

What we do first

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Basic actions, following Danto [1965], are the actions we do first, i.e. the actions we do directly by contrast to the actions we do by doing some other ones. The very concept of basic action is controversial (see e.g. Annas, 1977), but I shall here assume that there are such things as basic actions in order to address the question: which actions are the basic ones? Two main answers have been proposed. According to the first one, initially put forward by Danto [1963, 1965], basic actions are bodily movements. According to the second, endorsed by some volitionists (sometimes called volitionalists), basic actions are acts of will, mental tryings (Davis, 1979; Ginet, 1990; Hornsby, 1980; McCann 1972, 1974, 1998, 1975¹).

I shall defend a third proposal according to which basic actions are exertion of muscular forces. I shall first spell out the view that basic actions are exertions of muscular forces. Following Von Wright [1963, p. 42], our elementary actions have elementary changes as their results. The thesis I defend is that the elementary states of affairs that we change through our basic actions are the exemplification of physical forces in our muscles. Neither muscular forces nor changes in muscular forces are essentially actions: they might occur passively, such as in passive cramps or spontaneous contractions of our muscles. What is an action is the *exercice* of a force, which I shall call muscular *effort*. Following Von Wright, there are four kinds of changes, and therefore four kinds of elementary actions: doing of p (from $\neg p$ to p), destroying of p (from p to $\neg p$), preserving of p (from p to p), and suppression of p (from $\neg p$ to $\neg p$). There are consequently four types of basic actions: doings of muscular forces destroyings of muscular forces, preservings of muscular forces and suppressions of muscular forces.

I shall then propose two arguments for the claim that forces rather than bodily motions or acts of will are basic actions:

¹Not all volitionists claim that volitions are basic actions. See e.g. Armstrong, 1980, 1993, p. 149; Lowe, 1996, p. 151. I also favour the view that there are volitions, but that volitions are not actions. Volitions are only constituents of actions.

1. *The truthmaker argument*: Zeus sentenced Atlas to carry the earth for all eternity. Suppose that after some time, Zeus decides to ease his punishment and to condemn Atlas to mere immobility, without any load to carry: he takes the earth from Atlas' arms, and charge him to stay motionless forever, keeping the very same position he had when he was formely carrying the earth. Intuitively, Atlas's action is not the same before and after the removal of the earth. Something must make it true that he is not doing now the same thing than he was doing when the earth was on his hands. By hypothesis, that change is not a change in the motion of his body. It is neither a change in his act of will, as I shall argue. It is rather a change in the muscular force he exercises.
2. *The perceptual feedback argument*. According to a view initially put forward by Armstrong [1993], basic actions have to be individuated by the first perceived effect of the operation of the will. I argue that Armstrong is right about that principle, but wrong to maintain it leads to the view that bodily motions are basic actions, muscles contraction being, he believes, not perceived. Muscles contractions are indeed perceived: both phenomenology and empirical data suggest that proprioception of our body movements heavily relies on muscle sensivity. If true, muscles contractions rather than bodily motion are the first perceived effect of our willings.

Third, I shall address an objection originating from a rival proposal about the individuation of basic actions, put forward independently by Lowe, 1996, p. 151. According to him basic actions should be individuated not by the first perceived effect of the volition, but by the object of the volition. Since we almost never attempt to contract our muscles, exertion of muscular forces are not basic actions. I reply that this objection misses the point for the very same difficulty applies to bodily movements as well (Grünbaum, 2008): we almost never attempt to move our body in order to achieve a task.

Finally, I shall draw on some consequences of that view relative to the nature of effort and will. That there are physical intentional actions (i.e. forces' exertions) prior to bodily motions might explain away some of the volitionists' intuitions. It may well be that the intuitions we have about the paralysis cases that volitionists often appeal to are not so much intuition about mental effort, than about muscular effort. I shall argue that though some volitions have to be preserved, it is an important mistake to conceive of the will on the model of a mental muscle, capable of trying more or less hard (as Ryle, 1990 rightly pointed out). Trying hard is a matter of the intensity of the muscular exercice, not of the mental push.

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