CHAPTER I

NATURE OF HUMAN ACTION
In the analysis of action, the central problem is whether or not it is possible to state the criteria by which a line could be drawn between actions and non-actions. An answer to this problem does not seem to be as straightforward as it may seem to one who holds that actions are what human beings do, for in philosophy, the problem of action is:

"essentially that of supplying the difference between mere bodily motions and those that represent acts.... That there is a difference is perfectly obvious, for the fact that a man makes a motion certainly entails that such a motion occurs, whereas the fact that such a motion occurs never entails that he makes it, or that it is his act."

Wittgenstein's question "what is left over if I subtract the fact that my arm goes up from the fact that I raise my arm?" has been answered in various ways by different philosophers. But the underlying assumption is most of these answers has been that the question demanded an explication of the relationship between bodily movements and actions. To support the point we shall consider the following remarks:

1 Taylor, Richard, Action and Purpose, pp. 88-89.

This way of raising the issue ignores the fact that we do not speak of something as an action without assuming an active subject as the source of what was done.
“It appears as though an action was a bodily movement of a special sort and that we need only to specify the distinctive features of bodily movements that count as actions in order to elucidate the concept of action. We are inclined, accordingly to look for certain psychological factors in order to mark off bodily movements that count as actions from all those that do not.”

“Our ordinary action-concepts generally pick out the behaviour they are used to describe not just by its form or overt characteristics or by what it actually brings about, but also by the form or goal-result which it was the agent’s purpose or intention to bring about.”

“An action... is any bit of behaviour whose complete description, that is, an account of what is occurring, requires mention, in addition to manifest behaviour, either of such things as the person’s motives, intentions, and thoughts of such things as moral, legal, or conventional standards or rules. Strictly speaking, an explicit mention of standards is redundant, since they essentially involve thoughts or purposes.”

A consideration of the above remarks indicates that Wittgenstein’s question was understood as search for a way to sort out bodily movements (or behaviour) which are actions from those which are not. Though there

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is a wide disagreement on the question of assimilation of the concept of action under the concept of movement (a sequence of events) or behaviour, a major theme of recent writing in analytical philosophy is that 'movements' can, under specific circumstances — usually where they can be linked with conventions or intentions, rules or motives etc. — count or be redescribed as actions, and that any action can be redescribed as a movement or a sequence of movements (except, perhaps, those actions which have the character of refraining). The implications of this are that there are two alternative ways of describing the same conduct, one in which an action is described as a mere happening and another in which it is seen as a doing. There are some philosophers who hold that there are sharp differences between these two modes of description.\

5Most of the philosophers known as 'post-Wittgensteinian', e.g. Kenny, Melden, Winch etc., hold that the language of action and reason — explanation and the language of movement and mechanical causal explanation are two different conceptual schemes which are non-reducible to, and are logically incompatible with each other. The post-Wittgensteinians are not alone in holding that there is an unbridgeable gap between the language of actions and language of events. But the reasons and arguments that are provided in defence of this new conceptual dualism, and the conclusions drawn from it, are not necessarily the same, e.g. Taylor and Von Wright would agree with Peters and Melden in appreciating the conceptual difference between action and movement but do not draw the same conclusions from these differences.
It may be argued that these two alternative modes of describing actions cannot be equally appropriate for the understanding of actions as the proper unit of reference for analysis of action has to be the person, the human agent, who is lost sight of in one of the modes of description in which action is seen as movement. The view which regards actions to be a subset of events or holds that there is no difference between action and behaviour, cannot be very illuminating, for any characterisation of action merely in terms of changes in the physical realm fails to draw a distinction between what human beings do, what happens to them and what they undergo. It may be pointed out that even if doing and undergoing were exhaustive categories, they are not mutually exclusive; since the person committing theft may also be feeling nervous or guilty; and the man being robbed may be simultaneously acting, i.e. resisting his assailant. Those who argue for the assimilation of the concept of action within the concept of event or concept of behaviour do not fully appreciate the reflexive character of the awareness that human beings have of their capacity to intervene (or not to) in the world with a view to bring about certain consequences.\(^6\)

