

Planners, Deciders, Performers.

Aristotelian Reflections on the Ontology of Agents and Actions

LUDGER JANSEN, BONN

1. Agents, Actions, and Aristotle

Aristotle did not write a book about action theory, nor on the ontology of agents. But he does touch upon the topic of actions in many of his works: in his works on ethics, in his work *On the soul*, in the biological part of his work, where he discusses the movements of animals, and also in the *Physics*, where he is concerned with change in general. However, opinion is divided as to how these somewhat scattered remarks are to be evaluated. Some, like John Ackrill (in Ackrill 1978), think that Aristotle tampered around with his remarks on action and that his account is seriously inconsistent. Others, like David Charles, think there is such a thing like a consistent theory of action in Aristotle, and indeed Charles wrote a voluminous book to reconstruct this theory (Charles 1984).

In what follows, I, too, want to combine several of Aristotle's scattered remarks on action to yield a coherent picture. I do not necessarily want to attribute this very picture to Aristotle himself. But I consider this picture to be Aristotelian in two ways. Firstly, it was inspired by Aristotle's work. Secondly, it is intended to represent a theory consistent with the remarks on agents and actions in Aristotle's extant works.

2. Actions Successful by Performance

Where does an action come from? What is its origin, its *archê*, as Aristotle would call it, its originating principle? Aristotle is quite explicit on this point: An action's *archê* is the decision (*prohairesis*) to perform this action (EN VI, 1139a 31–33; Metaph. V 1, 1031a21; Jedan 2000, 129–131). I will say more about decisions in due course. First I want to ask: Which are the actions I can decide on? I want to argue that these actions are not all those I can perform. I may wish to

- think about philosophical problems
- study philosophy
- aim at a degree in philosophy
- get a degree in philosophy
- become a professor of philosophy
- become the leading intellectual figure of the 21st century.

Maybe I will be successful, and all my six wishes will be fulfilled. Then we could, retrospectively, assure us that I was then back in the past (i.e. I am now) indeed able to perform all these six things. Thus I may start today to become the leading intellectual figure of the 21st century. But is this something I can decide on? No, I cannot. To assume such an ability would be sheer

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nonsense. Whether someone becomes the leading intellectual figure of any century is no matter of decision. Nor can I decide to get a degree in philosophy or to become a professor. But I can decide to think about philosophical problems. I can decide to study philosophy. And I can decide to *aim* at a degree in philosophy. But whether I *will* get a degree and whether I will become a professor of philosophy, or not, does not depend on my decisions alone, but also on many other factors.

Is there a common description for those actions which only depend on my decision to perform them? Yes, there is. These actions consist in the exercise of one of the agent's capacities and they do not require any other criterion over and above that capacity's exercise to be successful (Metaph. VIII 8, 1050a 34–b 2). We can thus picture an agent as an agglomeration of his capacities. And the agent can decide, which of these capacities he wants to exercise. Now having the capacity and exercising it guarantees the success of the action in all those cases where the success just consists in the exercise of the capacity. In these cases, Aristotle's "perfect-test" indicates that the *telos* of the action, the action's goal, has been reached: If I exercise the capacity to F, then—*ipso facto*—I have exercised the capacity to F (cf. Metaph. IX 6, 1048b 23–35; Jansen 2002, 116–133; also Jansen 1997 and 1999).

Aristotle uses the perfect-test to draw his distinction between movements and changes on the one hand, and activities which are neither movements nor changes on the other hand: his famous distinction between *kinesis* and *energeia*. For a change or movement (*kinesis*) like walking from Gloggnitz to Kirchberg, it is not true that the action's goal (= being in Kirchberg) is fulfilled while the action is performed. Quite the other way round: When the goal has been reached, the action is over. With an activity (*energeia*) the perfect test yields the opposite result: The goal of an *energeia* (like being in Kirchberg or seeing Wittgenstein's house) is fulfilled if and only so long as the action goes on. And the goal that is analytically connected with the exercise of a capacity is just the exercise of that capacity.¹

Aristotle knows an intellectual virtue for choosing the right action—*phronesis*, which might be translated as "practical wisdom" (EN VI, 1140a 24–b 11). It is the duty of *phronesis* to decide about which *praxis* the agent should perform. And a *praxis* is just an action of the previously described kind: An action whose success is guaranteed by our decision to perform it, given we have the appropriate capacity.

