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	<u>पृष्ठ संख्या</u>
13. गाँधी दर्शन में धार्मिक सहिष्णुता का वैशिष्ट्य	नीलम कुमारी 91 – 96
14. पर्यावरणीय मानवकेन्द्रिकतावाद की पुनर्समीक्षा	अन्नू सिंह 97 – 110
15. धार्मिक सहिष्णुता का मानवीय निहितार्थ	डॉ. वन्दना कुमारी 111 – 115
16. वर्तमान परिप्रेक्ष्य में योग-दर्शन की प्रासंगिकता : एक विमर्श	रेखा कुमारी एवं डॉ. ब्रजभूषण शर्मा 116 – 120
17. गौतम बुद्ध के अष्टांग मार्ग की प्रासंगिकता	रूपेश कुमार सिंह 121 – 127
18. पीड़ा रहित दुःख	डॉ. शालिनी कुमारी 128 – 130
19. दलित और अम्बेदकर : एक विमर्श	प्रियंका कुमारी 131 – 136
20. गाँधी का धर्म दर्शन	वर्षा रानी 137 – 143
21. आज के संदर्भ में आरक्षण का मूल्यांकन	डॉ. राजकिशोर प्रसाद 144 – 150

ENGLISH SECTION

1. Gandhian Satyagraha : A Pathway to Peace and Freedom	Dr. Maheshwar Mishra 151 – 158
2. Critique of Volition Theory of Action	Neeti Singh 159 – 165
3. A spiritual study of aurobindo's theory of evolution	Sanjay Paul & Dr. B.R. Yadav 166 – 169
4. Meaning of Humanism in the Philosophy of Swami Vivekananda	Gaurhari Singh & Dr. Shashi Singh 170 – 173
5. Importance of Bad Faith in the Philosophy of Jean Paul Sartre	Kartick Gouri & Dr. Yogendra Prasad Singh 174 – 177
6. Thought and Language: Its Practical Significance	Sushant Kumar 178 – 182



CRITIQUE OF VOLITION THEORY OF ACTION

Neeti Singh *

I

Addressing the question of volition and moral action is an important issue in Descriptive Ethics.¹ It relates to the psychology of morals and it is a study of people's belief about morality, values, rightness and wrongness of actions and so on. It is desirable that we know about the basics of volition, intention, motives and things like that if a suitable discussion about moral action has to take place. We all know that moral judgments are passed on the actions of human-beings, which enable actions to be evaluated as moral and immoral. But the question is: what are actions? Action defines those behaviours that are under our control as opposed to behaviours that in some sense just happen.

Major metaphysical, epistemological and ethical questions discussed under analysis of action have been considered at length by a number of thinkers who may be categorized as supporting four major theories, namely, Old-time Volitional Theory (OTVT), Mental Action Theory (MAT), Causal Theory (CT) and Double Action Theory (DAT). I am not dealing here the details and nuances of each theory but focusing on VTA. Volitional theory considers action as a series of two things: the state of mind called volition followed by an effect. Mill writes: "the volition or intention to produce the effect is one thing: the effect produced in consequence of the intention, is another thing. I form the purpose of instantly moving my arm; that is a state of my mind: my arm (not being tied or paralytic) moves in obedience to my purpose; that is a physical fact, consequent on a state of mind. The intention followed by the fact, or (if we prefer the expression) the fact when preceded and caused by the intention, is called the action of moving my arm."²

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The passage clearly states that Mill has taken volition and intention as synonymous and this seems to be erroneous because for other thinkers volition is not intention properly so-called but a different thing. Some have even denied of the existence of volition such as Gilbert Ryle.³

One of the supporters of this theory is Carl Ginet who says that an act is a voluntary movement of one's body which follows volition. According to VTA, volition is prior to act and our bodily movements follow the volition. Volition, here, is 'trying to act' which is sometimes understood as will. In OTVT, an action is recognized with the complete act-sequence, covering the desire and belief. According to OTVT, an action is a bodily movement (effect) caused by a mental event (volition). Mill preferred this view about actions but later on we find a little difference in opinion on this matter when Ginet favoured it. Volition is an antecedent of distinctive bodily movements which makes it an action. Volitions are not mere awareness of what is happening but awareness of doing.