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\(^6\)Events presumably are not linguistic entities; like trees and molecules, events can be talked about, referred to and described, but they are not themselves
It may be asked how is it possible to distinguish action from behaviour. Behaviour is a term which is used by psychologists for referring both to actions and to bodily movements of the agent that may or may not constitute acts. A man's head is nodding, he may be doing so to show his approval, or to give some other signal, or he may be doing. If we merely say that his behaviour is such that his head is nodding, we leave it open whether he is acting or there is no action on the part of the person under reference. Action cannot be identified with behaviour for behaviour-terms refer to the observable processes rather than what human beings do. We understand the concept of action as distinct from the concept of behaviour by referring to that which the agent tries to bring about rather than simply with reference to statements, sentences, descriptions or any other kind of linguistic units.... Events and relations between events could exist even if there were no humans, or language, to describe them; there still would be earthquakes, collision of particles, and expansions of metals caused by rising temperature.∗


Actions are unlike events in the sense that they are not language-independent. As language-users human beings are capable of self-reference, a capacity lacking in objects and organisms.

∗It is quite unclear, and has been from the early days of behaviourism, just what the term 'behaviour'
what is actually brought about or what goes on.

We do not come to understand the concept of action by first understanding a concept of (mere) behaviour and then adding to it concepts like intention and beliefs etc. It is not possible to make sense of action unless we understand the ways in which specific instances of action are rooted in the social practices and institutions which are constantly and continuously reinforced and restructured by the very people whose lives are pervaded by them. The fact that actions are performed against a background of social institutions and practices, beliefs and values of the agent; descriptions of actions in behavioural terms alone are quite inadequate. In case of understanding and description of actions, it is not only the behavioural responses that are attended to but also that these responses are interpreted within a system of rules of the form "x counts as y in the context C".

is intended to include. When one finds perception, thought, and feeling ranged under that heading, it is difficult to resist the conclusion that the label 'behaviour' is simply used to legitimise anything the psychologist wishes to study. However, whatever else it may include, the category of behaviour has from the beginning been designed to range over familiar examples of human action." (emphasis added).

These rules are applied not only by those who attempt to understand actions but also by those who perform these actions. What distinguishes actions from behaviour is that it is within the capacity of human agent to provide a description of what he is trying to bring about (or finally actually brings about) — a capacity that is found lacking in animals and natural objects.

Language plays a very crucial role with respect to human actions. Animal behaviour and physical events can be discussed, described and explained in language (through these phenomena, by themselves, are non-linguistic in character, i.e., language is not involved in their occurring etc.) but it is only human actions in which language is used by the agents involved in actions. Language is used not only in talking about actions, (as in case of physical events and animal behaviour) but for engaging in action itself — i.e., in planning an action, in

8 The difference here between a human being and an animal lies in the possibility of the human being expressing his intention and putting into words his intention to do so-and-so, for his own benefit or for the benefit of others. The difference is not merely that an animal in fact has no means of communicating, or of recording for itself, its intention, with the effect that no one can ever know what the intention was. It is a stronger difference, which is more correctly expressed as the senselessness of attributing intentions to an animal which has not the means to reflect upon, and to announce to itself or to others, its own future behaviour.”

Hampshire, Stuart, Thought and Action, p. 98.
In order to show that actions are different from events, it shall be argued that action is not identical with its corresponding event or sequence of events for the same action may involve different events and the same events may be involved in the performance of different actions. To deny that an action is identical with its corresponding event(s) does not imply that it is not identical with any event. But the thought of every action being identical with some event is counterintuitive for it is a category-mistake to think of events as being intentional or unintentional; a tendency in thinking which comes naturally as a consequence of the cartesian influence.\textsuperscript{9} It does not make sense to speak of an event as intentional or unintentional for unless an X was already characterised as an action it would be irrelevant to ask

\textsuperscript{9}"If one simply attends to the fact that many actions can be either intentional or unintentional, it can be quite natural to think that events which are characterisable as intentional or unintentional are a certain natural class, 'intentional' being an extra property which a philosopher must try to describe."

Anscombe, G. E. M., \textit{Intention}, p. 84, 47.

This approach falls into the trap of constructing additive theories of action, according to which actions are bodily movements plus some psychological factor. Such additive theories can be found scattered in the writings of many advocates of a phenomenological psychology or phenomenological sociology.
whether A is intentional or unintentional. It is wrong to think that events are characterised as actions by virtue of their possession of an extra property of being intentional or unintentional. Incidentally, this also shows that 'intentional' and 'unintentional' are mutually exclusive categories but are not exhaustive of behaviour (for behaviour includes animal behaviour as well).