3. Actions as Causes

Actions that are successful by performance are not all there is about actions. This is nicely shown by the phenomenon of trying. For if an action is successful once we start with it, it seems to be nonsense to say that we try such an action. Those actions we can try to do no-nonsensically must be of a different kind. Of course, there is no special "trying capacity", such that a trying would be an exercise of this specific capacity. When we try something, we exercise the very same capacities that we exercise in successful cases. Thus, the difference between mere trying and having success cannot lie in the exercise of our capacities alone—we have to search for it

1. This gives us also a clue for the definition of omission. Given the set of the agent's capacities, we may say that if an agent omits to F, then (1) he does not F but (2) has the capacity to F. For, presumably, we do not want to say that an agent omits actions he is not capable of.

“outside”, in the surrounding of the agent. For, I will claim, we can only then no-nonsensical-ly try to F, if “F” is an action-description that does more than simply name the agent’s capacities that are to be exercised. And this bit more is to prescribe a certain change that has to be brought about in the world.

My applying my pushing ability with respect to my car will, hopefully, bring about my car moving from its previous place A to some other place in space, B. I am obviously not only applying my pushing ability, but I am also pushing the car from A to B. Whether my pushing the car to B will be successful, or not, is not determined by the fact of the actualising of my pushing ability alone—in addition, the car has to arrive at B. Therefore pushing the car from A to B is not a *praxis*: it is *poiesis* (EN VI, 1140a 1–6). The paradigm case of a *poiesis* might be, say, a potter’s producing new pottery or an architect’s building a new house. A *poiesis* aims at producing something in addition to the action itself. The product of the pushing is not a new three-dimensional thing like pottery or a new house, which would belong to the ontological category of substance. The product in question is “only” something new in the category of place. Other actions may bring about new qualities, quantities or relations. Nevertheless, any such action qualifies as a *poiesis*.

We have, thus, to distinguish three elements on the side of the agent: the decision, *praxis* and *poiesis*. On the side of the material being manipulated, the patient, we can add the experience of a change (the *kinesis*). Or, in verbal expressions: the *prattein* and *poiein* of the agent (doing and making) and the *pathein* (suffering) of the patient. The intellectual virtue responsible for a good *poiesis* is no longer *phronesis*, but *technê*, the knowledge of a certain craft or art: the *technê* for healing is the art of medicine, and the *technê* for building a house is what architects have to learn (EN VI, 1140a 6–23).

In some cases, these different parts of an action might be distributed to different persons. For example, a farmer may deliberate with his wife about what to do with their cow. Finally, the farmer might decide that the cow has to be milked. But he does not himself perform this action but delegates the performance to his assistant, his farm-hand. The farm-hand in turn will milk the cow and thus bring about a change in quantity of the milk in the cow’s udder. In this action, three human beings and an animal are involved: The farmer and his wife are the planners, with the farmer being the decider. The farm-hand is the performer. And, last but not least, the cow is the patient. A similar example is the case of building a house, in modern times as well as in ancient Greece: The *architekton* deliberates and decides, the slaves move the stones, and the stones and the rest of the building material is, collectively, the patient that is transformed into a house.²

It is possible as well that all four roles are united in one person. Aristotle’s stock example for this case is the medical practitioner who cures himself (Phys. II 1, 192b 23–27; Jansen 2002, 39–47). Practitioners and patients are not normally numerically identical. But of course, if Hippokrates has a flu, he can cure himself. In this case, Hippokrates plays both the role of the practitioner (who is planner, decider and performer) and the role of the patient to be healed (who is also the patient in my technical use of this term). Quite similar is the case of walking, which has caused much trouble for modern commentators (Ackrill 1965; Pickering 1977). When I decide to walk from Gloggnitz to Kirchberg, I decide to exercise my walking ability, combined with

2. Cf. Makin 2000, 154 for another example: „A crippled doctor, who retained that [medical] understanding, who could not administer treatments herself, but who could guide others, would retain her medical skills, because such a doctor would be a source of health in her patient.“

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he intention to aim at reaching Kirchberg. Of course, this case differs from the case where I was pushing my car. Now, one might say, I am pushing myself. Subject and object of the action, agent and patient, are one and the same person. On the one hand I have myself as the agent, on the other hand myself as the patient. Also in this case I do not move myself as itself, as Aristotle would put it, but myself as something different. I am the mover or the agent in this case insofar as I exercise my walking ability. But we have to distinguish between this ability and the ability to fill a certain amount of space and to be located at different places. The latter is what grounds my being the patient of this action. Hence we get the result that such an ordinary thing like walking makes us kind of schizophrenic: Insofar as I have the ability to walk, I move myself insofar as I have the ability to be located at different places. While I share the ability to walk with several higher animals only, the ability to be located at different places is a property of most extended bodies (for such distinctions within the same individual cf. Phys. VIII 4, 254b 28–33).

