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# CLICK:

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Exploring Social Actions in the 21st century



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## Abstract

The phenomenon of social media has become part of our everyday interaction with others. At the heart of this exploration lies the idea that 'clicks' on social media are meaningful ways of communicating with others and doing things together. Approaching them in their role as a symbol of 21<sup>st</sup> century everyday social action means considering how 'clicks' are understood as meaningful units of behaviour in context.

Whereas the standard philosophy of action tempts one to think of a 'click' as a highly individualistic action, I contend that even the simplest 'click' retains important senses of sociality. Philosophical theories struggle to explain these nuances of social action and ignore how sociality weaves through conceptions of actions, offline and online. I criticise views in philosophy that are enchanted by a solipsistic paradigm of action. I call this point of view atomism. The atomistic paradigm has been uncritically employed in accounts of collective action, which proposes a particular way of making the distinction between actions performed individually, and action that is performed socially or collectively. The former is traditionally taken to be preliminary to the latter. This has led to a misguided understanding of the connection between sociality and action, resulting in unnecessary metaphysical tangles.

As an alternative, I propose a view that illuminates how *actions* are social regardless as to whether they are performed with others or alone. An action's sociality can but is not necessarily constituted by the number of agents involved at any given time. Sociality rather, interweaves conceptions of action on a conceptual level. To highlight the nuances of the interplay of sociality and action, I suggest social holism as a perspicuous perspective from which actions are conceptualised in the light of an inquisitive aim. It explores how actions are ordinarily understood in relation to what they mean. What the action *is* thus, depends on the context and is informed by senses of sociality.

This *ordinary action philosophy* investigates the phenomenological engagement of ordinary agents with actions and outlines the social resources that are active in understanding each other's actions. Where atomism might tempt one to think of a 'click' on social media as an individual action in isolation, I show that understanding 'clicks' as actions is already social, both on empirical and conceptual levels. Reaching from being accustomed to a world in which this form of communication is conceivably doable to the ways in which the opportunity to do so is a socially enabled achievement.

The argument will proceed in three steps: first, drafting a holistic perspective on how agents come to *see* action as meaningful wholes. Second, showing how perceptual holism is informed by senses of sociality: paradigmatically, one encounters actions in a variety of social ways. These

## *Abstract*

include the understanding of doable actions that are ordinary and repeatable; the sense in which actions are interactive and enabled by others. With these senses in place, and by drawing on a range of methodological allies outside the philosophy of action, an exploration of the acts of communication performed on social media is presented as demonstrating how actions are understood, described and rendered intelligible. And third, applying the senses of sociality to everyday examples of social media action. Starting from social holism avoids caveats of atomism; paradigms of *social action* collapses the artificial distinction that atomists make between individual and collective action. Embracing this alternative starting point lays the groundwork for conducting further research in the area, particularly internet ethics and considerations of online action.

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## List of Abbreviations

CA	Conversation analysis
MI	Methodological Individualism
SNS	Social networking site

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## Preface

We are living in a world of communication technologies. Clicks have become a symbol of 21<sup>st</sup> century action and interaction. Almost every day a new communication solution is invented, and the worldwide number of internet users increases by the minute. Doing things together with people is increasingly done in ways that no longer reside in spatio-temporal proximity to one another. Whilst the reasons for wanting and needing connections presumably have not changed, the ways in which we connect have. As a philosopher, I understand my role to be not only a thinker, but also a careful observer of the unique historical moment in time. I sense a shift has occurred, from a generation of people who took a conscious decision about whether to ‘be’ on Facebook or Instagram or not; towards a generation in which ‘being online’ on social media has become the most mundane thing to do. This thesis reflects on this shift and is aimed at laymen and philosophers alike. Since the early 2000s, I have been fascinated with how ‘clicks’ online have become social actions, i.e. socially meaningful things we do.

This has inspired me to ask: how have online actions become so meaningful – many of them at just *one* ‘click’? How have we moved from clicking *with* someone, to clicking *on* someone? How does what one intends to do in ‘clicking’ coincide with what one is understood to have done? And what might one have done inadvertently? These and other questions outline the conceptual space into which this thesis ventures. It contains a theoretical and empirical exploration of the ways in which human agents understand the nuances of each other’s actions or activities, albeit some of them residing in the same mechanical ‘click’. The philosophical labour to be done in this thesis, is to convince the reader that ordinary action, as for example, ‘clicks’ on social media, is social in a number of senses which are widely ignored within the discussion of social ontology in philosophy. One reason for which clicks are ordinary and social actions is that they are communicative actions that enable, against the background of a social networking site, a sense of togetherness and community. And at the heart of the idea of communication lies a connection that holds between two agents in which understanding what a ‘click’ by an Other meant is paramount.

Hoping to draw onto philosophical considerations of acting socially, Chapters 1 (*Introduction*) and 2 (*Atomism – one ring to rule them all!?*) will critically engage with accounts in the philosophy of collective, joint, shared or plural<sup>1</sup> action, and by extension individual action. I show, however,

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<sup>1</sup> I use the different labels in the philosophy widely interchangeably throughout the thesis, as they do not affect my critique. I have a tendency, however, to group them as theories of collective action, because it insinuates how the philosophical debate centres on instances in which multiple agents act together as instances of social action.

that many of these theories bypass the fundamental importance of sociality to the investigation of action. Chapter 2 in particular demonstrates how the so-called *big four* (Chant, et al., 2014) theories of collective action, authored by Searle (1995), Gilbert (1992), Tuomela (2013) and Bratman (2014), explain how the *modes, content or subject of action* (Schweikard & Schmid, 2013) varies from acting individually to acting collectively. They all take the former to *not* be social action and to be preliminary to the latter. I demonstrate how most of these theories thus, operate with a paradigm of action that is artificially isolated and basic. I call this view atomism. Following the trail to where this paradigm resides, takes the investigation back to the very beginnings of the philosophy of action, in which a passage of –perhaps surprisingly–Wittgenstein (1953/2009, § 621), introduces an arm-raiser into the debate about action. Nested assumptions of an atomistic paradigm of action, come in full view as they bleed into the treatment of social phenomena, producing theories that proceed in small mechanistic steps. All of which run into a cohort of metaphysical tangles and create an artificial distinction between individual and social or collective action. Looking at the things we do on social media from the point of atomism, will leave one in the dark about what an action meant, for it will tempt one to think of a ‘click’ not in its social relevance as an act of communication, but as an isolated instance of moving one’s finger.<sup>2</sup>

This thesis, however, takes ‘clicks’ as online actions that lend impetus to a renewed inquiry of the assumptions made in the philosophy of action. It suggests an alternative to prevalent views that presume a possibility for enquiring the concept of action in isolation from context, situational and social. This alternative starting point is social holism, illuminating the nuances of what will be introduced as paradigm cases of everyday *social action*. The argument will proceed in three steps: first, drafting a holistic perspective on how agents come to *see* action akin to a Gestalt that one is struck by in chapter 3 (*Actions as Gestalt*). Second, showing how perceptual holism is not only informed by senses of sociality, but also how a certain understanding of a particular action is required to examine it in chapter 4 (*Senses of sociality*). The senses illustrate how agents paradigmatically perform and encounter actions as socially relevant in a variety of ways. They include the sense of an encultured understanding of actions that are ordinary and repeatable, or as I call them *doables* (*Chapter 4.1*). Further, they comprise the way in which actions can sometimes directly be comprehended as *interactive* (*Chapter 4.2*) activities, or in which their conceptualisation comprises a sense of *social enabling* (*Chapter 4.3*) by others. Their sociality can be, but is not necessarily, tied to the number of agents involved at any given time, but rather interweaves conceptions of action on conceptual and empirical levels. Chapter 4 will conclude that

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<sup>2</sup> Philosophers of action thus, are interested in the offline occurrences of online action, although some have argued that there is no longer such a distinction (Floridi, 2014).

observing, understanding and describing an action in a sense of sociality is an achievement that is neither random nor atomistic. With this perspective in place, and by drawing on a range of methodological allies outside the philosophy of action, an exploration of the actions performed on social media becomes a matter of setting of a perspicuous perspective on actions as they are understood, described and rendered intelligible. And third, positively demonstrating how the senses of sociality come to bear in the understanding of acts of communication on social media as an empirical study in chapter 5 (*'Posting', 'Liking', 'Tagging' – an exploration*). Inspired by the many things a 'click' can be, chapter 5 explores actions on social media to make visible when a 'click' might be comprehended as, for instance, a 'liking something', a 'liking who has posted' or 'liking what was posted' and what is needed to do so. And what is needed, is a holistic exploration of meaningful units of behaviour, i.e. actions in their context, situational as well as social. And further, a purpose for which one is asking the question.

Chapter 5 then, although different in approach and style, demonstrates the many and nuanced aspects that can be highlighted in the investigations of action. Social holism is not a theory, but a background assumption for the enquiry of how agents make sense of each other in and through action. It is thus that I conceive of what I am doing as *ordinary action philosophy*, for I conceptualise the study of actions as possible and beneficially performed from a mundane perspective that engages with how actions strike us in their meaningfulness, whilst staying neutral on their metaphysics. This is contrary to theories in the philosophy of action, whose metaphysically motivated paradigms and constraints cause them to lose touch with the social phenomena they attempt to explain.

Consequently, this thesis does *not* offer a theory of social action. It is rather an exploration of how actions and their understanding could be examined and to which end. It purposively rejects the philosophical trajectory of advising one theory that explains all possible actions. It is hence mainly concerned with proposing an alternative starting point for the exploration of actions and demonstrating the opportunities by examining actions as they occur on social media. From this starting point, I envision caveats that arise due to a theory being under the grip of atomism to dissolve, most prevalently the distinction between individual and collective action as assumed in standard accounts of action, as well as metaphysical tangles (because they simply do not ascend anymore). All of this, I do – strictly speaking - by showing how actions, their understanding and mode of presentation<sup>3</sup> are embedded in sociality, even when they might seem basic or are performed in solitude.

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<sup>3</sup> I follow Sandis (2012, pp. 11,170) introduction of Husserl's mode of presentation here, as an alternative to the narrow notion of linguistic descriptions of action in the philosophy of action.

## *Preface*

The last chapter returns to the questions I opened with regarding 'clicks' and perspectives on their meaningfulness, as well as the wider implications for the inquiry of actions. 'Clicks' as actions are conceived as meaningful and ordinary things to do. What it *is* they are understood to be, depends on a purposive and contextual perspective taken on them, both informed by senses of sociality. In strengthening an understanding of actions as pertaining to holistic and meaningful qualities, I have flipped the starting point for investigating actions, thus pointing out the weaknesses of looking at actions atomistically. I conclude with a reflection on the opportunities this switch could bear for the philosophy of action and its importance for other philosophical disciplines such as (internet) ethics, as well as related disciplines in the social sciences.

## Chapter 1 ◦ Introduction

What then, the reader might ask, is my strategy for exploring actions sensitive to how they recognised and understood in everyday life? I will start by giving a texture to the views I critique. As an alternative, I will introduce a perspective on social actions which I take to help exploring acts of communication on social media, and their understanding. My thesis is that a perspective embracing the ordinary ways in which we come to *see* actions as meaningful units of behaviour (Ch. 3), in and through senses of sociality (Ch. 4), avoids the problems and metaphysical tangles arising within traditional approaches to collective actions in philosophy. I will introduce social holism, paired with the acknowledgment of one's inquisitive aim for the investigation of actions, as a perspicuous starting point for exploring communication on social media. Social holism is thus *one* way of highlighting a variety of aspects to social action that can be brought to attention, observation and study. I explore actions empirically, based on what we know about the things we can do on social media in combination with how they come to mean something to us. The idea of actions as a currency of meaningful units of conduct will permeate this thesis. Rather than merely assuming actions in their relationship to meaningfulness, I shall explore how and why actions come to mean something and which role sociality plays in this.

In his *A Plea for Excuses*, Austin (1956) beautifully identifies meaning and understanding in action as a "good site for field work in philosophy" (p. 183), as well as related disciplines, to produce "methods to bring phenomena under observation and study" (p.186). I take online actions in general and acts of communication on social media in particular, to be a field worth exploring. Although I will not in this thesis concern myself with the relationship between language and action explicitly, I shall propose an *ordinary action philosophy* that acknowledges the internal relationship between action and language. Naturally, I do not mean to insinuate that my work in any way equals Austin's genius, but rather that I take his and other ordinary language philosophers' works as an inspiration for choosing an alternative starting point to the study of action. This approach allows for highlighting aspects of social action that are called to one's interest via a particular angle one takes on them. An angle might simply be a sense in which one grasps the action, as will be examined in chapter 4. Although the philosophy of action is the methodological starting point for the exploration, I will distance myself from a mindset that appears to have guided many accounts written on the problem of action since Wittgenstein (1953/2009, § 621) seminally introduced the arm raiser as one of the most notoriously discussed paradigms.<sup>4</sup> The paramount temptation of this

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<sup>4</sup> Alas, he might not have known what he has done, and need not have meant what he was taken to say. I will discuss the relevant passage in his *Philosophical Investigations* in chapter 2 of this thesis.

mindset is that the phenomenon of action can and ought to be understood as resting on a concept that can be investigated in isolation from context, situational and social one.

This isolationism assumes that it is possible (if not necessary) and fruitful to seek a pure concept of action, i.e. an action *per se*.<sup>5</sup> In the search for (ontological) properties and regularities to actions, the question ‘What is action?’ has been answered from isolationism, producing a variety of connected views that I will critique.<sup>6</sup> The most important of these I will call atomism, a view that I take many theories in the philosophy of action to implicitly embrace. One of the caveats of atomism, to anticipate, I take to be that it restricts the exploration, based on a misguided understanding of the connection between sociality and action, to a mechanical and purely metaphysical analysis of action. It investigates the necessary and sufficient conditions for something to count as an action, in their qualities as intentional action. Atomism, as I will show, has led to a paradigm of action which is assumed to be isolated and basic. I will discuss a variety of philosophical accounts on action and collective action and show how they almost unanimously carry attitudes which create a distance to how we ordinarily experience actions, artificially moving the study of actions into the unknown. Akin to a sterile treatment of an atom in a lab, actions here are being treated as if their nature lies beyond what we know and perceive every day, accessible only through analytic treatment. Residing in the conceptual considerations of primarily individual actions, explaining actions performed by more than one agent, has created metaphysical tangles and extraordinarily complex theories in which the phenomenological ease with which we ordinarily do things together deteriorates. Questions about how actions in their social relevance come to mean something are side-lined in a run for capturing the conceptual essences of how agents act and how sociality arises when many agents come together in action. I will argue on the contrary, that senses of sociality are present in most instances of seeing, recognising and understanding actions that are ignored by atomistic theories.

Atomism can thus be understood as the product of answering the question ‘What is action?’ in isolation from context, social and situational one, inciting a variety of subsequent views. I discuss explicitly collective atomism as an upshot of atomism in the following chapter as it is the centrepiece of my critique. In what follows I highlight the concepts of individualism and individual holism in their relationship to atomism. All of these are categories, I have divided the philosophical

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<sup>5</sup> In his introduction to *Action in Context* Leist (2007, p. 34, Leist’s emphasise) raises a version of the assumption in his discussion of practical reason: “With the obvious wealth of different interests in actions, the assumption that all actions are first and foremost actions *per se*, independently of particular interests in them, becomes obsolete. Far more, actions *are dependent* upon interest and context, and this makes them differ.”

<sup>6</sup> For overviews on how the investigation of action is traditionally framed see Wilson & Shpall (2012), Lowe’s (2010), or Frankfurt (1978) to name but a few.

landscape into. They are not an exhaustive representation and there might, of course, be others. Although each of the views discussed may comprise a different focus – may that be the ontological nature of actions as events, their relation or identity to bodily movements, mental properties involved, the ways in which they are rationalised – their investigations share the assumption that understanding actions in isolation from context is possible and that explaining individual action is a necessary first step. The introduced perspective is not meant to be an exact representation of the chronological or topical relationship between the views but rather invites the reader to a perspective in which the limitations of atomism and other answers enchanted by isolationism are illuminated. It is a way of presenting that, no matter how different and nuanced the aspectual interests of theories introduced may seem – they originate in a similar attitude towards how the question should be answered philosophically. All investigations create a stir, adding or focussing on a different constituent of action, but the sense of their answers reside in the same pool of assumptions. The pool as such of course is motivated by the wider understanding of the goals of analytic philosophy, that in its endeavour tries to de-contextualise human phenomena clearing the view on all the variables involved in action.<sup>7</sup>

In further detail, chapter 2 (*Atomism - One Ring to rule them all?*) explores the current philosophical state-of-the-art approaches to collective action.<sup>8</sup> Using theories of collective action as evidence (Bratman, 2014; Gilbert, 1992; Searle, 1995; Tuomela, 2013), I will demonstrate the ways in which philosophers of action embrace atomistic assumptions. Because atomism is my term used for categorisation, and thus not a term used within the philosophy of action, I consider it my task to make atomistic assumptions entailed explicit.<sup>9</sup> Highlighting the atomistic assumptions shimmering through most approaches to collective action will be the paramount effort in chapter 2. It reminds the reader that atomists simply assume the paradigm of action to be *isolated, basic* and akin to a concrete entity. The attributes of being basic and isolated here denote how the paradigmatic action is taken to be *one* action reduced to what is conceived of as the most basic constituents (often a ‘basic’ bodily movement), performed by this one individual agent in isolation (from sociality). Further, the concept of action is understood to be abstract, therefore admitting

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<sup>7</sup> This chapter is less to be understood as a criticism of analytic philosophy, but rather a consideration of how much the views on action are affected by the premises they presuppose. I wish to creatively engage with re-considering whether actions are the right phenomenon to be philosophically approached in this way.

<sup>8</sup> I should anticipate that when I write about collective action, I refer to philosophical accounts of actions performed by more than one agent. Although views are divided into theories and models of joint action, plural agency, social ontology, collective action and collective intentionality. I do not wish to conflate them, but the details of their theories do not affect my argument. In chapter 2, I will mention the differences of the accounts in so far as I need to, to lay bare the atomism I am suspicious of.

<sup>9</sup> Other versions of the critique of atomism are contained in Leist (2007, pp. 3-5) and Thompson (Thompson, 2008) to propose idiosyncratic views against the standard view of action.

of investigation of its necessary and sufficient conditions without requiring reference to situational or social context. The presuppositions of atomism are bootstrapped in traditional philosophical thoughts on actions as performed individually.

The chapter will further highlight how accounts of collective action residing in atomism are at risk of conflating the many ways in which agents can act together into treating them as more or less the same thing (Sandis, 2016). Accounts are grouped under the umbrella term of social ontology or collective intentionality (Schweikard & Schmid, 2013), whilst approaches vary between the use of *shared*, *collective* or *joint* action demarcating the particular subject of study. I will further draw attention to the difference between theories of collective action and theories of sociality.<sup>10</sup> Whichever descriptor used for the models of collective action, I shall show how atomism lingers, to the result that many theories evoke a somewhat *collective atomism*, in which atomistic assumptions are maintained and extended to actions performed with others. Figuratively speaking, action atoms are quite literally adjoined into action aggregates. Theories suggest explaining modest or reduced versions of collective action as a preliminary step to expand from there to more complex social phenomena. This conviction that the study of actions moves from individual to social or collective, and from modestly collective towards fully-blown social<sup>11</sup>, I take to invoke the ethos of atomism. Much of the following chapter is thus concerned with unpacking the question ‘Why have philosophical theories of action almost unanimously started the investigation of action from the individual to the social or from the atom to the aggregate?’.

There is a further conceptual nuance to be drawn and that is the relationship between atomism and individualism. In the debate on collective action, most theorists overtly ascribe to *individualism*, i.e. *the view that ultimately all collective intentionality is to be found in individual’s heads, inducing the actions performed to be grouped or joint together*. One of the reasons for doing so is that the considered alternative, i.e. accepting a thesis that alludes to a group mind as a supra-entity, is metaphysically untenable.<sup>12</sup> Views suggesting the latter, have often been identified as holistic approaches verging on esotericism, for their belief that the whole is somewhat more than its parts.<sup>13</sup> The theories of collective action I will introduce ascribe to individualism. I take

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<sup>10</sup> See for instance Beth Preston’s (2016) argument against the conflation of sociality and acts of collaboration. She suggests understanding sociality and collaboration as the two ends of a spectrum along which collaboration and social activity meander.

<sup>11</sup> The excerpts by Tuomela (2013) and Bratman (2014) specifically, illustrate collective atomism and the ethos of atomism particularly well.

<sup>12</sup> Others such as Stoutland (1997; 2008) and Tollefsen (2015) have argued for a much more nuanced understanding of social action and further for group entities as a proper alternative to the individualistic view.

<sup>13</sup> My Gestalt chapter entertains the idea that perceiving actions in ordinary life is very much holistic in the sense that we only rarely perceive another’s basic and individual actions, but rather that there is an immediate sense in which we understand what another is doing, segregated from its situational setting.

individualism to be rooted in atomistic premises: if we understand the paradigmatic example of action to be isolated and basic, as atomists do, then accounts will run into problems when explaining collective action, because individualism, under this premise, offers the only viable metaphysical stance to be taken. Only from the point of atomism does one have to necessarily side with either individualistic conceptions of action that involves more than one agent, or something such as a holistic concept of the group as a separate group entity. In a sense, the atomistic starting position produces the problems that will arise in the investigation.

There are in-between examples of individualistically inclined holists. Thompson's (2008) account of action for instance, is holistic in the sense that he understands certain actions to be indivisible into further actions or more basic actions. An action thus, is a relation between its constituent parts. And yet he ascribes to individualism in that he takes individual action to be the paradigm case of action that it takes to be understood before more complex or collective actions can be explained. Helen Steward (1997; 2000) similarly, argues on a metaphysical basis for a more holistic understanding of actions, events and the constituents involved. She describes a dynamic strategy of how action fragments or constituents piece together the mirage of an overall event to which we assign the part-whole relationship. I will summarise holistically inclined theories as individually holistic. While their accounts offer perspectives on actions that include a form of holism as they do not insist on one basic action underlying complex descriptions, their holism remains individual, because it stretches across the individual action of one agent as the paradigmatic case of inquiry.<sup>14</sup>

To summarise, atomism conditions the investigation of actions in certain ways. Explanations of actions performed together result in a collective atomism in which atomistic premises are maintained but extended to more than one agent. Atomism further, takes the debate in collective action to the point where it induces a choice between individualism on one side, and esoteric holism on the other. Most theories chose the former as the only feasible alternative. But there are more theories of action, who strengthen the importance of holistic relations between action constituents, criticising the point-like notion of basic actions that swing with atomism. They remain individual, however, in subscribing to an atomistic picture of using individual action as a model or precursor for social action. I will demonstrate how neither of these key ideas emerging from atomism, collective atomism in particular, stress the role sociality plays in approaching and

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Chapter 4 will then argue that this perceptual holism is informed by senses of sociality in that we have come to see or perceive actions as meaningful units of conduct. This social holism links to empirical and conceptual ways of individuating actions that have not been entertained.

<sup>14</sup> Most of views in the debate – may they be holistically inclined or atomists – take individual action to be primary to any form of social action. For a critical approach to understanding individual action as primary, see Preston (Preston, 2016, pp. 31-32).

organising the world around us in terms of action. What has made action a valuable unit to go for and why can we all agree that there are things that we do ordinarily that are recognisable and understandable in a community? What makes us see the conduct of another as the act of calling a cab, greeting someone across the street, or blocking out the sun in their face? Explaining or understanding how the bodily movement underlying all of these came into being is not the same as understanding the action in question. Understanding the latter sense of an action, goes beyond what atomistic conceptions can afford, but is of paramount interest to social agents engaging with one another every day.<sup>15</sup>

What I have done so far is outlining the theoretical field of collective and individual action as an effort to describe and group theories in the debate. I have touched on the analytic aim in philosophy, assuming the concept of action to be hidden from the view of ordinary eyes. The possibility and legitimacy of isolationism assumed in the study of action gave rise to an atomistic paradigm of action that has uncritically been applied to collective action. The next chapter will start with models and theories of collective action in which I show how they are under the grip of this atomistic paradigm. I move to an exploration of atomism in accounts of individual action to demonstrate the roots of collective atomism. I will then suggest social holism as a rewarding alternative starting point. Chapters 3 (*Action as Gestalt*) to 5 (*'Posting', 'liking', 'tagging' – an exploration*) will progressively explore social holism as a point of view from which aspects to the phenomena of action can be highlighted. To do so, I will ask the reader to entertain with me, step by step, a dissolution of the atomistic paradigm into conceptions of social action. If we imagine the analytic perspective on action to be 'zoomed in' on necessary and sufficient constituents of action, social holism starts by re-thinking the way we perceive the world and in it action, i.e. 'zooming out' to what we know and how we observe and relate to actions ordinarily. This is one way to account for by which methods actions are recognised in and through situational context.<sup>16</sup> To walk away from the caveats of atomism then, I will replace, what I take to be a confused paradigm with a variety of paradigms of social action which understands actions and their conceptions as embedded in sociality. I progressively present social holism as a perspicuous perspective, allowing

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<sup>15</sup> Velleman (2013, p. 27) also criticises the lack of emphasis on the way in which conceptions of actions are linked to socio-cultural situatedness: "We talk about "taking" an action, as if we were picking an apple from a tree, but actions don't antecedently exist in nature, waiting to be picked. What we can call taking an action is actually making an action, by enacting some act-description or action concept. Which actions we can make depends on which descriptions or concepts are available for us to enact. [...] Our shared ontology facilitates mutual understanding and cooperation."

<sup>16</sup> I chose the term methods here consciously, for I have been accustomed to the works of Ethnomethodologists whose paramount aim is to make the methods of ordinary agents overt on the basis of real life data to better understand how meaning is maintained in and through social action and interaction.

for the highlighting of aspects in actions rather than searching for the essence of the concept. One of the foreseen benefits of understanding social actions as paradigmatic is that reverses which actions are understood to be irregular occurrences in need of further explanation, i.e. those that are basic and isolated respectively.

Chapter 3 (*Action as Gestalt*) uses a picture arising in psychology as a metaphor to describe how we perceive actions as wholes. This metaphor highlights how human perception groups objects in the visual field into meaningful wholes. I transfer this idea to actions. I ask when we actually and experientially perceive someone as raising an arm, the apparent favourite example of theorists of actions. I explore how in ordinary situations we group together a sequence of contextual information in recognising someone as ‘hailing a cab’ or ‘greeting someone across the street’. Of course, arm-raisers are somewhat involved in these actions, but they do not seem to be the feature turning the scale. More information is needed to discern one action from another. I introduce seeing an action as akin to seeing the Gestalt of an action, holistic in so far as it is the Gestalt of actions one encounters and recognises as the result of grouping together what one perceives into a meaningful whole. Actions come to have meaning, segregated against the particular background in which they occur. The constituents involved in the action are secondary to the whole perceived. Only for special reasons or interests do we zoom into the constituents. It is also in this chapter that meaning enters explicitly into the discourse on action for the first time. For actions to be imbued with meaning, more than perceptual holism is needed.

The next step is to highlight how perceiving and conceiving of action is intertwined with sociality. Social holism takes being an agent in a community as a starting point for being in a world or social space of actions. Actions make sense, we learn about them in relation to their understanding in a community of agents. Actions are therefore meaning-related Gestalten. We see someone as ‘sending a text message’ or ‘taking a selfie’ and to do so, we need an understanding of actions that is anchored in sociality. This also means that we immediately perceive actions in their descriptions. As agents we are embedded in a practice which aids our perceiving, conceiving of, and recognising action. Chapter 3 argues that the way we see and recognise units of behaviours as actions is indeed better described as holistic. This holism is socio-culturally informed, in which seeing an action is already guided by actions we know or are aware of in socio-cultural practices as a meaningful thing to do. It forges the sense in which a hypothetical Robinson Crusoe, stranded on a lonely island at birth, can in principle have conceptions of actions, but he simply cannot conceive of an action such as ‘liking a post’. It is holistic in the sense that there is an immediacy with which we group situational information and activities of other agents

together in meaningful ways. And it is social, for our encultured knowledge of practices and things that are ordinary and doable, informs our conceiving of them as such.

I am not the first one to highlight how senses of sociality of action have been neglected as a subject of study in the realms of the philosophy of action. Leist (2007, p. 39) notes

The mutual dependencies of cognition and action, the entanglement of doing and experiencing within the biographical framework, the dependencies between individual and social action—these aspects are surely discussed in many disciplines of the arts and social sciences, but fatally they are largely and systematically ignored in philosophical action theory so far.

Chapter number 4 (*Senses of sociality*) targets the senses of sociality that pertain to actions even when they are performed in isolation from others. I focus on arguing that and how actions can be social when performed alone but need not be collective in the atomistic sense. This chapter dissolves the idea of collective action into a variety of senses of sociality of actions. Whereas a group performing an action together, i.e. sharing in the same goal has been taken to be the paradigm of collective action, I explore different senses of sociality that help to show how social action in some sense is the ordinary experience of actions. Collective action as assumed in philosophy is but one manifestation of social action. It is also in this chapter that the idea of collective atomism as a homogenous phenomenon collapses into the idea of social action. Social action comes in different shades, sometimes it overtly involves others, sometimes it covertly involves others, sometimes it is better described in its interactive aspects. Mostly, it involves agents being part of a community in which a certain range of actions are doable, enabling and securing mutual understanding.

The perspective on actions as social in a variety of senses, even those performed in isolation, allows for new paradigmatic examples of what people do, pushing isolated and basic actions such as arm raisers out of the focus. Acts of communication shared sharing on social media, is social in at least the three senses of sociality I introduce, although I am sure there are many more. It is not my aim however, to prove that and how part one is true, it is rather an exploration that experiments with a variety of perspectives to approach ordinary ways of making sense of one another's actions. It is an exploration of why people communicate on social media, embracing – what I will call – social and holistic attitudes in which actions are part of the social realm of meaning, in which making sense is both trajectory as well as tool to mutual understanding. Rather than telling a story on how the movement of the finger to click a mouse is at best explained, I will highlight that and how this click is connected to wider conception of what one does on social media and how these acts come to mean something.

## Ordinary Action Philosophy!?

*To ask the question in general, without bearing in mind the reasons we have for asking, is the beginning of a process of “sublimating” our words.*

(Moi, 2017)

I might just be interested in a different idea of theory as exploration. Something that I call *ordinary action philosophy*, that takes situational and social context, conceiving and perceiving, the language used to describe them, and ordinary narratives about the things we and others do to be of importance when we ask questions about actions. Whereas views in the philosophy of action have made an effort to inquire an action *per se* (Leist, 2007), assuming that there is such a thing and thus imbuing their investigation with a certain set of atomistic attitudes; I wish to explore actions from a standpoint that is not fixated on a general and interest-free position, but rather from one where taking an interest in a perspective on actions is embraced and made overt in the investigation.<sup>17</sup>

It will be my aim to suggest a starting point that embraces the latter. What can we learn about actions, if we start from the assumption that we are living inside a world of action in which much of the workings of actions are known, without being reflected on? Can one bring the *vernacular* and pragmatic idea into the exploration of actions without losing the attention of philosophers of action? There is at least one way of understanding philosophical inquiries as starting from within, inside of an understanding of actions as they unfold. Philosophers writing at the intersection of philosophy and social sciences, such as Wittgenstein (1953/2009) or Winch (1958/1990) have pointed to positioning philosophy with the social sciences.<sup>18</sup> And although one might conceive of there being the possibility to explore actions from the perspective of a Martian or any extra-terrestrial being, this shall not be the arena in which I wish to place my research.

I am interested in exploring how people understand communicative acts on social media, assuming that there is an ‘inside’ knowledge to the phenomenon of communicating in these ways

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<sup>17</sup> See Moi’s (2017) chapter 3 on a brilliant discussion of the different understandings of what constitutes a theory, and how ordinary language philosophy wishes to lead us out of the confusion about finding and synthesising the essence of a concept beyond its ordinary use.

<sup>18</sup> I mention Wittgenstein and Winch here, but one could mention Descombes (2014), Flyvbjerg (2001), Gergen (2009), Lynch (1993), Martin (2011), Schatzki (1996; 2000), as part of the contemporary discussion on the relationship between philosophy and the social sciences. Critical voices against Winch in particular, are to be found in MacIntyre (1973) and Pettit (1998; 2000).

that is acted out and acted upon. Supposing then that there is an ordinary way of communicating on social media, i.e. that there is a *vernacular* way of practicing and reasoning about these acts of communication, I want to make explicit the ordinary ways in which we make sense of one another – through the ideas of actions. Throughout my inter-disciplinary research of approaches to actions, I have found a variety of methodological allies, the most important of which is probably Ethnomethodology. Ethnomethodologists explore how people in conversation use methods inside those conversations. From within here means that they approach conversational data without a thesis or premise in mind, but explore the ways in which ordinary agents continuously try to allocate ‘the sense’ in another’s actions (Sacks, 1984). One of the ethnomethodological resources that I am most interested in is the idea of turn-taking as a mechanism for creating meaning inter-subjectively (Sacks, et al., 1974). Turns are conceptualised as actions that afford and relate to one another. Meaning is elaborated through these turns. This basically means, that understanding each other’s actions is a deeply social achievement and demonstrates how actions, particularly those performed with others, depend on each other. Another important influence to conceptualising actions as social, is the Austin’s (1962) idea of uptake in which the understanding of an Other is a felicity condition to successfully performing an act. These and other theories of allies are employed to illuminate actions in their role as meaningful units of behaviour.

Communication on social media is a fascinating example of social action. Based on the case examples entertained in chapter 5, it becomes very clear how many senses of sociality are active in understanding ‘posts’, ‘likes’ or ‘tweets’. Attempting to make this possible, I seek a holistic perspective on actions as a starting point from which casting a light on how they are understood in relation to and through their meaning. Much like in real life, we are involved in discovering what the meaning of a post is, rather than say, how a post came into existence. This holism further is considered as a social holism, explicitly taking into account how senses of sociality are at work in our capacities to recognise, interpret and understand each other’s actions. I am therefore not interested in the mechanics of what made the finger move to ‘click’ or ‘post’, but in the meaningful whole that we pragmatically and praxiologically understand as the action of another. Explaining how it is possible that a finger moves to post, helps understanding another’s post just as much as knowing the location and neurological function of the retina helps me understand what I see – not at all. Philosophical accounts of action have focused on arm raisers and finger movements and as a result missed the incentive and opportunity to explore actions on a praxiological plane.

When being interested in questions such as ‘why do people communicate on social media?’ and ‘how do they make sense of one another’s social media acts in and of communication?’, there is a variety of ways in which these questions can be interpreted.

One might be interested like philosophers from Locke onwards were in what communication is, starting with the model of information exchange moving through a variety of iterations (Banks, et al., 2011, p. 6; Durham Peters, 1999). Durham Peters in his book on 'Speaking into the Air' dissolves what he portrays as a historical misconception of the term of communication. Since the first record of the word, so his argument goes, the term communication has been laden with a variety of different meanings, as well as the varieties of human interaction it has been used as a descriptive account for. Too long, according to Durham Peters, have researchers and intellectuals complained about the imperfections of human communication, shadowed by ideal modes of communication such transparent, coalescent minds, often and possibly only ever found in angelic communication. He breaks with illusionary visions of scientific and technological progress as being able to overcome the natural fractures in human communication:

*The message of this book is a harsher one, that the problems are fundamentally intractable. "Communication," whatever it might mean, is not a matter of improved wiring or freer self-disclosure but involves a permanent kink in the human condition. In this James was right. That we can never communicate like the angels is a tragic fact, but also a blessed one. A sounder vision is of the felicitous impossibility of contact. Communication failure, again, does not mean we are lonely zombies searching for soul mates: it means we have new ways to relate and to make worlds with each other. My emphasis on the debt that the dream of communication owes to ghosts and strange eros is intended as a corrective to a truism that is still very much alive: that the expansion of means leads to the expansion of minds. (Durham Peters, 1999, p. 29)*

Social media might be one of these new ways of 'making worlds' together. And one might, for example, interpret the starting questions as being interested in the reasons for communicating on social media. And there are many potential and actual reasons for why people might decide to communicate online rather than in face-to-face situations. Communication quite generally can be about entertainment, story-telling, about listening as well as speaking, about gift-giving, about procrastination, as a form of dwelling or sharing to name but a few (Banks, et al., 2011; O'Hara, et al., 2014). One might also be intrigued by why people choose to communicate via Facebook, Twitter or Instagram, rather than the traditional face-to-face communication, for example, highlighting how our choices in communication create a texture to our expressions affecting our social relations (Harper, 2010). Some suggest social media use to be a matter of habit (Chun, 2016),

others present it as an addiction (Molloy, 2016). Some contest that what we are addicted to is social interaction more than to the technology (Veissière, 2018; Veissière & Stendel, 2018), others persist it is because social media allows judging each other (Seargeant & Tagg, 2017).

It is very hard then to say any more about communication other than that most significantly it happens between two people, although I am sure some would contest. As tempting as it might be to brush over the multitude of answers one could give to the 'Why'-question (Anscombe, 1963/2000)<sup>19</sup>, it seems we learn something through the variety of perspectives taken on it. Starting the investigation by assuming to understand communication per se, as a concept separated from its use, renders all the perspectives given above into unnecessary competition. Communication might not be reducible to one thing, but we learn something through the variety of perspectives taken on it.

I am interested in communication on social media as a social phenomenon and action, occurring between people who treat one another's acts as meaningful. The philosophical perspective that suggests itself for looking at a social phenomenon are accounts on collective, joint or plural actions, asking questions about how the former are constituted. Much to my surprise however, the way action theory has been approached leads away from applicability to real-life contexts such as social media use, for reasons the following chapter will present.

One of the most prevalent caveats of the discussion of action in philosophy, despite a variety of keywords used to outline perspectives, the question is posited such that one answer or theory is supposed to give the right answer. Joint action appears to be conceived as one relatively homogeneous phenomenon (Sandis, 2016), with little exploration of the many ways in which we do things together, resulting in assumptions that there is an action per se, and further, a collective action per se. I take the opening quote by Moi to be a summary of the problem: by positing the question generally, we have started the process of sublimating actions. The present thesis is an attempt to lead questions about actions back to the place where their answers have application in offering a perspective on how a phenomenon can be understood. Rather than replacing one idealised concept by another, this and the following chapters can be read as introducing different methods to better understand actions, leading to an applicability to social media communication. Whereas atomism might be useful to explore and explain some aspects of human action and interaction, it does not easily help to understand acts of 'posting', 'liking' and 'sharing' on social media in their social relevance and the relation to meaningfulness exhibited in action. Chapter 5 (*'Posting', 'liking', 'tagging' – an exploration*) will explore in greater detail the meaningful character

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<sup>19</sup> I explore Anscombe's 'Why'-question in greater detail in Chapter 3 (*Actions as Gestalt*).

of social media actions. And in chapter 6 I conclude with outlining the further questions to be explored when embracing the starting point of social holism.

## Chapter 2 ◦ Atomism - One Ring to rule them all?

*“A model must be recognized for what it is.”*

(Austin, 1956, p. 202)

### Introduction – setting the link between collective and individual atomism

In this chapter, I will focus on a group of theories of collective action whose ‘models’ fall short of so many features of the phenomenon of acting socially, and so, in my view, are at risk of losing contact with the phenomenon they wish to describe in the first place. In the paragraph which I have taken the opening quote from, Austin (Austin, 1956, p. 202) describes how models usually arise from an observation of a case which is taken to be a paradigm, from which a model is abstracted. Often, these models are then taken to explain all related cases of the phenomenon. I will demonstrate how the ‘models’ or theories of acting together in philosophy are working with the paradigm of atomism. This has two consequences: firstly, their models lose contact with many of the questions that we are interested in when pondering social action in an everyday way, replacing them by questions about the mechanics of acting socially. And secondly, they evoke the phenomenon as if there is one encompassing way of explaining all action that is performed together. Again, to the loss of the richness with which we ordinarily experience the phenomenon.

