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**Action, Activity, Agent**

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## **Action, Activity, Agent**

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### **Abstract**

How is it that someone is an agent, an active being? According to a common and dominant opinion, it is in virtue of performing actions. Within this dominant trend, some claim that actions are acts of will while others claim that actions are identical with certain basic bodily movements. First I make an assessment of these traditional accounts of action and argue that neither of them can make sense of how is it that someone is an agent. Then I offer some supplementation and argue for a better alternative.

**Keywords:** Will, action, activity, agent, being active

## **An Agent**

In the movie about his life, Forrest Gump says:

That day, for no particular reason, I decided to go for a little run. So I ran to the end of the road. And when I got there, I thought maybe I'd run to the end of town. And when I got there, I thought maybe I'd just run across Greenbow County. And I figured, since I run this far, maybe I'd just run across the great state of Alabama. And that's what I did. I ran clear across Alabama. For no particular reason I just kept on going. I ran clear to the ocean. And when I got there, I figured, since I'd gone this far, I might as well turn around, just keep on going. When I got to another ocean, I figured, since I'd gone this far, I might as well just turn back, keep right on going.

I take Forrest as a perfect example of what is to be an agent, someone who is an active being, someone who is somehow the source of his own movements. But what does this mean? What does being an agent or an active being actually involve? For instance, how is it that Forrest started running and kept going on? Did he obey to an inner voice that said 'Run, Forrest, run!', and then his body took a first step, and then a second one, and so on? Or did he simply moved a leg, 'just like that', without doing anything else by which he moved that leg, and then he took a second step, 'just like that', and so on? Or is the running of Forrest something completely different? In fact, I think it is something completely different, and here I want to make sense of what Forrest did by defending an alternative account. I will start criticising the standard accounts of action and showing that they cannot make sense of our runner. After clearing the ground, I will defend what I think is a better solution.

## **Actions (I): Acts of Will**

Under one standard account of action, an action is never a bodily movement but always a volition or act of will (Prichard 1949). Thus, an action is not to move a leg but to will the movement of a leg. According to this account, there is in fact something like an inner voice that says 'Run, Forrest, run!'. If we ask, like Wittgenstein (2001: §621) would ask, what is left from Forrest's first bodily movement if we remove the fact that there is a bodily movement, the volitionist will answer: an act of will, the particular matter of fact that Forrest willed to take a first step, to move his right leg. Forrest is an active being because he performs acts of will, and these exhaust the content of his actions. It is commonly said that the volitionist faces a regress: if an act of will is what causes a bodily movement, don't we need another act of will to cause that act of will, a sort of willing to will, and then another willing to willing to will, and so on? No. This objection only works under two assumptions: (i) that in order to do something an agent must perform an act of

will, which is something that the volitionist accepts, and (ii) that what is willed is an action, which is something that the volitionist denies (Prichard 1949: 64; Hornsby 1980: 117–8). If the sort of thing willed were an action, then we would certainly face a regress, since that would involve willing a willing. But, according to the volitionist, this is not the case. The sort of thing that someone wills is never an action but a certain extrinsic event: typically a bodily movement, but someone with unusual self-confidence might well will a planetary movement.

How can a volitionist make sense of Forrest's enterprise? Only in terms of one act of will, or a series of acts of will. It seems that all what Forrest needs to do is either one master act of will that (somehow!) causes a series of bodily movements, or various consecutive humble acts of will, each of which (somehow!) causes a single bodily movement, a step in Forrest's running. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that all what makes of Forrest an agent is the fact that there are acts of will of his. Whether these acts of will cause or not the desired bodily movements is up to nature but not up to Forrest. In principle, there is nothing in the nature of an act of will according to which the existence of a bodily movement or of a distinct act of will must follow. The fact that an act of will is followed by a bodily movement or by a distinct act of will is a metaphysical accident. All what Forrest can really do for running is one or many acts of will and then let things go.