Consider the following cases:

(a) A gives 0 to B.
(b) A returns 0 to B.
(c) A lends 0 to B.
(d) A donates 0 to B.
(e) A deposits 0 with B.

Now, though the meaning of giving, returning, lending, donating, and depositing are different from one another, all these actions seem to involve the same (observable) event i.e. the object 0 passes from A to B. Nevertheless, whether passing of 0 from A to B is a case of giving or depositing (or any of the others mentioned above) is determined by the context of the situation. As far as

10 One very fundamental action is that of giving. To give is not just to hand over, but to authorize the recipient to retain and use, and if he so chooses to dispose of, what is given, and to extinguish one's own rights to do likewise. Giving cannot be understood except with regard to these rights and powers — else how should
physical facts are concerned, passing of 0 from A to B will be sufficient to make any of the above statements (a to e) true. But these physical facts are only a necessary and not sufficient condition for the truth of any of these statements. The difference between depositing and simply handing over some money has in part to do with what one means or intends to be doing — and what one can mean or intend (by doing what one does in the way one does it) is related to the particular socio-cultural context in which the action is performed.

In our attempts to distinguish actions from events, it was argued that the same sequence of (physical) events may characterise different actions. Now we shall show that different sequences of events may characterise the same action:

(a) x may pay back a loan by signing a cheque and handing it over.
(b) x may pay back a loan by handing over currency notes.
(c) x may pay back a loan by working for the creditor.

we distinguish giving from lending? — and these rights and powers only make sense in a social setting and cannot be explicated in purely physical terms."

The above three cases show that depending upon the context X may pay back a loan in different ways. Therefore, it may be said that the same action can be characterised by different events; and (in different contexts) the same events may characterise different actions. Thus we may say that the concept of action cannot be assimilated with in the concept of event.

Actions and events need to be distinguished for a failure to take into account the context of action (constituted by institutions, rules, beliefs and intentions) is likely to result in a misinterpretation or misunderstanding of the action. D.I. Lloyd has provided

11 One can describe "an action simply in terms of physical behaviour in a given circumstance, and give a similar description of the actions which commonly accompany its non-performance in the circumstance. Here neither teleological nor intentionalistic elements are invoked, and normative expressions are not used. Such a description would, in most instances of distinctively human action, display a complete lack of understanding of the action.... But more complex intentionalistic descriptions of action will invoke a welter of factors pertaining to the agent's description of his action and goals.... will refer to features such as the agent's beliefs, values and desires which play a role in his practical reasoning.... Here the complex descriptions of action will employ a host of normative words which characterise the social practices which normally inform the agent's understanding of the social context of his actions."

Hacker, P.M.S., "Hart's Philosophy of Law", in ibid., p. 13.
a rather amusing account of what a tribal anthropologist
might see if he visited the Brighton beach in the middle
of the summer. The anthropologist's account may read
somewhat like the following—

"The people of England are religious and devout
worshippers of the sun. Each year they leave
their homes and travel to the coast for the
purpose of worship and often take up small
accommodation in tents or in what they call
caravans, or live with other people during
their short stay. Each day they begin worship
by prostrating themselves on the shingle in
the heat of the sun, which is often so hot that
they wear shields over their eyes. Their bodies
become burnt and some become ill, but few
are deterred by this, such is their devotion.
At various times people will baptise themselves
in the waters, calling to each other and
waving their arms in ecstasy. At midday,
families group together when a symbolic
ceremony takes place. Three-cornered pieces
of bread, known to the natives as 'sandwiches',
are passed around and eaten. During the
afternoon they throw symbolic, large, inflated,
multi-coloured orbs to one another, illustrating
the dominance of the sun in their lives.
Throughout all this, the elders lie motionless
in their canvas seats with their faces covered,
in deep and prolonged meditation. These
observances may continue for a family for up to
fourteen days, when they return to their work
until the following year."12

Lloyd says that such an interpretation of what
the people on Brighton beach were doing seems quite

12D.I. Lloyd, "Nature of Man", in Philosophy
and the Teacher, edited by D.I. Lloyd, p. 36.
consistent with their physical movements. That is to say, that if these people really were sun-worshipping instead of sun-bathing and enjoying themselves, their bodily movements may be no different. The difference lies in how they saw their movements. What the anthropologist did not do was to see things the way the natives did, to entertain the ideas they had and to understand the significance that these things had for them. If we wish to understand what a person is doing we have to understand his beliefs and intentions and the significance that he confers on his actions.