The opening citation then, is a reminder that, if we set our models out to explain the mechanics of action in atomistic fashion, then what we get is a mechanistic treatment of a social phenomenon. This begs the question as to whether a mechanistic treatment is the most promising model for what we are trying to do. My answer to this question will be that it is not, at least not if one is interested in the meaningfulness and understanding of one another’s actions. And to convince the reader of this, I will show how theories of social action are enchanted by the paradigm of atomism, as it was regarded in theories of individual action. At the very least, I will have to sway the reader into agreeing that the atomistic paradigm is problematic for the explanatory horizon of social action, if not further for the explanations of individual action. One of the problems I point to in this approach, is that collective atomism takes a concept of action that is stripped of its embeddedness in sociality to be its paradigm. It then explains collective action in small and mechanical steps which run into metaphysical tangles.

I will show how - regardless of their different foci – the theories of group action I present share an underlying assumption invoking one paradigm of collective action, albeit different

authors might give the subject different names (Sandis, 2016).<sup>20</sup> These include collective intentionality, joint action, plural agency or shared action. This starting assumption is critical as it is.<sup>21</sup> It seems there are obvious differences between two people having a conversation, dancing a Latin American dance together, people running for shelter in the park when it starts raining, or our collectively polluting the planet. Each of these social phenomena appears to have different conditions or features. They are, for instance, different with regards to group size, commitment, pre-planning elements and individual awareness of what one is doing to name but a few. What makes them different are the nuances. What appears further to be different is the sense and degree to which these actions count as social actions, one might want to add also intended social actions. These other nuances, however, are brushed over if it is assumed that it is ultimately one phenomenon that is to be explained, i.e. the phenomenon of collective action, contrasted to individual action.

In the second half of this chapter, I will explore what might have led to collective action being approached in collective atomistic ways. Before I do so however, I must address the point of view of atomism in individual action briefly to contextualise why I think it is conducive of the way philosophers have approached collective action phenomena. I suggest that these collective theories rest on assumptions anchored in theories of *individual* action. That is, action performed not by a group, but by an individual. In the realms of theories concerning the latter, it is widely assumed that there is a paradigmatic example of action that is isolated, basic and relatively concrete. To repeat, action qua exemplar, is taken to be *one* action performed by *one* agent. The term isolated alludes to the assumptions that actions can be analysed separately from context, situational and social. Almost unanimously, accounts of individual action start from a paradigm case embracing these attitudes.<sup>22</sup> Often, theories abstract a model from an isolated and basic exemplar that is sought out to represent all possible actions.<sup>23</sup> The concept of (individual) action so understood, is conceptually isolatable and can be used abstractly, as a model to explaining most empirical instances of individuals acting.

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<sup>20</sup> Chapter 4 (*Senses of Sociality*) of this thesis will be centred on showing how these different names do not point to a homogenous phenomenon, but rather to a variety of senses of sociality.

<sup>21</sup> See Sandis (2016) critical evaluation of the conflation of the phenomenon of collective action. Sandis rightly criticises theories of collective action as conflating different senses of acting together, but he does not discuss whether there are different degrees of sociality involved in all action, even those performed alone.

<sup>22</sup> There are philosophical approaches however, such as by Thompson (2008), who do not easily fit the criteria of atomism. This is usually when theories can be described as more holistic than others. I discuss Thompson and Anscombe in particular, but there are others such as Stoutland (1997) or Baier (1997) who argue on a similar vein.

<sup>23</sup> In his *A Plea for Excuses*, Austin (1956), who I quote at the beginning of this chapter raises this tendency to abstract models from disputable paradigms.

The notion of basic action, determines the assumption that all possible actions feature a simple explanatory and ontological regularity that they can be reduced to.<sup>24</sup> Bodily movements or mental acts are the prime examples of what is declared as the most basic form of an action. Ideas concerning the most basic cases of human action have dominated the philosophy of action for much of the past 80 years, starting – perhaps surprisingly – with Wittgenstein’s investigations of volition:

621. But there is one thing we shouldn’t overlook: when ‘I raise my arm’, my arm rises. And now a problem emerges: what is left over if I subtract the fact that my arm rises from the fact that I raise my arm? ((Are the kinaesthetic sensations my willing?))

Whereas Wittgenstein could otherwise be portrayed as a conceptual and social holist, his exemplar of action in this paragraph appears highly isolated. It is arguable that Wittgenstein artificially isolates the arm raiser in this way, to criticise predecessors such as William James by ridiculing the way they posit the question, alluding to an extra faculty or acts of volition (Hyman, 2015). Although he continues from this paragraph to dissolve precisely this question in his idiosyncratic way, i.e. pointing out why positing this question is philosophically confused, this paragraph may have lent momentum to the philosophical perspective on action as isolated and basic.<sup>25</sup> To Wittgenstein’s mind out of a confusion, philosophers such as James have sought out to answer this question, taking actions to be caused by an intention. Anscombe’s (1963/2000)<sup>26</sup> *Intention* and Davidson’s (2001; 1987/2004) *Essays on Actions and Events* are clearly two examples in the philosophy of action being infatuated with Wittgenstein’s question.

Anscombe’s (1963/2000) work after Wittgenstein, introduced the ‘Why’-question as the most important criterion to recognise an action. Anscombe was concerned with how actions are described in language, by taking an interest in them. She concluded that only where the ‘Why’-question applies, one is confronted with an intentional action. In a sense then, she approached actions on the level of understanding, as an instance of description in language, as meaning in use. But as I will further show in chapter 3 (*Actions as Gestalt*), her pragmatism about the understanding of action, leads her also to set in motion a discussion concerning the individuation

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<sup>24</sup> This term was coined by Danto (1963). But I do not confine myself to any particular notion of the term (Davidson, for example, uses the term ‘primitive action’), but rather to the variety of ways in which this assumption is affirmed.

<sup>25</sup> See Hyman’s (2015) introduction chapter for the historical context of the debate on action before and after Wittgenstein.

<sup>26</sup> In this chapter I will focus on theorists after Davidson and will in Chapter 3 return to Anscombe’s work which deserves extra attention because of her pragmatic treatment of action.

of actions: where there is more than one description of an action available, are we confronted with many or one action. Anscombe argues that only one action is performed in accordance with the intention *of* an action (Anscombe, 1963/2000, § 26). This view has been refined by Davidson (2001). He enriched Anscombe's theory by proposing an argument for quantifying over and qualifying the identity conditions of events, for he takes actions to be special types of events (Davidson, 1967/2001; Davidson, 1985/2001).<sup>27</sup> Similar to objects, events are best individuated in terms of their spatiotemporal occurrence.<sup>28</sup> Yet whereas objects *occupy* spatiotemporal locations, events *occur* in spatiotemporal locations. In the discussion on actions as Gestalten (Ch. 3), I show how Davidson – via Danto's (1979) basic actions - argues that, whereas multiple descriptions of an event might be available, the most basic one, i.e. the one expressing a bodily motion involved, will determine the event's spatiotemporal occurrence.<sup>29</sup> A series of challenges arose (Hornsby, 2012; Pfeifer, 1989; Sandis, 2010), in which – amongst other aspects - the importance of reaching the desired end-state of an action has been emphasised. The desired end of an action suggests a relevant sense of completion of an action which is not identical to, and therefore not acknowledged, in the description of the bodily movement involved (Thomson, 1971). Assumptions made by Davidson however, and the rigour with which he advocated a causal theory of action shines through a very many accounts on action, individual and collective.<sup>30</sup> Where Wittgenstein and Anscombe might be considered as early explorers of the concept of action, I consider Davidson's physicalist theory to be fully under the grip of atomism as I will go on to show later. It is important to outline the link to atomism, for the reader to recall, before diving into accounts or models of social action.

The next section then, presents perspectives on collective action<sup>31</sup> that can be categorised, starting from a rather uniform point of view on action: atomism. Atomism attempts to explain social phenomena by expanding models of individual actions, uncritically adopting nested

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<sup>27</sup> For critical views on Davidson's re-direction of Anscombe's work see Ricoeur (1992), Millgram (2009; 2009) and Sandis (Sandis, 2015).

<sup>28</sup> Whereas initially, he thought events would be best individuated by means of their causes and effects, he followed a Quinean suggestion to individuate in terms of spatiotemporal location (Davidson, 1985/2001, p. 310).

<sup>29</sup> Davidson (1971/2001, p. 58f) concludes: "We must conclude, perhaps with a shock of surprise, that our primitive actions [...] mere movements of the body – these are all the actions there are. We never do more than move our bodies; the rest is up to nature." It should be noted here, that there have been remarkable developments in the philosophy of action: critical voices have taken issue with implicit presuppositions, particularly with the ontological status of actions as events (Hornsby, 2012; Hornsby, 1979; Millgram, 2010; Mourelatos, 1987; Steward, 1997; Thompson, 2008), or the simplification of the notion of a bodily movement (e.g. Alvarez & Hyman, 1998).

<sup>30</sup> In section 4.3 in chapter 4 I discuss Davidson's double approach and causalism in more detail.

<sup>31</sup> Traditionally, social action is understood as actions performed together with others. I will suggest a move towards redefining social action as comprising most actions, regardless of being performed alone or with others.

assumptions and paradigmatic case examples, treated as isolated and basic. Theories of collective action based on atomism are evoked as collective atomism. I chose the term collective atomism, because it captures how nuances of social phenomena are squeezed into a seemingly ontological regularity. Collective atomism is sought out to understand how individual, isolated and basic actions are linked together to form what one might call – in alignment with the analogy - an action aggregate. It targets the explanation of the glue that holds the atoms together, synthesising it as making sociality effable in ontological terms.

At first sight, one might conceive of atomism as being an elegant way of letting sociality arise from the individual. And yet this chapter will call into question whether atomism is the only valuable starting point for understanding action. And throughout the course of the thesis I will progressively question whether an explanation of sociality arises from explaining the actions of individuals and whether isolated and basic examples suitably qualify as a paradigm of actions. And further, to entertain the contrary: whether affirming the concept of action as arising in sociality is not an alternative to conceptualising social actions in their phenomenological mundaneness.

To anticipate, I will offer social holism as a point of view that brings senses of sociality of actions into the centre of attention. It shows how social, and thus neither isolated nor basic, the understanding of even the most individually performed action can be. Social holism offers an alternative perspective on action that stresses the sociality of action both on a conceptual, as well as empirical level. If successful, it will be an incentive to shift away from the paradigmatic arm raiser, free of social or situational context; towards actions understood as taxi-hailings, greetings, and social media postings in the immediacy and social embeddedness in which they strike us in everyday life. Social holism puts forward a view in which conceptions of actions, their recognition and understanding are holistic, not reductive, and deeply social phenomena. If basicness wants to be maintained, then only in the sense that we ordinarily immediately see the goings on around us as an instance of an act of X.<sup>32</sup> In this case, not the social manifestations of action would call for a long and complicated explanation, but the individual and basic actions that lack a sense of sociality. This will be the target perspective of the thesis at hand, I will progressively elucidate.

### Exploring Collective Atomism

The debate on collective action more recently, has focused on understanding how the actions of individuals enter a collective action. As mentioned before, just as with models of individual action, a hope of finding one explanation to rule them all is hovering over models of sociality and

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<sup>32</sup> Chapter 3 will introduce the metaphor of a Gestalt for this purpose.

acting together. To the result that collective action has become so complex that authors constrain themselves to modest versions of sociality (e.g. Bratman), because theories so far apply only to very constrained areas of collective action.

It is therefore useful to dwell a little while longer on the underlying presumptions which shine through the variety of accounts of action, without being critically assessed. As already highlighted in the previous section moving from an isolated and basic action as a paradigm towards more complex, social actions is a common direction of investigation. But the presuppositions do not stop there. The juxtaposition of accounts on both social and individual action will bring many more theoretical convictions in full view. When reading through the excerpts from accounts on collective action following, I invite the reader to observe how atomism as a perspective on action takes it for granted that action investigation ideally moves from basicness to complexity, from the individual to the social, and from abstraction to lived experiences.<sup>33</sup> The excerpts will shed light on attitudes embracing the explanations of all empirical actions via an action *per se*. And they will show the presupposition that reducing actions to constituents such as metaphysical form, intention, bodily movements (or a combination of the latter) will help fathoming the whole, i.e. understanding actions performed together. Many of the excerpts will evoke actions as concrete items akin to objects. Concreteness is valued over experiential messiness and flux with which we encounter actions and their available interpretations naturally in everyday life. And although many of the collective atomists I will introduce assume that acting together will become explainable via the paradigm of isolated and basic action, many treat individual and collective action as conceptually separated disciplines. It shall not be my aim to refute any of the views introduced or accuse them. I am interested merely in highlighting the challenges arising precisely because of the accepted paradigm and make visible the possible ramifications.

I start by demonstrating how the main theories in the field of collective action have approached the issue and why I take predominant perspectives to be too narrow and homogeneous to exhaust a phenomenon as rich and nuanced as action performed socially. To get a better handle on where theories of collective action differ, Schweikardt and Schmid (2013) categorised approaches as being concerned with *mode*, *content* or *subject*. This segmentation is a

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<sup>33</sup> Preston (2016, pp. 31-2, my emphasis) writes a fascinating critique of philosophical accounts on social action from a perspective on material culture. She addresses and assumption no unlike the atomism I introduce here: “First of all, the assumption **that collaboration and joint action generally can be understood on the basis of a prior understanding of individual action and very little more**, involves a commitment to some form of methodological individualism – the idea that social structures and group activities can be fully explained in terms of intentional states and actions of the individual making the same social group.” I think she is too quick in conflating all views on collective action as residing in the same methodological individualism, but her point highlights the confused assumption I will be working against.

useful categorisation to understand the subtle differences of their arguments as well as their limitations. Unless stated otherwise, all emphasise in bold in the quotes will be mine.

## Mode

John Searle, one of the 'big four' theorists in the discipline of collective action or collective intentionality, as Chant et Preyer (2014) endearingly call them, outlines the conceptual landscape for questions about socially enticed ontology as follows:

Our aim is to **assimilate** social reality to our basic ontology of physics, chemistry, and biology. **To do this we need to show the continuous line that goes from molecules and mountains to screwdrivers, levers, and beautiful sunsets, and then to legislatures, money, and nation states.** The central span on the bridge from physics to society is collective intentionality, and the decisive movement on the bridge in the creation of social reality is the collective intentional imposition of function on entities that cannot perform those functions without that imposition. (Searle, 1995, p. 41)

As anticipated earlier, Searle here simply assumes that explanation of social action (and reality) moves from the basics to complexes, from abstract to embedded, from constituents such as molecules to wholes. To capture how collective intentionality factors into a sense of social reality, how physics, chemistry and biology have come to afford a shared form of living that is, Searle is one of the first theorists to suggest a we-mode of intending as a separate mental entity, as bridging the gap between action performed by an individual and action performed by a group. His approach to collective action therefore, falls under the *mode* category proposed by Schweikardt and Schmid (2013).

It seems obvious that there **really is collective intentional behavior as distinct from individual intentional behavior.** You can see this by watching a football team execute a pass play or hear it by listening to an orchestra. Better still, you can experience it by actually engaging in some group activity in which your own actions are a part of the group action. (Searle, 1990, p. 2)

Searle juxtaposes the experience of individual to that of collective behaviour as if they are two distinct phenomena. The examples he gives as paradigmatic of collective action are clearly a particular kind of being engaged with others in an action. He supposes that there is a distinguishable *mode* into which agents drift when they act as part of a group.

One of his most famous thought experiments introduces two scenarios in which people spending their time on a meadow run for shelter. In the first case, they do so, because it starts to rain whereas in the second the people involved are part of a ballet performance in which they engaged. Searle concludes:

**We can even imagine that the external bodily movements are indistinguishable in the two cases;** the people running for shelter make the same types of bodily movements as the ballet dancers. Externally observed the two cases are indistinguishable, **but they are clearly different internally.** What exactly is the difference? Well, part of the difference is that **the form of the intentionality in the first case is that each person has an intention which he or she could express without reference to the others, even in a case where each has mutual knowledge of the intentions of the others.** But in the second case, the individual "I intends" are, in a way we will need to explain, derivative from the "we intend's". (Searle, 1990, p. 404)

Searle's aim here is to highlight that the mental component of an individual changes between doing something individually and doing something as part of a group and that this difference effectively marks the difference between a we-mode and an I-mode intention.

It is arguable however, that Searle is not sensitive to all the nuances that his own examples suggest: they show that what someone is doing can be the same, although the reasons to do so are different. This might be due to the types of examples for collective action he chooses. They all confirm to a high degree of awareness and commitment out of the pool of things we ordinarily do as part of our social lives. Less clear examples would be participating in traffic, polluting the environment or saving the planet or even spending time with one's partner at home. When we participate in traffic, are we in the I-mode or in the we-mode? Are we not all by leading our lives the way we do responsible for polluting the environment, although we might not be concerned with that we-aspect every time we board a plane to realise one of our I-mode goal? Or take the case of reports of streams of refugees throughout the refugee crisis in 2015 (Anon., 2015). In some sense one could think of these people as a group of people migrating from one country to the other, and yet in a different sense they might all have slightly varying reasons to do so, although it is not necessarily wrong to say that saving themselves from a raging war is a reason that figures in many of the considerations. It is not clear whether the latter examples clearly fall into I-mode or we-mode, any more than what strikes us as a group effort or an individual effort upon observing the actions. And indeed, I would go as far that saying in a sense both perspectives (i.e. on either individual or collective reasons for action) highlight relevant senses of the action. They might

include a mixture of what Searle calls I- and we-intentions. Nuances of modes are highlighted in the interest taken. Sometimes it might be more suitable to understand mass migration qua the stream or group of people, and sometimes it might be very important to highlight the individual cases and reasons to migrate. Further, maybe neither of these two senses can be understood without the other.

By laying the case out as he does however, Searle is not interested in understanding the senses in which one can be understood as acting in I-mode or we-modes. His examples are directed at criticising generic theories supposing that we-attitudes are ontologically reducible to individual attitudes:

The argument is that because all intentionality exists in the heads of individual human beings, the form of that intentionality can make reference only to the individuals in whose heads it exists. [...] It has seemed, in short, that we have to choose between reductionism, on the one hand, or a super mind floating over individual minds, on the other. I want to claim, on the contrary, that the argument contains a fallacy and that the dilemma is a false one. **It is indeed the case that all my mental life is inside my brain, and all your mental life is inside your brain, and so for everybody else. But it does not follow from that that all my mental life must be expressed in the form of a singular noun phrase referring to me.** The form that my collective intentionality can take is simply “we intend,” “we are doing so-and-so,” and the like. In such cases I intend only as part of our intending. **The intentionality that exist in each individual head has the form “we intend.”** (Searle, 1995, p. 25f)

Although Searle is against the idea of reduction of social mental attitudes to individual ones, his approach is under the grip of atomism expressed as collective atomism. He outlines the problem as actions either clearly being an instance of individual or collective action, clearly separated by the mode agents intend their actions in. He inadvertently assumes that the individual is somewhat primary or paradigmatic to collective actions, for all modes are contained in an individual’s brain.<sup>34</sup> Further, he portrays the collective as arising from the individual and yet as having some special collective properties irreducible to individuals. His theory of collective intentionality clearly wishes to confirm some theory of individual intentionality as its paradigmatic

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<sup>34</sup> In the philosophy of cognitive science, Searle’s we-mode concept has been discussed as pre-supposing other and hence not necessarily being fallible to the ‘brain in the vat’ criticism (Martens & Schlicht, 2018).

version. As discussed in the first chapter, atomism is conducive to individualism expressed in this way.

Although I am not interested in criticising the introduced theories nor refuting them or taking sides, and rather in showing how they are under the grip of atomism expressed in models of collective atomism, I will highlight two interesting points of criticism for Searle. Regardless of his apprehension of the super-mind in the paragraph above, the super-mind is one of the metaphysical tangles reoccurring as a caveat in collective action models. If there is such a thing as a we-mode to intend, how can one save these models from suggesting that there is a higher mind we share when acting together. Searle's theory in particular, has been conceived of as either necessarily having to advocate a supra-mental entity hovering over the doings of individual members of a group, or as featuring that a collective intentionality can exist in a solipsistic brain (Schweikard & Schmid, 2013; Tollefsen, n.d.). Another weakness of his argument is seen to be the fact that as it stands, his theory seems to both target to explain collective intentionality and its results, as well as presupposing it in his account of we-mode intentions (Schweikard & Schmid, 2013).

Raimo Tuomela's (2013) account of social ontology in which he analyses collective intentionality and group agents follows a *mode-approach* also. His seminal investigation into the distinction between actions performed in the I-mode, i.e. an action performed by a singular or individual agent, and we-mode, i.e. an action performed by a group sharing a we-intention, shows both the intricacy with which he tries to avoid the abundance of criticism towards Searle's account as well as allowing for ever more complex and hypothetical individuation of mental states necessary en route to fathoming the phenomenon of people acting together.

Although Tuomela wishes to distance himself from the idea of collective intentions being reducible to individual ones, and suggest viewing collective action from a 'top-down' perspective (Tuomela, 2013, p. 15), he clearly introduces actions performed by an individual as the paradigm of action from which an explanation of more complex, sociable action will be illuminated:

The idea of a group agent can be based on an **intuitive analogy**: Analogously to intentional action (or at least the central kind of singular intentional action) by an individual agent, intentional action by a group agent (and its parts, the members) is **normally based on reasons for action. Analogously to an individual having to coordinate the movements of her body parts when performing singular action (e.g. a bodily one)**, the members of a (we-mode) group coordinate their action (indeed all activities including mental ones) both synchronically and diachronically in order to achieve group goals. Analogously

to an individual agent who is committed to her intended actions, the group members are committed as a group, that is, collectively committed, to the group's actions. (Tuomela, 2013, p. 34)

Tuomela argues from the point of view of atomism, suggesting that individual action is paradigmatic, enabling an explanation of group action. Tuomela similarly to Searle, suggests and assumes that we-modes and I-modes function analogously, with elaborating little on when we switch from one to the other, although he allows for some overlapping.<sup>35</sup> As a consequence, both individual and collective action are evoked as homogeneous phenomena. One either acts in the I-mode or in the we-mode, individually or as a member of a group, in which individual action is taken to be the paradigm to which the explanation of group action runs analogously. Constituents such as mental acts and bodily motions are understood as paramount features to the study of actions. What is assumed for an individual action is assumed to hold for collective action, too. His use of terms like 'intuitive analogy' and 'normally based on reasons for actions' makes assumptions about a consensus pertaining to the atomistic concept of action. In other words, Tuomela says something on the lines of: we all know what individual action looks like and collective action pretty much works in the same way. Only that there are still ongoing disputes about the nature of individual action and Tuomela's understanding of action as a goal as he assumes for 'simplicity's sake' (Tuomela, 2013, p. 35). He does not however, entertain the nuances in reasons for actions as I have proposed in the discussion on Searle. His distinctions are not guided by experiential examples and perspectives taken on to them, but rather he assumes actions in isolation from context and affirms attitudes in which actions are bodily movements.

Tuomela explicitly opposes his theory to methodological individualism [MI], but sympathises with an ontological individualism complemented by a conceptual and therefore weak collectivism:

My weakly collectivist approach is nevertheless far from full-blown anti-individualism, because it does not regard groups as intrinsically intentional agents, but rather characterizes individual human beings as the only agentic causal motors in the social world. **In a nutshell, groups can act only through their members' activities.** (Tuomela, 2013, p. 13)

By discerning intentional attitudes in this way, Tuomela avoids the vicious circularity of we-intentions presupposing the we-intentions as seen in Searle. As agents, we switch between the I-

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<sup>35</sup> For a criticism of Tuomela that is much more fine-grained with regards to the intricacies of his theory see Laitinen (2017). Laitinen (2017, p. 162) investigates the usefulness of the distinctions in mode, at least if it is confined to I or we-modes, suggesting this dichotomy does not capture the ways in which agents are constantly and overall part of more than one group whose authority varies from action to action.

mode and we-mode of acting. When acting in the latter mode, we act in virtue of the group's rather than the individual's intention. In a group scenario in turn, the group counts as an individual, intentional agent:

(2) The we-mode approach is based on the **intuitive idea that the acting agent in central group contexts is the group viewed as an intentional agent**, whose members are engaged in *we-reasoning from the group's point of view* (e.g. "We will do X" and "What does our doing X require me to do?"). Conceptually, the individual agent is not the primary agent (as in the I mode approach) but rather a representative acting for the group – although ontologically, in the causal realm, individuals are the only initiating "causal motors". **In general, conceptual and justificatory direction for theorizing and conceptual construction in the we-mode account is "top down" rather than "bottom up", as in the I-mode account.** (Tuomela, 2013, p. 15)

Although Tuomela argues for differences in the accounts, the overall explanatory arch of his theory takes individual action to be preliminary. He thus reasons from the individual to the social. The entirety of his account is highly abstract and actions – may they be performed by individuals or a group – are conceptualised as relatively concrete. Tuomela might at best be described as concerned with the question 'Where does collective intentionality reside?', thus assuming that concepts of action are usually described 'outside' of collective intentionality. His answer is that collective intentionality resides in these different modes of attitudes and "collective phenomena are individuated in terms of complex intentional structures that involve such specific attitudes" (Schweikard & Schmid, 2013, section 3.2).

The perspective from social holism I will explore in Chapter 3 and 4, will embrace almost the direct opposite: collective phenomena are individuated in terms of the inquisitive perspective one applies to them, and group actions can be perceived *in spite* of member's activities. I like to think of retired couples on holiday, she reads, he solves cross-word, and yet there is a sense of 'being together' permeating their non-interaction. Senses of sociality highlighted from a socially holistic perspective then, are neither top down nor bottom up but stand vis-à-vis the interest that is taken *in* an action. Again, sometimes one might want to approach actions qua the stream of migrants, e.g. moving further east. And sometimes, dependent on the inquisitive aim, one might want to approach actions according to the private motives and reasons involved. The clue is, that the perspective taken does not depend on mental attitudes, but on the inquisitive aim of the observer, or in other words the answers to questions about actions, will very much depend on the reasons for which one is asking.

To remind the reader, I am not trying to refute any of the theories introduced for what they are. I am describing them in their atomistic qualities. This is because I wish to ultimately better understand social media-based communication. Theories I entertain here, however, give an insight how mechanistically actions, even those which are social, are being brought about. How they come to mean something in social settings, remains undiscussed. Further, it is the atomistic assumptions that I understand as leading to the problems arising from those theories, often expressed as metaphysical tangles or quarrels. Critics have wondered for instance, why Tuomela would not accept the metaphysical existence of group agents' when arguing so strongly for their causally efficacious nature (Hindriks, 2015). One reason might be that Tuomela wishes to avoid both MI as well as a full-blown collectivism. Despite his account avoiding MI however, it has been argued that his account remains under the grip of *intentional individualism* (Schweikard & Schmid, 2013) undermining his top-down approach as a bottom up one in disguise.

Both Searle and Tuomela maintain a sense of the individual action as being basic and paradigmatic or analogous to collective action. Their theories try to avoid the pitfalls arising from the angle taken within their investigation: they are pressured to avoid counter-intuitive metaphysical consequences such as the affirmation of super-minds, or account for the reducibility or irreducibility of we-intentions to I-intentions. To my mind, this is because they have chosen to take a certain perspective on the phenomena of collective action. Whereas Searle might have to agree to the idea of a solipsistic mind being capable of we-intentions, Tuomela tries to avoid the circularity inherent to *mode-approaches* by denying the metaphysical existence of groups as agents. Further, both of their theories appear to assume that there is only space for one correct explanation of the phenomenon of collective action. And both theories are under the grip of atomism in their endeavour to argue from assumptions made about isolated actions by individuals towards more complex and collective cases of actions, resulting in a display of acting together as collective atomism. Possibly as a result of their approach to the phenomenon, they assume a clear distinction between an agent acting as an individual and an agent acting as a member of a group, in which both latter are understood to be relatively concrete and homogeneous phenomena.

Assumptions for collective actions are made based on unquestioned assumptions about individual action as their basis. Both accounts quarrel with increasingly complex needs for spelling out the dependencies between I-modes and we-modes in which a seemingly mundane phenomenon of acting together is hardly recognisable anymore.

## Content

Michael Bratman's account of collective agency shows the atomistic point of view even clearer by overtly by assuming individualism as a starting point. In Schweikard and Schmid's (2013) terms, Bratman's approach to collective agency falls into the category of content orientated accounts, because it is the content of the intention in action that is collective.

Other than Searle and Tuomela, who seem to suggest their theories as being apt to cover all possible phenomena of collective action, Bratman suggest an account of modest sociality in which he sees himself compelled to considerably limit the scope of phenomena covered considerably. He further anticipates how his account basically constitutes an extension of his theory of individual planning agency:

The limitation is that my focus will be primarily on the shared intentional activities of small, adult groups in the **absence of asymmetric authority relations** within those groups, and **in which the individuals who are participants remain constant over time**. [...] My interest will be preliminary with duets and quartets rather than symphony orchestras with conductors, with small teams of builders rather than large an hierarchical construction companies, with small and informal neighborhood groups rather than country governments, with small group discussions rather than deliberations in the US Senate, and with friendship and love rather than legally constituted marriage. **And I will assume that these small groups have stable membership**. (Bratman, 2014, p. 7)

The reasons Bratman gives for these limitations, express his nested, yet deeply engrained atomistic point of view:

Rather, I hope to gain some insight by focusing initially on the kind of small-scale shared agency to which I have pointed. Perhaps our theory of small-scale shared agency can, with due adjustment and further additions, be extended to such larger organizations. **But first things first**. I will be satisfied here if we can agree on a **basic approach** to the indicated kind of small-scale case of shared agency – as I will say, the case of **modest sociality** – and **leave to other occasions these potential extensions**. (Bratman, 2014, p. 8)

Bratman's theory is traversed by terminology alluding to the basicness of his claim. He seeks a basic approach of modest sociality by extending his basic approach to individual planning agency. The concept of modest sociality to Bratman (2014, p. 3) comprises examples of non-hierarchical relations and small-scale groups, expressed in examples such as "friendship and love, singing

duets, dancing together, and the joys of conversation". But are these really and clearly one and the same thing, are friendship and love the same things? How do they compare to dancing together or singing a duet? What about them is modest? Do all his examples share the same sociality? Is it that they only comprise two people? But then many friendships, conversations, and - alas – love relationships nowadays include more than two people. Bratman, does not further elaborate on these questions. But he elucidates how intentions, joint together are the basic building blocks of a shared action and therefore of basic sociality:

My claim is only that planning structures are one salient and theoretically important aspect of the psychology that underlies our agency. In the case of individual agency, such structures play a central role in characteristically human forms of cross-temporal organization and temporally extended agency.

**And my conjecture here is that versions of these planning structures are also an important part of basic forms of sociality.** (Bratman, 2014, p. 4)

Bratman is interested in basic, i.e. minimal cases of sociality, which include small groups or couples of agents from which he is convinced more complex cases of sociality, i.e. groups consisting of more agents or even institutionalised agents, will be explainable from the fundament of individual planning agency. His approach from the outset thus, wishes to explain collective actions from basic to more complex examples, from modest sociality to bold sociality, he chooses an abstract way of modelling and portrays actions as rather concrete, basic and isolated entities. And further, Bratman assumes these planning structures to be basic.

All this supports the idea that the move from individual planning agency to modest sociality, while both demanding and of great importance, does not require fundamentally new practical recourses – conceptual, metaphysical, or normative. **The deep structure of at least a central case of modest sociality is constituted by the elements that are continuous with those at work in the planning theory of individual planning agents who know about each other's minds.** (Bratman, 2014, p. 157)

These paragraphs strengthen a take on action in which individual and basic (planning) action is the paradigm case of all types of action from which point onwards – in collective atomistic fashion – the complexity of a shared action can be explained. The interlocking of planning agency modules is the basis for the explanation of modest sociality. One might say that the idea of planning agency under which Bratman analyses shared action, could be understood as an analogy or a metaphor, as a way of highlighting an inquisitive aim. But Bratman is less interested in describing how

planning can be used as an analogy to describe ordinary ways of acting together, Bratman is in the business of theorising the abstract, a shared action per se, isolated from context, situational or social. His theory is not directed at better understanding how planning features in doing things together, it is an attempt to show that collective action is realised with the very same planning agency that he evokes in individual agency. Bratman's theory can therefore be considered metaphysically modest, because other than we-modes in Searle's and Tuomela's accounts introduced in the section above, and Gilbert's joint commitments which I will turn to later, he does not introduce new or additional mental entities. Bratman offers a basic thesis which he later adapts into a compressed basic thesis, in which modest sociality is portrayed as the interlocking of individual planning agency. In a complex and detailed way, Bratman spells out sufficient conditions for shared action to be constructed<sup>36</sup>:

- (i) intentions on the part of each in favour of the joint activity,
- (ii) intentions on the part of each in favour of the joint activity by way of intentions of each in (i) and by way of relevant mutual responsiveness in sub-intention and action,
- (iii) intentions on the part of each in favour of the joint activity by way of meshing sub-plans of the intentions of each in (i),
- (iv) beliefs of each that, if the intentions of each in (i) persist, the participants will perform the joint activity by way of those intentions and relevant mutual responsiveness | sub-intention an action,
- (v) beliefs of each that the intentions of each in (i) are persistence interdependent
- (vi) the intentions of each in (i) are persistence interdependent, and
- (vii) common knowledge of (i)-(vii)

Finally, the connection between shared intention and joint action satisfies the connection condition just in case:

- (viii) the connection between the shared intention (as in (i)-(vii) and the joint action involves public mutual responsiveness in sub-intention and action that

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<sup>36</sup> As opposed to Searle and Tuomela for example who seek to identify where collective intentionality resides.

tracks the end intended by each of the joint activity by way of the intentions of each (in (i)) in favour of the joint activity.” (Bratman, 2014, p. 85)

Here presented is Bratman’s heart piece to his content-based account: he infamously allows for intentions to take the form ‘I intend that we X’. And further, that intentions with such a content are basic to the intentionality of the collective action (Schweikard & Schmid, 2013). An example of a shared intention for Bratman is thus that Clara and Randy both intend that they dance together, from which the analysis above, in which the mashing sub-plans of the agents involved follow. Often this theoretical hypothesis for joint intention has received empirically inclined criticism: can we really intend that someone other than ourselves does something? But also: how much of a dance is ‘planned’ and how much is spontaneous adaptation to one another? Can we really say that I plan a conversation, or plan to be part of a conversation? And is that planning akin to the planning occurring when dancing a choreography? Bratman’s notion of intending that we X is counter-intuitive, it has been criticised as violating the conditions under which one can only intend, control and be able to achieve one’s own action and not the actions of others (Schweikard & Schmid, 2013, section 3.1).<sup>37</sup>

Bratman’s theory shows how the atomistic formalisation of shared agency grows ever more complex. This however is not, because every-day shared actions need be ever more complex, but rather that the light he wishes to shed on these phenomena is motivated by atomism. The setting in which he sets his investigation is such that increasingly complex models and narratives are necessary to explain how agents come together in action. His account moves from what is assumed to be basic to what is sought out to be complex.

Although such an objection might come from a rather naïve place, reading Bratman has left me with the question ‘does this detailed analytic account bring us closer to understanding our everyday over-the-counter chit-chat or the spontaneous dance in the rain I had with my neighbours 5-year-old? Or does it rather wash us away from the phenomenon that we are hoping to be in contact with? Can Bratman’s theory of planning agency account for what happens between people on social media, how likes or posts come to have social relevance and meaning? It appears the models introduced so far may take meaning creation and making sense of each other for granted.

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<sup>37</sup> Further Bratman, not unlike Searle’s account is accused of presupposing sociality, in this case the jointness of the intention for his notion of a we-intention and thereby being circular (ibid.).

The point here is not to undermine Bratman's account and the philosophically detailed and rigid entertainment of the factors in play, but to note that much of the complexity of his account of shared action resides in the assumptions it is built on. In his case, these assumptions include that the paradigmatic case of action is individual and basic, thereby confirming to the atomistic point of view. Bratman's sense of basicness concerns amongst others, as I have demonstrated, assumptions made about the planning structures at play in action. He assumes that basic planning structures find their place in the explanation of shared action and therefore sociality.

More explicit than, for example, Searle and Tuomela, Bratman insist on an individualistic stance towards shared action and is demonstrably under the grip of atomism. The paragraphs above show how individual and basic action to Bratman's mind is extendable to shared action and thereby sociality. It is worth noting that all three theorists so far seem to be conflating shared, joint and collective action with sociality. This point is one raised by Beth Preston whose critique I will return to at the end of the next section. Before moving on to higher order criticisms relating to the conflation of social phenomena and treating them as one, it is important to entertain plural subject theories of collective action.

## Subject

Margaret Gilbert's theory is the most prominent account of *joint commitment*. Connected to the question as to whether it is feasible to ascribe agency to groups in the way one would to individual agents, Gilbert takes collectivity in action, or sharedness of action to arise through normative relations between agents. Two agents who are jointly committed to an action, somewhat owe each other to behave in certain ways. If one party fails to do so, the other would have a right to 'rebuke' the former. Joint commitments are irreducible to individual attitudes, and 'emulate' – if felicitous – a plural subject which can be the bearer of intentional states, as exemplified in the case of a group belief (Chant, et al., 2014).

In sum, there is reason to think that the following is a general feature of situations in which it is appropriate to speak of a group belief: **once a group belief that p has emerged or been formed**, members of the group will regard themselves as somehow *obliged* to not deny that p or say things which propose the denial of p in further discussion with group members. If they do say or imply that not-p, they must give some sort of explanation, or qualify by saying something like 'in my personal opinion, not-p'. If they violate the obligation, they stand to be rebuked. (Gilbert, 1992, p. 292)

As opposed to other views introduced, Gilbert's account is directed at beliefs and not intentions. Only after two beliefs had by individuals are merged and a group belief has been formed, agents are jointly committed and the social phenomenon of acting together is enabled. It is not clear however, whether the section above is compatible to holding that joint commitments are irreducible, for it seems that both individual attitudes as well as group attitudes can be maintained as in Gilbert's example. Only that the group commitment or belief is the stronger commitment. The individual who steps out of this group belief has to explain their divergent belief. A plural subject is portrayed as a rather rigid or concrete entity, in which being a part of something like a zero-sum game. One is either fully in or fully out. Gilbert discusses instances of social interaction, such as communication as an example:

Here, then, is the beginning of a theory of conversation. **When people talk together in conversation**, at least **when they make assertions** as opposed to questioning, they 'put up' propositions for joint acceptance or rejection. Dependent on how others react, **a given proposition is jointly accepted or rejected**. Wrinkle: some propositions may be kept on hold, so to speak. One person says: 'I think I should avoid all Sagittarians in the future.' His companion is sceptical of astrology and just says 'Hmmm'. In a definitely not agreeing tone. These two, one might say, **do not (as a group) 'know what to think' about the proposition in question**. (p.295f)

One might want to ask here whether one commits to talk together in conversation – albeit the strange expression – as one commits to carrying a piano together, whether conversation would better be conceived of as a willingness for interaction, negotiation, a hither and thither between beliefs of participants and therefore individual agents. Or otherwise, what is really left when two people, converse together? Are they not already doing something *together*, regardless to whether or not what they believe as a group about any given proposition?<sup>38</sup>

Another case example Gilbert uses to elicit her idea of joint commitment is that of a reading group in which the plural subject jointly accepts a belief about a literary work, whilst it is not necessary that either of the individual members believes what is said. Confronted with worries not unlike the ones above raised, she contends that:

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<sup>38</sup> The way in which Gilbert presents the case of communication is circular in that in order to communicate one already needs a commitment, but in order to receive at a commitment one needs to communicate.