### **Actions (II): Basic Bodily Movements**

According to the second standard account of action, an action is always identical with a bodily movement (Hornsby 1980). Under this account, Forrest's bodily movements can exist if some basic bodily movement of Forrest exists, that is, an action that Forrest performs not by doing something else, but 'just like that'. Allegedly, if Forrest were to move a stone, he would move it by moving his limbs, that is, by somehow causing the stone to move, and we could distinguish the movement of the limbs as the cause and the movement of the stone as the effect of that cause, and both events as distinct existents. Thus, if Forrest is an agent, then, in order to start running, Forrest simply moves his body, 'just like that'. He does not move it by doing something else. If moving the right leg is a basic bodily movement, then willing to move the right leg is moving the right leg, and moving the right leg is the action itself, not the effect of some other action. It might well be the case that moving the right leg is not in fact a basic bodily movement, since moving a leg seems to be a very complex movement that involves several muscular contractions. If this is the case, then some muscular contraction by which the leg moves must stand as a basic action of Forrest's running. The point is that if there are any actions of Forrest, then there must be some basic action of his. That is, if there are actions of Forrest that are effects of other actions of his, then there must be some action of his which is not the effect of other action of his. Otherwise, we would be involved in a regress: if moving a leg is not a

basic action, then it is caused by another action distinct from it, and if this other action is not basic, then it is caused by another action distinct from it, and so on (Danto 1965: 51). If there is no basic action, it seems that no action at all could ever be performed by the agent. Presumably, all the running of Forrest is either just a matter of one basic action done ‘just like that’ after another basic action done ‘just like that’, or a matter of one first basic action (somehow!) causing a second action, and this causing a third one, and so on, in a causal chain that at least includes one basic action as its first link –the very first step. In either case, the running of Forrest is simply a series of bodily movements. Basic bodily movements, that is, the actions that really make the case for the very existence of actions, presumably, are all internal to the body (Hornsby 1980: 14), e.g. a muscular contraction, a neuron-firing or other fine-grained bodily movement. Basic bodily movements are usually described or individuated in terms of their effects, but they are the causes of them and not, in themselves, the effects of other actions of the agent. When an agent acts, he performs a basic bodily movement ‘just like that’ and the rest is up to nature. It may or may not follow some further effect; and if it follows a further effect, it may be typical or atypical. Thus, it seems that the only real actions performed by an agent are basic actions. All what an agent can do for making something happen is to perform some basic action and let things go.

### **Something is Missing**

There are big difficulties with these two standard accounts of action: first, both acts of will and basic actions are very mysterious entities. Think in acts of will. If all what there is to an action is an act of will, then it seems that we have no idea of what an action in itself is (Lowe 2000: 249; Melden 1960). Acts of will are supposed to stand as wholly distinct causes of other wholly distinct events, and, as such, it should be possible to individuate them without making any reference to those events that follow them. The problem is that when we try to understand the content of acts of will without making reference to those events, we are in the dark. Conversely, when we do start to get an idea of what acts of will are, it is because we have collapsed their content with the contingent relations in which they stand to the wholly distinct events that they happen to bring about. Because the only recognizable aspect of the act of will to move a leg in an occasion is that it is the X that happens to cause the movement of a leg in that occasion. And that is not very informative about what X is in itself. And the same holds for basic actions. Typically, we also individuate them by making reference to their effects; but if their effects are wholly distinct from them, we are in the dark about what basic actions are in themselves; and if all what we know about a basic action is that it is the X that causes certain bodily movements, then there is not too much progress.

Secondly, the only real difference between acts of will and basic actions is that the first ones seem to commit us to a strong form of mind-body dualism, while the latter not. Otherwise, they are very similar. In particular, they both

seem to come into existence ‘just like that’. They both are particulars that come when they come, and the rest is always up to nature. Nothing really seems to be necessitating their existence. And in themselves they seem not to necessitate anything else for being what they are. Thus, it seems totally mysterious how acts of will or basic actions are supposed to really make Forrest run if not by pure cosmic coincidence. This pervasive metaphysical disconnection that particular acts of will and basic actions seem to enjoy makes very difficult to see what intrinsic feature may distinguish them from mere disconnected happenings.