4. Where Decisions Come From

Now, how does a decision occur? Aristotle models this by means of the practical syllogism (a much debated topic; cf. among others: Cooper 1975, Kenny 1979, Mele 1981). A practical syllogism is a piece of practical reasoning, that connects a major premise expressing general knowledge (like: "I should eat healthy food") and a minor premise expressing a particular observation (like: "This is healthy food"). These two premises lead to the conclusion that I should eat that stuff in front of me, and thus the practical syllogism can lead to a concrete action (MA 7, 701a 7–30; EN VII, 1147a 24–36; An. III 11, 434b 16–21).

What does it mean for such a major premise to be reasonable? It means to be integrated in a coherent hierarchy of means-ends-relations. Aristotle does not elaborate too much on these structures. But one thing is clear from his writings on ethics: For such structures to be meaningful, there must be at least one ultimate end, an end that is not a means to another end, but being pursued for its own sake (EN I, 1097a 25–34). Further down in the hierarchy we find ends that are themselves means for other, higher ends, and so on, till we reach the ultimate end. This ultimate end is, what we can construe formally, following Aristotle, as happiness and living well (*eudaimonia*, EN I, 1097a 34–b 20).

Practical deliberation, then, has at least two aspects. First, there are practical syllogisms like the example mentioned, resulting in concrete actions. When is this action complete? That is determined by the type of activity or process this action belongs to. This *telos* of the action itself—the "action's purpose" or "*finis actionis*"—has to be distinguished from whatever the agent performs this action for—the "agent's purpose" or "*finis agentis*" (Freeland 1985, 400–401; Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II–II q. 141 a. 6 ad 1; Ross 1936, 517–518 on Phys. II 5, 196b 17–22). The agent's purpose is not an intrinsic property of the agent's activity, but an integral element of the agent's process of practical reasoning. Thus it is extrinsic to the action itself. We can determine the agent's purpose only if we know enough about the agent's deliberation leading to that action. And in our example the agent's eating that very food is supposed to support his health. Actions of the very same type can be given totally different purposes by their agents. E.g., while the intrinsic purpose of singing is just the singing itself, performers may sing for a variety of different extrinsic purposes: to produce something beautiful, to have fun, to earn money, or to court a woman.

Different actions of the same agent will presumably be performed because of different purposes. And here the second aspect of practical deliberation enters the scene. For it should be desirable for the agent to pursue purposes that fit into a coherent scheme. There will be some purposes that have only instrumental value for him to serve other purposes, which rank higher in that agent's hierarchy of purposes, which in turn serve for even higher purposes, which ultimately are thought to contribute to the agent's happiness. Thus the planner not only has to decide whether he can realize a certain end in a given situation, but also which will be the right means to reach happiness.

5. The Picture So Far

If we summarise the account given so far, we get the following picture of the different parts of an action and, analogously, the different parts an agent consists of:

AGENT				PATIENT (<i>pathetikos</i>)
PLANNER	DECIDER	PERFORMER		
		DOER (<i>praktikos</i>)	MAKER (<i>poietikos</i>)	
Deliberation (<i>boulesis</i>)				
brings about →	Decision (<i>prohairesis</i>)			
	brings about →	Exercise of a capacity (<i>praxis</i>)		
		brings about →	<i>poesis</i> of the agent	
			brings about →	<i>kinesis</i> of the patient
				brings about → <i>energeia</i> of the patient

For non-intentional causal interactions—normal events, one might say—we can take over this picture, skipping the deliberation process. Normal events do not come from decisions. They are triggered by natural causal processes (witness their different treatment in *Metaph. IX 7*). But the rest remains basically the same, even if we may wish to change some of the labels, as seemingly Aristotle wished to do. He talks about *praxis* and *poiesis* only with respect to human actions. In normal events we can conceptually draw a distinction along analogous lines. Aristotle, however, has no distinct names to apply here. Both are interchangeably called *energeia* or *entelecheia* (Chen 1958, Blair 1967, Jansen 2002, 95–98).

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brings about →	The patient's being changed (= the <i>kinesis</i> of the patient)	
	brings about →	The patient's being in the new state brought about by the change (= the new <i>energeia</i> of the patient)

The three columns in this scheme correspond to three different kinds of capacities which are involved in causal interaction: the agent's "active capacity" to bring about a change, the patient's "passive capacity" to undergo a change, and the patient's capacity to be in the new state brought about by the change (Berti 1999). The two columns belonging to the patient represent the two kinds of results connected with a change: the "resulting change" and the "result of change" (von Wright 1969), i.e. the change itself and the new state brought about by it.