My main claim here is that the negotiation of joint view model applies to and can help explain what transpires in **clear cases of conversations**. It seems also to fit the poetry discussion case. (In both cases 'negotiation' may seem too strong a term; nothing like a hard bargaining may occur, or be in place.[...] The poetry discussion case, then may be argued to find a close analogue in many informal conversations. **A model of group belief derived in part from the poetry case may be expected to apply to much less formal and more common kinds of situations of everyday life.** (Gilbert, 1992, p. 298)

Although her theory and the actions she examines are less abstract than in the theories introduced before, in that she seeks a connection to everyday examples, her example of communication appears artificial. What distinguishes her from the other theories revisited earlier, is that she seeks for a paradigmatic case of collective action to make her point. And yet she does not fully escape the atomistic mind set in that she understands her model of joint commitment as "a basic concept of group belief which applies both to large and small groups" (Gilbert, 1992, p. 294). But is joining a plural subject in the instance of a conversation the same as joining an institution, such as the United Nations? With which certainty can she say that? Is her idea of a 'clear cases of conversations' straight-forwardly indicative as a paradigm case of other forms of plural agency. And what becomes clearer in this paragraph is that Gilbert introduces joint commitment as a mental state in that group agent switch. She concludes her book as containing an argument against individualism, in which she seems to say that singular action and plural action are two distinct phenomena whose conceptual schemes do not necessarily overlap:

The result of this book clearly goes against strong analytic individualism. Our collectivity concepts are plural subject concepts. [...] **If to simple analysis about what is true of most individuals in some set we add wrinkles about common knowledge or reasons having to do with everybody else we still do not get to plural subjectivity.** It emerged that the best one can do by way of analysis of the plural subject concept is to allude to a set of persons who understand their wills to be jointly committed to some cause. The notion of jointly committed wills comes from outside the conceptual scheme of singular agency." (Gilbert, 1992, p.435f)

Gilbert contends that her argument clearly goes against individualism, but the way in which she outlines her case examples is still under the grip of atomism. She appears to tackle how it could

possibly be agents act together and concludes that something within the individual, a mental attitude at the bottom of singular agency, needs to shift to enable plural agency. Although Gilbert entertains contextual examples, her analysis appeals to come to a result that is still compatible with the atomistic paradigm.

Just as all the other theories presented here, Gilbert's view is suspected to be guilty of metaphysical circularity (Schweikard & Schmid, 2013). And as the other views, the claim is that two agents showing willingness to enter into joint commitment presupposes the exact sense of collective intentionality that Gilbert wishes to explain. One of the paradoxes arising from the literature seems to be how social attitudes enabling agents to act together can be explained *from or as opposed* to their individual origin.<sup>39</sup>

With the idea of invoking atomism as a point of view I have tried to present here, how much of the problems with explaining collective action might reside in the way accounts try to conform or develop a paradigm of individual agency. And this paradigm is understood to be a concept of action which is isolated from sociality. The latter is then tried to be metaphysically grasped by alluding to mental changes in the individual to make her action part of a group's action. Starting the investigation of acting together from an atomistic paradigm invokes, at its best, a picture of collective atomism. The assumptions affirmed from this point of view on the explanation of social phenomena results in collective action being treated as *one* phenomenon, in which what is to be explained is the changes to individual action. In setting the aim the way the theories I presented do, ever more complex and often counter-intuitive theories arise whose explanatory force subsides before many of the nuances of acting together.

Consider, is having a conversation the same as all other forms of doing something together? Are we equally committed to the conclusion of a reading group, as we are to a political conviction? Cannot individual action be social in some sense? When we are talking about collective action do we then mean two people acting together, interacting, acting as a group or as a subject of intentionality? Is it likely to find one theory to explain them all on similar lines? Just by entertaining the accounts above, different senses of collective action arise. Searle's example of running to shelter is a more extended group of people and he points to different senses in which the very same action can be understood differently. Bratman considers dancing together in the same breath as loving each other. Gilbert reflects on plural subjects arising conversations as well as in

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<sup>39</sup> One such criticism is, for example, Laitinen's (2014) *problem of the first belief*. If it is counter-intuitive to conceive of a believer as having just one belief, but groups are understood to form via commitments pertaining to beliefs, then a group at some point will have to start by having at least one belief. He (Laitinen, 2014, p. 45) concludes: "If it is conceptually or psychologically impossible for the group to acquire its first belief, it can never come to acquire any beliefs at all."

institutions. And Tuomela's account appears to not be directed at any particular examples. And yet, the run for an all-explaining theory does not allow one to see the nuances of social action. To end on a note that returns to the quote I opened with, the accounts of collective action considered try to conceptualise phenomena of sociality in action, but their models fail to capture the many nuances of acting together.

### Zooming in on individual atomism

As I have outlined earlier, the conviction of individual action being the paradigm from which sociality is built and explained is inherited from accounts seeking to explain individual action. Atomistic perspectives on social phenomena as entertained contain residues from the theories of (individual) action. The role of intention, the status of bodily movements, the idea of isolated and basic action as paradigm; and the considerations about the ontological status of action including activities, processes and events, are but a fraction of the things discussed in action theory. Zooming in on the mechanics of an action per se *from* which all action can be explained has been the prime target in the debate on action.

One account on action that has been coined the standard view has been brought forward by Davidson, following a Humean line:

Both Davidson's own thesis and the Humean views that it encouraged rapidly evolved through **rational selection to form what has come to be known as the Standard View**. The view in question has two distinct components: a theory of action and a thesis concerning the reasons for which actions are performed. The first maintains that **actions are events that are identical to movements of the body caused, in a 'non-deviant' way, by a combination of beliefs and so called pro attitudes**; the second states that the **primary reason for which an intentional action is performed is whichever combination caused the bodily movement in question**. (D'Oro & Sandis, 2013, p. 22)

Just as with regards to collective action, actions performed individually are made out to be one concrete and regular phenomenon. The above way of answering the question as to what an action is has been taken as a starting point for the explanation of all actions possible. The move from the abstract and concrete, individual action, shedded -- to a supposed analytic benefit -- of any context beyond technical terminology, has been understood as the paradigm case of action.

Davidson after Danto introduces the abstract and concrete nature of *an* action, standing as placeholder for all possible action, as basic or primitive:

Our primitive actions [...] **mere movements of the body – these are all the actions there are. We never do more than move our bodies; the rest is up to nature.** (Davidson, 1971/2001, p.59)

And many enquiries into the phenomenon of human action were sought out to explain and show what distinguishes an action performed intentionally from one that is not, or in other words an action from a mere happening:

The problem of action is to explicate the contrast between what an agent does and what merely happens to him, **or between the bodily movements that he makes and those that occur without his making them.** (Frankfurt, 1978, p. 157)

So, fairly quickly the atomistic angle taken on action is presented. In order to explain or understand action, it suggests itself to take a paradigm case, such as a basic, individually and intentionally performed movement of the body, shows how it is linked to intentionality of that individual and one will be successful in explaining any other possible action. The quotes above are linking back to the question posited by Wittgenstein, that I opened the chapter with. Is there anything added to someone's performing a bodily movement that might be suggestive of a mental precursor to it? Intended or not, Wittgenstein's question might have enabled the setting of the atomistic perspective, which Davidson took to be answerable as follows:

When I say nothing has to be added to my arm going up to make it a case of my raising my arm, I don't mean no further conditions have to be satisfied to insure that the rising of my arm is a particular case of my raising my arm; this much is obvious, since it can easily happen that my arm goes up without my raising it. **But this addition is an addition to the description we give of the event, not an addition to the event itself.** So what my claim comes to is this: of the many **individual** events that are risings of my arm, some are cases of my raising my arm; and none of the cases of my raising my arm are events that include more than my arm going up. **Nothing is added to the event itself that makes it into an action.**

Why should we think otherwise? No one believes something must be added to a tree to make it an oak; some trees just are oaks. One reason we may be inclined to think mere arm risings can't be arm raisings is that we want to maintain the distinction between what an agent undergoes—what happens to him or her— and what the agent does, and we think of arm risings as something that happens to us, while raising an arm is something we do. But the distinction between **doings and sufferings** is not endangered if we allow that some arm risings are arm raisings, since we remain free to distinguish between arm risings that are deeds and arm risings in which agency plays no direct part. (Davidson, 1987/2004, p. 101f)

Davidson's way of answering this question has been criticised and debated at length and has contributed largely to the debate in the philosophy of action. Criticism however, was rarely focused on the atomistic assumptions made about individual and basic attributes of action. Take for example Alvarez and Hyman, who take issue with Davidson's categorisation of actions as events:

Thus, we shall argue that bodily movements<sub>i</sub> are not actions; and that bodily movements<sub>τ</sub> are not events. We shall take it to be uncontroversial that bodily movements<sub>τ</sub> are actions; that bodily movements<sub>i</sub> are events; that if bodily movements<sub>i</sub> are actions, they are the same actions as the corresponding bodily movements<sub>τ</sub>; and that if bodily movements<sub>τ</sub> are events, then either they are the same events as the corresponding bodily movements<sub>i</sub>, or their causes. For example, **if A raises his arm, A's raising his arm is an action; A's arm's rising is an event; if A's arm's rising is an action, it is the same action as A's raising his arm; and if A's raising his arm is an event, then either it is the same event as A's arm's rising or its cause.** (Alvarez & Hyman, 1998, p. 228)

Like in the debate on collective action, the premises of the successive arguments assume atomism. Alvarez and Hyman agree to the idea of discussing abstract notions of action, isolated from embeddedness into sociality. The paragraph above expresses their model of agent causation in which actions are presented as relative concrete movements of the body. They take the example of an arm raiser to make the case for a generalised claim about agent causation. The action is isolated and basic and an individual's bodily movement is taken to be the action in question, without this action having any meaningful, observational, contextual or social status. Their theory

thus relies on an atomistic paradigm of an action. This means that although they highlight a metaphysical nuance in the constitution of an action, they do so from a paradigm of action that is isolated and basic.

Accounts discussed up until this point shows how atomistic assumptions have been inherited throughout the succession of arguments in theories conceptualising action. All of the views start from a paradigm example of action reduced to one constituent, often bodily movements which are analysed and discussed isolated from situational or social context. They argue about the specifics of a paradigm view on action that was most influentially put forward by Davidson, replacing shortcomings of his theory by other theories. Questions about actions are abstractly addressed, adhering to an answer that will support one model of all possible actions. The examined examples also evoke a shared conviction that this is the most useful way of framing questions about action. Starting from a relatively basic action, performed by one agent in isolation, reduced to a bodily movement such as an arm raiser with little allusion to why it would have been a meaningful action is portrayed as key to unlocking the mystery of all action. What is left for philosophers to explore is how assumed features of action are aligned. Davidson, as well as Alvarez and Hyman take arm raisers to be the example by means of which constituents at play in performing actions can be elucidated. As we will see, the setting of the atomistic angle remains the same even for theorists who distinctively disagree with understanding actions as events.

Let me move to a demonstration of how process-views, i.e. theories in the philosophy of action that assume actions to be like processes. Because they explore the conceptual distinctions between actions and activities allowing for actions to unfold and stand in part-whole relations, one could describe them as embracing a holistic stance. Thompson's (2008) account explores action explanation as a naïve and ongoing trajectory, because to his mind "the type of explanation of action at stake in action theory, whether naïve or sophisticated, is uniformly a matter of **locating the action explained in what might be called a developing process.**" (Thompson, 2008, p. 132).<sup>40</sup> He could be considered as embracing holism with regards to two aspects: metaphysically, he holds processes to appeal to a bigger whole into which smaller units are subsumed, and with reference to naïve rationalisation, as he allows for rationalisations of action that relates to wholes, rather

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<sup>40</sup> I discuss Thompson in detail here, but there are other process views focussing on distinguishing actions from activities. See for example Hornsby's paper on *Action and Activity* (2012) which I discuss in further detail in section 4.2 of chapter 4. Or alternatively, Steward's (1997, p. 65) account of composite events in *The Ontology of Mind*: "The obvious move for the dynamic strategist to make here is to say that though composite events are not themselves changes in objects, they are composed of such changes. Picnics, for example, might be said to be composed of various runnings, playings, eatings, etc., and wars of various movements of troops and artillery, killings, bombings, and so on. If the dynamic strategist is to make a place for composite events in this way, then, her overall thesis will have to be a disjunctive one: events either are changes in objects (broadly construed) or are ultimately composed of changes in such objects.

than more basic actions or their constituents. Thompson's criticism of the philosophy of action further, amounts to a charge of atomism at times:

That such position seems strange, in spite of the ubiquity and seeming transparency of naïve rationalisation, **is in part a consequence of received conceptions of intentional action itself, above all, of the tendency of students of practical philosophy to view individual human actions as discrete or atomic or pointlike or eye-blink-like units that might as well be instantaneous** for all that it matters to the theory. (Thompson, 2008, p. 91)

Thompson criticises here the conceptions and theories of actions as being discrete, atomic or instantaneous. He charges practical philosophy as frustrating any attempt to seek for action explanation in the ordinary ways we rationalise action. He criticised the discrete or atomic assumptions made about action as residing in the narrowness of the event-view. In opposition to event views, he introduces his process view. His model highlights the nuances of actions in their relation to unfolding processes, that have not been discussed explicitly in this form before him. His approach to action varies distinctively from the earlier explored views understanding actions as events.

Thus, for example, in the treatment of action in the second part of this work, everything will depend on **viewing action as something that has parts and runs through phases**; a grasp of the nature of action will reside in the grasp of the specific type of unity these phases exhibit, and moreover on our seeing that **a certain rustic kind of understanding comes precisely from bringing the manifold phases into this unity; thus, I hope we will lay our hands on the peculiar mode of dependence of (some) action on instrumental thought.**" (Thompson, 2008, p. 11)

Thompson's description of action here verges on a holistic understanding in which he observes the connections between a whole and its parts. He mentions the various constituent actions synthesising or merging into the whole of the action, thereby acknowledging the temporal extension of an action:

If we reach for the last and shortest of these as our preferred illustration, as the one that makes everything especially clear – and proceed to dwell, for example, on its supposed identity with an apparently unanalysable *moving of a finger*, rather than its equally attractive and unlikely resolution into *reaching*

*for, raising, aiming and firing a gun, to say nothing of checking to see if the victim is done for and repeating as necessary – it is, I will suggest, because we are moved by considerations alien to philosophy of action, however legitimate they may be from the point of view of, say, a physiologist investigating “voluntary” as opposed to “reflex” movement.* The nature of intentional action, or the kind of being-subject-of-an-event that characterizes a rational agent and a person, resides in the peculiar “synthesis” that unites the various parts and phases on something like house building, for example, mixing mortar, laying bricks, hammering nails, etc. This synthesis is rendered explicit in naïve rationalization, which brings them successively to the one formula “I’m building a house.” **But the synthesis can be exhibited, I will suggest, even in the moving of a finger.** (Thompson, 2008, p. 91)

Thompson’s theory of action is a unique way of contemplating a holistic stance on action that reconciles completed individual action with process-bound composite acts which are procedurally performed synthesising the whole. He further presents a novel way of understanding how the metaphysics of action could link to ordinary or naïve ways of rationalising action.

But of course, the resolution of a *deed* into heterogenous organ-like parts, **and of these parts into further such parts, will come to a limit, no matter how the intended notion of articulation of heterogenous parts is rightly explained.** The suspicion I want to raise, in the present section, is that resolution is not necessary, **and that wherever a completed individual action is intentional under a description of the sort of Anscombe and Davidson have contemplated it will be possible to find a true naïve rationalization in which that description appears in the *explanans*.** (Thompson, 2008, p.107)

Thompson suggests here that the descriptions Anscombe and Davidson have taken as pointing to an event-ontology can be re-formulated as parts or trajectories of naïve action realisations. His view, to my mind, challenges the accepted paradigm of action the most. His theory is holistic, although one might want to call it individually holistic, as sociality plays an implicit role. His examples of naïve rationalisation include for example pushing a stone from position A to position Z, in which all positions before Z can be rationalised as ‘I am pushing the stone to Z’ by the agent. Similarly, when being ask why one is breaking the eggs, ‘I am making an omelette’ perfectly rationalises the action in expressing the synthesis the composite action of breaking the eggs is working towards with ‘making the omelette’ being the synthesis. All his examples however,

although they appeal to how actions are ordinarily rationalised stay relatively atomistic in that they entertain individual and isolated actions as basic instances of continuous movements.<sup>41</sup>

Another process-view, introduced here because it is the only account explicitly contemplating collective action as well as individual action is Rowland Stout (2005). Stout's conceptualisation of action zooms in on the quality of achievements of goals, from which he develops a process-based account of action that – to his mind – extends to collective action, too.

**“An agent achieves *E* if and only if the achievement of *E* results from a process that is the rationalization of a potentiality which is described in terms of sensitivity characteristic of intentional agency.”** (Stout, 2005, p. 94)

Stout's account at this point is similar to Thompson's in that it categorises action as a process in which rationalisation can be understood as a trajectory. He straight forwardly applies this view to collective action, thereby proposing to move individualistic to a more collective starting point on action.

Assuming that intentionally **achieving *E* can be identified with achieving *E* with the intention to achieve *E***, as I argued earlier in the chapter, then we have an account that boils down to saying that an agent achieves ***E* with the intention to achieve *E* if and only if the achievement of *E* belongs to a behaviour process that is adaptable to what should be done for in order to be achieved**. This can be extended to shared intentions as follows:

A group of agents achieves *E* with the shared intention of achieving *E* if and only if the achievement of *E* belongs to a cooperative **behavioural process that is adaptable to what should be done in order for *E* to be achieved**.

This account does not invoke some super-mind that the individuals in the group share. But it does invoke the idea of a super-process of behaving that the different individuals partake of. This may be an easier idea to accept. The process is distributed across the activity of several people. But this activity is adaptable to a **single goal**. And to the extent that the adaptability requires planning, coordination, determination and re-determination of means, **all**

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<sup>41</sup> “Even actions that, like arm-raising, do not divide in this way need not, after all be viewed as pointlike. To show this properly, one would need a clear view on the intended class of descriptions, an apt division of cases and perhaps a true theory of vagueness. I will illustrate the claim with a provisional discussion of continuous acts of moving of moving something—giving a turn to a crank, say, or pulling a curtain open, or drawing a bow, or pushing a stone, or raising a hand.” (Thompson, 2008, p. 107)

**these aspects of planning must be understood collectively. This is what it means to work together.** (my emphasis in bold, p. 115 f)

What is new in Stout's theory however, is the idea of a super-process arising to pursue a single goal. He embraces the point of view that having it right with individual action, will lead to an explanation of collective or shared agency in which in Stout's case the process characteristics of action is highlighted. Both introduced process-views move away from the metaphysical constitution of action proposed according to the atomistic paradigm. And yet, some atomistic residue remains, as their theories remain individualistic in the ways in which they approach the problem of action and collective action.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have evoked theories or models of joint action as being limited by the atomistic paradigm of action they embrace. This, so I demonstrated ramifications: collective action is portrayed as a homogenous phenomenon. Mechanical conceptualisations of acting together as portrayed in the models above, lose many nuanced senses to phenomena of sociality. I have entertained theories of social action in a way that illuminates how problems in explaining collective action arise from working with a confused paradigm of isolated and basic actions. It is supposed that once theories can explain the archetype, isolated and basic, all other actions will be explainable on the same grounds. Isolated and basic action, performed by an individual, is taken to be conceptually prior to complex actions, may they be individually or collectively performed.<sup>42</sup>

Just as I have asked earlier, whether it is apt to think of collective action as a homogeneous phenomenon, it is worth asking the same question for individual actions. How do actions such as a hypothetical Mowgli's 'moving through the jungle' and 'sending a text' to a friend compare? And how does the latter compare to actions such as 'writing a thesis', 'building a house', and 'saving the planet'? And what have we gained if we reduce all of them to an archetypal structure that we assume to underlie them all? Leist's Introduction to his collection on *Action in Context* offers a similar criticism and aim at bringing together a variety of original, holistic perspectives to the study of actions:

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<sup>42</sup> See also Preston (2016, p. 32) position on the issue: "On the interpretation I favour, however, it means that joint action and individual action are equiprimordial modes of human activity that must be integrated side by side and in interaction with each other from the start." I read her as questioning the rigid distinction between individual and joint action, as well as the conflation of the two. Working side by side with senses in which we do something alone or together, shaping our idea of action is the starting point she suggests and I am sympathetic to.

Why should we think that all actions are equal and, more to the point, that they are equally simple? **Like all human manifestations, acting can be simple, but it can also be very complicated, and the advantage of holism lies in its acceptance of this complexity, presupposed even for the most basic elements of acting.** One could only speak of a 'holistic' theory of action if the dependencies hinted at above were to become visible, whereas the standard theory of action has done its best to suppress them. (Leist, 2007, p. 3)<sup>43</sup>

The dependencies that Leist wishes to become visible are the dependencies between individual and collective action, the possibility of plurality of scientific and other explanations, as well as a variety of explanatory angles that can be cast on the very same action.

One might want to criticise me here by asking a) what is the problem with atomism as a point of view if it serves the conceptual analysis of the concept of action?, and further, b) what service does (social) holism do, if it entails that we get rid of the hope for unifying the explanation of action?

Atomism per se is not a problem, but I would suggest that it needs to serve a purpose in explanation. There may well be areas of action explanation in which starting from atomism can help to design a model of action. I am thinking here of robots and artificial agents, learning to move their limbs in certain ways of performing certain actions, starting from a relatively reduced form to add ever more complexity. What I wanted to challenge is under which premise atomism is the most useful and only philosophical perspective on human action and upon re-assessing these premises, whether it is the only starting point worth considering. As it stands the traditional philosophy of action serves mainly the purpose of refining its theories rooted in atomism, for other fields who work with action conceptions, such as in cognitive sciences, sociology, or psychology do not draw on philosophical accounts, for their sciences have either developed away from homogeneous explanations or have concentrated on digging deeper into the constitution of mind. And one question that I take to be hovering over the atomistic perspective is whether the term social action is reserved for actions in which more than one agent is involved, or whether it is a question about different ways of *seeing* involvement. Is the concept of action highlighted in a different sense when we are talking about collective action then when we are talking about individual action? In Chapter 3 and 4 I will entertain a perspective on actions that entertains holism as a starting point and explores how sociality is intertwined with understanding actions. Social

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<sup>43</sup> And yet, I would argue that many of the chapters in his collection and the fresh perspectives contained in them, reside in the very same atomistic assumptions that prevents us from understanding actions holistically.

holism might be a way of capturing phenomena of sociality and acting together, by starting from real life situated action, learning from ordinary recognition of action and moving from there towards aspects of actions worth highlighting. By acknowledging senses of sociality of actions, i.e. a heterogeneous understanding of action in sociality, what needs in depth explaining is precisely those actions that are performed alone, in solitude and comprise nothing but the moving of an arm or a finger.

## Chapter 3 ◦ Action as Gestalt

“[...] [A]ction concepts are learned through a rich variety of paradigms. If it is asked, how can we properly speak of sequences of movements like lightning a cigarette or jumping out the window as actions, the answer is that *that* is what is meant by an action and, consequently, that *that* is what is seen or observed.”

(Louch, 1966, p. 119)

### 3.1 Introduction to an alternative starting point

One is now in a better position to see that there is much to be learned about actions that is not contained in the atomistic analysis of action. I doubt that actions are a homogeneous and concrete thing and that their manifold appearance and experiences are reducible to a basic and isolated action *per se*, or for that matter any uniform constituent of *all* actions. I doubt that there is the concept of action that finds resonance in all empirical instances of action and wonder, why investigations of action in philosophy have almost unanimously considered actions in isolation. I do, however, believe that there are many reasons to explore actions and their explanations beyond the atomistic conception, most importantly in their sociality. Further, I think there is a way of evoking action conceptions as a means of organising the world of intersubjective dynamics we live in. And now the burden is mine to explore which alternative perspective can be entertained and how the study of actions can benefit from it. To envision an alternative point of view, I will explore the ordinary ways in which agents ‘deal’ with actions. One could, for example, ask when and how actions are encountered in everyday contexts, examine the link to descriptions in language, one of the primary sources for the investigation of action; or highlight how understanding action is tied to meaning and the context in which it occurs.

I will commence by evoking ordinary engagement with actions to propose an alternative and holistic perspective on action that recognises the ways in which actions are encountered. Further, I suggest that actions are described and accounted for in virtue of their holistic properties. Descriptions also play an important role in atomistic accounts, because they have been used to theorise actions as falling under an event-ontology (Davidson, 1967/2001; Davidson, 1985/2001; Millgram, 2009; Millgram, 2009; Ricœur, 1992). I will try, however, to create a space for doing philosophy of action without thinking about descriptions of actions in this purely linguistic way. Descriptions on my account are much closer to what Sandis (2012, pp. 11,147) introduces as Husserlian *modes of presentation*, i.e. accounts of how an action strikes one. A mode of

presentation thematises an action holistically, from which it can be 'updated' or zoomed-in on. Actions thus, are necessarily perceived in some meaningful sense and rarely from a view of nowhere. The next chapter, chapter 4, will introduce a variety of angles that can be taken on meaningful social action.

In this chapter, I will suggest that the immediate encounter of action is holistic. And from the whole that is perceived, one can examine either the constituents or the potential consequences. But perceptual holism alone is not enough: in the second part of the chapter, I will focus on the way in which sociality is intertwined with encountering actions. As opposed to atomism, I suggest that, before one can even propose the concept of action to be analysed in isolation, like atomists do, one will have been influenced by the ordinary ways in which we see something *as* an action *in* a certain sense. Atomists then, in my view, rely on an action Gestalt that they deny in their analysis.

The second half of the chapter will demonstrate how it is possible to set a link that moves from discussing *perceiving* actions holistically to *conceiving* of them via their embeddedness in sociality. At the heart of the exploration lies the idea that understanding actions resides in an agent's enculturation into a world and practice of meaningful conduct, in the experience of everyday life. What is encountered as an action, I take it, is affected by our aptness for understanding the world in terms of meaningful conduct, which in turn is informed by a variety of senses of sociality. A conclusive theory of action should reflect that actions and their conceptions arise in a deeply social world of experience, informed by sociality and local practices. The holism I evoke thus, will be a social holism.

The argument will proceed in two steps: the first is to describe how encountering actions is conceptually holistic, the second is to draw a connection to socially learned aspects of actions that affect how we conceive of ourselves and others as acting. The latter step adds an epistemic dimension to the ways in which actions are understood and explained. Moving towards a mindset in the study of the phenomenon of human action that takes situational and social context as paramount to seeing something as an action, I will progressively carve out just how intertwined conceptions of actions and sociality are. To the result that the term social action, will no longer be used for actions necessarily performed with others, but simply for actions in general. Chapter 4 will introduce senses of sociality of action in which even the most isolated performance of an act can be socially holistic and thus considered as social action. Chapter 5 will explore *in situ* how acts of communication on social media are understood as socially relevant although most of them might be performed as 'clicks' in isolation from others. Chapter 5 further examines, how 'clicks' are social actions that lead to effects which might not be intended and juxtaposes the 'thing posted' to the 'posting'. Each step along the way is meant to distance oneself from favouring an

abstract, unifying and discrete idea of a basic and isolated paradigm action, towards a recognition of the holistic and social threads which interweave conceptions of action.

### 3.2 Gestalt – the analogy

The first step of the argument for a holistic perspective on action starts with thinking and writing about how actions are encountered. Imagine you are entering a marketplace: children are playing, people are sunbathing, enjoying a cold drink, a couple of teenagers dangling their feet into the water of a gurgling fountain. What makes us see these actions? It is hard to pin down what exactly it is one does when sunbathing. How did one identify them as doing so? Is it their position on the marketplace? The fact that they are applying sun lotion? Or is it the way in which they contentedly jut their faces towards the sun? Is it one thing they do or a correlation of things that makes us see them in this way? What seems to be the basis for the examples of descriptions of actions that one encounters people as being involved in, appears to be a variety of things, particularities of behaviour mixed with information about the situation or setting upon which one understands another's doings as an instance of sunbathing or drink-enjoying. The impression strikes us as a meaningful action of one or the other kind. What exactly it is that strikes us, however, is not necessarily determinable. Although one might be in the position to answer questions such as 'What makes you think they are bathing rather than accepting the sunshine?' or 'How do you know they are enjoying these drinks?', the encounter of the action is immediate and so is the choice of a mode of presentation. And although in these examples, one has only imagined what these actions could look like, I suggest one has an immediate picture in one's head. This is not the least because one can recall how actions like these *typically* look.

Throughout this chapter, I entertain a variety of examples to elaborate on the phenomenological immediacy with which we perceive actions as instances of a meaningful unit of conduct in a context, as well as how quickly this registration can change to something else. Instead of relying on imagination, examples in this chapter will gear towards showing how action is perceived as meaningful (or the opposite) in direct segregation of its context.

#### Example: The Lady in the Street

In juxtaposition to generic examples of actions such as sunbathing or drink enjoying, consider examples of actions in which the immediate impression changes: a person is walking down the street, alone, and is energetically talking to something or someone that is not immediately visible. She may be raising her hand, gesturing, shaking her head, then nodding, she might look angry at some point and relieved at another. Whether one encounters this lady as a schizophrenic or a business lady depends on the contextualised features

of the action one encounters. And indeed, one might think it is odd for the person to be talking to herself in the streets in such an obvious manner, before one understands that she is wearing a headset that in turn is connected to her mobile phone allowing her to refresh her make-up, buy a coffee and take the bus to the city – whilst talking to someone on the phone.

What is seen, understood and described to be the action in this example depends on a variety of holistically entertained features. It is important to dwell on the experience of something striking us one way, whereas really it might be different. What was initially perceived as an act of X, might then be seen as an act of Y. Or it might be X in some sense *and* Y in another. Compare alternatively, cases in which the sense of the action changes in the following way:

Example: (In)appropriate Nudity

A person in your visual field starts undressing until they are nude. I suppose that whether one conceives this action as offensive, rude or absolutely appropriate, depends on features external to their actions as much as it depends on features internal to the action. Whereas on a high street or at a playground one would be alarmed by this behaviour, possibly doubting the sanity of the person, in a nude drawing session or at a German naturism lake, one would conceive of it differently.

At a naturism lake in Germany, one would not only perceive the action differently, but also describe it differently. A description that contains ‘a mad man stripping on high street’ is not the same as a ‘person modeling for a nude drawing session’. And neither of these descriptions is identical to an explanation of the movements involved in the undressing. Whereas the movements involved might well be the same, they carry a different meaning in each of these situations. It is arguable that a holistic encounter of an action includes the identification and recognition of an action in its immediate situation, which in turn bestows the encountered with an immediate sense of meaning. A mode of presentation is chosen. It is the act of undressing against the background of a drawing workshop that makes one see the action in a certain way and the act of undressing at a public park that makes one see it differently.

To explore what happens on the level of action encounter in the examples of *The Lady in the Street* and *(In)Appropriate Nudity*, I draw an analogy to Gestalt Psychology. The idea of a Gestalt is herein used to fathom the way in which doings of others, as well as one’s own, are subsumed into a meaningful whole. The analogous use of Gestalt pertains to perception as well as action to highlight a holistic perspective on action encounters. I do not wish to endorse Gestalt psychology as a theory of perception. Rather, I use the idea of Gestalt as a phenomenological means to explore *how* we encounter actions in relation to their context. It emphasises how the mode in which an

action is presented, is subject to the interest that is taken. Seeing something as an action in this or that way is thus conceived of as an achievement.

I commence by providing a background of the idea of Gestalt. The field of Gestalt Psychology gained momentum at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as an explorative study of human perception. The German term *Gestalt* entails the idea of perception as ‘grouping together’ or ‘putting together’ a whole (Ash, 1995, p. 112). As an antidote to mainstream theories that focussed on the encounter of constituents in perception, Gestalt psychology stresses the holistic character of perception, suggesting a paradigm shift in approaching the study of perception.<sup>44</sup> Originally introduced by Wertheimer (1923/1938), Köhler (1929/1970) and Koffka (1935) and strongly criticised in the sciences of perception, the principles of Gestalt psychology are today used in visual design for human-computer interaction, in marketing (Soegaard, n.d.) and psychotherapy (Axelsson & Wheeler, 2015; Wollants, 2012) amongst others. A central claim of the Gestalt idea is that ‘natural organisation’ in perception takes place in *immediate* response to a context, segregating the perceived *Gestalt* from other contextual features (Köhler, 1970, p. 139)<sup>45</sup>:

Gestalt Psychology claims that it is **precisely the original segregation of circumscribed wholes which makes it possible for the sensory world to appear so utterly imbued with meaning** to the adult; for, in its gradual entrance into the sensory field, **meaning follows the lines drawn by natural organisation**; it usually enters into **segregated wholes**.<sup>46</sup>

In this paragraph, Köhler construes the whole to be the salient percept and meaning as following the lines of this organisation into the whole.<sup>47</sup> The whole is presented as the immediate or direct encounter of the perceptual field. The aptness of grouping perceived items into a Gestalt was

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<sup>44</sup> In the literature, Gestalt is portrayed as a holistic understanding of human perception, countering atomistic accounts. See for example Ash (1995, p. 112, my emphasis in bold) “Gestalt Theory began toward the close of the 19th century in Austria and south Germany as a protest against the associationist and structural schools' **piecemeal analyses of experience into atomistic elements**. Gestalt studies made use instead of the methods of phenomenology. This method, with a tradition going back to Goethe, involves nothing more than the description of **direct psychological experience, with no restrictions on what is permissible in the description**. Gestalt psychology was in part an attempt to **add a humanistic dimension** to what was considered a barren approach to the scientific study of mental life.”

<sup>45</sup> Unless otherwise stated my emphasis in all the quotations in this chapter will be in bold.

<sup>46</sup> Whereas discussions in Gestalt psychology often focus on objects being segregated into meaningful wholes, the general interest evolved around human responsiveness to what is perceived (Koffka, 1935).

<sup>47</sup> There is a debate about the role of meaning in Gestalt holism. Whereas Wittgenstein for instance criticised Köhler's ideas as conceptually confused because, according to Wittgenstein, it is precisely because of their meaning that we are capable of identifying whole, Köhler maintained that this cannot be the case as human perception is capable of identifying Gestalten without comprehending their meaning (Toccafondi, 2012). Toccafondi (2012) attempts to reconcile the two perspectives and rescues Gestalt psychology as being sensitive to previous experience as aiding understanding of a Gestalt.

originally demonstrated by means of black and white drawings such as blobs on a white background, in which a natural organisation in terms of which blobs belong together is holistically and immediately perceived.

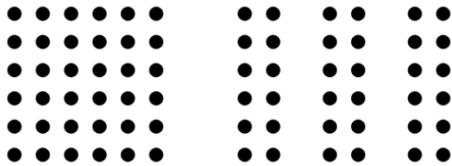


Figure 1: Grouped Gestalten.

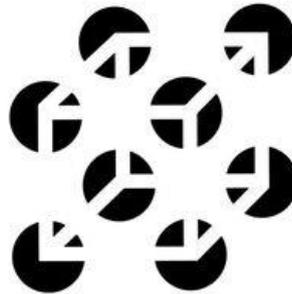


Figure 2: Cube Gestalt.

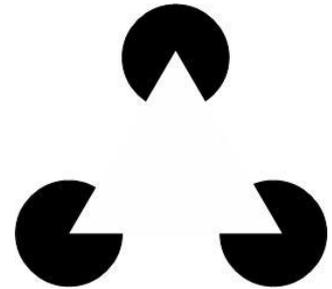


Figure 3: Triangle Gestalt.

In Gestalt psychology, the status of constituent parts is not denied, but it is subordinated to the whole that is immediately perceived. Figure 1, for instance, shows that human vision naturally perceives the proximity of objects as an invite to group them, rating the group against less proximate objects. Similarly, in figure 2, one might immediately see a cube, to the background of black dots. And yet, when asked to look again, all there is on the paper are black dots with cutouts; and in fact, not even that. There is a variety of geometrical figures in black on a white background. In figure 3, although one's perception can be guided to the fact that the image consists of three black dots with a white triangular cutout, one immediately encounters a large white triangle against the background of three black dots. Whereas visual perception has been the primary concern of Gestalt psychology, the relation between the whole and its parts apply to other sensory modalities, such as hearing for instance. When hearing a melody, one does not ordinarily perceive every single note that is played in a succession, but rather, one comprehends the melody on a different level, i.e. a holistic one (Ehrenfels, 1937).<sup>48</sup>

These examples demonstrate not only the possibility for using the idea of Gestalt as an analogy to the phenomenology of perception, but further, how drawing one's attention to constituents are possible *from* a Gestalt. The constituents of a melody, for example, i.e. individual

<sup>48</sup> It is further thinkable that the Gestalt idea pertains to olfactory, haptic and gustative senses. Think of the way a smell can recall a person or a situation, how it can alarm us to fire or gas.

notes, are of course integral to the melody as a whole and yet, they do not exhaust the phenomenological character of the melody. Further, one hears the melody *in its holistic qualities* immediately. One might hear the chorus of a song, or a theme of a movie. One can identify an advertisement jingle because of the frequent repetition on the TV. One can imagine a rock concert where, upon playing the first couple of tunes of a song, the crowd starts cheering, because they know the whole song that has already begun is about to follow. One might switch on the radio and start listening to a song somewhere in its middle and it might take a while to recognise the song, but one thinks 'I know that melody'. Hearing a melody is phenomenologically different from hearing notes, in that what one connects to when hearing a melody is different to what one connects to when hearing a single note. Re-focusing from the whole to the constituents, however, can be induced. One's attention can be guided to focus on involved constituents.

The shift in awareness to the underlying note sequence in the example of hearing a melody, or as in the visual examples blobs on a paper in the pictorial examples above, is afforded by a re-focusing in perception: switching from the whole to a constituent requires a sense of working *against* the immediacy of the whole. This means that although one can focus on a succession of individually perceived notes, say in a note dictation; a relevant sense of the Gestalt of the melody is purposively neglected. It is only with considerable effort – a trained ear – that one manages to zoom into the constituent parts of a melody. The point of Gestalt holism as I introduce it here however, is not to endorse a view, in which the whole somewhat mysteriously hovers over its constituent parts, but rather a holism that understands a Gestalt as immediately meaningful unit in which qualities are attributed to the whole and only the whole (Ehrenfels, 1937).<sup>49</sup> Although perceiving constituents is possible, it is so only at the loss of certain qualities of the whole. As in the figures above, one's attention can shift to the constituents involved, but at a loss of the whole initially and immediately perceived. The driving force of my analogy to the Gestalt idea with regards to action will hinge specifically on the immediacy with which the encountered is understood as a meaningful whole in one way or another. It is a way of fathoming the phenomenological experience that is analogous to seeing or perceiving actions.

Using Gestalt psychology as an analogy to action, it is possible to evoke actions as encountered as a Gestalt, i.e. as a meaningful whole segregated from its immediate situation. As

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<sup>49</sup> Köhler (1929/1970, p. 168) refers to Gestalt as a method of organisation: "Some critics maintain that Gestalt Psychologists repeat the word "whole" continually, that they neglect the existence of parts of wholes, and that they show no respect for the most useful tool of scientific procedure, which is *analysis*. No statement could be more misleading. Throughout the discussion of organization we have found it necessary to refer to segregation as well as to unification. In physics also functional interrelation within a field is entirely compatible with relative segregation. (...) In Gestalt Psychology (...). The very principles of organization refer to the segregation of such parts as much as to their unitary character."

in the examples of the imaginary crowded marketplace, one simply *sees* someone 'getting a coffee', 'casting a vote', 'ordering a book' or 'winding down from a long day at work'. One might perceive arm movements, crossing movements, finger-typings or limp bodies, but only in virtue of presenting the whole in a certain way. This is akin to the way in which we hear a melody, not its individual notes. Whereas one might encounter the whole in its situated encounter, one can break down one's understanding of the melody into finer-grained descriptions of notes or themes, it does not follow however, that they exhaust the encounter of the melody phenomenologically. Similarly, conceptions of the actions above are holistic in that they are irreducible to one aspect of whatever it is the agent is doing.

Modes of presenting an action as one of the above are conceptually and phenomenologically rich, because their encounter requires a shared background knowledge about how one ordinarily does these things. For there is not one thing that makes us conceive of someone as getting a coffee or voting, but rather a variety of things grouped into a holistic quality that need to concur to see the action as this or that.<sup>50</sup> Not unlike the case of the melody, there is a phenomenological encounter that is not exhausted by a constituent. We understand someone as voting not merely in virtue of a movement of a limb or a mental act involved. The quote opening this chapter suggests that agents learn action concepts through a variety of paradigms and strengthens the holistic and immediate view of understanding actions further (Louch, 1966, p. 119). Louch (*ibid.*) who I opened this chapter with concludes similarly that, if dissected into constituents, the virtue in which something has come to count *as* an action goes missing.