Third, both standard accounts explain agency through actions and not the other way around. Their focus is not activities like running or willing to run, but particular actions, particular steps. Firstly, what we have for accounting for the activity of running or willing to run is either one master act of will or a series of wholly distinct acts of will; in the other case, we have either one basic action or a series of wholly distinct basic actions. In both cases what we have are simply wholly distinct particular events. And like events, both acts of will and basic actions are all countable, well bounded, dated and unrepeatable particulars, complete units in themselves. In both cases we have the enormous difficulty of identifying what counts as a single action, what counts as a building block in Forrest’s enterprise. Presumably, one needs to accept the existence of point-like actions as the atoms of running/willing to run on pain of falling into arbitrariness. But the worst of all is that in both cases it seems that all the active character of Forrest enterprise has vanished. We are said that Forrest is an agent in virtue of performing basic actions or acts of will, and then our attention is directed to the content of basic actions or acts of will, but the key ingredient is left aside, namely what do we mean by performing an action or act of will. It is in the performing bit where all the interesting things are really happening. Because no one really runs if running is understood as a series of particular bodily movements, and no one really wills to run if willing to run is understood as a series of particular acts of will, just like no one really moves by being located at place  $p_1$  at time  $t_1$ , and then by being located at place  $p_2$  at time  $t_2$ . In fact, in the first place, no one really acts in virtue of one particular action of his being related to other particular actions of his. A relation is a state of being which, just like being located at, cannot be accepted to make sense of an activity like running or willing to run. And this happens either if we understand relations in the Humean way –as supervenient in external and contingent spatiotemporal relations (Lewis 1986)–, or in a moderate anti-Humean fashion –as external but brutally nomic (Armstrong 1997)–, or in a straight anti-Humean fashion –as internal and necessary (Bird 2007). If Forrest is really an agent, then this cannot be because one of his actions is in an actual relation (of whichever degree of necessity) to other of his actions. If activities like running or willing to run were understood in terms of events standing in relations, they would collapse into four-dimensional series where some parts actually stand before some parts and after other parts, or where some parts actually stand as causes of some parts and as effects of other parts. In the second place, if our focus is on particular actions but we exclude

cross-temporal relations and accept that only present objects exist, we still have nothing really active. Because under this understanding, activities are reduced to snapshots or instantaneous particulars that come into present existence and vanish from it in an instant. But obviously in neither of these cases we can find something like the activity of running or the activity of willing-to run; we only find a series of actions: one particular indexed to the present time after another one, or various particulars standing in cross-temporal relations, that is, ‘act of will to X at t1’, ‘action X before action Y’ or the like.

Fourth, the accounts that put the attention on particular actions do not only make activities like running very mysterious, as I showed above, but also tend to remove the very agent from the scene. After all, we are never told how is it that particular actions stand to the agent itself. That is, we are in the dark about what is meant when it is said that particular actions or acts of will are performed by a certain agent, how is it that the enterprise of running or willing to run belongs to Forrest. When we think of actions as acts of will, it is hard not to see Forrest either as himself being reduced to a series of acts of will or as a bare substratum that stands in a very mysterious relation to his own acts of will. Similarly, when we think of actions as bodily movements, it is hard not to see Forrest either as a series of basic actions or as a bare substratum that stands in a very mysterious relation to his basic actions. But if Forrest is really a willer or a runner, then he is not reducible to a series of particular actions standing in cross-temporal relations nor to a series of particular actions indexed to the present time, nor to a bare substratum that somehow supports one particular action after another one. If this were the case, he wouldn’t be a runner and his running would collapse into something totally frozen: a state of being.

### **Action as Abstraction from Activity**

What the standard accounts of action are missing is that running or willing to run are not actions nor series of actions but activities, i.e. ongoing processes. Activities should not be identified with actions. As Hornsby has recently argued, unless activities/processes are allowed as something that is prior to actions, then ‘it seems that we cannot think of agents as ever being in any sense active’ (Hornsby 2013: 1). I agree with her in this point, though, as I will argue later, this is still not enough. Certainly activities need to be incorporated to make sense of what Forrest did. Now, what makes the difference between an activity and an action? Actions are species of events, and events are particulars. An event is always a countable, well bounded, dated, unrepeatable, and complete particular, a self-contained unit of being. Thus, events are things like births, football matches, weddings and funerals, and they are usually reported in sentences that suggest their complete and perfect character, like ‘the vase broke after the stone hit it’, ‘Peter ate an apple’. In contrast, an activity is an ongoing and occurrent process, and it can only be reported as a dated event when it is over. Activities, unlike particulars, exhibit something like a type or universal character: when Forrest started running/willing to run that day he



