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# **INCIPIENT ACTION**

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## ***ABSTRACT***

We conceive of thinking as a process which occurs inside our heads and we assume some entity or organ in there responsible for this process — hence, ‘mind’. Thinking is a ‘mental’ process. Nowadays, most philosophers believe that the mental is explicable in terms of the neurophysiological, and that the entity or organ responsible for thinking is the brain. However, neither mind nor brain is responsible for thinking. No entity or organ is responsible for it. This is because thinking is not a ‘process’ in the first place. Thinking is an action we perform. Nor is there any specific body part associated with the act of thinking, as lungs are with breathing, say, or lips with smiling. Thinking is no more associated with a particular part of the body than mimicking or playing make-believe is, or being careful.

Part One argues that our conception of thinking as an inner process — operations in or of the mind (or brain) — stems from our habituation to certain figures of speech. Endemic in the colloquial vocabulary for talking about thinking is a particularly deceptive type of figurative expression, in which metaphor is used in conjunction with a nominalised verb. We unwittingly take these expressions too literally.

Part Two reviews action-based theories of thinking by Ryle, Vygotsky and Hampshire. Although none manages entirely without ‘mind’, all are precursors of the present work.

Part Three identifies the core action in thinking as ‘incepting’. Incepting is ‘making as if to’ do something. One readies oneself to perform a given action, and maintains this readiness, while stopping oneself overtly commencing the action. The incepting of an action can be deliberately ostentatious. However, the ‘thinking’ kind of incepting is usually an extremely subtle and covert performance. Covert incepting is a constantly useful skill. With adult help, we begin in infancy to learn how to covertly incept actions. After years of practice we get very good at it. It becomes second nature to us. Interestingly, the activity incepted during thinking is always social — and based on concerted, shared activity. Most often, thinking is incepted conversation.

## **PREFACE**

This thesis equates the various ‘mental phenomena’ with incipient action of one kind or another. And the bringing about of incipient action, the ‘incepting’ of the actions in question, is identified as itself a species of action. This idea is a contribution to a larger project, namely, to establish actions as a legitimate philosophical ‘given’. The ‘actions as given’ claim is that the concept of something one *does* is self-sufficient and *sui generis*, and does not need cashing out in non-actional terms.. It is philosophical hard currency.

It is conventional wisdom that the concept of an action includes and presupposes concepts of mental phenomena — beliefs, desires, decisions, intentions, volitions — and that these are concepts of a fundamentally non-actional kind. If the present thesis is accepted, the latter assumption will be rebutted. ‘Mental’ concepts will be seen as actional concepts. And it will be apparent that in specifying the thinkings that lead to and/or accompany an action one is not specifying an action plus some other kind of phenomenon but, rather, specifying a more complex action, or specifying an action plus some ancillary actions. Consequently the ‘actions as given’ claim would not be vulnerable to the fact that actions involve mentation.

It is also often assumed that, in order to specify any but the simplest of actions, one must refer to the agent’s perceptions of things in the world — things to which the action is a response, or things which are necessary accessories (patient, venue, instrument, product, etc.) of the action. And it is assumed that these perceivings are impersonal events rather than actions. However, if it can be shown that perceivings are also actions of a kind, then the larger ‘actions as given’ thesis stays intact here too. Most, or even all, actions do have an essential perceptual component, but in my view this perceptual component is not a departure into anything non-actional, such as an impersonal event. The perceiving is part of the action, as the thinking is. My attempt in this thesis (in Appendix Two and elsewhere) to show that perceiving is a species of action is probably too brief to convince. However, indicating how the point could be argued is worth doing. I also suggest the possibility of defining the ‘thinghood’ of things in the world in terms of the sharing or ‘concerting’ of given perceptual behaviour.

Finally, it is widely assumed that if actions are real things in the world, then they must, like everything else in the world, be in-principle specifiable in objective scientific terms. In the case of actions, the scientific description would be primarily a description of

physiological events — although the description might well have to encompass a complex causal interaction (including feedback) between external physical objects and physiological events. And the physiological events might be thought to include perceptual and mental events as well as muscular ones.

From the other side, proponents of the ‘actions as given’ view could agree that, if actions are real things in the world, they must be scientifically describable. Only, while continuing to assert the reality of actions, they could deny that actions are ‘things in the world’ in the required sense. And they could deny that actions are explicable in physiological terms. I argue for both of these denials, albeit again too briefly, in the thesis. The question of the possibility of a scientific analysis of actions is as large and controversy-fraught as the above questions about action’s relation to mentation and to perceptions of things in the world. To show that actions are both real and *sui generis*, all three would need to be argued at length. I argue only one of them with anything like the required thoroughness.

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