Dissection or analysis of such sequences, in order to find the elements which compose them, are bound to fail, **for it is not in virtue of some possibly discoverable ingredients, revealed by analytic strategy, that we are able to say, 'this is an action'**. One could say that the lighting of a cigarette is composed of such and such muscular and nervous elements, also such and such geometric arrangements. [...] Such an analysis lacks point, however, unless it fortifies our assertion that this is an action of such and such type, or clarifies the application of a concept to a case. **Ultimately, in much philosophy, the grounds of analysis are connected with the demands for pristine and incorrigible elements of sense experience. Once we see ourselves out of that wood, it is easier to see how analysis, though possible, might be quite irrelevant.** Actions are primitive in our

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<sup>50</sup> See also Winch's (Winch, 1958/1990, p. 49) discussion on reasons for action in which he entertains the example of voting as being tied to understanding the social implications of the act of voting. I will return to this discussion in detail later in this chapter.

discourse, and consequently primitive also in our recognition of features of the world.

It is rather an informed interpretation of a whole one encounters immediately, subsuming a variety of input about the movements, their situatedness and the wider context of the action. Drawing an analogy to Gestalt is a way of approaching the phenomenological richness and holistic qualities involved in understanding actions.

When one encounters others as acting, one often directly recognise what they are doing in one way or the other, i.e. there is this immediate sense of understanding the situated action in a sense. One rarely encounters a constituent, but a variety of things grouped together in a meaningful way. And it is based on this holistic and immediate impression that one chooses a description that mirrors what it is that one perceives or how one will react to it. There is at least one way of entertaining the holistic and informed way in which one encounters action as immediately given and paradigmatic of our making sense of actions. This is compatible with the view that when pointed to it, one is capable identify constitutive parts such as props or bodily movements involved, but it changes the sequence of encounter, and therefore the direction of explanation, from holistic towards contained constituents, as opposed to atomistic reasoning, moving from a minimal constituent towards a holistic description of it.

Critics might want to raise the concern that in psychology, Gestalt perception as a theory has been shown to run into problems concerning failed cognition and attribution errors in assigning practical reason to oneself and others and is perceived as defunct.<sup>51</sup> As mentioned earlier, this need not concern the present exploration, however, as I am merely proposing a novel way of thinking about action as encountered as a meaningful whole, i.e. a Gestalt in segregation to its immediate situation. I, therefore, use the idea of Gestalt as a descriptive account of our

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<sup>51</sup> The cognitive outline of Gestalt psychology has been challenged predominantly with situations in which cognition is erroneous and the competence of the perceiver is compromised without herself being aware. There is for example the problem of failed cognition, i.e. a situation in which a segregated whole is turning out to be different from what one thought. This is rebutted by making explicit that identifying errors in cognition implicitly assume cognition to be organised rather than arbitrary and otherwise functioning processes which in turn plays into the hand of Gestalt theories (Martin, 2011, pp. 172-173). Further, experiments have shown the divergence between agents assigning practical reasoning and sensitivity to context to oneself, but attributing other's actions to their personality. Rather than attempting a rebuttal, Gestalt psychology embraces this bias in attribution, arguing that "understanding the process of attribution requires not that we reject the idea that our cognitive system successfully takes in the regularities in the environment, but that we understand how what is "the environment" is shaped by patterns of social interaction" (Martin, 2011, p. 174). The last point is more complex however, as experiments seem to have shown that human perception is biased by environmental features compromising agents' competence to comprehend a situation on one side and Gestalt theory's assumption of accuracy of perception on the other, undermining the basis of the Gestalt program (Martin, 2011, pp. 171-179).

engagement with action. I am not suggesting inheriting the theoretical and cognitive implications of Gestalt Psychology but have introduced the idea of seeing wholes as analogous to how actions are ordinarily encountered. I use it as a way of asking ‘isn’t it much more like this, when we see an action...?’. For my project to be successful it is merely important that it is rendered possible – via the Gestalt analogy – that what is encountered as an action is more often than not encountered as a meaningful whole rather than its constituent parts (such as a bodily movement for instance); and further, that I have successfully shown that the perceived action (and its description) is immediately dependent on the situation in which it is encountered.

The idea of Gestalt in my view is not vulnerable to criticisms regarding the specifics of the mechanics of psychology. It is used to contrast views such as atomism, presuming actions to be basic and isolated. Whilst atomism might be suitable to explain certain things, it misses out on the ordinary and holistic way in which meaningful social actions are encountered. Although it might be possible to unpack actions with regards to the qualities of their constituents, this treatment deteriorated the view on the action Gestalt as it is immediately perceived. Tuomela’s or Bratman’s accounts of how acting together is internally structured may display something informative, but it does not grasp the light-footedness with which agents organise their actions in interaction with others.

Gestalt applied to action then, is a vehicle to suggest a paradigm shift away from investigating actions from a basic constituent (as in atomism), towards an exploration of action from its immediate, holistic, social and contextual encounter. Rather than assuming that a multiplicity of descriptions is readily available in ordinary situations, the analogy to Gestalt demonstrates how the momentary, meaningful impression of an action, in segregation to its immediate situation plays an important part in what the action is understood to be. The examples of *The Lady in the Street* and *(In)Appropriate Nudity* have further demonstrated how a mode of presentation of action is in a sense an achievement fuelled by a variety of factors. This effect can also be shown in a gradual example in which descriptions are updated.

#### Example: TV Trump

Consider the following example: you are invited to a friend’s house for a tea. The TV is switched on, yet muted, and your friend asks you ‘What do you see?’, to which you might answer ‘Well, it’s Donald Trump speaking on TV’. Or you might say ‘The president of America is talking’. Both descriptions capture the action in accordance with your immediate encounter of what is going on. Now consider your friend switches on the volume and you all over sudden hear what Donald Trump says. You may now be in a better position to say that ‘Donald Trump is giving a speech in congress/ to the Republicans / holding a press

conference'. And again, these descriptions all appear valid, at the right time and according to the situation you are in.

The action one encounters switches momentarily with the situated particulars of your encounter. What the action in question is primarily considered to be, is immediately dependent on the situated insight one has. This does not mean, however, that every description goes, but rather that descriptions are sensitively tailored to the encounter. Encountering action and describing them, therefore, comes in degrees relative to the immediate situation.

### 3.3 Flipping the Gestalt-switch

Naturally, the Gestalt encounter is not infallible. In the examples of *The Lady on the Street* and *(In)Appropriate Nudity*, I explored two Gestalt switches that moved from seeing the action as rude or confused to doing something rather ordinary. These are indications that one can be mistaken or neglect a multiplicity of other information once one is set on a Gestalt. What one encounters is tied to a variety of features, both in the environment of the action, as well as within the observer. The flexible experiencing of contextual features 'update'<sup>52</sup> our encounter, for instance, when new information enters the picture. Whatever the Gestalt encountered originally might be, it can switch. And it can do so in a variety of ways.<sup>53</sup> The *TV Trump* example above, in which information is added gradually, resembles a sense of 'updating'. The descriptions given in the situation of minimum input (i.e. when the TV is muted), is not wrong but tailored to what one encounters. The more qualitative the input encountered, the richer and more detailed the account of the encountered action can be. Whereas in this example the descriptions are corrected and 'updated' according to the situational particularities, in other examples one might encounter an action that turns out to be entirely different from what one thought.

#### Example: Old Lady

Consider a situation in which a man is furiously and rapidly approaching an old, horrified-looking lady. At first sight, one might encounter this action as a man assaulting an elderly lady. On the second sight, however, one sees another person moving away from the scene with a handbag in hand. Whereas the immediate encounter might have suggested otherwise, it is now, after updating one's encounter, possible to

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<sup>52</sup> 'Updating' is used as a metaphor for context sensitivity here via which a corrected or new aspectual understanding of an action is reached. It further evokes the language used for computers which are being updated to the most actual version of their system etc.

<sup>53</sup> Wittgenstein (Wittgenstein, 1953/2009, Part II: §§ 111, 117) famously discusses this as aspect-seeing and introduces the iconic 'duck-rabbit'. What one sees can change 'now' to something different.

reach a more nuanced way of connecting the dots. Whereas one might have described the action at first as ‘a person assaulting an elderly woman’, one might soon come to understand that it is ‘a man hurrying to help an elderly lady who has been assaulted and robbed’.

Descriptions of actions as they strike us are therefore defeasible<sup>54</sup>, because one can update them according to new contextual input. And whether and when a description satisfies a situated encounter, depends on the purpose and mutual acceptance of describing the action in one way or the other. In the *TV Trump* example above, upon being asked what one sees one might have answered ‘a monkey directing a circus’. Whether or not this description is accepted as permissible depends, yet again, on a shared background and whether or not this sort of description fulfills a purpose that can be agreed upon.

What I have used the analogy to Gestalt and the examples provided to evoke, is an *ordinary* take on how one encounters actions. I have demonstrated that we can imagine actions and have pointed to the multiplicity of the question as to what it is that we encounter when we perceive something as an action. This ordinary encounter of action is what I propose to take as the starting point for an investigation of action. The analogy to Gestalt psychology served as a vehicle to highlight the immediacy with which the perceived is understood as an action, yet deeply dependent on the situation and the perspective one chooses on it. In addition, I have highlighted how the momentary perception of action interferes with the degree of detail in the description. The description of an action is given in accordance with that which is encountered, what it is seen as. From the point of the encounter, the description can be refined and corrected. As in the Gestalt idea, emphasising the constituents over the whole might be possible, but only at the loss of the distinct qualities of the whole.

### 3.4 Zooming in: the curious case of constituents

Let me however entertain situations in which one would precisely recognise the constituents of a Gestalt. For I doubt not, that this is possible. I mentioned this in the example of a note dictation. Upon entering a note dictation exam, one is prepared to write down the musical notes

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<sup>54</sup> I borrow this term from Kenny who uses it in his discussion on practical reasoning. Kenny (1989, p. 44, my emphasis in bold) distinguishes theoretical from practical reasoning in action, whereby which the latter is defeasible as a consequence of its angle of interest, purpose and scope: “It is much more difficult to give an adequate formal account of practical reasoning than to give one of theoretical reasoning. This is because satisfactoriness, unlike truth, is a relative notion. An assertion is either true or false; but a plan is not just satisfactory or unsatisfactory. It may be satisfactory to some persons and not to others, satisfactory for some purposes and not for others. This means that practical reasoning, unlike theoretical reasoning is – to use a convenient term borrowed by philosophers from lawyers – **defeasible.**”

one encounters. One's focus lies precisely on not hearing the melody but grasping the individual notes comprised in it. Quite possibly, losing oneself in the melody will lead to a bad result for one's note dictation. What then is it exactly that we do to the ordinary way of hearing a melody to manage to write down the singular notes contained? One switches the attention from the whole to the constituents. Away from the immediate, ordinary and aesthetic encounter, one focusses on the sequence of singular notes. One tunes in at the price of neglecting the overall melody for the concentrated focus of permeating to the constituents involved. The setting of an exam, plus the exercises one has done in class help to change one's mode of encounter with a melody. I experienced a similar situation in the school for marketing. During an exam, we were asked to write down the HTML code underlying a user interface of a website that was shown to us. Instead of seeing just a website in its holistic properties, I was asked to grasp the coding of picture proportions, table-boarders, text inserts, navigation menus, mouse-over actions and many more details of how whatever one encounters was assembled. Only with considerable effort and a developed skill for coding, I was able to transform the ordinary encounter of the website, into an analysis of its design features.<sup>55</sup> These examples demonstrate how zooming into the constituents of an experience is possible, but t least ordinarily less immediate than encountering the Gestalt.

What unites these examples is the shift away from the ordinary paradigm of encounter towards a more focused, purposive elucidation of the underlying detail; often at the acknowledged loss of holistic qualities of what is encountered. Conveyed to action, one can conceive of an artist interested in bodily motions, particularly asked to look beyond what another is perceived as doing; by purposefully focusing on the way an arm moves or the way in which a finger bends, legs walk, eyes blink. It is possible to imagine a controlled experiment in which subjects are asked to make note of the bodily movements they encounter. Similarly, a neurologist might have an extended interest in underlying processes connecting an impulse in the brain with a physiological contraction of certain muscles producing a body movement. What is important to notice in all these cases, however, is that they move away from the ordinary to a more refined view. Their view starts from the encounter of holistic melodies or bodily movements and moves towards a more detailed analysis of the phenomena.

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<sup>55</sup> It is further interesting to take note of the development within coding away from HTML code towards so-called WYSIWYG (What-you-see-is-what-you-get) programmes that ease the process of coding for intelligible and recognisable junks of code are given as units one can employ in one's website. That means that whereas before one would have had to code a square, add a 3-D effect and a click-function, one has now the option to just chose a 'button' from a menu of designs.

Example: Movie Director

Imagine a movie director, shooting a scene of a horror movie in which a hand appears behind a door with the unsuspecting victim watching TV or doing the washing up. In this setting the movie director might be very interested in just how the hand moves, how finger-by-finger grasps, moving up and down in attempts to silently unlock the door. Shooting the scene, a variety of times from different angles and perspectives, she tries hard to capture the finger movement in all its details, knowing about the intense experience this hand movement will create in the movie.

Here one has an example of a focused observation of a hand movement. And yet, is not the purpose of the meticulously planned hand movement precisely that the audience in the cinema will understand it as the murderer approaching her next victim? The focus of the movie director in this example is to appeal to the audience understanding the Gestalt rather than the finger movements. Of course, there are movies with completely disembodied hands, but this is a different example altogether. Strictly speaking, one sees a hand moving, and yet it is the dawning of the Gestalt that makes for a terrifying experience.

Of course, all these examples show that one can purposively move from the whole towards its constituent parts. I doubted not that this is possible, but rather I doubted whether the focus on constituents is i) easily argued to be paradigm cases of encounters, and ii) whether they are encounterable without their relation to the whole. In the atomistic point of view, paradigm cases such as arm-raisers, finger movements are discussed as events or processes from a close-up perspective. The analogy to Gestalt, on the contrary, has been used to entertain a way of capturing how one usually encounters what others do. These encounters include instances of couples not sharing in any activity and yet being understood as being together, as well as hand-movements understood as the murderer approaching in a horror movie.

The range of examples demonstrates that the situation and context in which one sees someone performing an action will affect how one chooses to present the encounter. In a café on the campus of my university that operates in a counter-based service only, upon someone approaching the counter, I immediately see them getting a coffee (or another hot beverage), sandwich or a drink. When my professor furiously draws his laptop out of his bag, after hearing me admit that I did not own a copy of Elizabeth's Anscombe's *Intention*, I immediately sense that he is now ordering that book for me. If, however, he was a stranger and I an observer of the very same situation, I would maximally see a man 'removing his laptop from his briefcase'. The more I know about a socio-cultural context, a situation and the persons involved, the more informed by descriptions of actions will be. These might altogether be things that I understand, because I know

enough about these other persons to interpret their actions that way.<sup>56</sup> The involvement with what is perceived informs and is informed by the encounter. Just how much conceiving of something as an action is informed by sociality and shared background knowledge about practices, shall become increasingly important in the present thesis.

Anscombe, who I have mentioned in chapter 2 as having been (possibly incorrectly) interpreted as lending impetus to atomistic theories of actions, is making a similar point to the above paragraph. Her investigation hinges on the application of the question 'Why?' (Anscombe, 1963/2000, § 5-7). Asking someone 'why are you doing this?', and the answer that is given, cache out intentional actions as perceived by an observer, as well as by the agent, who reveals her reasons for doing so. In a sense then, Anscombe unearths a method of thematising actions intersubjectively. Thus understood, enquiring actions in their relation to intention is a praxiological and interactive matter.

Since a single action can have many different descriptions, e.g. 'sawing a plank', 'sawing oak', 'sawing one of Smith's planks', 'making a squeaky noise with the saw', 'making a great deal of sawdust' and so on and so on, it is important to notice that a man may know that he is doing a thing under one description, and not under another. (Anscombe, 1963/2000, § 6)

Anscombe's account is – as opposed to most theories in the previous chapter – not embracing atomism, because she does not seem to investigate actions in isolation, but the talk of actions and intentions as a language game. She does, however, introduce the variety of descriptions as equally available. She approaches actions in a pragmatic and normative way, in which their recognition and individuation to be responsive to the 'Why'-question. Further, it is in interaction that conceptions of actions become relevant as a means to understanding what is going on, as well as each other. Asking the 'Why?'-question thus is part of the practice of acting purposively. It points to those moments when reasons for actions or an agent's intentional stance matter. As opposed to atomists, she entertains ordinary cases in which the discussion of intention becomes relevant via the applicability of the 'Why'-question. Anscombe does not theorise the metaphysical constitution but enquires purposive references to intentional action in language and interaction. And yet, her discussion is represented as heralding the opportunity to subsume these ordinary exchanges under an event ontology (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 62f).

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<sup>56</sup> Most accounts in the philosophy of action are sensitive to the role of description but disregard the degree to which descriptions chosen are part of a socially induced practice of action recognition. I remind the reader here that descriptions are situated and purposive, not neutral or objective.

Whereas in the paragraph above, Anscombe entertains the differing descriptions as discerning to which extent an agent is aware or assumes her doing as intentional, later passages have been interpreted as yielding a statement of identity conditions of actions.

Now if all this holds, what are we to say about all these many descriptions of an intentional action? Are we to say that there are as many distinct actions as we can generate distinct descriptions, with X as our starting point? I mean: We say 'Why are you X-ing?' and get the answer 'To Y', or 'I'm Y-ing', Y being such that we can say 'He's y-ing' [...]. E.g. **'Why are you moving your arm up and down?'** 'To operate the pump', and he is operating the pump. 'Why are you pumping?' 'To replenish the water supply' and he is replenishing the water supply; 'Why are you replenishing the water-supply?' 'To poison the inhabitants' and he is poisoning the inhabitants, for they are getting poisoned. [...] So let us stop here and say: are there four distinct actions here, because we have **found four distinct descriptions satisfying our conditions, namely moving his arm up and down, operating the pump, replenishing the water supply and poisoning the inhabitants?** (Anscombe, 1963/2000, § 23)

Anscombe starts from four different descriptions which can be given for an action as answers to a 'Why'-question. The encounters targeted by these questions range from descriptions of bodily movements towards more situated, expanded descriptions of the action. She asks for the relation between a description grasping the bodily movement, and the description of the act as being one of poisoning the inhabitants.

Let us now return to the questions with which we ended § 23: Are we to say that the man who **(intentionally) moves his arm**, operates the pump, replenishes the water supply, poisons the inhabitants, is performing *four* actions? Or only one? The answer that we imagined to the question 'Why?' brings it out that the four descriptions form a series, A-B-C-D, in which each description is introduced as dependent on the previous one, though independent of the following one. Then is B *a* description of A, C of B, and so on? **Not if that means that we can see that 'he is operating the pump.' is another description of what is here also described by 'he is moving his arm up and down'**—in such a way that is, that what verifies the latter, in this case, also verifies the former. (Anscombe, 1963/2000, §26)

In §26 Anscombe goes on to explain that there clearly is a relationship between the description of the 'arm's moving' and the 'poisoning of the inhabitants' not unlike the part-whole relationship Thompson suggest as discussed in Chapter 2 of this thesis. Only that she does not anchor the thought in metaphysical parts and wholes but in statements regarding the nature of intention. Whereas moving, pumping and replenishing are done intentionally, poisoning is the intention *with which* all subsumed actions are performed:

So, there is one action with four **descriptions, each dependent on the wider circumstances, and each related to the next as a description of means to end; which means that we can speak equally of four corresponding intentions, or of *one intention***-- the last term that we have brought in this series. By making it the last term so far brought in, we have given it the character of being the intention (so far discovered) *with which the act in its other descriptions was done*. Thus when we speak of four intentions, we are speaking of the character of being intentional that belongs to the act on each of these descriptions; but when we speak of one intention, we are speaking of intention *with which*; [...] and this intention so to speak swallows up all the preceding intentions *with which earlier members of the series were done*. (Anscombe, 1963/2000, §26)

In this paragraph, Anscombe appears to explore how the use of intention as a concept is used in different senses, relating to different 'characters' of intentional action. In cases where there is more description of an action, different senses of intention apply: in some sense, moving, pumping, replenishing are intentional doings, but they are swallowed up by the intention to poison the inhabitants. Anscombe's discussion can be read as being still very much concerned with the ways in which ordinary interaction about actions determines descriptions available in language in a variety of ways.

Most atomistic theories however, have taken Anscombe to be making a metaphysical claim, because she answers the puzzle she posited earlier in the following way:

In short, the only distinct action of his is this one, A. For moving his arm up and down with his fingers round the pump handle *is, in these circumstances, operating the pump*; and, *in these circumstances, is replenishing the house water-supply*; and, *in these circumstances, it is poisoning the household*. (Anscombe, 1963/2000, §26)

Whereas Anscombe has been read as pointing to the metaphysics of action individuation, i.e. identity conditions of action,<sup>57</sup> it is possible to read her as stipulating a phenomenological point of view. Theories of action after Anscombe have appealed to her use of *is* as a metaphysical one. I think, however, that Anscombe stresses ‘in these circumstances’ equally through repetition. It is further arguable that by appealing to these circumstances, she elaborates on the different senses or characters of intentions applying to the different descriptions of an agent’s doing. Almost as if saying, in a situation like this, where all the question why applies to all doings involved in the poisoning, one is in a position to know that the descriptions relate to each other in this way.

I discuss Anscombe in detail, because much of what came after her in the philosophy of action hinged on her assumed allusion to a metaphysical conclusion and abandoned the epistemic nuances to her exploration. And further, I recall how Anscombe is interested in the shared phenomenon of using references to intention in language and interaction. Intention is not understood as a matter of private ostension, but as taking place in a practice of acting. She explores, how actions are related to expressions of intention. Ricœur (1992, p. 67) describes Anscombe’s analysis as relating the question ‘what is an action?’ to certain responses to the question ‘why are you doing this?’<sup>58</sup>, to ultimately slay the assumed distinction between reasons for acting and causes. For although ordinary accounts of action may relate to causes in some cases, they do not do so in a generalisable way. Atomists however, understood Anscombe’s investigation of intention, as suggesting a possibility to integrate the talk of action to metaphysical and causal explanations.

From Davidson onwards, the debate about the individuation of action centred mainly on the metaphysical identity conditions of actions, in which those ‘impressionistic’ nuances that were present in Anscombe have been neglected (Davidson, 1971/2001, p. 58). Ricœur (1992, p. 67) beautifully summarises that Anscombe’s impressionism about action as being subsumed by Davidson’s cubist analysis of action. Davidson’s cubist solution to the problem of action individuation runs as follows:

The idea that under the assumed circumstances killing a person differs from moving one’s hand in a certain way springs from a confusion between a feature of description of an event and a feature of the event itself. **The mistake consists in thinking that when the description of an event is made to include reference to a consequence, then the consequence itself is included in the described**

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<sup>57</sup> See for example Pfeiffer’s (1989) monograph on the multiplier-unifier debate, as well as the extended discussion about action individuation (Goldman, 1971; Hornsby, 1979; Mackie, 1997; Sandis, 2006; 2010; Thalberg, 1971; Thomson, 1971; Weil & Thalberg, 1974).

<sup>58</sup> Ricœur criticises this move as leading further away from questions about the ‘who’ of actions.

**event.** The accordion, which remains the same through the squeezing and stretching, is the action; the changes are in aspects described, or descriptions of events. [...]

We must conclude, perhaps with a shock of surprise, that our primitive actions [...] **mere movements of the body** – these are all the actions there are. **We never do more than move our bodies; the rest is up to nature.** (Davidson, 1971/2001, p. 58)

Davidson comes to a metaphysical conclusion here about the relationship between description and the identity conditions of action. He assumes that all descriptions are equally available at all times and that their investigation starts at best from the description of primitive bodily movements involved. The direction of explanation as starting from the bodily movement towards a more contextual understanding of the action shows in many of his famous examples, such as the instance of switching on the light (Davidson, 1963/2001, p. 4):

I flip the switch, turn on the light, and illuminate the room. Unbeknownst to me I also alert the prowler to the fact that I am home. Here I need not have done four things, **but only one**, of which four descriptions have been given.

One reason why Anscombe's account might have been misinterpreted as conforming to or being compatible with the atomistic models might be that her model of explanation runs from basic to complex action descriptions. In all the quotations examined above, the order of available descriptions runs from a description of a bodily movement to a richer or more complex one. This presentation reflects the atomistic conviction to move from basic to complex, from individual to social and from a constituent to the whole. The diagram below represents the reasoning from the bodily motion towards richer notions and re-descriptions of the action in question.

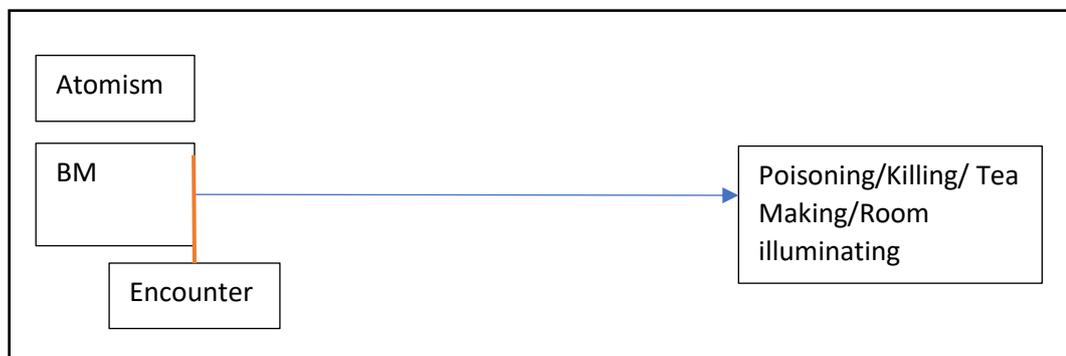


Figure 4: Atomistic action encounter

It is now possible to see that the paradigmatic sense of description in the philosophy of action is parallel to the structure of atomism, sought out to run from a basic and isolated event (in Davidson for example) towards those describing complexities. For potentially different reasons, Anscombe and Davidson hold all descriptions to relate to the same action.<sup>59</sup> Both Anscombe and Davidson highlight the role of bodily movements in action with Anscombe enriching an understanding of an action by an application of the 'Why'-question and Davidson drawing metaphysical conclusions about the identity conditions of actions. Anscombe herself might not be an atomist, but how she approaches intentions sets the scene which invited atomistic notions of action.

I have used the analogy to Gestalt psychology to show that perceiving an action does not necessarily start or end with a bodily motion, but rather that the recognition of a meaningful unit of conduct is dependent on a variety of contextual features – social and situational ones. Framed in this way, focusing on a bodily movement or an assumed mental entity as the paradigmatic and pivotal feature of action, is understood as a zooming into a constituent of a whole that can only be grasped as such in context. As with a melody, the whole is the level of experience, albeit the possibility to focus on individual notes. Gestalt psychologists would even say that the zooming into an individual constituent can be done, but only at the loss of the whole. I will continue to explore how recognising and understanding an action is not just merely a perceptual holism, but that it is informed and shaped by sociality in which the meaningfulness of action becomes a focus.

Starting from an action Gestalt then, evokes an alternative picture for the direction of explanation of action, too. The situational encounter of the Gestalt determines how the action is presented. It matters, when and where one identifies something as an instance of an act X and immediately affects the choice of description.

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<sup>59</sup> There are notable exemptions such as Thomson's (1971) 'A time of a killing', in which she suggests the result of an action as being important for an individuation, but her reasoning is atomistic in so far as she starts from the bodily movement towards the more expanded descriptions. Sandis (2006) challenges both strands of the debate and yet the debate has quieted down and is often claimed to be 'sorted out' in favour of the idea that actions occur, when their bodily movement occur, although one might be able to describe them differently at different points in time (Bennett, 1973/2015).

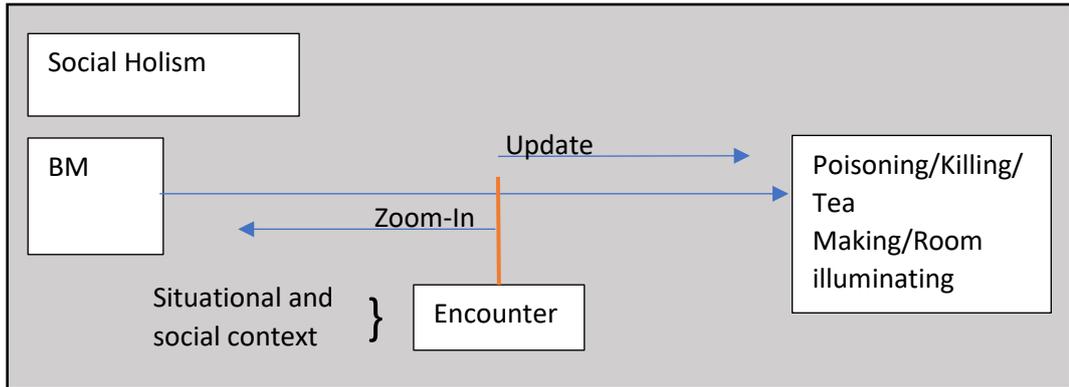


Figure 5: Holistic action encounter

Other than in the figure on atomism above, a holistic understanding of action starts from a situated, contextualised action that is encountered as meaningful. From a naïve point of view, one would probably describe the man in Anscombe's example as 'pumping', rather than moving his arm or poisoning the inhabitants. As I have tried to show with the *TV Trump* example, this description is neither infallible nor necessarily persistent. And yet it is from this immediately perceived action that one updates to an either more expanded understanding, or maybe a more fine-tuned perspective on the action perceived. And as has been shown in the *Movie Director*, it is possible to zoom in on the constituents of bodily movements (with the Gestalt in mind), or it can be 'updated' to wider or more contextualised descriptions of the action. Actions and their understanding are a tool used to make sense of the world.

One of the aims of this chapter has been to urge for a way of entertaining actions holistically. To do so, I have introduced the analogy to actions perceived as a Gestalt stressing the immediacy of the whole. I discussed Anscombe's investigation as embracing a similar impressionism which was neglected by atomists. It is worth asking again, why the study of actions has been collapsed into metaphysical questions? I think the social and interactive plane of how we come to think, talk and write about actions has much potential to be further explored. Like Anscombe, I think caching out when we come to talk about actions and reasons for them is a valid exploration that incorporates how making sense of an action is one trajectory of everyday social life and practice. The Gestalt analogy serves as a demonstration of how actions are encountered in ordinary settings. I have argued that one perceives them as meaningful wholes which are recognisable and intelligible as ordinary things to do. The discussion of Anscombe has further helped to outline the conceptual space in which reasons for actions matter, i.e. when (a particular aspect to) an action is inquired. This suggests that there is something beyond a holistic perception that informs our conceiving something as an action.

### 3.5 Social Holism – from perceiving to conceiving

One question that hovered over the discussion above without having been made explicit is the question as to how tightly perceiving and conceiving of action is intertwined. In this section, I will suggest that sociality is the glue between the two and continue to bring the senses in which actions are social under observation in chapter 4. Social holism understands actions as a currency, so to speak, of organising social interaction or togetherness. Sociality is the starting point from which it makes sense to think and talk of actions of individuals. The holistic perspective on actions proposed, embraces human sociality expressed in culture, practice and the doings of individuals from the outset as affecting conceptions of actions. Perceiving and conceiving of actions thus, is a holistic achievement informed by sociality. Comprised is the view that understanding action relies on more than just perceptual holism for the latter can in principle be had in isolation from sociality.

One of the advantages of social holism as a starting point is that the striking of a Gestalt applies to all meaningful social actions, performed individually or in a group. Many of the examples I have given in the examples of an imaginary crowded marketplace comprised more than one agent and it did not harm one's capacity of imagining it, nor did one have to put considerable effort in thinking about two or more agents as enjoying a cold drink on a hot summer day. Applying conceptions of actions is carving out a social Gestalt, which is not primarily tied to individual agents. Collective action is therefore no longer a particularly complex case to be explained but understood as an immediate Gestalt of social action in a collective sense. If actions are conceptualised as social actions, how many agents are involved is an aspect to the social action, rather than a constitutional feature to sociality.

Social holism further, can embrace technical distinction between actions and activities. Whereas actions allude to a completed thing done, activities refer to an ongoing doing in which agents are involved. In the next chapter, I will specifically discuss how there is a sense in which interactivity, i.e. an activity unfolding between two agents can be immediately perceived. When two people engage in a conversation, for instance, there is not one action Gestalt that needs to be segregated, but rather an activity Gestalt unfolding between two agents. The conversational turns are thus comprehended not as self-contained action units, but as socially developing a conversation. I take inspiration from Ethnomethodologist, who understand turn-taking systems in terms of meaningful activity organised interpersonally (Sacks, 1995; Sacks, et al., 1974). In chapter 5, I will further illuminate the idea of turn-taking in its application to examples of conversations on social media. Perceived activities differ from actions in that they are entertained in a different, but equally accessible sense of sociality.

The socially holistic perspective also includes omissions and other negative acts. If actions are understood as meaningful in immediate segregation to their environment, then inaction can be understood as meaningful and intentional conduct. A variety of case examples will be entertained.

#### Example: Planking

Suppose you enter a hall in which you see real human bodies held in a static position leaning over everyday objects of use, such as fences or chests of drawers. Without further input, you can see that they are doing something that is not conventional – not as human agents *usually* conduct themselves. You understand that something is going on, they act in a certain way. Considering situational features, such as other agents observing those that are static, noting things on their clipboard and wearing a “jury” badge and a banner on the other side of the room reading ‘Planking Marathon’ you get a sense of what might be going on. You extrapolate the situation.

Not doing anything is a sense of acting that can be of immense social importance, which the perspective of social holism naturally includes, because it is not tied to a universal constituent such as a bodily movement or a mental act. The planking example is stylised in that a peculiar non-action is featured, but it shows how a non-doing can be a significant action. Take a different example that shows how omissions are understood as meaningful, if not purposive breaches to interaction norms.

#### Example: Text omissions

I am repeatedly reminded that I am very bad at texting back when I receive an instant message. Although I rarely ever intend for my not-replying to mean something, my inaction is frequently perceived as purposive ignorance. Especially, because on many instant messaging services, the other can now see that I am or have been online. This has led friends to accuse me as follows: ‘You are always online, but never text me back. Have I done anything wrong?’. My not-replying whilst being online thus was conceived of as a deliberate, meaningful omission, although I did not reply late intentionally. I simply forgot or did not reply for no particular reason.<sup>60</sup>

As opposed to the planking example, my not replying is not something I am doing at any given point intentionally and yet it is something I have done as far as my friends are concerned.<sup>61</sup> This is

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<sup>60</sup> Research as Microsoft (O’Hara, et al., 2014) has shown how through what’s app togetherness is simulated by dwelling, i.e. exchanging text ongoingly for no particular reason. This might illuminate my inaction as a violation of this sense of togetherness.

<sup>61</sup> For a nuanced discussion of the concept of inaction as posited in the philosophy of action and its shortcomings see Sandis (forthcoming).

to say that although we simply *see* people as doing X, or indeed not doing X, what it is we encounter is affected by concepts of ordinary expectations to do in our immediate social and situational context. Social enculturation into a world full of meaningful behaviour is thus fundamental to perceiving actions as well as of conceiving of things as doable, repeatable and intelligible. This 'grammar of action' informs the recognition of actions when observing others, but also how to react to or understand them.<sup>62</sup> According to my friends, I should have had replied. And because I did not, my reasons for not doing something became relevant.

Human agents segregate activities into meaningful units of action and their socio-cultural experience aids this understanding by recognising an act in its role as an established practice. What is subsumed into a Gestalt then, depends heavily on the socio-cultural community in which it happens and what is conceived of as ordinary things to do. Upon entering a situation and encountering another as doing X the immediacy of the encounter is fuelled by what is considered socio-cultural doable. Precisely because a person's conduct appears immediately meaningful, one perceives it as an item. Sociality in action is therefore not an end-result of a highly complex analysis, but rather it is best conceived of as permeating conceptions of action. Being able to recognise actions as we do, is intimately tied to being an agent involved in a community of agents sharing practices. Through enculturation and fuelled by descriptions in language we learn to identify behaviours as 'googling a restaurant', 'taking a selfie' or 'eating a panini'. Googling was not a thing 20 years ago, neither as a description nor as an act and certainly not connected to certain activities that one performs on a daily basis, but it became a thing 18 year ago, after its launch in 1998 (Google Inc., n.d.). Social Holism as a starting point entertains how and why did the act of googling entered our repertoire of everyday doables<sup>63</sup>?

Recall the example of planking for instance. Some readers might not have heard of the activity of planking before, others might indeed have googled it instantaneously, yet others might have continued reading without having fully comprehended what planking entails but having gathered that it might be an act of obtaining a static bodily posture for which even competitions are held. If this last reader would find himself walking into a planking competition, he would holistically be able to understand what is going on and might now even remember that it is called planking. To the least, there needs to be a social dynamic between someone's moving their body in a certain way and the attribution of meaning and descriptions. The idea of social holism evokes the ways in

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<sup>62</sup> I use grammar of action here after Harper et al. (2013) as invoking a shared system of acting socially with each other and accounting for each other's actions. I take it to be an evocative expression for the orderly management and understanding of one another's actions in context.

<sup>63</sup> I derive the concept of doables from Velleman (2013 via Sacks, 1984). I will however, develop it in its socio-cultural implications in the course of my argument. Doables on my account, will be further elucidated in the first of the 4 senses of sociality of action I introduce in chapter 4.

which actions are learned as part and parcel to conceiving of them as actions, which aids our recognising them as meaningful actions as they immediately strike us.

When we encounter someone as 'having a coffee to go' or 'not texting back', we encounter a Gestalt that is in interplay with the social settings of our encounter, the world we live in, the things we know and the language in which we understand and describe action. 'Having a coffee to go', not only includes a succession of skilled movements and exchanges with one's barista of confidence, but it requires an understanding of a wider cultural practice. It has become a thing to do, a reflection of a lifestyle of the society we live in. One does not observe in awe that a person takes a hot beverage in a paper cup out of the café, one relates to it as an ordinary and possible thing. Conceiving of something as a *doable* action affects how we encounter actions and how encounters of actions shape the way we conceive of them. 'Sending a text message' is one of those examples of an ordinary doable that developed over time, changed in its appearance and has now acquired of a frequently encountered action. Whereas 10 years ago one would have used the index finger to type a text message, nowadays one has grown accustomed to that typical thumb movement swiping over the display of a smartphone. The concept of the action of texting, however, has not necessarily changed but allows for further applications. Conceiving of something as an action and encountering it as immediately meaningful is thus closely connected to our senses of the ordinary things we do and others do in ordinary settings.

Whereas it might seem as if I am stating the obvious rather than producing a theory of action, I understand it as reminding philosophers that these are cases of action that concern us in everyday life. It is a reminder that actions as a point of interest arise in social settings in which metaphysical explanations might not fathom what is at stake: understanding each other in and through action, tied to local practices. They are local, because the examples I present are Western examples of a horizon of doables, whereas in a different cultural and social setting, people might wonder what the person with the hot beverage in a paper cup is doing, or why one would send a message in such a way. Further, the mundaneness of these examples shows how rarely actions are either individual or collective in the strict sense in which philosophers of action have made them out to be. Is then having a coffee to go an individual action, or is it a collective action in which barista and customer act together? One might want to say in a sense the former and in another sense the latter and in another sense an interaction or a case of the barista enabling the act of drinking coffee. I have introduced a perspective in which they all make up the phenomenon of social action, in which individual action is social in certain senses as well as acting together. Which answer one will give to the question above thus, depends on the aspect of action one is interested in. All the examples in this chapter demonstrate that atomism falls short of fathoming their

embeddedness in sociality from a starting point of conceptual isolation. The discussion in this chapter has urged for a move towards the conceptual embedding of actions into sociality to counter the paradigms assumed in theories of action.