kept doing the same activity during various days. The activity of running/willing to run is something that goes on as long as it goes on. The sentence 'Forrest ran yesterday' does not report Forrest's activity; in contrast, the sentence 'Forrest was running yesterday' does report it. In itself, an activity is neither a relation nor a relatum of a relation and it does not enjoy a well-bounded spatiotemporal location. In principle, Forrest might be running for his whole life without ever finishing his race, or he might decide to quit right after starting. As Hornsby (2013: 4) claims, if there are particular actions at all, it seems meaningful to ask how many of them there are. But it is meaningless – not merely difficult, but simply meaningless– to ask how many of ongoing activity there is. Asking how many running there is is like asking how many water there is. Since ongoing activity is not a countable particular, the proper question would be something like for how long has been (was, will be) Forrest running. For a day? For a year? For his whole life?

When we understand that running/willing to run is an activity, then particular actions are better understood as abstractions from activity. The standard, atomistic, conception takes a process to be the result of particulars standing in causal or spatiotemporal relations, a four-dimensional string of frozen snapshots, or as a series of actions indexed to a privileged present time, where the relation of location at a time replaces the role of cross-temporal relations. Under this understanding of processes, all the apparently dynamic character of an activity is lost. Because there is nothing properly active in a sequence of particular actions nor in any particular member of such sequence, just like there is nothing properly active in a sequence of still photographs that tries to reconstruct, frame by frame, snapshot after snapshot, the process of a flower growing. Understanding a process in terms of actions indexed to times or in terms of actions standing in cross-temporal relations is the very denial of the tensed character that processes exhibit (Sellars 1981). In contrast, since an activity is a process, it is essentially tensed, and it can only take place in a tensed conception of reality. This conception excludes states of being like those involved by cross-temporal relations or by relations of being located-at-a-time as the ways of making sense of motion or change, since it takes these to be prior to states of being. After all, nothing really changes or moves in virtue of being related to other things or in virtue of being located-at-a-place-time. When one starts with process as basic, one reaches the ideas of action, cause and effect, events-in-relations, and temporal locations, as abstractions from process. In fact, in a tensed view of reality, the very notion of time is obtained through abstraction from process.

Now, even if we incorporate activities to our effort of understanding Forrest's enterprise, there are still some crucial doubts. First, how do activities stand to the agent? How is it that an agent engages in activity? Are we thinking of Forrest again as a bare substratum or as a logical atom of which we contingently predicate some activities? Are we thinking of activities as somehow primitive and free-floating that come when they come 'just like that', as acts of will and basic actions seem to do? That is, we might well have replaced actions with activities, but we are still in the dark about what is meant

when we are told that an agent performs an activity. Second, if there are activities like running or willing to run, how can we preserve their alleged active or dynamic character without falling in the temptation of accommodating them in a tenseless, eternal, conception of reality? It seems clear that if there is any activity, then this cannot take place in a tenseless view of reality, where all past, present and future objects actually exist. But, on the other hand, how can we accommodate activities like running in a tensed view of reality, without collapsing them into something like one particular stage popping into present existence and then vanishing in an instant? As far as I can see, these two worries are connected, and they have one common solution: we need to link activities to persistent agents, to runners and willers, in a more intimate way. That is, an agent cannot be an agent in virtue of being linked to certain activities via this mysterious relation that allegedly falls under the word 'performing'. After all, an agent is a performer.