6. Three Problems

There seem to be quite strange overlaps and redundancies in this picture. I will discuss here the following three difficult distinctions: (1) between decision and *praxis*, (2) between *praxis* and *poiesis*, and (3) between *poiesis* of the agent and *kinesis* of the patient. Here is how I would try to account for these:

(1) Are the decision and the *praxis* really two different events? Even for Aristotle, to decide for a certain action and to perform this action are different types of things, but one and the same token. The conclusion of the practical syllogism is at the same time the end of practical deliberation and the begin of acting (An. III 10, 433a 16–17). One might compare this with a point dividing a certain stretch of a line (a comparison used by Aristotle himself, though for another purpose, in An. III 2, 427a 10–14). Just like this point is the end of one stretch and the begin of the other, the conclusion is the end of deliberation and the beginning of acting. Thus, one and the same individual is playing two roles at the same time, can be subsumed to two different types of events. Thus the decider is the limit case between the deliberator and the performer.

(2) *Praxis* and *poiesis* are being enabled by the very same capacity. In so far as the realisation happens within the agent or has the agent as its logical subject, it is a *praxis*. In so far as the realisation happens within the patient, it is a *poiesis*. Many kinds of *praxis* can only co-occur with a *poiesis*, but a *praxis* without *poiesis* is possible, and indeed Aristotle thinks that the most valuable kind of *praxis* is of this kind, namely contemplation (*theoria*). This possibility allows us to distinguish conceptually between *praxis* and *poiesis* in other cases as well.

(3) The *poiesis* of the agent and the *kinesis* of the patient may be judged to be the same event. However, this event is being called *poiesis*, in so far as it is the realisation of a capacity of the agent. And it is called *kinesis*, in so far it is the realisation of a capacity of the patient.

Of course, we know that the agent's capacity will only be realised if the patient's capacity will be realised, and *vice versa*. Thus *poiesis* and *kinesis* necessarily occur at the same time. This is just alike in Aristotle's theory of perception. A perception is at once the realisation of the active capacity of the perceptible thing and of the passive capacity of the perceiver. These two capacities can only be realised together, and Aristotle tells us that they both happen within the same individual, namely the perceiver: though, of course, the perceptible thing remains the logical subject of the realisation of its capacity (in the end, it is *its* capacity that is being realised), it would be odd to say that something happens within the perceptible thing when being perceived. Perception does not really change something within the perceptible thing, but only something within the perceiver.

7. The Intentional and the Non-Intentional

In Aristotle's picture, the two main elements of acting, namely intentionality and performance, are neatly separated. They can be re-discovered in the two elements decision and *praxis*. With a *praxis*, in so far as it is a *praxis*, its success is guaranteed. All those elements of an action whose success is not guaranteed enter as *poiesis* or *kinesis* or via the agent's practical deliberations. The result of an action, i.e. the end-state of the patient's *kinesis*, does not necessarily correspond to the intended result (for this distinction between the *heneka tou* of an action and the aim *kata prohairesin* cf. Phys. II 5, 196b 17–22; cf. also section 4 above): The result brought about by the action is not always the result aimed at in the decision. If I go to the market place to buy fruits, this might also lead to the collections of debts, because, by accident, I meet one of my debtors (Phys. II 5, 196b 33–36). Intention is thus not necessary for a certain result. On the other hand, intention is not sufficient. The general practitioner who intends to cure his patients cannot be sure about his success. All he can say is that he does the best according to his knowledge and the state of the medical art (Top. I 3). All he can decide on is whether to activate his medical skills. This is, what is *eph' hemin*, i.e. what is entirely in his own power to do. But whether his endeavours will be crowned with success, whether the patient will actually be cured—this depends not only on the medic's skill, but also on the state the patient is in and maybe on other intervening causes.³

At its basic level, this sketch of a model of actions takes into account only decisions for or against the exercise of active capacities. Is it possible to decide on the exercise of passive capacities, too? Sun bathing seems to be a case in question. Can't we decide on whether our skin should get a darker complexion? Well, let's have a closer look at the elements of sun-bathing that are really intentional. We can decide on going to a sunlit place, we can decide on staying there for some time with an (partially) uncovered body. And we can do this with the intention to aim at getting a darker complexion. But whether the pigments in our skin will be stimulated by the sunlight to change the colour, whether there are such pigments in the first place, or not, this is not our business. We cannot decide on these matters, because with respect to these things we are no autonomous agents, but simply subject to the causal happenings in nature.

3. These are of course all those factors relevant for the realization-conditions of the respective capacity. Cf. Metaph. IX 5 and, commenting on this, Moline 1975 and Jansen 2002, 177–188.

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