Another question concerns the discussion of atomism: do basic and isolated actions really qualify as being the norm or a paradigmatic case of action? Much of what I have discussed in this chapter contests this notion of a paradigm. When do we *really* ever act in a basic and isolated way? Clearly, we act alone and do many things in solitude, but do we have to assume that these actions are in any sense less social? As demonstrated in chapter 2, philosophical models built on these paradigms run into problems when explaining social behaviour. I have tried to show that it is precisely because the challenge of explanation is set in atomistic terms, that theories remain atomistic and struggle to fathom our ordinary experiences of actions in their senses of sociality. There is, however, a realm of action in which the actions of others matter because they mean something to and do something for us. We are making sense of the world around us via conceptions of actions. Even when one is alone, normative ideas or rules guide our thought of what we do.

The remaining parts of my thesis will entertain how our take on action and its explanation might change when we accept social action as a paradigm, in which most actions are social in some sense. And further, how our understanding of action might change, once philosophical accounts move away from explanation of the mechanics of action and consider the dynamics and implications of action. Social action is the paradigm, actions in isolation the weird cases that need further explaining.

Social holism is an attempt to set the paradigms of actions straight: the social holistic perspective bears the potential to show, how, although in principle actions can exist and be performed by individuals in isolation, many actions are not conceivable in this way. In what follows I will forge a perspective in which a hypothetical Robinson Crusoe abandoned at birth on a lonely island can perform actions in principle, and yet there are arguably things he just could not do. 'Posting', 'tweeting' or 'liking', i.e. acts of communication on social media, for instance, require senses of sociality and a community of agents that Robinson simply does not have access to. The debate around rule-following as introduced by Peter Winch (1958/1990) after Wittgenstein (1953/2009), comes to mind. Although I discuss rule following in the next chapter, I will focus on Velleman's (Velleman, 2013) *doables*, which I take to be a way of thematising a related point. Whereas Winch's rule following debate is about whether one can follow a rule in isolation and, if so, what the limits of this rule following practice might be, Velleman's concept of doables will be the basis for discussing whether one can in principle act in isolation, and if so, which limits apply. I

will argue that on a lonely island there might be some senses of action that can be had by a sole inhabitant, but there are also conceptions of actions that are inaccessible, because they require a contextual *more* that is intertwined with developments in sociality and practice.<sup>64</sup> Particularly, with actions performed online on social media, it appears that if an attempt is made to reduce it to one constitutive feature the holistic Gestalt decomposes and with it its social importance.

Concepts arguably play a bearing role in determining and sharing the encounter of an action as an instance of X. For the perceiving of someone as ‘googling a restaurant’ is intimately tied to a language use in which googling is understood as a practice or action. A thing that one can do. Further, the use of a concept such as ‘googling’ subsumes knowledge of situational affordance and contextual knowledge. In order to ‘google’, one needs to have a computer, internet access, needs to have heard of google before, knows of its function and use etc. Yet the use of a concept such as ‘googling’ is dynamic in its application to activities. For it is imaginable by now that someone might ‘google the restaurant on bing’. The term googling thus, has become a shared practice that applies to a variety of encounterable actions. It is in language that one can share encountered actions and through language that actions are encountered or confirmed.<sup>65</sup> Describing action is tied to the encounter of it as an action. And the methods by which actions are understood as such were introduced here as socially holistic. Holistic, because actions strike the observer as meaningful wholes and social, because these meaningful wholes are informed by some sense of sociality. Perceiving and conceiving of actions thus, is intertwined. For something to be conceived of as an everyday doable action, it needs to be embedded in a communal practice that is recognisable and intelligible. Robinson Crusoe abandoned at birth on a lonely island, is perfectly capable of acting and describing his actions, but for him to ‘google’ or ‘post’, a network of actions and their understanding needs to be in place. Socio-cultural doables are tied to practices in which

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<sup>64</sup> I am aware that there are debates about the correct reading of Wittgenstein’s comments on rule following. I will not discuss these but point to the fact that my reading is probably closest to Malcolm’s (1989).

<sup>65</sup> My argument is inspired by philosophers who discuss language use as shared, public and therefore inherently social. This argument has been widely argued for by Wittgenstein (1953/2009) and in succession by Winch (1958/1990). It understands using language is a human activity that is tied to the idea of following a rule. And for someone to be following a rule, her exercising the act of following that rule, need to be a matter of public and social scrutiny. For someone to follow a rule, a chance of failing to follow the rule need conceptually be in place, which in turn is tied to an agreement about what counts as accurately following it. So understood, it is dubitable whether it makes sense at all to speak of someone as following a rule in solitude or privately, because it takes away the highlighted conventional aspect. If then activities such as googling enter a community’s use of concepts, what is contained in acting out googling in the right way, is in a dialogue with ordinary convention. Yet again not summarised in a rigid taxonomy, but in an elastic interaction with others in the shared culture. Robinson might well think of himself as googling, but for his googling to become a shared and public practice, in which he could fail. Arguments like these strengthen a socially holistic sense of action in which the sociality is at the heart of the conception. Establishing googling as a practice to which certain rules agreeably apply in a socially holistic way is not something that Robinson can do all by himself.

understanding each other is enacted by way of understanding what one and others are doing. Agents might be capable sole creators of certain actions, but it takes a community to establish a practice attached to understanding. Only in a socially embedded practice, one is capable of conceiving of someone as 'googling'.

Social holism suggests casting light on the ways in which actions are ordinarily thematised as a starting point. Highlighting the ties to sociality and social practices, it gears towards an understanding that speaks to a phenomenon of action that is socially relevant and meaningful. It posits the question as to whether there is room for a philosophical exploration of action before one assumes that all answers are to be found in metaphysics. And whether this ordinary action philosophy can nevertheless speak to philosophers and other social scientists. It invokes the immediacy with which actions are encountered as meaningful. This sense of meaningfulness, however, is not to be found in the mechanics of encounter, but rather in the ways in which sociality is intertwined with our conceiving of actions. Recognising and understanding each other's actions is on this account deeply contextual and holistic and not unlike a family resemblance concept. The Gestalt analogy has helped to bring out this point: when a whole is reduced to a constituent, what goes missing is the sense grasped in the immediate encounter. Social holism is the perspective that embraces actions as they strike us to the background of our sociality, making social action the paradigm that allows for a variety of perspicuous perspectives onto aspects of action worth exploring.

The paramount strength of a socially holistic take on action I evoked, is the change it can create for investigations of collective action.<sup>66</sup> Starting an analysis from an understanding of agents as acting together by making sense of what is seen, lifts the atomistic burden of having to reason from the individual atom to the aggregate. Take the following situation as an example: when writing this chapter, I sat in a café. Two people were sitting at the table on the other side of the room. A reads, B writes. They don't talk and yet it is possible to identify them as spending time together. This is not only because of their physical proximity in our visual fields, nor is it because their mode of action allows for assigning a joint action. It is rather because one's cultural engagement aids in understanding this action of spending an afternoon together – because one has an idea of what it looks and feels like. Whereas under an atomistic grip socially collective action becomes a highly complex issue, social holism understands action starting from the social. Performing acts together is the norm from which individual parts can be elucidated. The Gestalt of an action performed by multiple agents is encounterable just as the action performed by an

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<sup>66</sup> I use collective action interchangeably with social, joint or group action at this point, because the formal differences of these accounts are bracketed when understanding the phenomenon in socially holistic terms.

individual – through making sense of the precisely situated goings-on, by grouping the relevant pieces together, understood via one's socially minded and interpretive engagement with the environment.

The next chapter will be concerned with demonstrating how the robust take on collective action as one phenomenon to be explained, can be collapsed into different senses of sociality. Social holism as an alternative and useful starting point for the exploration of meaningful social action will progressively be demonstrated throughout the remainder of this thesis. Action thus far has been evoked as not being one concrete thing, but rather as a holistic and situated family resemblance concept. To incorporate the practical and cultural influence that is part and parcel to social holistically understanding actions, I will move to a discussion of at least three senses of sociality in action which are dismissed when following an atomistic approach. As a result, the assumed boundary between atomistic individual and collective action in the philosophy of action will be weakened. These senses include the way in which agents come to understand that something is doable in their immediate cultural community. I call this sense *doables*, which I will explain in detail in the next chapter. Further included are *interactive actions*. This sense explores actions in which another's uptake and input is part and parcel to the course of the mutual action. Think about the difference between seeing two people as having a conversation, as opposed to seeing the individual turns they take and understanding them as instances of actions. The third sense of sociality comprises actions and their conceptions as tied to social and environmental enabling. I call this sense *socially enabled actions* and contrast it to theories of causal enabling. All senses of sociality introduced will gear towards showing that the majority of actions are social in one or more of these senses, strengthening a take in which understanding actions as social and holistic is the norm and isolated and basic cases need further explanation. It is further meant to emphasise that ordinarily actions are encountered and described in a particular way that is closer to an achievement rather than a modality. This means that whenever an action is presented or described, it is understood in a particular sense or for a purpose. And the senses in which one understands actions as either *this* or *that* and not, as in Davidson as *this and that and that*, is an important aspect of what the action is.

## Chapter 4 ◦ Senses of sociality

I have moved away from agreeing to a paradigm of action as promoted in the theories I introduced in chapter 2, by evoking a picture that allows even actions performed in isolation from others to be social in a variety of senses. I gave incentives to replace the concrete, isolated and basic action concept by an explorative starting point which honours the role sociality plays, both on conceptual and empirical levels of understanding action. The aim is to create a social space in which making sense of each other's actions is made centre piece to the investigation. Moving away from metaphysical discourses about the nature of action, sets one free to do *ordinary action philosophy*. The senses about to be introduced in this chapter hence, draws attention to the nuances of which actions are conceived against the background of their sociality. They serve as a means to further demonstrate how social holism makes explicit the nuances in conceptualising and understanding actions as *already* embedded in sociality and practice. It expresses that which many theories discussed in chapter 2 might have either taken for granted implicitly or need to be reminded of. I suggest the view from social holism as a perspicuous perspective that brings aspects to action under observation and study. It changes the philosophical direction of explanation dramatically: social actions in one or more of the following senses are conceived of as the norm, in which accounting for an isolated and basic action becomes an odd exemption. When, one might ask, does one ever just perform a movement or minimal version of action? Positively demonstrating the senses in which many of our actions are social, even those we performed in isolation, will be the cornerstone to forge a take on actions as embedded in, recognised, and understood via sociality.

One motif for thinking about actions as they strike one in a variety of senses is collapsing the artificial boundaries drawn in philosophy between individual and collective action, taking the former to be primary to the latter (Preston, 2016). And further, to evade the tempting conflation of the latter into a homogeneous phenomenon as done in theories of collective atomism. There is not one way of doing things together, there are many. The idea of social action as I propose it, is neither identical to individual nor collective action. It works on paradigms based on a heterogenous phenomenon, highlighting how the majority of actions are performed socially in different senses. These senses permeate our everyday engagement with actions and are simply dismissed when their investigation starts from atomistic grounds.

Collective action as problematised in the philosophy of action (in which all agents are fully committed to the same goal), is understood to be but one sense of the sociality of action (I am only interested in the phenomenology of acting together in that way, not the metaphysical

constitution). Paradigms of social action weaken the robust picture of collective atomism in philosophy and relieves the pressure on the analytically drawn dichotomy between individual and collective action. The examples I entertain demonstrate how even actions performed alone can indeed be instances of social action. This is because their understanding and enactment requires a sensitivity to senses of sociality. The thesis at its strongest is, that many, if not most, actions are highlighted under one of the following senses of sociality. They are not an exhaustive taxonomy, however, or an attempt to bring all possible actions under their belt. They are rather a starting point for observing actions and examining how their conception is afforded and shaped by sociality. What is important is the acknowledgement of actions as being understood in a particular guise. There is no objective, neutral or pure action, but rather an action is what is being understood in a purposive sense.

To recall, the focus of this thesis is communication and interaction on social media. That is social action performed on networking sites. The working thesis is that to better make sense of what we do online, many of the senses I introduce need to be active. Whereas in this chapter I explore three senses of sociality alongside a variety of offline and online examples, in the next chapter, I will explore empirically the ordinary occurrences of ‘posting’, ‘liking’ or ‘sharing’ on Facebook and how clicks are understood in particular senses. Both chapters are concerned with shedding light on how actions assume social relevance. This one in principle, the latter in fact.

Firstly, I shall entertain how communicating and doing things online has joined the range of ordinary things to do, at least in the Western world. The current generation being the witness to the shift from texting and emailing to ‘posting’ and ‘liking’. Explaining and investigating the things we do online and why we communicate online, lies with understanding these actions via their sociality, rather than their mechanic exegesis. For it is not the same to explain how someone posts and what someone posts. Thinking about what it means to ‘be’ or ‘being together’ online, plays with conceptions of actions performed alone and through one’s finger moving and yet, possible only in the light of an understanding of how things are done. At its best, the experienced novelty of social action online will allow to draw new inferences to both novel and conventional perspectives on action.

Closely connected to my discussion of senses of sociality is the debate on rule following as I mentioned in chapter 3, introduced by Wittgenstein and seized by Winch. Whereas Wittgenstein’s discussion lead to the private language paradox (Wittgenstein, 1953/2009, § 243ff), Winch concerns himself with how rule following sheds light on social action (Winch, 1958/1990). He argues that acting socially is rule-governed, as is in Wittgenstein the use of concepts, and that recognition of the application of rules goes hand-in-hand with the risk of getting it wrong. Winch’s

(1958/1990) second chapter centres on the idea of meaningful action as entering the space of reasons and are rule-governed. Only the agent who conceptualises actions under a certain rule, can find the right reasons to perform them and make sense of others. Winch's argument also discussed the praxiological nature of actions, in which agents participate in a community of practical reasoning.<sup>67</sup> It is therefore sensitive to the degree to which understanding each other's actions and interacting presupposes sociality and a communal sense of grasping a rule that is acted out and acted upon. I follow Wittgenstein and Winch in asking to which extent it makes sense to speak and think about action abstractly, in isolation from senses of understanding on the one hand, and situational context on the other. Wittgenstein seems to commit to the idea that although it might in principle be possible to exercise a rule-governed practice in isolation, most of the things we say or do are social in fact. Winch's conclusion appears as drawn to presuming the latter. I do not want to exclude the possibility for an agent acting meaningfully in solitude in principle, but side with views in the debate that understand the existence of a community in which one is brought up to behave as necessary for an agent to have the concept of, for example, 'googling' as an action.<sup>68</sup> Any action thus, that is not mere behaviour, is already social in a sense. The senses I introduce are concerned with the ways in which in ordinary life sociality plays a distinctive role in understanding actions. Entertaining examples of different senses of social actions emphasises the frames activated in recognising an action as an instance of X. These frames could be understood in terms of knowledge about how to go on about a certain action, but also about how to act within a social convention and in agreement with local norms. Further, it is these frames of actions that allow us to render one's own and others' actions intelligible, repeatable and recognisable.

The previous chapter explored the ordinary methods with which human agents recognise and understand each other's actions. The present discussion will comprise three modes of presenting<sup>69</sup> an action: the sense in which actions are socially learnt *doables*, the way in which actions are *interactive* and a perspective on social *enabling*. All of the senses aim at understanding the

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<sup>67</sup> See Pettit (2000) for an in-depth discussion of Winch's argument, comprised strengths and weaknesses. Schatzki (2000) further, discusses in detail the Wittgensteinian influence on Winch and the limitations of both of their arguments. Both Pettit and Schatzki in their critical engagement maintain, that here described base line of Winch's argument is widely accepted as uncontroversial. Pettit further shows, how Winch's argument lends itself to a rejection of atomism based on the assumption of actions being rule-governed and thereby social matter both conceptually and empirically. I understand the philosophical method both Wittgenstein and Winch devise as a useful way of considering action as a social phenomenon that is not exhausted by metaphysical treatment, but as tied to praxiological understanding. For other critical evaluations see Macintyre (1973) or Schatzki (2000).

<sup>68</sup> Without wanting to make a judgment regarding the right reading of Wittgenstein, my view is possibly closest to that of Malcolm (1989).

<sup>69</sup> I use Sandis (2012, pp. 11, 170) Husserlian term 'modes of presentation' here to appeal to a Gestalt or action as it might strike us, as opposed to descriptions of actions in the deflationary way in which it has been used in action theory.

heterogenous ways in which actions are *social* and are recognised in a particular way. In turning the settings of the exploration upside-down, it becomes apparent that many of the actions presented as individual actions, include the input of others, both on conceptual and empirical levels. In acknowledging sociality's central role in acting, the use of the concept becomes involved with meaning in which a discussion of actions assumes social relevance to them as a tool in organising everyday life.

#### 4.1 1<sup>st</sup> sense: *Doables*

The sense of doables integrates ideas about how one learns to see or recognise actions. It connects to the synthesis of perceiving and conceiving of actions as intertwined in segregating meaningful action Gestalten as raised in chapter 3. Doables are therefore possible actions which are understood as ordinary, shared (e.g. via language), recognisable, accountable and intelligible. The anchoring thesis is that, whereas a hypothetical Mowgli abandoned at birth, might perform actions, for someone to 'share a picture', or 'post a post' and understanding of them as being *doable* is required. This first sense dwells on how a range of actions become *doable* for capable, social minded agents through living in a community with others. It emphasises a perspective in which acting is learnt in a local cultural setting. It encourages considering when and how agents come to thematise actions as not random, but an immediate achievement of seeing this as an act of that.<sup>70</sup> As mentioned in the introduction, although actions might in principle figure in the life of an isolated agent, there is much to be explored as to how conceptions of actions figure in everyday *social* life. How is the conceptual landscape of ordinarily doable actions shaped? How is the web of doables activated in our understanding of recognising others as enacting them?

The concept of doables invokes actions as something akin to shared conceptual currency of making sense of the world. Agents are encultured to understand each other's actions to the background of their social setting. Actions do not appear in a void, their perception and conception is sensitive to context, both social and situational. The things one does and can do are linked to the ordinary and shared forms of doing something, as well as making one's own conduct available to its understanding by others. What is perceived to be ordinary is both acted out and acted upon. One of the pivotal points is to illuminate what it means for an act to be ordinary and doable. It is not intended to propose a taxonomy of action kinds, but rather to illuminate that and how

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<sup>70</sup> Recall Anscombe's 'Why'-question as a way of identifying intentional actions. The 'Why'-question appears not only to be an analytical tool, but first and foremost an ordinary and methodical one arising between agents that share a horizon of doables in which inquiring one or the other action of another makes sense.

understanding action is tied to social enculturation of agents, in which one has a good sense of things one can do. Further, the understanding of doables is considered as part and parcel of the philosophical enquiry of actions. It is one way of engaging with the constraints of what it means to be in the space of actions.

My understanding of doables rests on Velleman's (2013) monograph on the *Foundations of Moral Relativism*, in which he defends the position of moral relativism by drawing on anthropological and sociological research. Two threads in Velleman are digested in what follows: the use of doables as a concept and the take on *ordinariness* in the sociological branch of Ethnomethodology that underlies Velleman's use of the concept. Velleman (Velleman, 2013, p. 54f, if not otherwise stated throughout the chapter my emphasis will be in bold) introduces the idea of doables as follows:

In order for anyone to aim at **doing what's ordinary, there has to be something that is ordinarily done, which is whatever is done by others, who, according to Sack's thesis, are also aiming to do what's ordinary.** Hence everyone has to converge on a **repertoire of ordinary actions that isn't defined in advance of everyone's converging on it.** Ordinariness is socially constructed, and constructing is a classic coordination problem.

Because ordinariness is socially constructed, it is also local, in the sense that it is relative to some population of agents which interact regularly, usually because they live in one another's vicinity. What's ordinary in New York or Omaha is not the same as what's ordinary in Ramallah or Singapore, as everybody knows. One way to think of this phenomenon would be to imagine a domain of action -- or, more accurately, action-types -- from which different communities select different subsets on which to converge as the ordinary set. I will argue that this conception of the coordination problem would be mistaken, because there is no neutral domain of actions from which a community can select. **In constructing what's ordinary, a community also constructs the domain of action-types.**

Velleman criticises the idea of assuming neutral action-types, from which subsets are locally chosen in moral theory. He uses the concept of doables to show that if understood in terms of action-types moral disagreements become impossible.

The result is that communities can find themselves unable to disagree about what should be ordinarily done, **because they differ in respect to what is doable:**

**there is no neutral domain of action-types from which they choose what to do.** What's more, action-types are invented, and there is no domain of inevitable action-types from which communities can choose which one's to invent, much less disagree about these choices. Insofar as they can disagree about which action-types to invent, **they disagree just by living differently, each converging on ordinary choices from among its own, socially constructed domain of doables.** (Velleman, 2013, p. 55)

Velleman talks about a 'constructed domain of doables' which he introduces in relation to the impossibility of moral disagreements, when we constructed as action-types. He goes on to explain the construction of different 'practical domains' that afford local ordinarieness. My use of doables parts from Velleman's at this point, because I want to explore the implications of doables for actions and conceptions of actions. I use doables to evoke how acting is shaped and embedded in sociality. It situates the concept of social action on a continuum, influenced by past developments as much as it influences future developments of senses of actions. Whereas some might think that thinking about actions in this way is intuitive, it seems accounts in the philosophy of collective action have forgotten about exactly this socio-cultural and praxiological embeddedness in the concept of action.

Following Velleman, I will be inspired by other disciplines such as Ethnomethodology, which start their investigations from a premise of social action empirically explored. Beyond Velleman's discussion of the concept in moral terms, I will demonstrate it as a sense in which ordinary understanding of action arises, based on a variety of examples.

Developments in our cultural environment then, in combination with a sense of an action conception being picked up by a community of agents, affords a multitude of action possibilities. These in turn are not newly created by individuals, but they stand in a relation to already known ways of doing things as well as the immediate environmental limitations. Agent's rarely *invent* new ways of conducting themselves, at least not on an ordinary basis. As Velleman suggested above, if a community is understood to invent or create a set of doables, then they do so in virtue of leading their lives as they do. It is the dynamic between old knowns and new adaptations of things to do that is embedded in the idea of doables. Whilst one can perform actions in solitude and describe them to oneself, it requires senses of sociality to be aware of cultural doables, as actions which are intelligible and recognisable. Consider, for instance, the following examples.

Example: Googling

Googling is an everyday thing one does. This way of seeking for information on a search engine, using the service Google provides, is learnt in a culture as a thing to do. One can google on a phone, on a home PC, a laptop or a tablet. The idea of gathering information is not new but doing it in this particular and yet so ordinary way has become doable only fairly recently. Googling has further become a thing that one can do on Bing or YouTube, i.e. detached from the context of Google's own website.

It seems, that conceptions of actions are open to acquire new ways of how one can go about performing them, which in turn is tied to the development of methods for doing certain things in one's environment. Googling is a repeatable, intelligible and recognisable thing one can do, alone or with others. It is a doable in our (the Western) cultural community. Doables are active senses of sociality that are instantiated in particular instances of googling, i.e. your 'googling the name of a celebrity' or my 'googling Ulaanbaatar'.<sup>71</sup> And although in each of these instances it is an individual agent performing a certain action, it is the social sense of the action that makes you and I understand what we are doing. Whether or not one could so conceive of her action without acknowledging the methods by means one acquires knowledge or capability to perform certain actions is not indubitable. Even if an agent is not interacting with a person or a group in fact, she has cultural knowledge of a range of possibilities of what she could do, thereby accessing a range of ordinary doables. Being part of a steadily developing community translates to the acquisition of action possibilities.

Example: Book-colouring

Contemplate for a moment, how colouring books have become a revived mindfulness trend amongst adults. How does one conceive of this trend as a doable? How does colouring books become a thing to do that is recognisable, repeatable and intelligible? Environmental adaptation denotes here that colour books in general and by and large those specifically created for adults needed to be available in order to create a sense of adults colouring books as being a doable. A community of adult agents agrees on what is understood as the practice of colouring books and enters the realm of a doable, repeatable and intelligible thing.

Understanding actions as doables, presupposes being an active agent in a community of agents and possible things to do. Through a word of mouth, one learns that colouring books is the new thing for enhancing mindfulness. Through an advert on Facebook one learns about events in

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<sup>71</sup> In the metaphysical debate, the differences between doings and things done are discussed in relation to universals and particulars by Hornsby (2012) for example, which I will discuss in the second sense of this chapter. Further, the distinction has been explored in relation to possible moral implications in ethics (Sandis, 2017).

one's environment and sometimes even who is attending them, and via books and journals one arrives at the conclusion that a lot of one's thoughts have been thought before – and written down. Despite all the above being in some sense 'individual' actions, they are in virtue of a multitude of socio-cultural things to do. Doables however, are not a finite set of culturally given acts, but akin to a resource of conceptions of how one can conduct themselves in ordinary ways. Doables then, is not a concept which admits of a typology of action kinds but evokes a phenomenological constraint to recognisable and intelligible things to do. Thus understood, doables point to the connection between perceiving and conceiving of meaningful actions in a context, both social and situational.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, I take inspiration from the debates on rule-following which I understand as closely connected to the sense of doable things. In his book on *The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy*, Winch (1958/1990) seminally challenges the notion that neither the performance of action, nor the institution of action being a social matter (Winch, 1958/1990, Ch.2). He offers the example of casting a vote as an instance of action that is irreducibly tied to sociality, for one can only truly vote if one is aware of the importance of the act in a particular social and political setting. He draws an analogy to the Wittgensteinian discussion of following a rule that implies the possibility of making a mistake. And because contravention is entailed by the idea of following a rule, a community of agents is required to establish the merits of conformity. To strengthen his point, Winch evokes purposive explanations of actions as entailing sociality because they presuppose notions "appropriateness and familiar patterns of behaviour" (Schatzki, 2000, p. 97). There is one way of understanding the sense of doables as reflecting these thoughts. Agents do not only know about performable actions or things to do ordinarily, they also share an awareness about the appropriateness of these actions.

Winch's arguments were broadly criticised and reformed<sup>72</sup>, so that in the preface to the 1990 edition Winch acknowledges his dealing with the rule following idea as problematic and fragmented, pointing out an important claim he had made in the first edition and wishing he had followed up on; towards the end of his monograph, he posits social interaction can be "more profitably compared to the exchange of ideas in a conversation than to the interaction of forces in a physical realm" (Winch, 1958/1990, pp. XVII, 128). Ethnomethodologists who are hinted by Velleman and will be discussed in what follows, appear to have taken Winch's postulation of actions as an 'exchange of ideas' to be their starting point for exploring actions via conversation.

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<sup>72</sup> For critical arguments see Pettit (1998; 2000), Flyvbjerg (2001) and MacIntyre in Ryan (1974). Schatzki (2000) revises Winch's argument to defy it against challenges from methodological individualism, but further to better account for inherent sociality of action. I will return to this argument at a later point in this chapter.

Ethnomethodology speaks to Winch's idea of a social science and helps to better understand the texture and importance the conceived ordinariness plays in the present discussion of a sense of sociality in which ordinary things to do are understood as doables. To posit Ethnomethodology as an unlikely ally in proposing social holism as a starting point for highlighting the sense of doables, let me introduce it in further detail.

### Ethnomethodology

The study of Ethnomethodology is directed at the ordinary methods by means of which social order is established. It is inspired by Husserl, Durkheim and most importantly sociologist and phenomenologist Alfred Schutz. Schutz's investigation centred on asking how social reality is realised, introducing inter-subjectivity as the salient feature of making sense of the world. According to his thesis, social reality is collectively established and both 'trusted in' and 'acted upon' – a theme which is taken up by Ethnomethodologists as *reflexivity*. Eikelpatsch (1982, p. 11) suitably portrays the role of inter-subjectivity in Schutz not as a transcendental problem, but rather as a 'given of the "Lebenswelt"'.<sup>73</sup> Understanding each other is a goal of human interaction that is both resource and achievement of everyday conduct, in which action is but one part of this commonly shared knowledge. Schutz's theory motivated the phenomenological move from a solipsistic 'I', towards an understanding of social reality as a product of interaction, established via an assumed context independent, but context sensitive pool of knowledge, shared by the participants or members of a community which is shaped and re-shaped in its use in social practices. This shift has far-reaching epistemological consequences, since common agential knowledge is portrayed as neither being fully context dependent, nor objective, but rather a reflexive achievement of maintaining a sense of objective social reality in interaction. The most overt differentiation between Schutz's phenomenology and the proceedings of Ethnomethodologists is that for Schutz the everyday world is a taxonomized world in which members' typed actions produce a sense of a society.<sup>74</sup>

Sacks and contemporary Garfinkel were pioneers in evoking - via the analysis of conversational patterns – ways in which social order is established, enacted and maintained in ordinary life. In Winchean terms, they are pre-occupied with - quite literally - identifying senses in

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<sup>73</sup> Schutz (in Heritage, 1991, p. 48) "The social world is experienced from the outset as a meaningful one. The Other's body is not experienced as an organism but as a fellow-man, its overt behaviour not as an occurrence in the space-time of the outer world, but as a fellow-man's action. We normally 'know' what the Other does, for what reason he does it at this particular time, and in these particular circumstances. That means that we experience our fellow-man's action in terms of his motives and goals."

<sup>74</sup> I will discuss Schutz's approach in further detail in Chapter 5.

which ideas are exchanged in a conversation. Their aim is to highlight tacit and reflexive methods used by members of a community, usually passing by researchers and members alike in 'seen-but-unnoticed' fashion (Garfinkel, 1984, Ch. 1; Heritage, 1991, p. 304). 'Ethno' and 'methodology' means accounting for member's methods and making them "detectable, countable, recordable, reportable, tell-a-story-aboutable, analysable -- in short, accountable" (Garfinkel, 1984, p. 33). Due to its focus on conversation, Ethnomethodology treats all action as necessarily social and strictly contextual. I take Ethnomethodology as moving away from action *per se* towards action as an ordinary method of making sense of the world, enacted by agents. By explaining action in an already social sense, the ethnomethodological programme appears to be an unlikely ally to draw inspiration from, when arguing for an anti-atomistic mind set for the study of human action.

Velleman adopts the ethnomethodological trope of 'doing being ordinary', coined by Sacks (1984). Whereas in Ethnomethodology one's actions are already tied to a social understanding of how things are being done, Velleman (Velleman, 2013, p. 53) evokes 'doing being ordinary' as an additional achievement to whatever one does: "The thesis of this brilliant essay [...] is that no matter what we do, **we are doing something else in addition, namely, being ordinary.**" In the context of Ethnomethodology however, Sack's (1984, p. 415; also quoted in Velleman, 2013, p. 53f) essay suggests that social agents cannot *but* act in ordinary, conventional and meaningful ways – because actions are tied to the common ways in which social order is created and maintained:

Among the ways you go about doing "being an ordinary person" is to spend your time in the usual ways, having usual thoughts, usual interests, so that all you have to do to be an ordinary person in the evening is turn on the TV set. **Now, the trick is to see that it is not that is happens that you are doing what lots of ordinary people are doing, but that you know that the way to do "having a usual evening," for anybody, is to do that.**

This conception differs from Velleman's in so far as one is not intentionally enacting the ordinary, but rather that due to social enculturation one cannot act out of line, non-ordinarily as it were, even when performing morally or otherwise controversial acts. Heritage (1991) describes the conceptual move as one from understanding an agent as a *judgemental dope* towards that of a *necessary meaningful agent*.

This is one of the reasons why I introduced the sense of doables as akin to a constraint to our understanding of actions. It is a way of describing how agents are influenced or constrained by their socio-cultural conceptions of ordinary things to do. Understanding action usually starts with what they mean in a particular context. This point is stressed by Ethnomethodology. It is realised

in the ethnomethodological study by changing the original mind-set of the investigation: rather than abstracting and reducing a human phenomenon to its most basic features in isolation, it focusses on the methods used by ordinary agents in understanding one another in interaction. In which mutual understanding is a reflexive achievement of or between agents to the background of doables.

Doables as a sense of sociality through which actions are understood, aids the suggesting of a socially holistic perspective from which aspects to actions can be highlighted. This perspective on action stands in direct opposition to views which contend that it makes sense to understand an action as an isolated and basic concept, separate from senses of sociality. Understanding action in terms of doables is a way of conceiving of them as bound to an agent's socio-enculturation, in and through processes of perceiving and conceiving of actions.

The primary aim of this section has been to show that learning what one can do, how one does it, conceptions of doing it, and how one understands others as doing it, is tied to sociality. Ethnomethodology as a sociological study of action via conversation, starts from a premise of social action and explores how meaning is created and manifested throughout the actions of agents. In the sense of doables then, even instances of individual actions such as 'googling' or 'book-colouring' examples are social. The sense of doables evokes a range of ordinary things to do. To the background of sociality, these things become things to do for the individual. There is not a unilateral reference between the concept of a doable and its expression, but rather the doable stands as a paradigm of a social action, which can be enacted in a variety of ways, to make it accountable for oneself and others.

#### 4.2 2<sup>nd</sup> sense: Interactive actions

Whereas the first sense demonstrated how even the most individually performed action can be social, the present sense explores how many activities are joined by another agent. Doables as discussed in the previous section can be refined by interactive actions. This means that ordinary conceptions of actions include actions that are performed inter-subjectively. This sense highlights a perspective on action in which *one* conceived action stretches over the turns of *two* agents (or more), as in a conversation for instance. It stresses the nuance of an action arising through an interactively determined effort. The perspective works against tendencies of treating interactive action as either a sequence of individual actions or fully committed and collective and takes an interest in the unfolding of actions between two people. It elaborates on just how many ordinary actions can strike one as a part of an interaction or a reaction to preceding actions by oneself or

others. It further evokes the understanding of another agent as an important part to instantiate or realise the action.

When agent X wants to greet you across the street, you seeing X and recognising X's action as a greeting influences the length, intensity and success of X's action. X's action and your recognition of it so understood, stand in a relation to one another that goes beyond what X intended or desired. In acting socially in this way, one is prepared to allow for contingencies with regards to the course of action that depend on other agents or environmental influences which I will turn to in the next section. So understood, 'greeting' can be directly perceived as an interaction – requiring initiation by one agent and recognition and understanding by another. Greeting implies more than just one agent's intended goal. Your understanding the act as a 'greeting' rather than an instance of 'swearing at you' is intricately tied to the immediate social or intersubjective context of the action. Consider whether greeting is an action that is easily thought about without an Other that is the recipient of a greeting, an Other that is being greeted or understands herself as being greeted.

There are examples of action in which another's cooperation lies at the heart of conceiving of it as a doable. Think of having a conversation, seeking ethics approval for a study, the dynamic of publishing an article between author and editor, applying for a job or a visa in the UK when you are, say, a Cuban citizen. All of these examples appear to already project an Other (which can be a person or an institution, or even a state) that is a determining factor not only in whether someone's action will proceed, but also which course, duration and intensity it will have. I suggest understanding these actions as social in that they relate to doables, as discussed in the previous section, of which the agent's conception immediately includes the recognition and reaction of an Other – as an action Gestalt that arises in *interactivity*.

A possible way of distinguishing as to when we are to understand an action as unfolding in interactivity, is to distinguish between actions and activities as suggested, for instance, by Jennifer Hornsby (2012, p. 235): "Occurrences—particulars that occur—are not all that occur. **Actions are not all that agents participate in: also they engage in activity.**" She clarifies this thought as follows:

Strolling is an activity in the sense in which we saw raising one's arm to be an activity. So also are walking, reading, etc., activities. Now each of raising one's arm, strolling, walking, reading . . . is considered *an* activity by virtue of its being a *type* of activity. **And when 'raising an arm', 'strolling', 'walking', 'reading' name types of activity, they are not count nouns.** In understanding how they work, it can be helpful to think about another brand of non-count nouns—those which name types of stuff. Names of stuffs don't pick out particulars. If a name of a

stuff can be pluralized, that is not because particulars satisfy it, but because there can be different types of a single stuff. So for instance ‘gold’ names a type of stuff; and someone who speaks of three golds has to mean three types of gold. (Apparently jewellers say that there is yellow gold, white gold, and rose gold.) (Hornsby, 2012, p. 237, my emphasis in bold)

Hornsby here marks a useful distinction between activities and actions: the examples she mentions are referring to possible things to do that are not particular instances of doing them. On this view then, one can be engaged in an activity that is not yet a thing done or action which is a particular. Before I continue to say how this might apply to the current discussion on interactive actions, I will remind the reader that Hornsby is arguing for a metaphysical distinction between a doing and a thing done, to move away from an event-causality-view on action. Her argument is directed against Davidson’s ‘cubist’ move of subsuming all actions under the category of events as discussed in the previous chapter. All her examples are relatively individualistic examples of acting. Further, the comparison of actions to stuff, evoke the atomistic point of view that I wish to escape.

In the current debate however, I think the distinction between activity and action, as introduced in the cases of individual action, can be discussed without taking on the metaphysical purpose Hornsby was after. This is because the distinction between activity and action, helps to clarify the difference in Gestalt which can be immediately perceived: one can perceive another’s conduct qua the ordinary doable or thing done one understands them to be performing, or qua the activity they are involved in before any concrete sense of a doable thing is activated yet. It is, for instance, conceivable that in encountering interactive action, one immediately encounters an activity Gestalt as unfolding between two people. Without necessarily having done anything (yet). Further, doables as introduced in the previous section, could be more precisely described as ordinary things done or to do, whereas the doing of it is particular to the agent doing it in context.<sup>75</sup>

Whereas atomism would separate each turn in interaction into either an autonomous action or group it into a collective goal, there is an alternative conception that highlights how interaction is shaped via the turns and how this differs from having agreed on the same goal as described in collective accounts. It rests on the idea that it is not the same to encounter two people as having a conversation (as an activity as discussed above) and perceiving agent A to say X, followed by a perception of agent B saying Y as independent actions. Nor is it the same to hear two people speaking as one. In interactive activities there is a dynamic between two people unfolding in which what it is they are doing is sensitive to what the other just did. For understanding how one turn

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<sup>75</sup> This conceptual distinction has a variety of possible applications, most fruitful as entertained in the present discussion or in relation to normative ethics (see for example Sandis, 2017).

relates to the next, is not random, but a careful process of shaping the interactivity. This interactive sense of sociality invokes a flexible understanding of intersubjective action, sensitive to its immediate situatedness. This dynamic goes missing once one compresses interaction into either individual actions or a collective action as discussed in chapter 2. There are different senses of understanding actions involving more than one agent and that the separate sense of interaction has been neglected. As a social agent one is prepared to involve others in one's activities, as well as *seeing* others as involved in interactivity with others. Many conceptions of actions involve an Other in that one's one idea of it is tied to the reaction of another.

Only some philosophers have been explicitly sensitive to the nuanced interactive dynamics of some actions. Austin's (1962) speech acts come to mind. Austin's investigation of *How to Do Things with Words* reflects on the way in which utterances can be actions, because they do things in the world. They include instances of 'promising', 'betting', 'naming' of buildings or ships or 'weddings'. Speech acts are therefore understood to be a subset of action. This aids the present account, for it highlights a perspective on communication as action, as well as action being communicative as they come to mean something in a particular context. Austin's overall aim is thought to dissolve a strict division between semantics and pragmatics, i.e. the acts of utterance and their consequences by showing the hopelessness of trying to impose a taxonomy (Wieland, 2015). Austin seminally highlighted how speaking is acting and how actions speak to us. Speech acts on his account do not necessarily involve speech. To his mind, waving and nodding are taken to be examples of speech acts (Green, 2010).<sup>76</sup>

Austin introduces speech acts as socially significant acts, 'unearthing' a conventional sense of actions that is not exhausted by the meaning of words (Green, 2010). This conventional sense manifests itself in terms of the extra-semantic conditions that need to be secured to perform a speech act (ibid.). If these conditions are not met, the speech act is infelicitous either as an instance of misfire or abuse (Austin, 1962, p. 16f). My discussion will focus on one of the conditions that need to be secured: *uptake*. Only in three places, Austin explicitly introduces the idea of securing *uptake* (Austin, 1962, pp. 116-7;120;138) which I take to be majorly insightful for the present sense of interactivity:

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<sup>76</sup> I mention this to further highlight how blurred the lines can be between communication and action as one arising from another. Where philosophers of action have suggested the investigation of action as necessarily starting in the physical realm, Austin shows that there is more to action than motion and change in the physical world. He picks up on a very important sense of sociality that there is to actions which is their relation to language.

