

Voluntary

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Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Biology, Neuroscience, Psychology, Philosophy (Ethics, Action Theory), Law.

1. Core Definition

The concept of **voluntary** refers specifically to actions that are performed by an agent through conscious initiation, intention, and executive control. Such actions are characterized by the existence of a choice, distinguishing them fundamentally from behaviors that occur automatically, reflexively, or through purely physiological necessity. In the context of human behavior, a voluntary act requires the involvement of higher-level cognitive processes, including planning, decision-making, and the specific commitment of resources to execute a goal-directed movement or behavior. This means the agent perceives alternatives, selects one course of action, and intentionally carries it out, assuming ownership of the outcome.

Voluntary actions stand in stark contrast to **involuntary** actions, which occur outside the purview of conscious will. Involuntary actions include basic autonomic functions essential for survival, such as the regulation of the heartbeat, digestion, and the mechanical aspects of breathing during rest. Furthermore, reflexes--rapid, automatic responses mediated by the spinal cord or brainstem, like pulling one's hand away from a source of heat or the knee-jerk response--are also strictly involuntary because they are executed without conscious thought or intention as a mediating step. The distinction lies in the latency and pathway: involuntary actions bypass the conscious decision centers of the cerebral cortex, whereas voluntary actions originate there.

While the distinction seems clear in extreme cases, certain actions exist on a continuum of voluntariness. For example, while breathing is typically an autonomic, involuntary function, an individual possesses the capacity to deliberately hold their breath, hyperventilate, or consciously regulate the rhythm of respiration. When these actions are performed through conscious initiation, they transition from involuntary biological processes to voluntary acts. Therefore, the definition hinges not merely on the type of action itself, but on the cognitive mechanism utilized for its initiation and sustained execution, emphasizing the role of **will** or **intent** as the primary catalyst.

2. Biological and Neurological Basis

The biological substrate for voluntary action is localized primarily within the motor system of the brain, involving a complex hierarchy of structures responsible for planning, executing, and monitoring movement. The initiation of voluntary movement is typically linked to the prefrontal cortex, which establishes the goal, and the supplementary motor area (SMA) and premotor cortex, which prepare the specific motor plan required to achieve that goal. This planning phase is crucial;

it converts the abstract intention into a series of coordinated muscle commands before any physical movement begins.

The commands for voluntary muscular action are primarily routed through the **corticospinal tract**, which descends directly from the primary motor cortex to the motor neurons in the spinal cord, controlling skeletal muscles responsible for movements such as standing, walking, reaching, and fine manipulation. This path ensures precise, deliberate control over the musculature, allowing for the flexibility and adaptability characteristic of intentional behavior. Damage to these cortical areas or the corticospinal pathway often results in paralysis or severe impairment of voluntary control, demonstrating their indispensability to the execution of willed actions.

A significant area of neuroscientific inquiry concerns the timing of voluntary action, particularly the phenomenon known as the **readiness potential (RP)**. Studies pioneered by Benjamin Libet demonstrated that the brain begins preparing for a voluntary action--as measured by electrical activity in the motor cortex--hundreds of milliseconds before the individual reports having made a conscious decision to move. This finding introduces complexity into the traditional understanding of voluntariness, suggesting that the feeling of conscious intent might be an awareness of an action already initiated by unconscious neural processes, thereby fueling ongoing debates regarding the nature of free will and conscious agency.

3. Etymology and Historical Development

The term "voluntary" derives from the Latin word *voluntas*, meaning 'will,' 'desire,' or 'choice.' Historically, the philosophical exploration of voluntary action predates modern neuroscience by millennia, featuring prominently in classical Greek philosophy. Aristotle, in particular, dedicated substantial attention to the relationship between choice, action, and moral responsibility in works such as the *Nicomachean Ethics*. For Aristotle, an action could only be considered truly moral or immoral if it was performed voluntarily, meaning the agent was aware of the circumstances and was not acting under compulsion or ignorance.

Throughout the medieval period, theologians and philosophers debated the concept of the will (*voluntas*) extensively, particularly regarding its relationship to divine grace and human culpability for sin. The emphasis remained on the internal mechanism of choice as the determinant factor for moral status. This tradition cemented the idea that an individual must possess the freedom to choose otherwise for their actions to be morally or ethically meaningful.