There are some considerations, however, which make one doubt the hard and fast distinction between actions and events which has been attempted above. It was pointed out that the same bodily movements may be involved in performing quite different sort of actions and the same action can be performed through quite different bodily movements. It may be objected whether this is necessarily so.

Let us consider the examples that were stated on page 35. The same movements (involved in the passing of object 0 from A to B) may be meant for signing a cheque, giving an autograph or signing a contract; and the act of clearing a debt may be performed through the bodily movements of signing a cheque, handing over cash etc. It is, perhaps, arguable that, if we knew more of the context, this may not be so
in either case. The bodily movements involved in writing one's name are the same in all three of the above cases; but in each case there is more to the bodily movements than is apparent. Different bodily movements, besides signing one's name are involved in each case: for example, opening one's cheque-book, finding a blank page in an autograph-book, reading the text of the document, respectively. It would be odd if, after having signed a cheque, one tore it and handed over one's cheque-book to the person for whom the cheque was meant as it would if, having signed an autograph-book, one tore that page and handed it over and kept the autograph-book, and it would be rather bizarre if one carefully studied all the printed material in one's cheque-book or in an autograph book before signing, as one usually does in case of an authorisation before putting one's signatures on it. It is being argued that if more was known about bodily movements in each case, the possibility of confusing one activity with another would disappear. Against this argument, it could be pointed out that even if enough has been told to avoid the possibility of a sequence of bodily movements to be understood or interpreted in alternative ways; there may still be questions which require reference to beliefs, conventions and intentions etc. For instance, when we are in no doubt that a
particular description of bodily movements refers only to signing a contract and not an autograph-book, we may still need to tell more to indicate whether this is the case of signing a genuine contract or a case of fraud. And similarly when we have specified the intention to such a degree that a given case of paying a debt is quite clearly a case of paying in cash, we may have to tell more whether it was simply a case of paying a debt or also of trying to make a good impression. Although for all such qualifications, it is conceivable that a point can always be reached where the bodily movement description is so graphic that it will fit only one action, or the intention description so specific that it will fit only one set of bodily movements. If this is conceivable then the claim that all action-concepts cannot be assimilated within the concept of event will seem to collapse. Nevertheless, it may still be claimed that, although when we tell the whole story and only one account of bodily movement fits any given action and vice versa, the two descriptions of what is going on are conceptually distinct. Even if this claim is made, the question still remains as to what the basis for this claim might be.

The controversy mentioned above forms a very small part of the debate whether human actions can be regarded as identical with physical events or not.
It is not difficult to recognise that in the above presentations, it is the Cartesian dualistic conception of human beings which is the moot point. The problem is somehow to dissolve or transcend the Cartesian dualism adherence to which encourages to view actions in two distinct ways: as sequences of bodily movements and as intentional actions. Does my protest come off at the same point in time and space as the corresponding physical movement of my arm? Are there really two different realms; one in which things happen and another in which things are done. But the question is what is the relation between them? Or are these only two different ways of looking at the same phenomenon? It would be helpful to refer to Wittgenstein's at this stage.

Wittgenstein wrote of the two conceptual schemes, that of action and that of events, in the following ways:

Examine these two language games:

(a) Someone gives someone else the order to make particular movements with his arm, or to assume particular bodily positions (gymnastic instructor and pupil). And here is a variation of this language game: the pupil gives himself orders and then carries them out.

(b) Somebody observes certain regular processes -- for example the reactions of different metals to acids -- and thereupon makes predictions about the reactions that will occur in certain particular cases.
There is an evident kinship between these two language games and also a fundamental difference. In both one might call the spoken words "predictions". But compare the training which leads to the first technique with the training for the second one.  