Generally the effect amounts to bringing about the **understanding of the meaning** and of the force of the locution. **So the performance of an illocutionary act involves the securing of uptake.** (Austin, 1962, p. 116f)

It is the idea of an *understanding of meaning by another* that I wish to draw attention to in the paragraph above. Integrated into his tripartite framework of locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts, *what is said, what is meant* and *what happened as a result* respectively (Green, 2010), uptake is considered as one of the effects relating to the illocutionary act. What is meant by producing an utterance thus, can be dependent on the utterance being understood in that way:

We distinguished in the last lecture some senses of consequences and effects in these connexions, **especially three senses in which effects can come in even with illocutionary acts, namely, securing uptake, taking effect, and inviting responses.** In the case of the perlocutionary act we made a rough distinction between achieving an object and producing a sequel. (Austin, 1962, p. 120)

On the flip-side, the performance of a speech act can misfire is when uptake is failed to be secured.

Once we realize that what we have to study is not the sentence but the issuing of an utterance in a speech situation, there can hardly be any longer a possibility of not seeing that stating is performing an act. Moreover, comparing stating to what we have said about the illocutionary act, it is an act to which, **just as much as to other illocutionary acts, it is essential to 'secure uptake': the doubt about whether I stated something if it was not heard or understood is just the same as the doubt about whether I warned *sotto voce* or protested if someone did not take it as a protest, &c.** (Austin, 1962, p. 138)

Austin's sense of uptake enabling the illocutionary act hinges on the hearing and *understanding*, that is of the meaning of an act for it to be successful. To the risk that if uptake is not secured, the illocutionary act will not be successful. This means that some acts, although uttered by an individual, depend on another's understanding. Securing uptake further, can occur both verbally as well as non-verbally.

Illocutionary acts are conventional acts: perlocutionary acts are not conventional. Acts of both kinds can be performed-or, more accurately, **acts called by the same name (for example, acts equivalent to the illocutionary act of warning or the perlocutionary act of convincing)--can be brought off non-**

verbally; but even then to deserve the name of an illocutionary act, for example a warning, it must be a conventional non-verbal act: but perlocutionary acts are not conventional, though conventional acts may be made use of in order to bring off the perlocutionary act. **A judge should be able to decide, by hearing what was said, what locutionary and illocutionary acts were performed, but not what perlocutionary acts were achieved.**<sup>77</sup> (Austin, 1962, p. 120f)

The discussion of uptake in Austin yields a parallel to the present discussion of a sense of sociality of action in which the latter is interactive in three ways. Firstly, some acts are interactive. Secondly, they are evaluated according to the understanding of their meaning and thirdly, both meaning and uptake relate to the sense of activity that I distinguished from the thing done earlier. In saying something another's uptake of what I mean is necessary for the act to be successful. And this activity can be verbally as well as non-verbally, based on the nature of the activity. As in the example of greeting someone across the street, it requires not only a recognition, but a sense of understanding in light of the act's meaning, for the act of a greeting to be successful.<sup>78</sup> Some acts in a sense then, require the input of others to acquire the status of a performed action. Austin goes so far as to say that without uptake being secured in those cases requiring it, the speech act was unsuccessful (Austin, 1962, p. 116f).<sup>79</sup>

The force of this idea is that the conditions of success of a speech act lie outside the control of the agent and moreover at the scrutiny of the understanding of another in the immediate situation. Austin's uptake conditions help to qualify the interactive Gestalt of certain activities and paves the way for a view on some actions as unfolding interactively. Austin at first maintains, that a speech act only occurs in cases where uptake is secured. Yet surely, something occurs when one agent waves at another across the street and the latter does not take up on it. He calls these acts of speech. Arguably however, even in cases in which Austin's securing of uptake is not a condition, one agent's action can depend on or be directed at an Other. If you don't see me greeting you, I will eventually abort the activity without having accomplished a sense of greeting you and return

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<sup>77</sup> An alternative interpretation places uptake in a relation to conventionality in weakening the idea of an immediate response by an addressee and strengthening the idea of uptake being secured via the conventionality of the effect of a speech act (Sbisà, 2009). The effects of speech acts are a matter of agreement in a social group, which in turn is made possible by securing uptake (ibid.). Uptake so understood, is less explicitly demanded in a speech act situation and rather present as a tacit agreement about which effect is expected conventionally.

<sup>78</sup> And on the stronger, note in relation to the conventionality of uptake as discussed in the previous footnote, if someone promises something they will be taken up as doing as they pledged.

<sup>79</sup> "Unless a certain effect is achieved, the illocutionary act will not have been happily, successfully performed [...] I cannot be said to have warned an audience unless it hears what I say and takes what I say in a certain sense [...] the performance of an illocutionary act involves the securing of uptake." (Austin 1962: 116-117). See Sbisà (2009) for a detailed discussion on uptake in Austin, Searle and Strawson.

to whatever it was I was doing before I saw you. Although an action might not be a successful, its sense of social sensitivity to the input of others remains. Your taking up my activity as an act of greeting, or your refraining from doing so feeds back into the course of my doing. I suggest that many actions, felicitous or not, in this sense are interactivities and seek for an understanding generated in another.

In a conversational situation, the input of one agent will determine the turn of the next. Ordinary actions gear in with situational features and is conditioned by them. When one perceives two people as conversing for instance, it is now arguable that what it is that one perceives is the Gestalt of an ongoing activity or better interactivity, into which the different turns by the conversationalist are grouped. Further, with the insights of Austin, many actions assume not only the recognition of another, but their understanding to be successful.

This perspective finds an unlikely ally in Ethnomethodology again. In Ethnomethodology and studies in Conversation Analysis [CA], ordinary methods of turn-taking between agents in interaction are investigated (Sacks, 1995; Garfinkel, 1984; Sacks, et al., 1974). Turn-taking as an activity in the present sense, is highlighted as a tool for organising and managing social interaction; the thesis being that the way in which a natural sequence of turns between speakers suggest a recurring pattern of doing conversation, which are particular to ordinary and unscripted conversations (Sacks, et al., 1974). As opposed to Austin for example, who is portrayed as highlighting particularly ceremonial speech acts, conversation analysis understands interactivity organised into turns as a norm in conversation. It highlights, how turns are systematically directed to the maintenance of successful interactive meaning creation. To Sacks et al. (1974, p. 699f), it is possible to abstract what they call a system of 'rules of interaction' that is context free and yet context sensitive. All this means to Sacks is that via turn-taking systems meaning can be elaborated in context. Other than the use of context being employed in linguistics however, their use evolves around the social context in which they understand some general rules to pertain regardless to the particulars and others to be adapted to them (*ibid.*). Similar to theories in action or speech acts, the proclaimed aim of conversation analysis in Ethnomethodology is to explore turn-taking systematics from within a conversation.

As opposed to traditional forms of action theory, speech act theory and CA perspectives highlight the nuances that lie somewhere between individual or collective categories. The interactive sense of sociality on my account, is sensitive to ad hoc or pragmatic processes in which agents are involved in interactively shaping what is perceived immediately as an ongoing interactivity in which making sense is the trajectory. What agent Y will say next depends immediately on what agent X just said or did. Interaction as an activity is the whole through which

the pieces of conversational turns or utterances are perceived. Interactive action points to the sense in which the turns taken by individuals are related to one another and conceived as an interactivity. The sense of interactive actions is geared to the immediate grasping something as an activity. And further as a social activity, including other agents. This is not only valid for conversation or speech, however.

#### Example: Car-parking

Consider the instance of someone parking a car in a narrow parking space, helped by their front seat passenger who disembarked the car to navigate the moves of the driver. Although it is the driver's movements that are steering the car, they are influenced by the input and signalling of the front seat passenger who obtains an additional perspective on the driver's action. The commands of the passenger then, distinctively shape the course of action of the driver.

The activity of parking a car in this example is interactively realised and can directly be perceived as this Gestalt. So orientated, the investigation of action allows for a dynamic course of an interaction or that is closely linked to its context and activity of two or more agents. The things that the agents involved do, are not independent from one another, they develop and shape the interaction. As in Austin's conception of uptake, there is something about the drivers intended action that lies beyond her action and is yet included in her action: the input and understanding of her front seat passenger. Interaction conceptually includes the dynamic relations between agents involved in an activity – forging a shared thread of action. And this sense of sharing in interaction allows a potential observer, to understand the Gestalt immediately as an activity. The discussion of Sack's and Ethnomethodology further helped to conceptualise actions and activities as ordinary things to do.

One is now in a better position to see how much of our everyday conduct is interactively shaped and socially organised. Activities that involve more than one agent, are another sense in which actions can be immediately encounterable. Verbal acts like betting in Austin, where social convention suggests that two people need to agree to, as it would be a whole different matter if I try to bet alone or against myself. The ceremonial act of marrying is a similar example that on top of two people saying 'yes' requires the act to be performed in a particular situation for it to be valid. Also, non-verbal acts such as a dance based on leading and following. Not only does the leader's lead influence the reaction of the lady, but also it is simply not enough for two people to perform the same steps in the same rhythm to be considered as dancing together. Job interviews and their outcomes are distinctively shaped between two people, as are flirting, playing chess and fighting.

Although the idea of turn-taking might be perceived as echoing atomism, in which each turn is understood as a self-sustained and isolated action performed by an individual; it requires the senses of sociality introduced here to understand what it means to 'take a turn' in conversation and how one does this in the right way. Having a sense of 'turn-taking' and how it works demands much more understanding than saying something in a sequence with others. Both Austin and CA make visible what the understanding and implications of certain actions are from within a social perspective. In the empirical exploration in the next chapter, I will highlight how turns on Facebook are related or 'tied' to one another, thereby elaborating how each act of communication is understood and interpreted in turn-by-turn fashion. It will become clear how what an action is understood to be, is demonstrated by how it is reacted to. Making sense in conversation thus, is highlighted as an interactivity and can directly be perceived as such.

The discussion of this chapter shows that there are many actions which are neither solely dependent on one or the other agent but are better conceived of as interactivities. Austin's cases of uptake and the possibility to grasp activities as a Gestalt have pointed to how each other's mutual understanding is in a sense trajectory to many of our activities. I have invoked the interactive sense on action as neglected when either reduced to individual or collective senses as discussed in the philosophy of action. It is neither an elaboration however, on how some actions might be easier to be performed with the help of others, nor how in some cases performing a group action is logically impossible for one agent, say, playing all instruments of a quartet. It is rather an exploration of how interaction with others and understanding by other's can be portrayed as necessary conditions for many acts. Interactivity is a sense of sociality that interweaves turns into a meaningful whole that is immediately graspable. As argued in chapter 3, doings or activities of people are pieced together to a meaningful whole which makes it possible to see something as a conversation or an interaction, immediately perceiving is via a sense of sociality. When the course of an activity is interactively managed, we can also see how the doings of one agent relates to the other. And it is this seeing that I invoked as being socially learned. Once understood in their social sense it appears more fruitful to dismantle individual units of an action.

#### 4.3 3<sup>rd</sup> sense: socially enabled action

A different angle to take on social action is how and at which points actions that we ascribe to individuals, are enabled by other agent's actions. It is a perspective in the light of which an action is understood via a sense of sociality. The conception of these actions thus is social in some sense, whereas the organisation or instantiation of the enabling can take a variety of peculiar

forms. I will introduce the examples of ‘building a house’ and ‘editing an anthology’, both signifiers of cases of actions that are clearly social in some sense, and yet individual in another. Their conceptions allow for both senses, dependent ultimately on the reason for which one brings the action under observation. Whether or not building a house is discussed in virtue of being a collective or individual action, depends on which aspect to it is sought to be examined. That ‘building a house’ or ‘editing an anthology’ is understood as an action however, requires a sense of social enabling. Social enabling here points to the acknowledgement that there is not a tension between doing something alone and yet with others in this way.

Social enabling further, merges three aspects of enabling that cross over with what has been discussed in previous sections of this chapter: sociality, as enabling agents to be in the space of actions; acting and interacting socially as enabling many actions both on conceptual and empirical levels; and sociality as shaping the environment that affords ordinary action doables. I shall illuminate these aspects in turn. Whereas I consider the first and third aspect as framing conditions, the prime interest and emphasis will concern the second aspect. To remind the reader, the aim of all aspects to actions presented, is to counter an atomistic mind-set by inducing an image of overlapping and intertwining senses of sociality of action. This starts from a social perspective on action and interaction, informing our insight regarding the acts of individuals.

#### *Aspect 1: sociogeneric enabling*

The first aspect of sociality as enabling links to much of what has been said in the section on doables above. Doables in the first sense of sociality of actions enables the understanding of a range of ordinary actions: for a certain act to become a doable, it needs to become a cultural known, socially afforded, and an aspect of everyday life. Agents are not creating from void, but they are immersed in their environment and new features of the environment yields new senses of doables – developing over time in a close dialogue to social and environmental features. And this in turn gives a hint to the interconnectedness of the aspects of enabling introduced in this section. Preston (2016, p. 78) summarises this effect as the confrontation of *suigenerism* and *sociogenerism*:

On the suigeneric view, the theoretically significant facts about individuals are facts only about them, owing nothing essential to the social or collective aspects of human life. On the sociogeneric view, the theoretically significant facts about individuals are always already social facts, because they reflect the internalization or (as I would prefer to say) instantiation of the *source of sociality*. On the suigeneric view, sociality has its source in the in the formation

of groups and the exercise of group agency, by putatively non-social, contemporary individuals. [...] On the sociogeneric view, **sociality has its primary source in the social practices established by previous generations.** [...] Similarly, **sociality is a precondition for groups and group agency rather than an effect of them.**

The first aspect of this sense of sociality, is that it is the source for agents living in a world of action, in which actions of one's own or others are points of interest. In activating the awareness of this aspects of enablement of sociality it becomes apparent that sociality not only infiltrates ordinary conceptions of action, but enables agents to be in the space of actions.

### *Aspect 2: social enabling*

To the background of these assumptions, this second aspect to the sense of social enabling is concerned with entertaining how seldom one performs an action in isolation. It asks how many of the things one does in a day are exclusively one's own work? The project for work? The book one writes? The end of year presentation? The coffee making? The bread baking? One might want to say that from one point of view all of these are done by just one agent, and in another sense all of these are somehow also realised through social enabling and the environmental development.<sup>80</sup> Further, as has been suggested in terms of the first aspect of enabling, the social realm plays a primary role in understanding potential for action in one's immediate circumstances via social enculturation. Without the social sense of enculturation, it is dubitable whether one would have a sense of acting, let alone acting whilst being dependent on other agents. It concerns cases of actions which are under the control of one agent, but involve other agents to succeed. Other than in the interactive sense discussed in the previous section, this sense focuses on how agents can be part and parcel to the actions of an individual, again both conceptually and empirically. They can thus be presented as socially enabled. Take 'building a house', 'editing an anthology' or 'buying online' for example. These actions seem to admit of the possibility for other agents to enable their accomplishment, without losing a sense of individual ownership.

### Example: House-building

Assume for a moment you are building a house. At various stages of the process of doing so you will likely involve other people's skills on your behalf, although you expect them to perform their actions

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<sup>80</sup> This sense of social holism, as far as the holistic enabling goes, might be one of the overlaps I have with atomists such as Davidson. In his entry on himself in the edited *A Companion to the Philosophy of Mind* (Davidson, 1995), Davidson appears rather holistic in his broader understanding of society to which he holds his theory of action compatible to.

according to your instructions or idea, i.e. your action of building a house. If they would do as they please, it would not be clear whose goal it is one is hoping to enable. It is as it were your idea of performing an action, or better reaching a desired end state, which is supported by someone else's action. You rely on those people hired. Their work will determine the success of your time-scale or have you re-schedule. The structure and texture of the ground of your land are important and whether the local building authorities approve of the extension plan in time, etc. Your structural engineer might advise you build another load-bearing wall to make the structure safer and you would do well to be responsive. Your plan of building a house then, is directly encompassed by the reality you build in; the world features in the action of your act of building a house. And although all these features are part and parcel to the realisation of it, you will rightfully report that you built your house. You will maintain a sense in which it is my action that all these other agents and environmental feature contribute to. Of course, it is your house that all these agents' actions are contributing to, but without their input, you could not have reached your goal. This sense of action then, is a social one in which other agents and environmental features are reconciled.

Suppose that at different points in the building process  $t_1$ ,  $t_2$  and  $t_3$ , you call different people to help with different jobs. Suppose also, that agents A1, A2 and A3 (your helpers) have a variety of intentions or motives for helping you. Whereas A1 at  $t_1$  is only interested in the money promised to him for helping, A2 at  $t_2$  does his bit as a personal favour to you, because you lent him some cash at some point. A3 at  $t_3$  thought they were working for your partner who flirted them into a major discount. So A3, having enjoyed the flirtation, turns up specifically to see your partner again. As one might imagine, A3 is quite shocked when things do not really play out the way they imagined them to go. What adds to it is that all these actions will have a temporal dimension that is not necessarily instantaneous. So, while the overall action of building a house ideally comprises all of them, each individual help takes up time itself and therefore lends itself to further social enabling.

What seems to be a simplified, but somehow ordinary case of building a house, alas with a bit of drama added to it, does neither clearly qualify as an instance of individual, nor fully fleshed collective action as categorised by atomistic theories in which all group members commit to the same goal or intention. In examples such as 'building a house' which might be categorised as a long-term project, it is common that at certain intervals one will rely on the work of other agents. There needs to be a sense in which the building owner maintains the superior role in 'building the house', yet there needs to be a sense admitting of others joining in without the first agent losing a sense of 'ownership'. And further, despite joining the house builder in her action, neither of the helpers need have the same goal. The sense of social enabling then, highlights social action in a

systemic way.<sup>81</sup> It is also likely to include environmental features such as there being a local building authority, its approval of the building project, the paperwork, the rules and regulations, the local constituencies, the cash-flow, stamp duty and many others more. Environmental enabling in this way will be the main interest of the next section. The longer the period over which a certain action stretches, the more likely it appears that other agents as well as environmental features will be relied upon, will come to bear a part in shaping the course of the action.

Where building a house might be complex and possibly less mundane than other action, it is useful to look at shorter orientated actions with varying degrees of mundaneness to get a feel for senses in which might be better understood as enabled. It seems some examples appeal to social enabling right away, whereas other come in an autonomous disguise, yet rest on an implicit involvement of social as well as environmental features.

#### Example: Anthology-editing

More immediate examples are for instance the action of editing an anthology. Possibly best accounted for as a mid-term endeavour, complex, social and collective in one sense, yet often falling under the responsibility of a single agent in another. The person in the role of the editor however, both hovers over and stands in an immediate interdependence with the authors or potential authors submitting for his edition. For an anthology would not be the same, had all entries been written by just one author. And realistically, the author would be foolish to assume all authors sharing in his goal entirely and for simply the reason of making it happen that he is reaching his goal of publishing the anthology. But this is not a surprise to any side. It is just what we are used to when working with other agents. There is only so much commitment one can assume. There are scenarios then in which one agent relies on the contribution of other agents precisely to realise her own personal goal. It is an activity that is both individual and collective, that is immersed in a dynamic interdependence on others, yet maintains a feeling of being the responsibility of an individual agent.

Editing an anthology relates to a sense of social enabling from its very start. And it is the interaction with others that will determine the course of the editor's action (as discussed in the previous section). The editor needs to be aware of that. She might have a time frame in mind and an intention to keep it, but there is also the awareness that ultimately the realisation of her goal does not lie solely in her hands, yet she will be the point of reference for when it does not. Having a sense of socially enabled actions is closely tied to understanding the scope and what it means to perform a certain action. Only an already social understanding allows for a conception of editing

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<sup>81</sup> See Stichweh's (2000) investigation of the interdependencies between action theory and systems theory in sociology. He argues that because these two theories are intertwined, it would be best to account for them in terms of communication between the two systems of action and social systems.

an anthology as something that one would aspire to do, individually and yet with other's in mind. At least some cases of active participation of other agents, forms the conceptual foundation of doables such as editing an anthology.

This is different from the conceptions of collective action in philosophy of action as discussed in chapter 2. Because it has been framed as cases in which people literally share in the same action or goal. Theories are aimed at explaining, how a potential state of joining a group is managed in the mental landscape of an agent (Bratman, 2014; Gilbert, 1992; Gilbert, 2010; Searle, 1995; Tuomela, 2013), and how this is different from individual agency. Collective intentions may be portrayed as an enabling condition for collective action, but not in a sense that affirms sociality as included in the concept of action in the first place. The assumed concept of action remains abstract and isolated in action atomism. These theories might grasp a case in which all workers share equally in the goal of building the house of one agent, but what if this is not the case? How does one fathom the over-reaching process of the building of a house? How is one to maintain both a horizontal view of the overriding action of one agent, whilst acknowledging its reliance on smaller, vertical acts by different agents?

There is a dynamic of interdependence that is not acknowledged in scenarios of either being fully immersed in a group or not. There is then a sense in which the action of building a house is a highly individualistic endeavour, yet socially reliant or collectively established in a different sense. And stressing these senses of sociality that are dismissed in atomistic analysis, is possible and the purpose of this chapter. There are of course questions as to whether building a house is rightly described as just one action, and how other agent's actions are consumed by the latter.<sup>82</sup> But these do not arise when 'building a house' is conceptualised in its ordinary Gestalt. At least with regards to actions such as house building the sense of sociality appears to be implicit to the nature of the endeavour. And it is rather that when someone built their house entirely by themselves, with no help, this will be extraordinarily highlighted. It is clear however, that on a scale of actions, house building falls on the grand design end of the spectrum. But there are other medium scale actions

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<sup>82</sup> Lelanuja (in Millgram, 2010) makes an interesting contribution in urging for distinguishing between actions with regards to the scale of their course of realisation, and further with regards to their varying degree of success. She therefore calls for understanding actions as falling under different ranges of actions. She makes an ontologically pluralist claim here, arguing that actions should be fathomed as falling under differing ontological categories – according to their scale. On the surface of things this seems valid, yet it is not my aim to go into an ontological discussion about the nature of actions here, but there is a sense in which highlighting actions in their sociality appears to support Lelanuja's thesis. It might be that building a house falls into a different category than erecting a wall, laying pipes and roofing. And that it is possible to relate the two explanatorily. One might want to make a distinction between activities, as I have introduced in the previous section (Hornsby, 2012; Sandis, 2017), and actions to link the involved doings to the thing done.

that equally rely on conceptions of involvements of other agents that allude to their social tendency.

Examples such as house building or anthology editing show how social action can be organised in the most peculiar ways. Agents do not need to be together or agree about what they are doing. If one has been persuaded by the Gestalt idea in the previous chapters, these examples show the nuances that can be highlighted in order to understand them as instances of social action in one or more of the senses introduced here. Entertaining the social enabling needed to realise an action, as opposed to succumbing to the intention of one agent, shows how flexible ordinary conceptions of action are. More complex examples of actions seem to float this way of understanding: where there is more than one agent involved in an action there is an element of unfolding that requires dynamic and indeed interactive conceptions of actions or activities that is sensitive to social and environmental features. If time scale and complexity of an action are features influencing the openness to understanding them as socially and environmentally enabled, then one might think that shorter, less complex and more immediate actions lack this sense of enabling. In a more detailed discussion of buying online at the end of this chapter, I will demonstrate however, how all introduced senses apply.

### *Aspect 3: environmental enabling*

Agents and their actions are socially and environmentally bound to the world they live in. Not only do they rely on socially known ways of performing an action, but they also interact with societal and environmental features. What is meant by environmental features here, is still directed at social and cultural and yet, as in the case of wind-surfing that is impossible in a place with little wind, it takes actions such as acts on social media to be inconceivable without the relevant technological and societal developments. Thus understood, there is a sense in which actions are socially and environmentally *enabled*.

This aspect of environmentally enabled action includes actions that are possible only *because* an agent's or a community of agents' environment is shaped in a particular way. In addition to the social enabling, the environment aids the broader conception of doables. Infrastructure, distribution, accessibility to conducting ourselves the way we do is a result of how the world we act in is shaped. Without the invention of the internet, email accounts, online banking, credit cards, website providers, servers, etc, a lot of everyday actions one is accustomed to nowadays would not be possible. Without the invention of electricity, philosophers could not have reasoned about the act of flipping the light switch (Davidson, 1967/2001). Without the invention of water supply systems, no one could have poisoned a village by pumping the water, by moving their arm

(Anscombe, 1963/2000). The present sense will therefore also focus on socially realised changes to the environment. This sense opens a discussion about how much the imaginary scope of how to bring about things is tied to social sources external to the agent. It is at best understood as a hint to the sensitivity with which conceptions of actions are aligned to, not independent of, the world in which we live.

#### A note on causalism in action explanation

The aspects of enabling teased out in the discussion above, are not to be conflated with causal enabling. Social enabling in the last aspect might well be described as causal enabling in a sense which would not necessarily be identical to a sense of causing or conditions of enabling in more traditional, metaphysical terms (Cheng & Novick, 1991). It is important at this point to highlight that this sense of enabling, nor any other of the senses of sociality are to be understood as an argument against causal models of action.<sup>83</sup> Although there is a similarity in that some things would simply not be doable, if the world one lives in was not as it turned out to be, ordinary and social enabling is acknowledged at the level of conceiving of and understanding an action.

Despite actions being frequently ascribed to a single agent, their intentions and capacities, there is a sense in which her intentions, desires and the things that are doable to her, are socially afforded and therefore connected to a cultural practice. In contrast to causal enabling, social enabling pinpoints the role of understanding plays in ordinary action conceptions. In stressing this enabling, a perspective on just how many everyday actions performed are not solely down to an individual agent or being collective either. They are socially enabled. The discussion above has tried to highlight this.

The atomistic accounts introduced in chapter 2 on the contrary, paint a picture, at least implicitly, of fully autonomous individual action: isolated, basic and self-contained. One is left with a notion of action that – at least theoretically – remains the same in either social or isolated settings. To which extent the concept of action is tied to sociality, plays a secondary and contingent role for analytic approaches to action. How one learns to understand and identify action as doable, that actions are interactive in some sense and dependent on the input of other social agents, is bracketed in the analysis of an abstract action concept. Many atomists rely on a causalist framework for explaining action that was most prominently proposed by Davidson (Davidson,

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<sup>83</sup> Although it is possible that should one move from the starting point of exploring actions as social actions, one could move towards a critique of actions as not being bodily movements (at all). This is not the argument I am concerned with here.

1963/2001). As I have discussed in chapter 3 in juxtaposition to Anscombe's investigation of action, it is Davidson's theory of action that subsumes actions under the ontology of event-causation.

His theory however, resides in what one might call a dual approach. Whereas he is an atomist of the physical aspects to action, he is a holist about the mental (Davidson, 1995). This means that whereas he is assuming a physical paradigm of action that it isolated and basic and caused by mental events, what enters the mental in terms of desires and beliefs is very much tied to a sense of social enabling as I am arguing for here. Davidson's own view at this point then, comes (at least in part) to be compatible with the present sense of sociality of action. The aspects of mental holism he suggested however, were abandoned in many accounts that have followed him. And much of the theory of social or collective ontology, resides in the Davidsonian paradigm of physical atomism.

The distinction of social and environmentally enabled senses of action is as such not meant to be exhaustive, but points to an ever developing, dynamic take on action developing in correlation to sociality.

### The continuum of social action

Having highlighted these senses of sociality, one is now in a better position to re-evaluate the way in which collective action has been treated in the philosophy of action. Only where one starts from a paradigm of action that is isolated and basic, one ends up in a position where one has to explicitly explain how social actions are possible. And only where collective action is taken to be a homogeneous phenomenon, one is at risk of either compressing the above highlighted senses into individual or collective action. If one starts from an idea of social action, as has been shown above, even acts performed in isolation from others can be social. Entertaining a variety of senses of sociality was an exercise to show how the phenomenon of action is tied to rather than the source of sociality (recall Preston's *suigeneric* and *sociogeneric* distinction). This is not to say that there are not actions such as the cases discussed in the philosophical debate on collective action as seen in chapter 2, but once again the phenomenon is not exhausted by these cases, and there is much to learn from the multitude of senses of sociality to action that can be entertained.

The discussion of senses of sociality is not meant to be a comprehensive taxonomy, but it is a way of demonstrating how metaphysical tangles in the philosophy of action might reside in assuming a paradigm of action that is not apt to the investigation of social action and dismisses important senses of sociality to action. Highly technical steps are involved in creating a scenario in which it makes sense to speak of an agent as genuinely acting socially. One indicator for these

metaphysical tangles, as I have shown in chapter 2 is that most accounts can be charged with a circularity in which sociality is assumed in order to explain it. Approaching the role of mutual understanding in, of, and through action is frustrated by positing an atomistic paradigm. Thinking about the senses of sociality to even those acts performed in isolation is one way of shifting the paradigm to one where the importance of understanding one another via actions can be emphasised.

Understanding actions thus, can be approached as ways of recognising meaningful units of behaviour. Collective activity is just one sense of segregating a meaningful whole from a context. Not every collective action is the same, not every form is equal in terms of commitment. Choosing a variety of examples helps elaborating the nuances: whereas in a Latin Dance formation a strong sense of collective intentionality and group identity might be fathomable, a change in mode from an individual dancer to becoming a part of a – if you wish – *plural subject* to which we might want to assign the intention of winning the championship in formation dance, things are less clear when one sees two people in a café, one taking notes, the other reading a book. What in the latter case is more prevalent? Their togetherness or their acting individually? I would want to answer, ‘in a sense the former and in a sense the latter’, because it depends on the purpose or constraint on entertaining one over the other.

In a way, one is part of some sort of group dynamics in many everyday settings: in the traffic, at work, during the dance rehearsal, at the boat party and the annual neighbourhood meeting. Entering a group of agents, and in fact acting accordingly as a group member seems to be the glue that our everyday interaction with the world around us is made of. There seem to be nuances to actions performed together: the latter varies in degrees of commitment, persistence of the group as such, and as to how much one identifies with the group. As agents then, we are capable of entering and leaving group dynamics in many ways. The discussion in this chapter illuminated these different ways. It takes a lot for a theory of action to grasp the nuances and variations in degrees of commitment of affiliation, as well as filtering out those actions to which its members are existential and those in which less agents are sufficient. These might allude to an interest in social action that goes beyond the questions answered in philosophical accounts of collective action. The nature of the versatile phenomenon creates the space for methodological varieties that are suitable for capturing and explaining the nuances of social action.

On the far end of the spectrum, it is worth entertaining large-scale examples of humanity bringing about global warming – aren’t we doing this (in a sense) unitedly? Or is it many deeds of individuals in separation? One might want to say that in a sense they are performed as a joint action and in a different sense they are performed individually without being directed at any goal

of doing something together. This aspectual seeing, or identifying a meaningful unit is the socially holistic paradigm opposing the atomistic one. It is a paradigm that allows for the socially embedded reflexivity that allows agents to identify something as an action from a purposive perspective.

With a sense of socially holistic understanding in place, what comes to count as a collective action varies in direct segregation of its context. Searle's infamous example of people running to find shelter when it starts raining on an otherwise beautiful afternoon in the park: in a sense one understands them as running in a grand scale collective sense, but further it is possible to make subtler distinctions. If we encounter a mother being busy to usher her children into shelter, we might assign a stronger sense of the collective. And yet conceiving of the two 'groups' on different levels is not incompatible, but everyday business. Think of the queue to the restaurant: every waiter understands in some way whether you are after a table for two or five, rather than assuming the entire queue is dining together because it is possible to assign the same intentional states to their activity. And although almost every person in the queue might have the same reason for being there, they are not in the same sense doing things together. We march together in a way in which we do not queue together, whereas running from an explosion might aptly be described as a 'shared' reaction. In an account in which understanding aids to segregate a group from its direct situation, it becomes clearer that the phenomenon of collective action is in no case homogenous. And yet, our ordinary perception, though not infallible, manages the differences very well. What impacts our understanding of a collective of people acting as a group, or just happening to act in similar ways, is a socially afforded understanding of what is going on in the background of a situational evaluation of the perceived.

Entertaining the different senses, teases out the many ways of understanding social action. I have tried to enhance each sense of sociality involved in recognising, conceiving of and understanding actions according to the perspective taken on them. Doables as the first sense, explored both the genesis of an action becoming an ordinary *thing to do* in a socio-cultural setting. Via Velleman's conception of doables in addition to tracing back its ethnomethodological origins in Sacks, I demonstrated how much living in a realm of actions is tied to an understanding that is socially afforded. I was inspired by the rule-following debate in Wittgenstein and Winch and highlighted how agents come to think and live in terms of action because they are socially relevant. This means that it is possible to contest that Mowgli, who grew up in the jungle, and Mowgli, who took to the jungle aged 18, have the same concept of action. I have argued that there are actions such as 'posting', 'liking' or 'sharing' that the first Mowgli could not perform, for he lacks sociality in the relevant senses. The interactive sense emphasised the ways in which cases of conversations

are encountered as *one* activity unfolding between two agents. Some actions then, are better understood as interactions, developing between two or more agents. It is here that I discussed the possibility of encountering activity-Gestalten, in which two agents might be immediately seen as involved in one activity. The ethnomethodological perspective first discussed in relation to doables, was introduced again as an unlikely ally in resisting the atomistic temptation to break conversations down into a pattern of finite actions. Ethnomethodology was introduced as a perspective on conversations in which turns are a means to a careful maintenance of a holistic and social order. A swerve into Austin's speech act theory has shown how some actions are conceived of as needing to be socially taken up to be successful. The sense concerning enabled actions, accentuated perceptions of action that are superficially individualistic, yet socially enabled in another sense. Whereas atomists would probably agree to a causal treatment of enabling conditions, it is arguable that changes to the environment, such as the creation of the internet, are socially afforded revolutions. This sense of sociality allows for the question as to just how many actions we actually perform individually and just how often or rarely we really commit to a fully-fleshed collective action. Social action as a paradigm offers a continuum-view on actions in which different senses of sociality are entertained in understanding them. 'Seeing' actions is an active and dynamic process tied to perspectives, interests and situations. Dependent on which sense is taken to be prominent or entertained, conceptions of actions vary.

#### Example: The continuum of Online-buying

Before moving to an exploration on the acts of communication on social media in the next chapter to explore how understanding each other's actions is realised, I will run a case example that has become a doable online with an ordinary offline counterpart: buying online. Being a relatively common example of what one can do online, it appears to be a more instantaneous example than for example building a house or editing an anthology. Atomists could tempt us to think that the act of buying online suits conceptualisation of action as isolated and basic when performed by one agent at their computer in isolation from others. It is possible however, to entertain the different senses of sociality as discussed above, allowing for an alignment of the interest in an action and the outcome. It seems that with online action, as with potentially so many other actions, the inquisitive light that is shun on an action depends on the reason or purpose for which one asks.

How did online shopping become such an ordinary thing to do or as one might call it a doable? Whereas not too long ago the action of buying would almost always have come as a Gestalt involving a shop on High Street, now our conception involves computers, virtual shopping carts, PayPal and an estimated delivery time. This addition to conceptions of acts of buying, is a related doable, now afforded via the internet. Via mutual understanding it has become an example of an action that reached a somewhat habitual status. One does not just order a pair of shoes online without knowing 'how it works' but has a sense of what and who it involves

thanks to social enculturation and enabling. Agents thus, need certain senses of sociality to conceive of it as a doable. It has become evident that a sense of sociality is involved in establishing as a social practice, resting on a community of agents agreeing to what is doable and how it is doable. Actions conceived of as doable on the internet or elsewhere are not a fixed in a taxonomy, but they are under the scrutiny of a community of agents who participate in the ordinary form of buying shoes online. The discussion of rule following has brought this dependency into full view. If an agent is brought up in complete isolation, they might have certain conceptions of actions, but things like buying online are simply not things they can do.

Another way of enhancing the sociality of the act of buying shoes online, is emphasising its interactive character. In one sense, the taking up of the buying is a success condition of the buying at all. The buying of one person is processed and dealt with at another end. Buying online so understood, is intersubjective and thus socially mediated between a buyer and a seller. When buying a pair of shoes in a shop on High Street, a similar interaction needs to happen for someone to purchase a pair of shoes. In some sense then, the buying of shoes is a social interaction between the buyer and the shop assistant. The case example suggests an understanding in which an action stretches across a temporal dimension, rather than occurring instantaneously. A sense therefore, in which the act in question is acknowledged as being unfolding, complex and as admitting of interferences and changes to the intended course of the action.

Further, the rise of online doables is enabled environmentally by the development of the internet, its distribution, email accounts, online banking, credit cards, e-commerce, websites, computers, their mass distribution and many other environmental features more. All of which are enabling conditions to online shopping becoming a habit (Chun, 2016). There is a sense then in which an individual being able to perform a doable such as buying a pair of shoes online is highly dependent on environmental development and infrastructure, that enables them to intend doing things in a certain way. Whereas one might want to classify this form of enabling as clearly a causal enabling, the present account understands it as enabling conditions being brought about by sociality for they are realised by human agents, and feedback into the way human agents act. This might be conceived as a weaker reading of social enabling that includes a dependence on an agent's take on action as residing in it's immediate, yet socially formed environment.

A stronger sense of social enabling is comprised in the idea that other agents are involved in the realisation of the action, i.e. the shoes arriving at the home of the agent who ordered. These agents however, do not partake in the buyer's action in the sense that they share a common goal, yet their active engagement brings about the buyer's action. Neither of the involved agents must necessarily have any information about the buyer or her goals, yet is vitally important to the realisation of the action of buying shoes online. Is it then, a collective endeavour? Well, in a sense it is and in another it isn't. But regardless, sociality and therefore a community of agents and practices is involved in understanding what one is doing when buying things online.

In a socially holistic understanding of action then, the relevant sense of occurrence of an action is tied to inquisitive aims. Questions as to when an action is over or has occurred would

then depend on the reason for which one asks, as well as be sensitive to the sense of the action that is highlighted. The answer to when the clicking occurred will be a different one to when the reception occurred and yet a different one to when the online buying occurred. Cases in which we cannot be sure that a buying occurred at all, although one has performed all the relevant steps, i.e. clicking and paying, highlight the advantage of approaching actions more holistically. Consider the example in which someone buys a book, the money leaves their bank account, they receive a confirmation of order and payment, but the copies of the book run out before the order is sent. The frustrated customer after waiting patiently for the book, contacts the seller and is only then informed about what happened and receives a refund. Has the buying of the book occurred? How does this relate to the way in which she might have described her action before she knew that the book was no longer available? She could have said “I just bought a book online” at any given point in time before she figured that the book she had bought will never arrive, without being doubted. In one sense, a buying occurred, yet in another it did not – an evaluation of occurrence is – at least in a social sense – tied to the understanding of the action in its immediate situation.

To an extent then, it is the purpose or interest taken in what is seen, that imposes which aspect of the action is highlighted to gain a suitable understanding. As I have shown previously in this chapter, Anscombe’s (1963/2000) ‘Why’ question as a way of caching out the description under which an action is intentional, implied this taking a stance or interest in someone else’s action. In a sense buying shoes online is social in its role as an ordinary doable. In another sense, it is a case of interactive action, in which a communication between a buyer and a seller needs to be successful for the act to occur. In yet a different sense, online buying is socially enabled, because other agents are involved in the performance of a superficially individualistic action both on a conceptual and an empirical level. Considerations of socio-environmental enabling help to see that many enabling conditions to the course of online actions are results of social human endeavours. In a last sense, one might want to argue that online buying is collective as it involves many other agents partaking in the action. As has been pointed to, the salient sense will be determined by the situation and treatment of the action. In a court hearing other aspects of the action will be more relevant than in a conversation between friends, or mother and daughter.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> This links to the discussion of individuation of action. Questions as to when an action is over or has occurred would then depend on the reason for which one asks, as well as be sensitive to the aspect of the action that is highlighted. The answer to when the clicking occurred will be a different one to when the reception occurred and yet a different one to when the online buying occurred. Cases in which we cannot be sure that a buying occurred at all although one has performed all the relevant steps, i.e. clicking and paying, highlight the advantage of approaching actions more holistically. Consider the example in which someone buys a book, the money leaves their bank account, they receive a confirmation of order and payment, but the copies of the book run out before the order is sent. The frustrated customer after waiting patiently for the reception, contacts the seller and is only then informed about what happened and

Evaluating the world in terms of action in many regards has the purpose of making sense of one another. It has to do with recognising each other conduct as meaningful and accountable. And from this seeing one can hardly take a break. Even if I do not know someone and watch her on the street, I will at least be able to tell myself a story about what she is doing. With regards to groups, we seem to have a similar mechanism. And there are matters of degree: if a group forms at a bus stop stepping forward to catch the right bus whilst others are stepping backwards waiting for the next one, one sees collective action in some sense, individual actions in another and interactions in yet another.