### **Activity as Abstraction from Active Object**

The two main reasons that explain why standard conceptions of action cannot make sense of what Forrest did is, first, that they think that the relevant objects that make Forrest an active being are particular actions of his, so they eliminate real activity from the picture; and second, that they also tend to remove the agent from the picture, since they never clarify how is it that those actions stand to the agent. We are never told how is it that an agent gets to perform certain actions. Either the agent is dissolved into a series of particular actions or the agent is taken as a bare substratum or logical subject of which we contingently predicate particular actions. But nothing like that can make sense of a runner like Forrest. Activities fill in one gap. Nothing can really be active if there is no activity. Particular actions are better understood as abstractions from activity. Now we need to complete the picture. We need to rescue Forrest, the performer, from the backstage. Just like actions are abstractions from activities, I claim that activities are better understood as abstractions from essentially active objects. Thinking of activities as sort of entities in which an agent is contingently engaged, leads us to think of activities as entities that are ungrounded in the nature of the object, that is, it leads us to believe that activities somehow get contingently attached to the surface of an otherwise passive and bare substratum. The temptation of treating activities as self-sufficient entities that enjoy their own determinate and independent identity conditions, comes from this 'loose and separate' understanding of how objects are supposed to stand to their features. But free-floating activities don't make sense, just like bare objects don't make sense. Mere activities do not act; passive objects do not act; only active objects act. So the bond between object and activity must be stronger than mere contingency. But, as Dumsday argues, simply saying that an object is 'necessarily' related to an activity is totally mysterious and ad-hoc, since there is nothing that can explain the necessity of that connection if we take object and activity, from the very start, as wholly

distinct existents each one with its own nature. The only necessity that is not mysterious is the one that flows from essence, from what something is. Thus, only an essentially active object can really necessitate and guarantee the existence of ongoing activity (Dumsday 2012: 55). Only an essentially active object has sufficiently rich nature to guarantee that certain activities will flow from it. An essentially active object cannot but be in constant activity. Such an object, of course, cannot be understood as a bare substratum. Only philosophers that have treated agents as substantial forms have the proper materials. Of course I include here Aristotle, but I also include those who follow Aristotle in thinking that to be a substance is to be an active being, that the essence of a substance is to act or to strive, that being is acting (e.g., Leibniz, Spinoza). What needs to be highlighted is that the properties of a substantial form do not stand as *relata-in-relations*. Thus, activities are not linked to agents through something like a relation of ‘performing’. As Scaltsas puts it:

[F]or Aristotle, a universal form is not related to its subject by an ontological relation (e.g., by participation, communion, etc.), but it is separable from that subject by abstraction. The realist element in Aristotle’s account of universals is that the singling out of a form by abstraction is grounded in experience: thoughts about the abstracted universal form derive their truth conditions from thoughts about the substance that the form is abstracted from. Thus, the path from the substantial form in actuality (=the concrete substance) to the abstracted form (=the universal) is separation by abstraction, which has no ontological correlate, but is governed by the content of our experience. (Scaltsas 1994: 5, his emphases)

This is why the activities of agents do not enjoy numerical distinctness and determinate identity conditions while being the activities of an agent. The agent itself is the only object that enjoys distinctness and determinate identity conditions. Activities acquire distinctness and identity only after a process of thought makes abstraction of them from the restless agent. Derivatively, actions acquire distinctness and identity only after a process of thought makes abstraction of them from activities.

So how do we make sense of Forrest enterprise? Forrest runs/wills-to-run because he is an essentially active object: he cannot help but running/willing to run. He wouldn’t be himself if he were not a runner/willer. Whether he is a runner or a willer-to-run depends on whether we understand him as a material or immaterial substance. But this, for our purposes, is not very relevant: in both cases Forrest acts because he is an essentially active object. In both cases we get the idea of a numerically distinct action through abstraction from activity, and the idea of a numerically distinct activity through abstraction from the restless unfoldment of an agent. The beginning of wisdom lies in accepting the basic character of the performer without destroying him *qua* performer; that is, we may rejoice ourselves in thinking about actions and activities *qua*

abstractions as long as we resist the temptation of reifying them. Otherwise, the very idea of what is to be an agent is lost in the process. Because once we take actions or activities to be numerically distinct existents, then there is no non-arbitrary way in which we can connect them to the agent. If there are genuine agents and we take actions or activities to be properties that are predicated of them, then we need to accept the following trade-off:

[T]here is an inverse relation between the identity and the actuality of a property: The closer we get to the property's actualized (instantiated), the further we get from the property's identity; the closer we get to the property's identity (in its definition), the further we get from its actualized state. (Scaltsas 1994: 4, his emphases)

If Forrest is an agent, then activities or actions of his are abstractions from him. Of course, this doesn't mean that there are in fact agents like Forrest. It only means that if there is someone like Forrest, then we cannot make sense of him qua agent by recurring to the idea of numerically distinct actions or activities that he (somehow!) performs. If he is genuine performer then the numerical distinctness of his actions or activities performed by him is well lost.

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