In the modern era, the concept became foundational not only in philosophy (Action Theory) but also in emerging fields of law and psychology. Enlightenment thinkers utilized the concept of voluntary consent as the basis for political legitimacy (e.g., the social contract) and individual rights. By the 19th century, with the rise of empirical psychology, the study of voluntariness began to shift from purely metaphysical speculation toward the empirical investigation of intention,

motivation, and the physiological execution of willed movements, setting the stage for contemporary neuroscience.

4. Key Characteristics of Voluntary Action

Voluntary actions are defined by a constellation of cognitive and physical characteristics that distinguish them from automatic or reactive behaviors. These characteristics are essential for establishing responsibility and agency in both ethical and legal frameworks.

Intentionality: The action is performed with a specific **purpose** or goal in mind. The agent plans the action and expects a particular outcome, demonstrating foresight and deliberation.

Conscious Control: The agent is aware of initiating and executing the action. This control allows the individual to start, stop, or modify the action mid-course based on immediate feedback or shifting goals, unlike fixed, programmed reflexes.

Flexibility and Adaptability: Voluntary actions are highly flexible, allowing the agent to adapt their movements to novel environments or changing external demands. For example, a voluntary action like walking can be immediately modified to navigate an unexpected obstacle.

Agency and Ownership: The agent recognizes the voluntary action as 'mine.' There is a subjective feeling of initiating and performing the act, which is central to the concept of self and personal responsibility.

5. Voluntary Action in Ethics and Law

The concept of voluntary action is paramount in ethical theory and criminal law, serving as a prerequisite for assigning responsibility, blame, or praise. Ethically, a person is generally held accountable for the consequences of their actions only if those actions were performed voluntarily. If an act is coerced, performed unknowingly (due to genuine ignorance), or resulting from an irresistible impulse, the degree of moral culpability is significantly reduced or eliminated entirely.

In criminal jurisprudence, voluntariness is a cornerstone of the requirement for *actus reus* (the guilty act). For an act to constitute a crime, it must usually be a willed bodily movement. Legal systems differentiate between acts that are genuinely involuntary--such as those committed during sleepwalking (automatism), epileptic seizure, or a pure muscle spasm--and voluntary acts, even if those voluntary acts were poorly judged or reckless. The law demands conscious control over the physical action itself, although the specific intent (*mens rea*, or guilty mind) may vary depending on the charge.

Furthermore, legal and ethical frameworks must account for circumstances that may vitiate or compromise voluntariness. Coercion (threat of harm) fundamentally undermines choice, as does severe mental impairment or certain states of extreme intoxication, depending on jurisdiction and the specific circumstances. The legal analysis often centers on whether the agent had the capacity

to choose otherwise, reinforcing the philosophical link between voluntary action and the freedom to exercise choice.

6. The Philosophical Challenge: Voluntariness and Determinism

While the definition of a voluntary act is clear on a functional level (conscious initiation), the concept becomes philosophically contested when viewed through the lens of determinism. If all events, including human decisions, are causally predetermined by preceding events and natural laws, then the 'choice' involved in a voluntary action may be considered illusory. This challenge forces a critical examination of whether true voluntariness--defined as the ability to choose freely from genuinely available alternatives--is compatible with a deterministic universe.

Philosophers generally approach this challenge through two camps: **Incompatibilists** argue that if determinism is true, then no actions are truly voluntary in the sense required for moral responsibility, leading to hard determinism or hard libertarianism (which denies determinism). Conversely, **Compatibilists** argue that true voluntariness only requires the action to be caused by the agent's own beliefs, desires, and intentions, regardless of whether those internal states were themselves ultimately determined by external forces. Under this view, an act is voluntary if it is not coerced and aligns with the agent's immediate desires, maintaining accountability even if determinism holds.

The neuroscientific findings regarding the readiness potential further complicate this debate. If brain activity precedes the conscious awareness of choice, it suggests that the subjective experience of willing an action might be a retrospective justification rather than the true causal trigger. This raises profound questions about where the line between neurological determination and genuine voluntary agency should be drawn, forcing both ethicists and legal theorists to adapt their understanding of what constitutes a 'willed' action.

7. Further Reading

[Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Action](#)

[Wikipedia: Voluntary movement](#)

[National Center for Biotechnology Information: Motor System and Voluntary Movement](#)