Social holism of action is a reflection on how we ordinarily deal with actions and what they mean to us and aims at the reversal from evermore abstract theories of action towards an investigation that purposefully initiates contact with everyday relatable action and its treatment. The understanding of something as an action presupposes a world in which action is a currency for individuating meaningful units of behaviour, thus embedded in and informed by sociality and interaction. Human conduct then, is looked at not from a perspective that aims at understanding physiological, causal, or psychological constituents of action, but actions as taking place in a meaningful world, in which acting means meaningfully and recognisably conducting oneself in one's community. What it means for something to be an action is deliberately made secondary, in order to fully embrace when something becomes salient *as* an action and how this is manifested in interaction. Action thus, is conceived of as a social means to understand. They may happen in solitude and in thoughtful execution, but they are equally mundane, social and relatively thoughtless. This yields the rationale for starting the investigation from a point at which communal and collective understanding of how to act in a certain environment (and the exact opposite, i.e. how to provoke, express protest, etc.) are assumed.

Whereas the consideration of senses of sociality of action has stayed relatively theoretical in this chapter, albeit shining a different light on paradigmatically social action, the next chapter will explore the things one does on social media. Based on a real-life case examples, and sketches illustrating the appearance of an ordinary post, I will examine how actions are dependent on and afforded by interface design features that resemble offline communication, as well as elaborating on how senses of sociality help secure understanding of each other.

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receives a refund. Has the buying of the book occurred? How does this relate to the way in which she might have described her action before she knew that the book was no longer available? She could have said "I just bought a book online" at any given point in time before she figured that the book she had bought will never arrive, without being doubted. In one sense, a buying occurred, yet in another it did not – an evaluation of occurrence is – at least in a social sense – tied to the understanding of the action in its immediate situation.

## Chapter 5 ◦ 'Posting', 'Liking', 'Tagging' – an exploration

This chapter will examine actions performed on social media. The last four chapters mapped the conceptual and theoretical space for an exploration of the things we do on social media, placing understanding and making sense of each other's doings at the centre stage of the investigation. Rather than asking what an action is per se, the present chapter elucidates on questions such as 'How is *this* understood as an action in situ?', 'Who has the effect of *this* action so understood?' and 'Why is this posting, liking or sharing an instance of X and not an instance of Y?'. It applies the developed ideas of actions as immediately meaningful and meaning as tied to social holism to everyday acts on social media. Against the background of the senses of sociality elaborated on in chapter 4, it enquires how perceiving and conceiving of actions are intertwined in the processes of making sense of how to do things on social media. It considers how an action is perceived immediately as an instance of X in some sense, but also how specific aspects to the action can be highlighted from the direct encounter. Finally, it takes the alternative starting point I have suggested for the philosophy of action as an incentive to think about paradigmatic actions that are social in a variety of senses. Against this background, this chapter presents perspicuous perspectives of social media actions that highlight different aspects or senses of sociality involved in understanding them. It is thus an empirically informed exploration of actions.

As elaborated in chapter 3 the immediate Gestalt in which an action strikes an observer will be of importance in the investigation that follows. In chapter 3 I argued that understanding an action is much like understanding a Gestalt. It is holistic in that the whole is perceived over the constituents, subsumed to the immediate background of the situation. And further, it is social in that senses of sociality need to be in place to conceive of and understand actions in their ordinariness. Based on real-life examples, I will demonstrate how actions are understood in context. To recall, descriptions or modes of presentation was introduced as an achievement that asserts an action in a particular sense (as for example those introduced in the previous chapter).<sup>85</sup> Emphasising the resources informing a mode of presentation, shows how nuanced the fabrication of making sense of one another's actions is. It contrasts those views that assume that paradigmatic actions are basic and isolated, such as atomistic point of views. It targets a view on how different

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<sup>85</sup> I follow Sandis (2012, p. 11) Husserlian use of the term *mode of representation* as capturing the way in which actions strike us. To contrast my way of understanding descriptions of actions from mere linguistic descriptions as Anscombe and Davidson conceive of the role of descriptions. Against this notion, Sandis (*ibid.*) contends: "One obvious complication is that a piece of behaviour in any of the above senses may correctly present itself to us in a multitude of different ways, rendering the explanation and evaluation of any given action as relative to its mode of representation. But even to identify an action under a *specific* description is not yet to identify *what it is about it* that is to be explained."

interpretations of actions are not merely a matter of equally valid re-descriptions of any given event, but rather how conceiving, perceiving and describing make the action what it is.

Take Figure 1 as an example.<sup>86</sup>



Figure 6: Post by Annie

Without further reference, most readers will be able to see this illustration as a sketch of a post on Facebook. One can see that it was issued by Annie, where and when it was posted and further that it contains both written and pictorial elements. One could report that all we can suitably say is that Annie gained 4<sup>th</sup> place in a kayaking race, that she was promoted to Division 5, that she saw two Olympians kayakers, that she fell over and that she hit a duck. Or one could say that there are 4 boats in the picture and a female figure that supposedly is Annie with a paddle in her hand. One might want to assume that the person shown in the picture is Annie, as the text refers to the 'highlights of my race yesterday'. This assumption, however, taps already into a knowledge about how things like 'posting' are being done on Facebook. Explicating why it is Annie who that 'my' refers to is so ordinary an assumption that it becomes awkward to try and explain. In this chapter, however, I will nevertheless try to fathom how and that one makes assumptions such that the

<sup>86</sup> I am using a stylised, anonymised sketch of a Facebook post as an example.

person in the picture is Annie. This is not the least to emphasise that actions are rarely understood from a point of 'nowhere', but from within a sense of sociality.

Other than what atomists have tempted us to think, the question 'Did you see her post?' is not typically about her act of posting or the constitution of that post, but rather about *what* she posted understood in a certain way. Now, if Annie was one's friend on Facebook and not a thought experiment in a philosophical inquiry, how would one describe the post? How would one make sense of what is going on? One might say that Annie's 'made an announcement', 'shared her success' or 'communicated a personal event on Facebook'. It could be further understood as an instance of 'bragging about her weekend' or 'cheering for herself'. But which of these ways of presenting Annie's post is the right one? Are they all equally suitable re-descriptions of one and the same event?

I will demonstrate that what Annie or her post is understood as doing, is not a sequence of interchangeable descriptions, but bound to purpose and understanding. Understanding an action as an instance of X over all other instances is an achievement. And the achieving is bound to the light in which an action is made out as meaningful. Whereas one can report what is going on in the post, higher level descriptions such as 'Annie shared her success' present her action as a meaningful whole, a Gestalt. Atomists as entertained in the theoretical discussions of this thesis, highlight the mechanics to Annie's posting: beliefs, desires and their relation to finger movements. This however, does not tell us more about what it is she is posting, nor does it help us to understand the post perceived and conceived of as a whole. To understand her action on the level of the post, one needs an explanation that relates to the meaning of the act as it is seen, understood and made out to be meaningful.

The senses in chapter 4 were a way of escaping the rigid conceptual boundaries between individual and collective action, as entertained in the philosophy of collective action. Is Annie's post an individual or a social action, or part of a collective action qua the collective of social media users? Philosophers of action would by default understand Annie's action as an individual one, for it happens in isolation from others and is a product of her intentions or desires.<sup>87</sup> But as I have shown, this need not be the only perspective on her posting. Annie's posting is social in a variety of senses, including 'posting' being an ordinary doable to her that is enabled by a variety of socio-environmental features. It is further an interactivity arising between her and other agents, and in doing so she is demonstrably part of a group of social media users. Although Annie acts alone when posting, one might argue that at the heart of what she does, i.e. communicating via social media,

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<sup>87</sup> Whereas Davidson's account might have initially integrated a mental holism, meaning and descriptions of actions have widely been neglected in the debate on collective action.

lies the connection between two and more people. And social media, one could insist, is the newest incarnation of this idea, successful precisely because it involves and connects so many people. Many actions on Facebook, could thus be referred to as acts of communication, because the purpose of using social media is not clearly an action that is individual only. If one accepts the things we do on social media as paradigms of social action, one is in a better position to pay attention to the nuances of making sense of each other. What Annie's post is understood to depend on the sense in which her action is highlighted and the inquisitive aim that it is being pursued under. Paying attention to how action on social media is understood or how one manages to make sense of each other's actions, this chapter further entertains approaches from sociological and speech act theories (as previously discussed in chapters 3 and 4) to entertain a variety of these inquisitive angles one could pursue to shed a light on the social relevance of meaningful action.

One perspective that is worth entertaining, has been part of my discussion of the interactive sense of sociality, i.e. the way in which an action can be the product of an interactivity between two or more agents. I evoked Austin's uptake as stressing that it is not only the other's recognition of one's action that is being secured, but rather that our actions secure being understood by other agents. It is such a pertinent example, because it stresses the other as a being a vital part to being successful in what one is trying to do. Making one's actions available to the understanding of others is deeply intertwined with a sense of acting altogether. In the second part of the present chapter, I use the ethnomethodological idea of turn-taking to show how rendering each other's actions meaningful is part and parcel to everyday social action. As hinted earlier, whereas using terms such as 'turns' might appear atomistic, Ethnomethodology embraces that agents need to understand what it means to take turns. Taking a turn is not a self-contained act, but is located in a sequence of acts in which what the other is doing needs to be understood to take one's turn. Turn-taking thus can be examined in its relation to senses of sociality: actions are entertained as arising in and through modes of presentations in conversational situations. Understanding each other is enabled by shared 'resources' such as background knowledge, including the comprehension of doables in one's community.

Uptake and turn-taking patterns are only two perspicuous perspectives one could use to shed a light on how social actions are understood on social media. I use them, because I familiarised the reader with them in previous chapters and because they stress the senses of sociality at work in our everyday engagement with actions. It goes without saying that one could use other perspectives to illuminate aspects of social media actions.

## Social Media Uptake: An inspiration from speech acts

Austin's account introduced in the interactive sense of action in chapter 4.2, is a useful perspective on social action online, because it integrates a sense of one's action being understood into the felicity conditions of an illocutionary act. This understanding transcends the mere utterance of a sentence as it is tied to knowing what it takes for an act of X to be successful. This success is, as Austin outlines, in some cases not dependent only on an act of one, but rather a synthesis of an act and its reception by an audience. To bet someone 10 pounds, for instance, the other person needs to take up the bet, otherwise, it is not clear whether an act of betting occurred at all (Austin, 1962, p. 116). If a bet is not taken up, it might be true that something occurred, but not in the relevant sense. Austin calls this an effect that is achieved. Let me remind the reader of how Austin puts his case for uptake:

Unless a certain effect is achieved, the illocutionary act will not have been happily, successfully performed. This is to be distinguished from saying that the illocutionary act is the achieving of a certain effect. I cannot be said to have warned an audience unless it hears what I say and takes what I say in a certain sense. An effect must be achieved on the audience if the illocutionary act is to be carried out. How should we best put it here? And how can we limit it? **Generally the effect amounts to bringing about the understanding of the meaning and of the force of the locution.** So the performance of an illocutionary act involves the securing of *uptake*. (Austin, 1962, p. 116)

Meaning, recognition and the understanding of an act is presented in Austin as part and parcel to making an action successful in the relevant sense, e.g. bringing about the 'effect' of having warned or betted someone. It is the sense of what it takes to understand another's act in this way that I have in part explored in the previous chapter and continue to emphasise in the present discussion. There are, however, questions to be asked about the effect a social media action can have in relation to how much of an effect one can foresee when 'posting', 'liking' or 'sharing'. I will return to the nuances of the effects of certain actions on social media multiple times in the course of this chapter. In Austin's case, the effect is the achievement of the recipient's understanding, *in situ*, of the meaning of an act of communication. If the illocutionary act is to be performed, an effect must be achieved. As highlighted in the discussion in chapter 4, uptake can both be verbal or non-verbal.

There is a conceivable parallel to the things people do on social media. One sense to illuminate social media actions is to show how they are directed at securing uptake, i.e. a reaction to what is posted demonstrating understanding. The spirit of a networking site can be presented as revolving around a wider idea of enacting togetherness via acts of communication and their uptake. In posting one avails acts of communication to a group of people, afforded by a technology enabling a variety of reactions. This is shown to an extent in the way Facebook and other social networking sites have formalised what one might call *uptake-functions* in their interfaces: one can write a comment, 'like' the post or 'share' it. Further, when posting in a 'group' on Facebook, it will report how many people have already seen the post. Many of the actions performed on social media, especially those signaling uptake, are realised as click-acts. At one click a 'like' or 'heart' button, for example, one can communicate one's uptake of a post. Austin's uptake as an angle thus, illuminates how the infrastructure of social media resembles securing uptake online. The way social networking sites have formalised the idea of uptake is just one aspect worth highlighting. It might be understood as emphasising just how important a sign of recognition or an understanding by another is, particularly when one is deprived of face-to-face cues. Imagine a post on Facebook that is not at all 'liked' or commented on. Has the post reached the desired effect? Surely, one might want to say that it is possible for someone to have seen the post without demonstrating uptake in a 'visual' way that is common on Facebook. And yet, one might say a relevant social media way of uptake is missing.

So evoked, acts of communication on social media bear resemblance to procedural speech acts, as special acts of communication requiring uptake in the relevant way. It seems however, there is something about the convention of what it means to interact on social media that makes uptake even more important, because one cannot rely on visual cues of face-to-face. Just like Austin weakens the distinctions between procedural and non-procedural speech acts towards the end of his monograph, uptake can be investigated as a feature of everyday actions. I will explore this further in the discussion of Ethnomethodology, because this sociological approach discusses turn-taking as enabling and demonstrating mutual understanding in mundane conversational interactions.

Beyond understanding generated in any given situation, uptake also links to my discussion of doables. Austin elaborates cases in which a successful speech act influences what is doable.

(2) The illocutionary act 'takes effect' in certain ways, as distinguished from producing consequences in the sense of bringing about states of affairs in the 'normal' way, i.e. changes in the natural course of events. **Thus 'I name this ship the Queen Elizabeth' has the effect of naming or christening the ship; then**

certain subsequent acts such as referring to it as the Generalissimo Stalin will be out of order. (Austin, 1962, p. 116)

After something has been named in a certain way, it would be 'out of order' to call it by its old name. This links to the discussion of social media in the following way: as discussed earlier, it is not clear whether a post is successful without any feedback or uptake. It is, to the very least, an extraordinary case. For the norm that arises around doables such as 'posting' or 'sharing' on social media is that a response from the network is conceived of as ordinary. And as I have shown in the discussion of Velleman's doable, Ethnomethodology is concerned with a sense of ordinariness that is acted out and acted upon by agents in a community to which a certain conventionality applies.

The effect however, is distinguished from the producing of consequences, by shaping a set of actions that could appropriately follow the action and those that could not. Two different senses of effect can be discussed: the 'taking effect' on a particular person, such as the person hearing the bet one places, and a sense of a conventional effect affording and pointing to possible doables and non-doables. Austin is interested in the effect certain speech acts need to generate to count legitimately as 'doing something', i.e. the effect that is achieved in the audience as a sign of the mutual understanding of the illocutionary force. This perspective shows that acts of communication can be understood in a sequence, in which the act of naming a ship limits the range of possible subsequent acts. These possible subsequent acts relate both to a partner in communication, as much as they relate to a praxiological convention agreed on by members of a group. Sbisà for instance, understands Austin as follows:

I suggest that the feature of the conventionality of illocution that Austin's remark about the availability of performative formulas should be taken to highlight that the **bringing about of conventional effects depends on agreement about their coming into being among members of the relevant social group. This is why the securing of uptake is required. This is also why Austin, in the few examples he makes, shows an inclination towards considering actual uptake (as opposed to the mere intention to secure one) as the standard requirement (1962: 22-23, 116).** (Sbisà, 2009, p. 48)

Conventional uptake, as opposed to individual uptake, signals how interaction relates to practices and doables, as well as situational features. In Austin's example of the naming of a ship, it would afterward be odd to call it by its old name or a different name altogether. This effect is no longer directed at a particular person or audience, but at a wider community of practice. Although it might come to bear in a conversation between two agents. It is a way of displaying how not

anything goes, but acts by individuals in a communicative setting, say, are sensitively shaped by both the interaction between to individuals as well as the wider community.

Uptake thus, is a way of moving the felicity conditions of an action away from the individual and towards an interactive achievement, linked to ordinary doables. It allows for a view on actions that affirms that, whatever it is that one is trying to do, certain acts more than others need another to understand them to be efficacious. If Jose wants to compliment Alice, Alice needs to not only hear, but understand the compliment as such, for there to have been an instance of complimenting. The question then is, what happens if Alice understands Jose's action as 'mocking her' or even 'deceiving her'? Although Jose might desire or intend to compliment someone, if Alice understands his action as something else, Jose, despite having had the right intentions, has not achieved his goal. Uptake in interaction of what is meant by an action, is thus a vital feature to the action. Austin's perspective stresses just how social actions can be in that their occurrence is tied to an understanding that lies outside the agent. And it is the externalised seeking of understanding, tied to a wider practice and knowledge of doables, that I take to fathom the relevance of senses of sociality to actions aptly.

'Posting' as an action, is embedded in a cultural practice that revolves around social media. Understanding what a post means, is intimately tied to being a member of a social network, i.e. a group of people ordinarily using social networks, accustomed to the relevant doables. This goes hand in hand with the awareness in which ways uptake can be secured on a social network. Securing uptake on social media starts with the settings one chooses for one's posts: with the right knowledge, the audience for posts is pre-selected ('only friends', 'friends of friends', 'public'), one posts with an audience in mind. Other than constraining the seeking of understanding or uptake to special, procedural acts, most actions on social media, especially when they are conceived as acts of communication are geared towards uptake by an Other.

The idea of Austin's uptake, stretched beyond ceremonial uptake appears as a valid filter to conceive of communication on social media, because it moves the emphasis from action performed by one agent to a conception of actions as embedded in communicative interaction. It evokes the awareness directed at the input of another as part and parcel to the success of the act of the one agent. Where atomistic theories conceive of the posting as a sequence of skilful finger movements, Austin's considerations elevate the discussion to a level in which senses of sociality are at play in being an agent that understands their own and other agent's actions in these ways. Neither explaining nor understanding *how* someone posts equals explaining or understanding *what* was posted. The latter concerns itself with the meaning of a post, inviting a response aiming at a recognition of one's social network for example. On social media, responses to a post, appear as

important as the post itself, because social media pushes the awareness of an audience right to the beginning of what it means to understand what one is doing when posting. Taking up acts on social media is formalised into what I have called click-acts, i.e. a quick, click-based demonstrating of one's uptake.

### Must we mean what we post?

Two upshots of the perspective on social media action in terms of interactive understanding worth dwelling on are the formalised click-act-options for uptake on one side, and the question as to whether Annie did something different in virtue of her post being taken up.

If one is to pursue the idea of uptake as a condition for securing an understanding in another, a separate question is to be had about whether and how this uptake is to be understood. As pointed to earlier, Facebook has formalised the idea of signaling uptake with commenting and 'like' functions. What a 'like' means, however, varies drastically. Upon asking people what their last 'like' meant, I heard answers ranging from endorsing the person who posted, the content which was posted, signaling one had seen that something was posted to effectively ignoring what was posted, but being polite. If then a click-act can mean all these different things, knowing what one did, or what another did when 'liking', is yet again an achievement at the intersection of knowing the doables of 'liking' and the context one is 'liking' in. What a post is then, as well as how it is taken up is not just dependent on the intentions with which one did it, but also what it was understood to be. There is then a sense in which both what an action is and possible responses to it goes beyond what can be intended or foreseen in the doing of it. This again begs the question whether one is responsible for posting in the same way in which one is responsible for what one posted and further, what one's post was taken up to be. Before I continue to highlight questions as to the effects of postings and posts in the next section, I will discuss the second upshot of the present discussion in what follows.

Further, it is worth asking, whether a post on social media is felicitous when nobody sees it? Or in other words, does Annie's post change in virtue of somebody seeing it? In some sense, as I have elaborated, one might want to say posting on social media entails the directedness of the post to be seen by others. If this is not the case one might want to argue that whatever Annie did, she did not post in any relevant sense. But how does the case change if Annie tried to post and did all the relevant mechanical steps to post, but the moment she clicks her 'post'-button her internet connection is disrupted, so that no post appears on her profile page? Has Annie posted in any relevant sense? Well, one might have to say that she posted, because she did do all the relevant steps of posting and does not typically need to check whether her computer is working and

connected to the network. And despite doing all the things necessary to post, she may not actually have succeeded. Anscombe makes this point about non-observational knowledge (Anscombe, 1963/2000). In a sense then, Annie is right in conceiving of herself as having posted until she realises the opposite. Although one might qualify that her understanding of her action is provisional and emergent, for she does not know otherwise. The meaning of her post, however, can retrospectively be re-defined or revised. In this way being struck by an action in understanding is different from grasping a scientific fact about the world.<sup>88</sup>

Now consider that soon after Annie's internet connection gets re-established and her post finally appears on her profile page. Annie, in this case, might never know that something went wrong with her post. It seems different senses apply to the action here. In one sense, Annie's sense, she has posted, for she has done all relevant things according to her best knowledge. In another sense, she has not posted, because her internet connection was compromised. Which sense is the proper one to highlight, depends on which aspect of the action one wants to bring under observation. Whereas a Facebook data analyst might want to conclude that Annie only posted once her post got pushed through the system, because before that moment, no post was uploaded to Facebook. Annie might have walked around asking people whether they have seen their post, before it appeared on Facebook.

The reason why I think it is important to highlight this is that it strengthens the understanding of senses as different aspects to an action one can draw attention to, but also because theories in the philosophy of action have tried to bypass these different senses by assuming that metaphysics will unify an answer. As I have discussed in chapter 2 and 3 of this thesis, atomistic theories of action reduce questions such as whether Annie has posted to the specifics of metaphysical occurrences of the event of Annie's post. One question atomists would be interested in resolving would be 'When has she posted?' or 'When did her posting occur?' But in Annie's case which answer is the right one to give? The time and date that appears on the post on her profile? Or when she did all the relevant things and conceived of herself as posting? Through the discussion of Anscombe who introduced the idea and old puzzle that one and the same action can be described in different ways (Anscombe, 1963/2000, §§ 23-6)<sup>89</sup>, subsumed into Davidson's event ontology, questions concerning in which sense Annie can be understood as having posted were addressed only from a metaphysical interest. Atomists are interested in how available descriptions relate to the quantity of events that occur. One side argues that descriptions of an event are at best *compressed* to their most basic description in order to mark the point of their occurrence, the other

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<sup>88</sup> This recalls Kenny's idea of defeasibility, introduced in chapter 3.

<sup>89</sup> Anscombe runs the example with the movement of an arm, supplying poisoned water to a house and killing the inhabitants.

side understands an action as having occurred only once its most *expanded* description is available.<sup>90</sup> Applied to the act of posting on social media, philosophers who argue in favour of the compression answer need to commit to the view that the buying occurs when one clicks the buy button in their browser window. In fact, Davidson (1971/2001, p. 58f) would have to commit to the view that the posting occurs when Annie intentionally flexes her finger to press the mouse button, the rest being up to nature. Before, say, the post has finished uploading or been seen or commented on by others. Advocates of the expansion view such as Thomson on the other side would have to agree that the posting occurs only once it is uploaded to Facebook or perhaps seen and commented on by others. And therefore, after she moved her finger, wrote the message, added the pictures, clicked the button to post, and others saw or commented on the post. Bennett's (1973/2015) account, which suggests that different descriptions of an action are available at different times: whilst the posting occurs when one moves their finger in anticipation of a mouse-click, it can only be accurately described as a posting when all the other stages were complete and the post is ready to be seen and commented on Facebook.

Thanks to Facebook's precision about spatiotemporal details of the post the assumption that actions are datable occurrences wins some ground. Not only can one say that Annie posted a post, but also when and where it happened, i.e. at Longridge Canoe Club on the 28<sup>th</sup> of August. And yet again, in the current case example, Annie might have done all the relevant things on the 27<sup>th</sup> of August, which is when she was actually at the Canoe Club, but her internet connection only re-established on the 28<sup>th</sup>.

Whatever the truth about the metaphysical ponderings is then, there is a relevant sense in which Annie understands herself as having posted, in which the data analyst would dare to contest her. The motif for considering case examples that are ordinary social actions, yet complex in these ways, helps to see that there might not be just one answer, but many adhering to different inquisitive purposes.

If then, one is interested in the interactive idea of acts of communication on social media in terms of uptake, one might conclude that, regardless of her thinking she posted, the data analyst knowing she didn't, until someone has taken up Annie's post, 'nothing' happened in any relevant sense and her post was unsuccessful. This is because a particular audience is targeted, an audience that is selected and catalogued in one's contacts. It is further arguable, that a post–response sequence on social media establishes conventions or doables. Communicative acts and their responses are guided by rules with which the permissibility of reactions is limited. In other words,

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<sup>90</sup> This terminology is inspired by the accordion analogy Davidson draws in his article on 'Agency' (Davidson, 1971/2001, p. 58f).<sup>90</sup>

not everything goes. Just as in the ship example, conventions of how one reacts to posts and appreciates the ways of reacting as normative, depends on a conventional agreement amongst the members of a relevant social group. Uptake then, is an interactive notion on framing the phenomenon of communication on social media. It does not establish an ontology of posting, but it highlights a sense of acts of communication on social media that makes others and their reactions a principal part of performing an action as an interaction. Emergent meaning of acts of communication on social media thus can retrospectively be revised via subsequent turns. These considerations illuminate the nuance of the corrigibility of emergent meanings of actions. In chapter 4 I introduced emergent meaning, the Gestalt by which one is struck, as being the starting point from which actions can be 'updated' or 'zoomed in on'.

### Posting, Posts and their effects

As mentioned frequently, the notion of an action taking effect when securing uptake is worth considering further. Take for example cases of posts 'going viral', i.e. reaching popularity and worldwide dissemination in a short amount of time. Let us take a look at a recent real-life example that was evocatively referred to as the 'Gorilla Channel Incident' by the New York Times and categorised as "either a sign of the immediate collapse of critical thought and public discourse or the first great meme of 2018" (Wang, 2018). A US-based satirical cartoonist posted on his Twitter account a picture of what he suggested to be an excerpt of a book being written about President Donald Trump. The excerpt reported about Donald Trump's wish for a 24-hour Gorilla-channel which – for a lack of its existence – was realised as a makeshift channel by employees of the white house and broadcasted into the President's bedroom.



Figure 7: Source: *New York Times* (Wang, 2018)

Despite the whole content being made up, the post went viral causing a commotion: it was 'shared' more than 24.000 times and 'liked' more than 80.000 times within 24 hours and further 're-posted' by members of the public and celebrities. When entertaining the effects of an action, cases like these are peculiar. Because understanding whose action had which effect and who enabled or disabled the effect becomes increasingly convoluted. Without doing anything, the author of the book about Trump experienced an effect on the popularity of his book. The cartoonist who posted what is widely understood to be 'fake news', posted and secured uptake. This uptake, in turn, made his post a viral phenomenon, enabled by many reactions of Facebook users. It is further unclear, whether his post was understood as satirical or as reporting a fact by those who liked and shared it. Without being possibly in the position to foresee the effect his action would have in a short amount of time, it is likely that this agent's post 'caused a commotion', 'offended the president', had 'Netflix issuing the following tweet':



Figure 8: Source: *New York Times* (Wang, 2018)

It further made communication theorists conclude “that we live in a social media society now” (Grygiel in Wang, 2018), and became a social event in 2018 important enough to make me add it to my thesis. It is possible to describe what happened, as a social media post reaching effects far beyond what any of the agents involved could have foreseen when posting, for it was enabled socially by the actions of many other Facebook users. It was the doing of one that made the doing of many making the thing done of the first into what was understood to be a viral phenomenon. But it is arguably true that without everyone adding to the mix, the initial post may have been an instance of ‘offending the president’ nonetheless, but not one on a scale to make it be reported on in newspapers, television.

Social enabling or disabling further (as discussed in chapter 4.3), appears to play an important role. Imagine alternatively, the case of someone wanting to raise charity money via Facebook, asking all their friends to ‘share’ their post to reach as many people as possible. If in this case, her contacts refuse or omit to share her post, what they are doing is disabling her action. Who has the effect of this cases of uptake? I take the social media version of uptake, including its role as enabling or disabling, to be yet again one way of highlighting what has happened, in that a communicative and comedic act of one agent, received social media uptake that not only caused an effect in the people taking up the post, but in turn creating an effect for the person issuing the post and persons who the post is concerned with.

What a post means and comes to mean is to be understood holistically and its emergent meaning as the post-example shows relates intimately to how it is being described. In the case at hand, descriptions of what happened do not only target what any given agent was trying to do, but also what they did inadvertently, or what they were part of. If we remember, Anscombe’s paradox about how many actions occurred, what happens to the action if the effect or result it has, includes a huge amount of other people and their ‘taking up’ the action in question? And of course, questions about the range of descriptions of the meaning of an act do not only apply to acts of communication on social media, although they might make the confusions arising from inferring or reducing ontological generality from descriptions of the actions. Compare this to cases of art:

what a work of art means to an audience, for instance, and therefore how one would describe its meaning, is often not identical to the meaning intended by the artist. How we read a poem as an audience and what it comes to mean to us and how we would talk about it, is not to be confused with what the poet had in mind or meant when writing it. What an act comes to mean in a community of agents can change according to the effect it has in terms of the uptake it receives, and the effect the uptake itself creates.

All the examples of actions on social media further blur the distinction between individual or collective action. For it is not clear whether they are actions of the individual or of the collective. But they help to urge for a conception of social action as a starting point from which different aspects to them can be highlighted. What the action in question is then, depends on in which sense it is understood.

Annie's action on social media conveys a meaning in an ordinary and organised way. Meaning is created not only based on the content that is communicated, but also in relation to the way in which the communicative acts are structured. The fact that she posts on Facebook can be interpreted as targeting a specific effect. The variety of interpretations of an act on social media, does not only apply to Annie's post, however. If one is connected with Annie on Facebook, what her post is understood to be will arise in an immediate sense. Whether that means, however, that she 'reached as many people as she knows as fast as possible', 'spread information about her weekend' or 'could not be bothered with calling anyone' or is understood as 'bragging about her abilities' out of context, is dependent on in which Gestalt it is understood and will affect the description someone chooses for the act she performed. From this emergent meaning, understanding can be 'updated' for example in disagreement or elaboration on the circumstances with others. The immediate understanding, is what I have tried to evoke as an achievement to the background of senses of sociality that will determine not only what one takes the instance of posting to be, but also how one reacts to it or takes it up. Which descriptors apply to an action thus, is holistically determined and neither arbitrary nor necessarily as portrayed in atomism. Holistic, because *what* Annie posted will strike the observer who is connected to her on Facebook in a certain way. Whatever it is one understands her post to be, the nuances of this achievement will be reflected in the description of the action. The achievement is a socially holistic one, because it is subsumed into a Gestalt to the immediate background of senses of sociality. It is an achievement however, that is not infallible. Imagine two of Annie's friends meeting at a barbeque, one asking the other 'Did you see how Annie bragged about her kayaking skills?' and the next answering 'Well, I thought she was just sharing her success!'. Two people in this case understood the very same post in two different senses. And Annie, further, might have neither posted to share,

nor to brag, but to archive a memory of the weekend. Or she might have not posted on Facebook for a while and thought the kayaking success to be a good occasion to post again. In this case, the 'doing being on Facebook' becomes the principle interest to her as opposed to what it is she posted. The richness of this example demonstrates just how intricate it is to 'know' what the action is.

Similarly, the variety of modes of presentation of what an action is understood to be applies equally to the uptake of them. Which sense of understanding is highlighted by a click of a 'like', 'share' or 're-tweet' depends on a variety of aspects. Liking what another has posted, maybe a genuine way of showing one's 'enjoyment of what is posted', it can be a way of 'communicating that one has seen the post', it can be a way of 'not engaging any further with the post', it can be ironic and as I have shown it can become part of making a post a viral phenomenon.

To better make sense of the nuances of understanding each other's actions, by highlighting aspects worth entertaining, Ethnomethodology explores the ways in which meaning is created and maintained in conversational situations. In the next section, I will elaborate on this to enrich my conceptions of senses of sociality, before entertaining it in relation to communication on social media.

### Social action in ethnomethodology: of meaning creation and turn-taking patterns

In sociology, meaningful interaction, for instance, is explored through conversational turns as linked in interaction. Via the method of conversation analysis [CA], Ethnomethodology, as a branch of sociology, proposed a way of analysing structured patterns of communication and conversation based on real-life conversational data. Following a social scientific approach, Ethnomethodologists employ experiential data gathered from ordinary conversation as evidence to reach understanding and make observable how meaning is created in and through social interaction. The analysis targets the resources or methods of 'making sense' available to participants in conversation, through which they make each other's actions explicit and observable to each other.<sup>91</sup> They strategically use a register of 'mechanisms', 'patterns' and 'devices' to allude to formal and social features of actions and interactions. Whereas turn-taking is understood to be a generalisable and thus formal feature to interaction and conversation, what is communicated about is random.

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<sup>91</sup> According to Zimmermann and Wieder (1970:289 in Eikelpatsch, 1982, p. 16) the Ethnomethodologist turn towards the problem of "how members of society go about the task of *seeing, describing, and explaining* order in the world in which they live".

Following the line of Husserl and Durkheim, sociologist and phenomenologist Alfred Schutz offered the phenomenological basis for Ethnomethodology. Rather than questioning reality as such, Schutz researched how social reality is realised and introduced intersubjectivity as the salient feature in establishing a shared social reality. Intersubjectivity in Schutz is not understood to be a transcendental problem, but rather as a 'given of the "Lebenswelt"' (Eikelpatsch, 1982, p. 11). His research begins with an assumption about agents as social agents who create the meaningful world they wander in inter-subjectively. Making sense of each other's actions and making one's own actions available to the understanding of others creates and maintains a common reality.

The social world is experienced from the outset as a meaningful one. The Other's body is not experienced as an organism but as a fellow-man, its overt behaviour not as an occurrence in the space-time of the outer world, but as a fellow-man's action. We normally 'know' what the Other does, for what reason he does it at this particular time and in these particular circumstances. That means that we experience our fellow-man's action in terms of his motives and goals. (Schutz in Heritage, 1991, p. 48)

Schutz here lays the foundations for moving mere behaviour into the realms of meaningful behaviour. To his mind, the concept of action is tied to meaningfulness in a social world, rather than a technical term. Schutz's considerations helped Ethnomethodologists and conversation analysts to embrace a natural access-point to sense-making in interactive situations (Schutz in Heritage, 1991, p. 48). Schutz's work in phenomenology is the foundation of Ethnomethodology in so far as it embraces social reality as an intrinsically holistic and meaning directed domain: the achievement of the interplay of agents is to understand another and make oneself understood, in which common sense 'knowledge' and assumptions are used as a set of resources which is learnt and activated in interactive situations.

Schutz's idea of a social world does not only comprise the acknowledgment of a fellow woman and her actions, but the fundamental acknowledgment of the principle of the *reciprocity of perspectives* in experiencing the world as meaningful.<sup>92</sup> This means that although from your

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<sup>92</sup> The reciprocity of perspectives principle might be one reason why Garfinkel attempted to rigidly merge two disciplines which are usually separated; cognition and morality (Heritage, 1991, Ch. 4). For Garfinkel, they result in a necessary re-specification of merging theories of knowledge and theories of action rather than approaching them separately. He evokes the threshold as being located where *what* we know and *how* we know it overlap (Heritage, 1991, p. 71, my emphasis). The overlap is best portrayed as the choice of actions an actor can choose from. When greeted on the street a choice of possible reactions arises. To the least, one can either conform to a social norm by greeting or omitting to do so. Choice in Garfinkel always has a moral component which is central to social organisation (Heritage, 1991, p. 76). The interplay between cognition and moral is taken to be a steady investment in the social order.

perspective you look at an object in our midst in a different way than I do, we both still take it for granted that we speak about the same object. Comprised herein is the idea that agents not only acknowledge slightly alternating takes onto shared states of affairs, but that in interaction a joint view on subjects that matter is accomplished as a common experience. Both Schutz and Garfinkel, understand the principle of reciprocity as a *resource* for living a social life successfully.<sup>93</sup>

Garfinkel moreover, assumes the reciprocity of perspectives to be a moral necessity, because actors simply assume that others experience the same state of affairs. Only when breached, these assumptions become overt (Garfinkel, 1984, Ch. 2). In a series of social breaching experiments, Garfinkel shows how deviances from these expectations towards the behaviour of another, are ordinarily understood not only as morally sanctionable, but as *intentional departures* from the norm (Garfinkel, 1984, Ch. 2; Heritage, 1991, p. 99). Garfinkel's breaching experiments are evocative in that they show how, when an interaction does not seamlessly follow the 'norm', i.e. the ordinary way of doing things, people react irritated. It is in these moments that the expected 'norm' of how to interact in a certain situation becomes apparent and overt. Garfinkel concludes that choices for interaction available to an agent in a given situation, ultimately rely on what is accepted as ordinary doing things.

It is possible here to draw a connection to a couple of cornerstones of this thesis in relation to the alternative starting point to investigating actions. Ethnomethodology provides an empirical perspective on when it is in ordinary situations that questions about actions arise. Not unlike Anscombe's theoretical tool of the 'Why'-question as a way of determining intentional actions, Garfinkel's experiments are sensitive to when an action appears so extraordinary that it is discussed. Further, Garfinkel shows how rules and norms of behaviour are laid bare when they are not being followed, because they lose the immediacy with which they can be accounted for. In other words, in deviating from the range of ordinary doables, they call the others' intention into question.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Others such as Bittner (Bittner, 1977, p. 207) assume the reciprocity of perspectives as a priori conditions for social life: "It is of principal importance that these structures not be thought of as intellectual achievements of persons in search of ways to live with one another, nor as pledges made to advance the cause of coexistence. The contrary is the case: Far from being the product of social life, they are a priori conditions for it; [...]". Bittner seems to assume that the acts of communication, i.e. trying to 'exchange' perspectives and make sense of one another and not an object, already imply the structures of the reciprocity of perspectives, although this might not be made overt in the conversation. He seems to agree to a circularity similar to the circularity that philosophers of collective intentionality were criticised of. He seems to assume that an agent's social directedness is pre-supposed by a principle of social directedness in their experience.

<sup>94</sup> Some might think that the Wittgensteinian and Winchian notion of rule following can account for most of the different senses I am highlighting in the present discussion and the previous chapter. I however contend that there are more nuances to be highlighted in perceiving and conceiving of actions. Further, the present discussion shows, how different notions of sociality arise. I consider for instance Wittgensteinian, Winchian, Austinean, Sacksian, Garfinklean notions to name but a few.

The overarching goal of Ethnomethodology is dissolving reified assumptions about language and action as separate, for it portrays conversation as the arena in which conceptions of actions arise. What Garfinkel and others draw attention to however, is that language and action are situated in that they are indexical, i.e. sensitive to context, not unlike what Wittgenstein argued:

The properties of indexical expressions and indexical actions are ordered properties. These consist of organizationally demonstrable sense, or facticity, or methodic use, or agreement among “cultural colleagues.” Their ordered properties consist of organizationally demonstrable rational properties of indexical expressions and indexical actions. Those ordered properties are ongoing achievements of the concerted commonplace activities of investigators. The demonstrable rationality of indexical expressions and indexical actions retains over the course of its managed production by circumstances.” (Garfinkel, 1984, p. 11)

Not unlike Austin, Garfinkel’s experiments lead him to conclude that the semantics of utterances do not exhaust the meaning that they aim at conveying. Agents commonly assume that the other will understand what is meant, by a) interpreting what has been said or done, given a Gestalt as I have been calling it and b) drawing on the common-sense knowledge and normative frameworks that are known and shared. This too is part of the Gestalt. The awareness of the *indexicality* of utterances and actions, as their meaning stands in a reflexive dependency with particular contexts and common social practices link Ethnomethodology’s empirical stance to speech act theory, pragmatics and Wittgensteinian and Winchian approaches to language and action (Eikelpatsch, 1982, p. 17). This overlap yields once more the idea that the meaning of utterances and actions is inseparable from their context of use. It further strengthens the Ethnomethodologists’ conversation analytical approach as a way of highlighting the intricate ways in which mutual understanding is established in interaction.