Carl Ginet writes: "if a person believes that it is not possible for him to open his hand, then he cannot try or intend to open his hand either, on the grounds that a person cannot try or intend to do what he believes is impossible for him to do".⁴ Many have rejected this theory by imposing the charge of obscurantism and brought other theories for describing nature of action. It is important to inquire the nature and role of volition in action so that we can define its role in moral actions.

II

This is an important issue in descriptive ethics and let us concentrate simply on what Carl Ginet and Gilbert Ryle says. However, I must say that this paper is basically about the possibility of volition, which is considered as an important factor to differentiate actions from non-actions. Donald Davidson⁵ supports Intentional theory and claims that volition is not the object of moral judgment but intention is. However, the volitional theory is a set of multifarious theories that portray numerous philosophical concerns and a variety of deep-thinking canons.

Carl Ginet is one of the leading modern advocates of the volitionalist theory and Gilbert Ryle is the most important critic of this theory. Ginet, in his book, *On Action*, defends VTA and says that mental events called volitions differentiate actions from non-actions whereas actions are those behaviours that are in the control of the agent and non-actions are those behaviours that are not in the control of the agent. Further, he adds that volition is an element or criterion which distinguishes actions from non-actions such as events, happenings etc. Ryle rejects that there is something like 'will' in human mind; it sounds, for him, like a ghost in the machine. For Ryle, 'will' or 'volition' is a created concept which does not really exist but is merely an imagination. He criticises the theory by adding that willing (act of will) is a mysterious phenomenon of which no one is aware of.

The debate between the two goes farther. Ginet insists that an intrinsic account of volitions can be given; here intrinsic means defining volition from inside because volitions have their own unique phenomenal feel and so they can be well-defined self-sufficiently from their relation to other events. It is a mark by which we know that an event is under the control of us (agent). But Ryle says that volitions are not empirical at all and it is arrived at from the grammatical trap that voluntary actions must be actions that are caused by volitions. We are unable to say anything at all about volitions barring the fact that they cause our bodily motions which are actions and so persons who are moral agents and who perform various actions do find the notion of volition mysterious and incomprehensible.

For Ginet, volition is a simple mental event that does not involve any composite causal construction and the proof of having a volition is 'self-evident' as he thinks that we feel an actish phenomenal quality which is the 'feeling of trying'. Ginet accepts volition as necessary and sufficient conditions of action. 'Willing as trying' enables us to clarify the philosophical conception of volition in daily expressions. Volitions are mental trying which consistently take place in every action. In the critique of this view Ryle says that 'act of will' and volition are purely philosophers' terms and no one in

ordinary speech ever says that one willed this and that actions. He presumes that there are no words in ordinary language by which the idea of willing can be elucidated but the idea of the willing can be explicated, and in fact it has been done so by a number of philosophers, with the help of such ordinary notions as 'trying', 'effort' and 'endeavour'. Ryle further enhances that we repeatedly perform actions and the belief that every action requires volition; one will have to admit uncountable number of volitions. Consider the case of a tennis player making numerous complex movements while playing the game. If corresponding to all these movements, we postulate isolated volitions; our mental life would be too jam-packed. Ryle's charge will hold good if a volitional theorist asserts that volitions are actions and every action must be preceded by a prior volition but no volitional theorist is obliged to hold this view and thus Ryle objects volitional theory to be involved in infinite regress.

I almost agree with Beverly K. Hinton⁶ who has presented his views on this debate in his famous research paper A Critique of Carl Ginet's Intrinsic Theory of Volition. I have taken his critique to a logical conclusion about VTA. The questions which must be answered are: what is the difference between action and moral action? What is action itself? Is every action, moral? What difference we create by adding the word 'moral' before 'action'? Why we say any action 'moral'? Lagier writes: "if we look at the central cases of action, or at least at what philosophers and lawyers take them to be, we can distinguish at least five such elements, to wit: bodily movements, an intention, a change in the world, a relationship between the bodily movements and that change, and an interpretation or meaning of the action."⁷ (italics mine) Intention is accepted as an important factor in explaining action.