It does seem odd to speak of orders as predictions, and Wittgenstein wants to emphasise the 'fundamental difference' in the two language games by showing this oddity. Another point that he is making is that we have been trained to play two different language games --- one about human beings and another about organisms and objects. The difference in these two conceptual schemes must be rooted in what Wittgenstein calls "tacit presuppositions of a language." We do not issue orders

\[13\text{Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, p. 162, \S 630.} \]

\[14\text{We cannot conceive a language without psychological terms or expressions --- there would be no way to translate it into our own language. Of course there could be a part of fragment of a language that lacked psychological expressions, provided there was a (complete) language in which to incorporate or explain the fragment. It makes sense to speak of irreducible or semi-autonomous systems of concepts, or schemes of description and explanation, but only as these are less than the whole of what is available for understanding and communication.} \]

or make requests to plants, stones or trees for we do not presuppose that they are capable of responding to them; as we do in case of human beings. We find it meaningless to explain an event such as 'explosion of a bomb' by pointing out that it had chosen to explode. Nevertheless, we do not find it meaningless to explain an action such as raising my hand because I chose to protest. Even in our own case, (i.e., about human beings) we make a distinction between delivering a lecture and growing old. We may choose to deliver or not to deliver a lecture but cannot in any sense be said to be choosing to grow old. Whenever we say that someone chose to do something, we mean that his act was intentional. Wittgenstein spoke of intention as "lying in" the action. He held that we express our intentions to be understood better by our peers:

"Why do I want to tell him about an intention too, as well as telling him what I did? — Not because the intention was also something which was going on at that time. But because I want to tell him something about myself, which goes beyond what happened at that time."\(^{15}\)

Intention takes us "beyond what happened at that time" in two ways:

\(^{15}\)Wittgenstein, op. cit., p. 167.
Imagine that I raise my arm. I may do so simply for the sake of raising it. But I could raise my arm for greeting a friend or calling a taxi or drawing someone's attention. In each of these cases when, you know about my intention, you know more about the context of my raising my arm, and this helps you understand more fully what I am doing. Consequently, you also understand me more fully. The important point to grasp is that knowing an intention not only takes us, in the above sense, 'beyond what happened at that time', but also helps us to understand even the unintentional actions of an agent. The fact that an action is unintentional, does not mean that it can be understood simply in terms of physical

16 Melden, Free Action, p. 102.

Similar views have been expressed by Wittgenstein and Kenneth Burke. Wittgenstein says, "An intention is embedded in its situation, in human customs and institutions." (op. cit., p. 108). It is for this reason that in order to understand action we have to understand its surrounding social context within which the action is performed. Knowing someone's intentions enables us to know more about the person for "action is not merely a means of doing but a way of being" (Burke).
movements. It is futile to attempt to characterize an action without any reference to the intentions or beliefs of the agent. Unintentional actions are recognized as actions for these are usually done either in attempting to do something intentionally which fails to come about or involves some consequences which were not intended by the agent. 17

An intention is no more 'behind' an action than the meaning of a word is 'behind' the letters of which it is composed and it is no more an 'invisible mental cause' of an act than is a melody the invisible mental cause of the pattern of notes that we hear at a concert. 'Intention', 'meaning' and 'purpose' do not refer to any occult processes that are hidden from the view of all except the person who is experiencing them. Perhaps the most damaging criticism of the view that intentions are private mental events is the fact that in stating our own intentions or in ascribing intentions to others we do not look for any special private mental events as our evidence.

17 "The concept of an intentional action is fundamental to the more general concept of action. It seems that we can bring out what is distinctive about actions, in contrast with other sort of events, only by first bringing out the distinctive contours of intentional actions and then viewing non-intentional actions as deviations from the central case in various directions."

Alston, William P., op. cit., p. 74.
for the claims that we make. We make sense of a person's actions not by referring to some private mental events but by placing his actions into a purposeful pattern which reveals how the act was warranted. In doing this we take into account the conditions and social circumstances of the actor on the one hand and his beliefs and wants on the other.

To sum up, we have attempted to show that the concept of 'action' is distinct from the concepts of 'behaviour' and 'event' as we ordinarily use them whereas action-concepts involve a necessary reference to the social conventions and rules and the agent's intentions and beliefs; the language of events and behaviour is exempt from such requirements. It has been maintained that the knowledge of the rules that the agent applies in planning, describing and appraising his actions is a prerequisite for an adequate understanding of the action. We shall explore the role of rules in action in the next chapter.