward shared objectives, transforming strategic plans from theoretical documents into operational realities.

Furthermore, in self-development and motivational literature, the emphasis on taking action--the definitive transition from planning or wishing to execution--is continuously highlighted as the primary differentiator between success and stagnation. This emphasis supports the core psychological principle that major achievements require consistent effort and self-initiated movement toward objectives, reinforcing the value of the active condition over the passive state of contemplation.

7. Debates and Criticisms

The most enduring debate surrounding the concept of **action** is its relationship with determinism and **free will**. If the universe operates according to strict physical laws, and all events (including the neuronal firings that precede intention) are causally necessitated by prior events, how can human actions be truly self-started or free? Critics of strong intentionalism argue that perceived agency is ultimately an illusion, suggesting that what we feel is an action initiated by intent is merely a highly sophisticated reaction driven by antecedent biological, neurological, and environmental factors beyond conscious control.

A second major challenge comes from the problem of automatism and unconscious action, which tests the strict requirement of conscious intent. Many highly complex behaviors, such as driving a car in traffic, typing quickly, or engaging in expert athletic performance, become automatic through extensive practice, significantly reducing the need for explicit cognitive oversight. While these behaviors are clearly goal-directed and initiated by the agent to meet an objective, they often lack the moment-to-moment conscious deliberation typically required by philosophical definitions of fully intentional action. This raises the critical question of where the boundary lies between automatic,

yet effective, behavior and truly reflective, intentional action that warrants full moral responsibility.

Neuroscientific discoveries also heavily inform the criticism of immediate self-start. Studies involving brain imaging and the measurement of the readiness potential (a measurable electrical activity in the supplementary motor area) have shown that brain activity associated with planning a movement precedes the subject's conscious awareness of having made a decision to move by several hundred milliseconds. These findings, famously associated with the Libet experiment, complicate the notion of action as a purely "self-started" chain rooted exclusively in conscious deliberation, fueling ongoing interdisciplinary debates regarding the true origin and nature of human agency and volition.

Further Reading

Philosophy of Action (Wikipedia)
Action (Social Theory)
Behavioral Science (Wikipedia)
Action in Physics (Wikipedia)
Action (Philosophy)