But many argue that volition is something which makes event an action. Here, we will see that how volition plays an important role to make action a voluntary action and therefore a moral action. This is the most important segment of my paper wherein we will ponder about the debate between volition and anti-volition theories. Ripley writes: "volition is a conscious or mental act which initiates

and guides the physical change that is brought about deliberately in a physical act."® Ripley has supported VTA in his paper published in 1974. Carl Ginet, Thomas Aquinas, Spinoza, St Augustine, J. S. Mill, Sellers, Goldman, Davis and many more are Volitionalist philosophers and Gilbert Ryle, H.L.A. Hart, A.I. Melden, Richard Taylor and so on are Anti-volitionalist or Non-volitionalist.

III

According to my understanding, 'volition' plays an important role in voluntary moral action. However, I am not refuting will's and intention's role in moral actions. I am also not completely in the favour of volition theory that has no place for will and intention. By giving one example, I will explain my view. Suppose that I am blind, deaf and dumb. Almost three of my sense organs are blocked except for skin, tongue and other organs. I cannot see anything in the world. One can tell me, explain me each and everything but how can I perform in the world when I cannot listen what others are saying to me? Now the question is: where from the things start? Where from the things initiate for such a person who cannot see, listen and speak anything?

The initial part is the 'conception or idea of a goal for any kind'. Without having that conception of an idea or a goal, nothing would happen. So everything starts from an idea and the idea that one wants to achieve something like consuming food, is an immediate end. Now, the conception of an end related to how will I do this when conjured up in our mind, is the starting point. The idea of an "end" and "means" becomes one of the pushing factors to do something. This instigates us and they become the motive of one's actions.

End theorists consider "motive" as nothing but the idea of the end plus means. The idea of the means with end is not merely an idea of the end but of intention. Some other elements are also there. These are pushers. When we are pushed in our mind, something happens; we just start choosing from alternatives. We have several alternatives at a time but we choose one immediately. When we choose one among many alternatives we prefer our immediate requirements and decide to do the one thing immediately.

So when the idea of the requirements comes, the idea of the urgency comes, the push is within us, our will start telling us to do as an internal factor. We accept for ourselves whatever we choose and decide and then we feel a power to do or to perform. We feel a push and a power inside us that we are able to do it and then we really start functioning from within (our mind) and then in the world.

The means becomes active in our mind as per the things that are already well arranged in our mind which guide us to do something first and then anything else. Hence, once will comes in touch with those things well arranged in our mind, immediately a sequence follows; we find that volition has taken place and it immediately translates into our bodily movements; we say that we act on what we have decided. There are then consequences or results by which we know what we really intended to do. Idea of the means, end and pushers (motive) taken together is called intention, which is the reflection of our characters. Intention is always known after action has been performed.

People object to such mechanical explanation and suggest that we should remove unnecessary and vague terms to make explanation simple and well accepted. We can say that we as agents do "will" and "act" because intentional actions amount to willing and performing. People accept that willing is associated with desiring, choosing, deciding, and acting. These are sufficient to know why we conceive the intermediaries like motive, volition and the terms like these. If motive comes under will and both covered by the term intention, why do we not put things together to make the analysis simple?

For me, VTA is a little outdated and old-fashioned taken in its old connotations. We need to refer to intending, desiring, choosing, deciding and acting. We must see the intention of the doer/performer/agent while or after doing any action then we ought to give moral judgment. Thus, actions which are considered moral should be judged on the basis of intention of the moral agent. So I support intentional theory of action which is becoming popular in the world of ethics.

References

1. Descriptive ethics deals with the foundational terms and terminology working behind moral and ethical actions, which are necessary to be involved in actions, otherwise moral and ethical actions would not be possible. It is a study of how people behave and how they think they should behave. It is grounded in observation of some sort like looking at people as they are, not necessarily as they should be. It is about what do people think is right?
Source: https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Descriptive_ethics
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