### Fabricating understanding through turns

What is important for the current discussion is recognising how other disciplines chose a starting point for the investigation of actions, acknowledging it as a social subject connected to meaning creation. At the very least, it is worth entertaining it as a perspective or a way of describing what is apparent in action and interaction. It offers a perspective on actions in which they occur to us as relevant via their meaning. It can further be used to describe how the

understanding of an action is like a *Gestalt*, in which meaning is assigned to the whole. How the meaning of acts of communication comes to bear in conversation is targeted in the offshoots of this sociological perspective in an applied social scientific way. In their investigation of turn-taking patterns, for instance, Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson highlight that and how meaningful acts emerge in orderly conversation *in situ* (Sacks, et al., 1974). Using recorded data of ordinary interactive situations, they demonstrate how the mechanics of turn-taking is not a science, but rather a practical common-sense way of reasoning in which each turn functions as an interpretive act, in that it is sensitive to the meaning of the preceding act. This methodological angle asserts a sense of meaning creation through time in which subsequent turns relate to another. In this view, actions and reactions are neither arbitrary nor atomistic, but socially holistic achievements. Each turn advises possible next turns.

Like Gafinkel, Sacks et al. propose a perspective on turn-taking that allows one to think of these mechanisms as context-free and yet context-sensitive organisational feature of conversations (Sacks, et al., 1974, p. 700). Ordered features of conversation such as turn-taking patterns are presented as “observable facts about conversation” (Sacks, et al., 1974, p. 696), i.e. brute facts of human communication. Turn-taking is a repeatable, reportable and describable feature of all conversations, viz. context-free but context sensitive. Sacks et al.’s (1974) paper is an attempt to formalise the underlying structures of turn-taking in social interaction in comparing it to an economy, in which the whole conversation is the study subject, targeting how turns are fabricating the communication. Other than Austin’s constraint to procedural speech acts, speech systems of all kinds are taken to be performative turn-taking systems, i.e. artifacts of social organisation.

One might communicate differently on social media than in a conversation with work colleagues, although the mechanics of the interaction as such might reside in the same mechanics of turn allocation through time. These mechanics function as a shared resource of talk. It is not deployed by participants but emerges as a common feature of conversations. In conversation analysis, turn-taking highlights the dependence between one turn to the next. This dependence is of explanatory nature, based on content, but most importantly on the relational and elaborative features of turns involved. In CA terms, a pattern of relation between turns emerges<sup>95</sup>, creating meaning through time in orderly, turn-by-turn fashion:

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<sup>95</sup> Turns can be composed of one lexical item up to full clauses (Sacks, et al., 1974, p. 703).

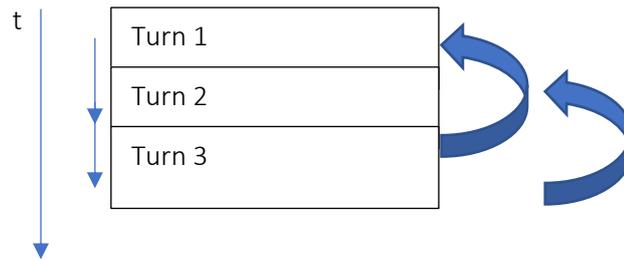


Figure 9: Turn-Taking Diagram

The simplistic diagram shows how secondary and tertiary turns refer and elaborate or feedback to the preceding turn. Further, it shows that every turn presents the following with a choice for interpretation and reaction. Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974) outline a variety of 'devices' with which turn-taking is realised in conversation, reaching from 'turn-constructural components' via 'turn-allocation' to the 'rules of turn constructions'. Moving away from a sentential structure, turns are generally understood to be units of action or utterances, depending on the preceding turn, providing the basis for the next turn in the sequence. A particular focus is cast on the first turn, next turn sequences, or as Garfinkel called it adjacency pairs, usually comprised of an initiative turn which is completed by a response (Garfinkel, 1984; Heritage, 1991). In many conversational cases, these two turns together compose a complete unit. This links to both Austin's and my own discussion of uptake in chapter 4.2.

In the example of Annie's interaction with her friends on Facebook, for example, all comments relate to her original message, they relate back to what Annie said, rather than to what a fellow commentator said. In a CA turn-taking fashion, Annie can be understood to initiate a turn, reporting a success which is complemented by the well-wishing second turns of a variety of her friends. Although Facebook organisational features are special in ways which I will proceed to elaborate, the example helps to understand a relational dimension of one turn to the other. One communicative turn is hereby understood as an act whose meaning is interpreted and evaluated by following turns. The way in which turns are assumed as a currency for a turn-economy is not too far off from atomistic acts explored earlier. They remain relatively discrete and are related in a sequential patterning through time. And yet the direction of fit of this sociologically motivated model is a different one. Turn-taking is presented as a members' resource to organise interaction. A parallel I see to the discussion on Austin earlier, is the intersubjective significance in a procedural creation of meaning. Turns are directed at each other and thereby validate, elaborate or explicate one another. Not any turn goes. Like the idea of uptake, the first turn conditions the second turn which is paramount to the validation and understanding of the first turn. Mechanisms and

economies of interaction are chosen to apply a purposive perspective on the recorded conversations.

### Turn-Taking on social media

CA observes how and by means of which orderly features of conversation meaning is created and maintained inter-subjectively, in turn-by-turn fashion, through time. As opposed to atomism in philosophy then, the social action of communicating is understood to be the meaningful whole, from which it makes sense to elucidate the turns. With the analogy to Gestalt psychology in chapter 3, I have suggested that moving from immediate whole to comprised constituents is reasonable, where moving from a constituent to a meaningful whole is troubled by metaphysical tangles and at the expense of senses of sociality (as demonstrated in chapter 2 and 4). I evoke here schools of thought, such as CA in sociology who appear to work on the level of social holism. Communication is already understood as social action from which it makes sense to analyse how the former is produced in interaction. CA relies on conversational data, from which it seeks to understand purposive ways of describing the workings of human communication. Turn-taking patterns are observed in communicative interaction, reaching beyond mere conversational situations, encompassing social interactions of all kind (Sacks, et al., 1974).

Resting on an epistemic claim about the knowledge about communicative sequencing, the turn-taking model highlights a *grammar of action* to which ordinary interaction is directed to. This organisational grammar is learned and enforced in and through social interaction. One turn relating to the next is a means of elaborating a world known in common by people sharing in a communication. Framed in conversation analytical terms, the interactive nature of action features in a very different and elaborated sense of meaning creation. With a focus on turn-taking sequences unfolding through a temporal *duré*, meaning creation in communication is understood to be a mutual achievement of situated interaction.

Critics might argue that turn-taking recalls atomism in so far as it deals with units or turns to build the meanings that acts adhere to. This might be true to a certain extent and metaphors to systems and devices are clearly not arbitrarily chosen, but the premise of CA starts with *social action* as its paradigm. Although Ethnomethodologists might agree that there are such things as acts in isolation, their thesis starts with social action as a means of interaction and elaborate action through a sense of sociality. Thus, although their register reminds of atomism, the purpose of the analysis is framed in a way where meaning and its maintenance are the focal points, already assuming that actions are social items, furthering social organisation and meaning creation.

Ethnomethodology and CA, therefore, avail a different perspective that is guided by assumptions about the social. Turn-taking could be an aspect of action arising under the interactive sense of sociality I elaborated in chapter 4.2. To understand someone as 'taking their turn' in relation to one's own turn, senses of sociality need to be active in an agent and her actions.

The perspective on meaning creation in and through turn-taking can be applied to conversation on social media. It offers a perspicuous standpoint on interaction so long as it is ordinary and appears between agents as an ordinary interactive activity. It less overtly applies to theatre performances or presidential speeches, because these are examples of interaction that are structured differently, thereby relying on other resources. The following section explores how turn-taking is managed on Facebook based on Annie's post and the responses she receives. Via this perspective, the nuances of what it takes to make sense of one another's posts, the workings of background knowledge, senses of sociality and social media doables are stressed. It will address step-by-step how the mentioned nuances to social action can be illuminated and brought to the surface.

Interactions on Facebook can be presented as visually and hierarchically organised turns through time. As an ordinary agent on Facebook, it is immediately apparent which communication comprises which turns, as shown in Figure 5. It usually comprises a turn in the form of a 'status update' or 'post', initiating a communication, information about what one might call 'symbolic' or 'formalised' uptake, realised as 'likes', 'hearts' or 'smileys' that can be administered via one click, and a 'comment' field in which one can type a comment relating to the post. Facebook's interface, however, has changed considerably since its launch in 2004 (Dickey, 2013). Where up until recently a 'like' was the only click-act available as a response to a post, 'hearts' and a variety of emoticons have broadened the range. How and when one uses which click-act to reply to a post has become more nuanced. It is arguable that this is because 'liking' a 'post' which is understood as 'sharing sad news' somehow clashes with how one would ordinarily wish to respond to sad news. Comments and symbolic ways of taking up or recognising the post are subordinated to the initiated turn. Second turns or uptake are 'tied' to initiating acts of communication.

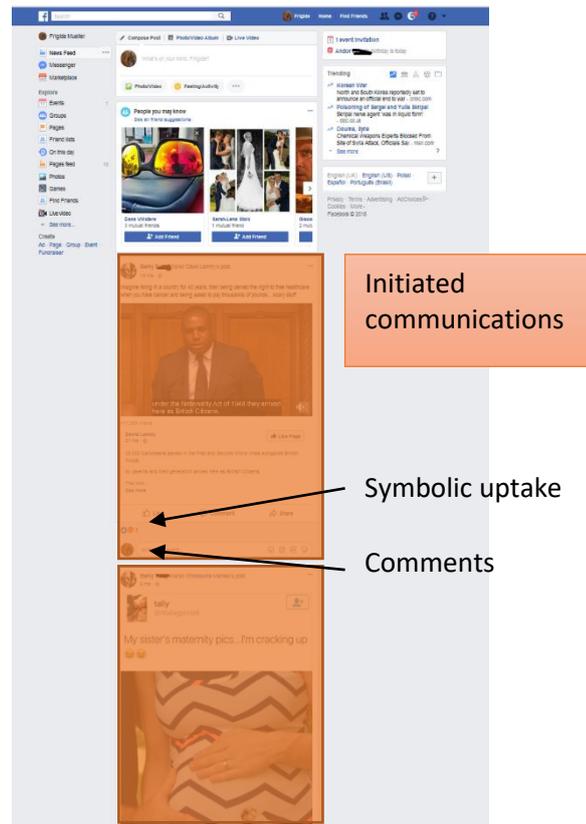


Figure 10: Visual Organisation of Facebook communication

In their paper on *Tying in comment sections*, Frobenius and Harper (2015), who follow the ethnomethodological approach, illuminate conversations held on social networking sites such as Facebook. They evoke tying one turn to another as a resource for making conversation, creating meaning, and paving the way for subsequent turns. Making *what one means* available to another is the trajectory, in which tying a ‘comment’ to a ‘post’ is a basic way of communicating understanding (ibid., p. 4, my emphasis).

People use any turn-at-talk, for example, **as a way of guiding future turns**, and those who make those future turns will themselves refer to prior turns in such a fashion that the conversations they are participating in turn into jointly produced **ensembles of orderly activities through time**. **One crucial technique in this patterning consists of the ties between one turn and another**. This is not merely a mechanical or ritual property of conversations, however; **it ensures that conversations are meaningful** – and shown to be meaningful – to those involved. As Sacks puts it: **“Tying an utterance to an utterance is the basic means of showing that you understood that utterance.”** (1995: 718).

The concept of 'tying' as originating in Sacks, is understood as producing ensembles or wholes through time, linking one utterance to the other. Not unlike Austin, tying one's turn to the previous one, is a way of demonstrating one's understanding by referring to the meaning. Frobenius and Harper (2015, p. 4f) illuminate the importance of tying in the context of social media use in which conversation is sequentially patterned into conversational turns between agents, as well as into spatial and design arrangements of the social networking sites.

Key to this would be explaining how participants rely on these practices (acts of various kinds) as **resources for interpreting any single communicative act such that subsequent (and prior) acts can be seen to make sense**: at the minimum, as measures of, and guides for, orderly communicative conduct through time (even if the actual conduct of users reported through these acts of communication might themselves seem odd or inexplicable!).

This paragraph describes how the perception and conception of acts or actions are relied upon as a common and social resource for making sense of 'single' acts in a sequence of turns. The trajectory is making sense in orderly and ordinary ways, even if what an agent did by posting appears odd. Contrary to atomistic explanations thus, making sense of actions and acts of communication is understood as requiring senses of sociality as highlighted in chapter 4, as well as an understanding of what turn-taking means in interaction. From the conversation analytic perspective then, communicative acts on Facebook are social actions, because they require senses of sociality to afford interaction in meaningful ways. Frobenius and Harper (Frobenius & Harper, 2015, p. 6), state their paradigm of social action as follows:

For the purposes of this paper, our analysis will start with an initial act on Facebook, a **social act that we will treat as prior and foremost**, and which provides a field of play for all subsequent acts – and this is a status update. The acts subsequent to an update have a number of properties **that can be described as structural mechanisms of sorts insofar as participants of the setting react to such updates in particular ways**.

They assume a perspective on acts on social media as an interesting aspect of social action. Their analysis targets the way comments to posts on Facebook are tied to one another and how meaning

is managed in the sequential arrangement of turns through time. It is then possible to apply this perspective to the example of Annie's post on Facebook and the subsequent acts.

Imagine Annie receives a total of 15 comments spread over five days after her post. Out of these 15 she replies in prose combined with a like to twelve and 'likes' the other three. Most comments refer to Annie's post. All comments are made relatively prompt. Facebook's visual arrangements moreover, aid the assembling and demonstration of 'post' to 'comment' relations as comments are displayed in proximity and visually related to the original post. Some comments *re-invite* Annie to respond to them. Although two corresponding utterances were perceived as the most basic sequence of making sense, the following exploration will show how at times Annie takes up a comment as in need of another reply. Theoretically then, one can imagine a turn-pair of an act of 'sharing of a success' as followed by an act of 'congratulating' as completed. This, however, does in fact not always mean that the conversation ends there. Consider the following sequence in which Giuseppe reacts to Annie's original post and Annie in turn comments on Giuseppe's comment:



Figure 11: Turn-taking patterns demonstrated in Facebook interface

It is the sense in which if Annie posts and 'reports an achievement' and Giuseppe 'congratulates her' on it that there is nothing more to be done. Annie's example, however, demonstrates that she understands Giuseppe's compliment as affording another turn.

Out of the group of Annie's Facebook-friends, Giuseppe is the first one to comment on Annie's post. Annie replies in two minutes. Annie not only likes his comment, but takes up his supportive compliment as a cliff-hanger to reply once more. Whether she 'liked it' before commenting or after is unclear. Her replies to comments are hierarchically and visually different from comments and her own post. Her responses appear subordinated to the comment she is responding to, as is

illustrated in Figure 6. Both comments in Figure 6 could be understood as 'encouraging Annie' or 'congratulating her' or a combination of both. Between Giuseppe's and Kim's comments lie just over two hours. To Kim's post, Annie replies with a 'like' of which the spatio-temporal location is unknown to us as the observer.<sup>96</sup> Both of these modes of commenting and recognising the comments of friends seem ordinary in the context of social media. 'Liking' someone's post is a communicative response just as writing a response. One difference between the two comments is that Annie understanding Giuseppe's comment as apt to re-inviting her to a specification, Annie writes: *'Thanks Peppel! Got 3 races coming up next month 🍀'*. Her comment appears to be directed at both the *'joy of competition'* which Giuseppe mentions, as well as his supportive *'keep pushing!'*. Although one does not exactly know which part of Giuseppe's comment Annie ties her answer to, a sufficiency in coherent relation appears to be reached, as neither Annie nor Giuseppe continue the sequence. The method used in Kim's comment and Annie's response via a 'like' appears closer to the idea of a basic completed turn-pair. Kim recognises and celebrates Annie's success with a *'Woop, Woop!'*, a commonly recognised expression of excitement and Annie retorts with a 'like'.

Time is an important factor in the spatial arrangement of comments on Facebook. The comments are organised by the time of their posting, not for instance, by relevance or amounts of 'likes'. Who comes first is served first. The temporal ordering also shows that some of Annie's re-invited turns come in almost synchronous fashion (e.g. in Giuseppe's comments case, Annie replies in two minutes), whereas others are replied to by Annie with a considerate temporal gap in between. Some turns then, are taken in rather a-synchronous manner. Other than in face-to-face conversations, it is a common known that an immediate connection cannot be expected. This shows how different normative nuances to the method of turn-taking apply. Whereas in a face-to-face conversation waiting for someone's turn for two minutes would be an awkwardly long time (unless there are good, apparent reasons for a delay), two minutes in the a-synchronous management of conversations on Facebook is considered a rather quick response. This illuminates how, although ordered into turns, different conceptions of what and how something is doable apply to the process of meaning creation and understanding in different media. This is not the least, because it indicates how the act of 'being online' of two agents in conversation coincides.

This taps into a nested sense of understanding what one does and how one does it on social media. Agents on social media drift from 'being online' to 'being offline'. This drift explains ordinarily, why social media conversations are a-synchronous and can spread over long periods of time without the latter leading to a breakdown in communication. As a social media user, one

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<sup>96</sup> Facebook most likely knows the exact spatio-temporal locations of all actual likes, for it monitors the activity of users.

accepts or recognises that agents are online when they choose to be, which is when they engage with conversations they might be part of.<sup>97</sup> Drifting in and out of a conversation in face-to-face situations however, would have different consequences and could potentially lead to a communication breakdown. One can imagine for example, a narcoleptic agent drifting in and out of sleep whilst being engaged in a conversation with a friend. This case however, is extraordinary in that that agent has good reasons to drift in and out of the conversation. In a very ordinary conversation, the shift of attention in the other agent will either lead to a breakdown in communication or to moral judgements of the other as 'not being interested' or 'being rude'.

The horizon of expectations, afforded by the senses of sociality via which actions are understood, vary according to situations. Whereas delays in responses are normatively sanctionable in face-to-face conversations, they are expected and ordinary in social media conversations. And yet, even on social media, there are intricate nuances at play. The next example shows, that there are cases even in social media settings, in which a delayed or a-synchronous reply is considered to be *too* late, or extraordinary tardily.<sup>98</sup> Consider the following conversation between Annie and one of her friends:



Figure 12: Facebook Conversation Snippet

<sup>97</sup> Two or more agents 'Being online' can appear synchronously or not. It is insensitive to different time zones or spatial locations. Some argue that via the use of technology, the boundary between 'being online' and 'being offline' is blurring increasingly (Floridi, 2014). It is likely that assumptions will shift our notion of where an action is and affect the importance of spatio-temporal location. It is possible that this shift in understanding actions has metaphysical implications for atomistic theories.

<sup>98</sup> This is another reason why I do not take rule-following to be sufficient to explain the senses of sociality. In the example to follow there appears to be a mismatch of the understanding of a rule pertaining to social media conversations, despite both agents belonging to the same group.

Dave congratulates Annie two days after her initial post, whereas Annie's replies four days later. Although one might rightly perceive the tonality of this sequence of turns as 'sympathetic banter', Dave understands Annie's delayed reply as a subject for discussion. Whereas on the level of meaning creation, Dave's 'comment<sub>congrats</sub>' is followed by Annie's 'comment<sub>thankyou</sub>', Dave ties another comment to Annie's thank you note. Beyond the sufficient pair of a 'congratulating' and 'thank you' turns or a secured uptake in Austin's sense, Dave's subsequent turn continues the interactive activity. This breaks the sequential patterns observed up until this point. Dave does not understand the sequence to have ended with Annie's saying thank you. He alludes to her reply as coming *unusually* late. 'Now you see your reply' he comments, 'tagging' her name in the comment. 'Tagging' on Facebook can be described as a way of selecting the next speaker in CA terms, as well as a method of securing uptake in Austin. Dave thereby uses the methods afforded by Facebook to bring Annie back into the conversation and select her for another turn, because he knows that Annie will receive a distinct notification letting her know that she received another comment. Via the mechanics of Facebook, Dave draws Annie's attention to his comment on her post. He secures in a way that Annie (this time) sees his post (in time). In response to that, Annie promptly answers Dave's comment and 'tags' him in turn. And it is precisely because Dave's understanding of Annie's act of 'replying late' indicates not only Dave's take on Annie's action but a judgment of it, too, that Annie might give an explanation as to why her reply came as late as it did.<sup>99</sup> When being asked, or rather taking a comment as asking why she replied late, Annie is prepared to give an explanation or excuse, assuring Dave that it was not done intentionally, but rather for good reasons. Namely, her being on holiday. As a next step, Dave takes up Annie's reply as a sufficient explanation and repairs or reconciles his original judgment. Annie 'likes' his reply and the sequence comes to an end.

### U-turn

As has been demonstrated, from the idea of turn-taking and uptake it can be illuminated how a conversation unfolds through time as an interactive activity, hence a social action. How a post was understood, i.e. in which sense it is presented, is elaborated in the way it is being reacted to. This process of meaning creation was targeted by the aspect of 'tying', highlighted as a perspicuous perspective on conversations on social media. Beyond the basic turn-pair assumed as affording understanding, however, the case example examined showed, how an interactivity can spread

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<sup>99</sup> The discussion of Anscombe's conception of the use of the 'why-question' as a tool or method for identifying intentional action comes to mind.

beyond two turns. It is a way of highlighting that uptake can be linked to securing further uptake. Turn-taking patterns were further explored as emphasising the nuanced differences on Facebook as opposed to face-to-face communication. Although the two modalities are not understood as different kinds of actions, but rather the former being an extension of the latter, they are presented in their aspectual differences. The time between turns, for instance, has been explored as being managed differently in face-to-face situations than on Facebook conversations. 'Tagging' further, has been investigated as a doable for bringing agents back into conversations beyond the simplest turn-pair mechanic. Annie's reaction to Dave gives insight in turn, on what she understands Dave's act of 'tagging her' to be and require as a next turn.

If a conversation on Facebook is understood as an activity arising between two or more agents, aspects of how this is done on the level of understanding can be brought under observation and study. On the basis of an ordinary example of a communication on Facebook, background knowledge, senses of sociality and modes of presentation can be evoked and determined on the basis of how the action struck the agents involved *in situ*. It goes without saying, that the analysis in this section is not exhaustive, as there are many more aspects of interaction online which could be discussed. As hinted earlier, the evolution of Facebook's interface as moving towards an ever more intuitive design for resembling turn-taking in face-to-face situations and from there the specialties of online communication could be highlighted. Further, it would be worth dwelling on how Annie's not replying immediately is understood as an 'act of omission' of sorts, of which this interpretation is not entirely annulled by her eventual reply.

Nevertheless, my purpose has been to use the turn-taking perspective on interactions on Facebooks as a tool for exploring how the meaning of posts and comments are elaborated in and through a sequence of turns. Although one can choose to investigate every action as self-contained and in isolation from others, this discussion has shown that they could also be highlighted in virtue of their sociality. This perspective gives an insight on how actions are in fact understood in context, both situational and social, and allows for an in-depth investigation of the conceptual space in which perceiving, conceiving and understanding action from within senses of sociality is possible.

### Questions of knowledge

The idea of meaning creation in conversational situations compliments and enriches the socially holistic picture of action. For there is no longer a clear separation between *acts* and *meanings of acts*. Actions are understood qua meaningful unit of behaviour in a social and

situational context. If we assume making sense and maintaining this sense of one another to be an overarching theme of interaction, actions can be approached via the sense in which they maintain a mutual recognition and understanding. Against the background of the considerations comprised in this thesis that explore actions in and through sociality by highlighting how perceiving, conceiving and understanding actions are tied together. All aspects highlighted foster understanding actions as social: 'posting' and 'liking' are in this chapter entertained in their role as doables. Austin's uptake was suggested as resembling the things we do on social media. It offers a way of describing how action is organised and understood on social media. The ethnomethodological perspective understands language and action as conceptual tools for intersubjective meaning creation and starts from an empirical premise, pointing at both in situ mechanisms to account for meaningful actions, as well as context-independent resources for understanding.

One of these resources is the common knowledge about how things are ordinarily done. Fleshing out this pool of knowledge or resources is one descriptive perk of Ethnomethodology. Closely related to my idea of doables, Ethnomethodologists draw a picture in which a range of actions and behaviours are known to members of a community as resources or methods of organisation to share the way one sees and understands the world in conversation. Sacks describes this as 'social action being fitted into these categories' and that the procedures by which relevant categories are chosen are not arbitrary, but rather used as a resource to make sense of the actions of others (Sacks, 1995, p. 273). He calls these categories 'inference rich' as "a great deal of knowledge that members of a society have about society are stored in terms of categories" (Sacks, 1995, p. 272). Actions thus are interpreted via the socio-cultural knowledge that is shared. But what does this mean concretely?

In our example, one might interpret and understand Annie's post via her belonging to a group of Facebook users to whom posting is the ordinary thing to do. Just in reporting Annie as posting on Facebook will tap into certain resources for conceiving of the person she might be and the actions she performs as a Facebook-user. Even if this is just a categorisation entailing 'on-Facebook' as opposed to 'not-on-Facebook', senses of sociality are used to account for and make sense of her actions. The picture Annie chooses further serves as an indication or signpost for understanding her action. The picture suggests her to be 'outdoorsy' or 'sportive', because of a variety of features including her pose, the kayaks etc. This is a sketch on how one can understand her post, and how that understanding is dependent on shared knowledge, i.e. what people do with canoes and the postures they strike. These resources or 'filters' affect the responses to her post. Most of her comments are thus acts of congratulating her, rather than telling her off for bragging.

In Annie's case, her posting a post on Facebook, the kind of posts she makes helps to fabricate her as a particular type of person via her access to doables on Facebook. Via her access to doables on Facebook, she *does* who she *is*. Unlike posting a 'selfie'<sup>100</sup> for example, Annie posts a picture that is taken by another person (we see Annie's full body, at a considerate distance). The picture of Annie shows her in sportswear, with a paddle at hand pointing to her sportive achievement, relating to knowledge about actions that require a certain attire. Annie's post is enough to make inferences about the type of person she might be, i.e. outdoorsy, uncomplicated, sportive etc. And it is the employment of this kind of background knowledge that is portrayed as ordinary and resourceful in Ethnomethodology. It is a way of observing how agents make sense of each other's actions, evoking the background resources at play. Whereas my sense of doables pointed at a conceptual intertwining of perceiving and conceiving, Ethnomethodologists start with empirical observations of how making sense of actions is afforded in everyday life. Actions are understood as meaningful and meaning is understood as a social, praxiological matter. Examining examples in detail is thus one way of better understanding actions as they unfold.

Let me demonstrate by introducing further examples of the conceptual spaces that become accessible when one takes the meaning of a post or the way a post is understood into consideration: Facebook allows for a 'status update'. Despite the meaning of the act of a 'status update' already being tied to the doables of social media, a 'status update' can be different things. Similar to Annie's post, a status update could be understood as an 'announcement about one's current status', it could be an instance of a 'sharing a piece of news with one's social network', it could be a 'communication of one's feelings' or it could be a 'cry for help'. These possibilities of what an act might mean will affect the understanding of the post as an instance of one of the above, and further will influence how people respond or react to it. What one takes a post to mean then, is best summarised as the post striking the reader as an instance of X.

In its 15-year history, Facebook has delivered a range of case examples in which posts were understood in one way or another leading to actual and concrete action and reaction. One must only remind oneself of the birthday invitation of a teenage girl in the UK who did not apply privacy settings to her invitation post containing her address and telephone number, resulting in more than 20.000 RSVPs to her event, and leading the nearby Police to take increased patrolling action on the day of the event (although the latter had been cancelled) (Jamieson, 2010). Alternatively, in November 2015 musician Sinéad O'Connor posted a 'status update' in which she addressed members of her family, shared from an unknown hotel room in which she reported having taken

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<sup>100</sup> Notice here that 'selfie' is a term describing a person or an act, very much tied to an understanding of social media and related ways of presenting oneself.

a drug overdose. Just as in Annie's example there are a variety of takes on a post like this: it could be understood as a 'cry for help', 'a claiming of attention', a 'reaching out', a case of someone 'having gone mad' or 'suffering', or it could have been understood as a 'suicidal note' (Kreps, 2015). How one understands it will affect how one reacts to it or what is chosen as the right way of taking it up. It goes without saying that posts by Sinead O'Connor, due to her celebrity status, might receive different levels of attention than other's people's posts. But as captured in the discussion on posts becoming a viral phenomenon, there is a question to be had about the 'effect' a post has. In O'Connor's case, the post was, in fact, understood to be a suicidal note and triggered according reactions. It was reported that the Police searched for her, checked on her and saved her from the lethal consequences of the overdose that she had actually taken (ibid.). Compare this case, however, with the 'Gorilla Channel'-joke entertained earlier. Had O'Connor's post been understood as a fake, the outcome might have been a different one. This elaboration shows, that the effect of a post is dependent on the meaning it is understood to have.

One might also recall the discussion about whether re-tweeting something, i.e. posting another's person's tweet on one's own twitter feed, is necessarily a sign of endorsement (O'Hara, 2011). For example, if the re-posted content contains bigotry or prejudice, is the person who re-posts responsible and chargeable for re-posting? Did Donald Trump intentionally or inadvertently endorse Britain First's Anti-Muslim paroles by re-tweeting their deputy leader's tweets? Whether or not he intended to, Theresa May understood Trump's acts of re-tweeting to mean precisely that and criticised him publicly (Emanuel, et al., 2017). Or did White House spokeswoman Sarah Huckabee Sanders have a point when arguing what Donald Trump meant to do was raising awareness about an issue in line with the agenda of Britain First, whereas verifying the content re-tweeted was neither his responsibility nor his duty?

Examples like the latter show that actions are understood as a meaningful whole, i.e. as they strike someone. What the action is taken to be, links to socio-cultural conventions, more than it does to metaphysical structure. They show that actions are hardly ever isolated and rarely basic, but rather social and holistic. And further, they demonstrate how much actions arise in their understanding, as opposed to what an agent intended. The case examples in this discussion, point to the distinction between things that one intentionally does and those that one inadvertently does. Can one intend to post a viral post? And if so, to which extent? And is this intention as potent as Annie's intention to post, but failing because the internet connection is corrupted? Ought Donald Trump to know that his re-tweet might be understood as an endorsement of the content of that which is re-tweeted? Must Annie know that her clicking produces data that can be compromised and in theory used for manipulating elections? Should she have known better? All

these questions contain important insights into conceptions of intentional action, as well as questions about whether a posting can be re-described as all the possible things the post can be described as.<sup>101</sup> Whatever the metaphysical views are on these questions, it was my aim to show that there are important nuances that relate not only to what a post is understood to be, but also how this might be different from the posting or the intention with which one posted. Many of the above questions could be answered with 'in a sense yes and in a sense no', in which one prevalent task would be to define the sense under which the action is highlighted and make considerations from there.

I have tried to show that what one describes is a sense of the meaning in which one is struck by an action in a particular context and is therefore understood *in fact* in a certain way. And this way of understanding is not arbitrary. It is mediated through the activation of knowledge of doables, affecting the possible ways of reacting to it. The meaning of an action on social media, is socially holistic in that it depends on the particulars of what is posted and by whom in which context, social and situational. As suggested by Ethnomethodology, actions and their understanding can be described in terms of generalised terms, but the generalised terms need to be fitted to a context. Categorisations function as a framework to understanding, brought to life in the specificities of a situation. Communicative acts such as 'posting' videos, pictures, virtual postcards, 'sharing' another's post as an artifact, 're-tweeting', 'linking' and 'liking'; all these actions appear to inadvertently ask for modes of presentation of what it is that they might mean and come to mean. Settling these issues is not a task of generalisation. It becomes even more important to highlight the relevant sense in which an action on social media is understood. A post on social media is a doable that admits of different understandings and effects in which the doing of them, i.e. their mechanistic production is not. This is because they are perceived as wholes.

Even within a community of practice, action can come to mean different things. It is widely accepted that meaning is holistic and many theorists would probably agree to it being socially holistic, in that to understand each other's actions requires socio-cultural background knowledge about conventions, norms, and ordinary ways of acting. Sociological frameworks such as ethnomethodology and conversation analysis highlight how coming from holism about encountered meanings of actions, one can analyse the constituents of interactions. I have used CA as a perspective on communication, in which meaning is created in the making. Communication, on social media or otherwise, is a social action, not just because it involves more than one agent, but because its understanding involves senses of sociality. One of the upshots of approaching

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<sup>101</sup> There are debates about the metaphysical consequences of re-descriptions of doings or causings versus things done in the philosophy of action about this problem, for instance, between Davidson (Davidson, 2001) and Alvarez and Hyman (Alvarez & Hyman, 1998).

action in these ways is that it can embrace a deep sense of accountability tied to making sense of one another. Meaning can thus be understood as socially elaborated in an everyday sense in which interpreting and scrutinising each other's actions matters as a form of accountability. Scruton (2017) makes a similar point regarding morality and ethics, urging to include the study of actions into what it means to be a person, in which actions are artifacts of the accountability of a person. Ethnomethodologists, on the other hand, explore ordinary accountability, but suggests that the mechanisms in different discourses remain the same.

This chapter has broken away from theoretical considerations assuming 'a point from nowhere' towards elaborating on how actions are understood in context based on concrete examples. It stressed how actions are understood in relation to what they mean to agents. Clicks on social media have become everyday actions that are recognised and understood via their meaning in context and what they are taken to be. The effects they take relate to the whole produced and not the producing of it. This chapter sought out to better conceive of how this is done, thereby revealing once again the weaknesses of approaching action from atomistic angles only. The next and last chapter will reflect on the evolution of the argument in this thesis. With what this chapter has shown, it will emphasise that what an action is, is highly dependent on what it is regarded as. And what it is regarded as depends on a variety of features in context, as well as it depends on the sense of sociality under which it is conceptualised. The next chapter offers a perspective on how the insights gained from both the theoretical and praxiological inquiries contained in this thesis point to further implications for the study of actions.

## Chapter 6 ◦ Conclusion

I have opened this thesis on a personal note and I will finish it that way. Whether or not it is true that my generation experiences a shift in ordinary ways of *'being together'* and *'doing things together'*, the landscape of acting socially now firmly includes *'posting'*, *'liking'* and *'sharing'* as meaningful, interpersonal acts. The intention or idea in mind with which we do what we do online then, might not be that far off from what we do elsewhere and yet – demonstrably – it creates a possibility for a renewed inquiry into conceptions of actions and how we approach them. Philosophers and laymen, offliners and influencers, teenagers as well as retired people (in the right socio-economic and cultural setting) are confronted with getting to grips with *what that post is* and *what it means*, why she *'liked'* this and he *'shared'* that. And this rendering meaningful the everyday acts of communication on social media is what I have taken as an invitation to search for new paradigms of actions, contrary to assumptions made in the philosophy of action. Many might agree that the mechanics of an action and the meaning of the action are not the same, but philosophical interests have narrowly focused on the former. Their focus lies not on illuminating the social relevance conceptions of actions have, but on finding metaphysical generality.

Especially, in the realms of better making sense of actions performed together, socially holistic features such as the social relevance of actions have taken the backseat. The work at hand has thus been widely concerned with reminding philosophers of all the senses of sociality at play in understanding action and exploring the possible outcomes of an alternative starting point. And that even the abstract enquiry of action starts with very ordinary tools of understanding action. Ordinary here, however, is not simple or basic, but rather a conglomerate of complex senses of sociality that allow human agents to understand each other in terms of meaningful behaviour. Allowing the philosophical perspective to dwell on how one comes to see actions in the way we do phenomenologically, has given rise to calling it *ordinary action philosophy*. Essentially, the latter proposes understanding the concept of action as less of an abstract matter and rather urges to rekindle with the empirical and phenomenological knowledge of actions ordinary agents have. The concept of action thus dissolves naturally into a variety of family resemblances in the way it is used.

Where philosophers have almost unanimously treated the (social) phenomenon of action as if it is not only possible, but also most beneficial to understand the concept in isolation from context, situational and social one, I contend that in order to better make sense of why we communicate on social media in the way we do, we need to create the conceptual space for *understanding* actions as we ordinarily do: according to how they strike us, what they mean to us and how they can be highlighted as either an instance of *this* or of *that*. We need to, as Austin proposes in the citation I opened chapter 2 with, recognise what our models are doing for us. Part

of my endeavour has been to stay neutral on metaphysical views. Not only, because metaphysical theories have dominated the philosophy of action, but also because I take many problems in explaining social action in the philosophical discussion to arise from the metaphysical assumptions in which the study has been placed. Alternatively, I suggested to take actions to be a currency of everyday meaningful life and if we wish to enquire actions, we need to include the purpose of the explanation into our starting point.

In the most expanded projection of this shift towards understanding action in and via its identification as a social phenomenon, has far-reaching consequences that bleed into a variety of related fields of study. The most important of which is probably the study of ethics in general, and internet ethics in particular. With the advent of artificial intelligence and rapid technological revolutions, the buzzwords of internet ethics have conquered both the academic and popular discourse. To this day, however, the debates in the philosophy of action and ethics coexist almost separately to one another. Anscombe's (1958) claim in her paper on *Modern Moral Philosophy*, in which she argues that before there is hope for a fruitful study of ethics, questions about actions need be settled, applies now as it did then. The alternative starting point I propose for the study of actions that are performed online could thus be adapted as prolegomena to research into internet ethics. The gist of my thesis is that *knowing what we are doing* is an achievement of a synthesis of a contextual mode of presentation of a Gestalt as it strikes one immediately and senses of sociality which inform the former. The methods and ways in which this understanding is synthesised, have not been taken into account. It is thus that one wonders if we don't know what we are doing, how can we talk about ethics?

As opposed to embedding the study of action into socio-cultural understanding, the philosophy of action has traditionally tried to establish a concept of an action *per se*, as if there was one definite answer to the question '*What is action?*'. Where there are actions, so the majorities of views seem to agree, it must be possible to isolate and distil an abstract concept of action. Their target is basically the inference to an isolated concept from a deeply social phenomenon. This isolationism has led to a sequence of artificial moves in which metaphysical questions have taken the limelight. In my introduction, I problematised these moves leading to atomism as the prime approach to action. I present the atomistic paradigm, i.e. isolated and basic action, as permeating the debate on individual action, as well as the discussion on collective action. Especially the debate on collective action appeared, however, as the paramount importance to my endeavour of better understanding acts of communication on social media, for at the heart of the idea of communication lies a connection that holds between at least two people. In chapter 2, I demonstrate however, theories of group action rely on nested atomistic assumptions, resulting in

mechanistic explanations of our doing things together, often to the backdrop of counter-intuitive metaphysical commitments. Much of the debate thus, revolves around metaphysical tangles and appears to lose contact with the phenomenon they sought out to explain. The metaphysical treatment further, results in a rigid boundary between individual and collective action, as well as invoking the latter as a relatively homogenous phenomenon. The discussion on approaches to collective actions has brought me and hopefully the reader, too, into a position to see that atomistic conceptions of actions lack a grip on how and what actions come to mean to us in everyday life. Particularly when attempting to fathom actions on social media, it seemed that explanations from atomism did not touch upon the issues that interest us ordinarily arising in communicating online. Approaching acts of communication on social media according to atomism left me with the option of explaining the mechanic genesis of a posting, or with spatio-temporal occurrences of 'posts'. It did not, however, provide an apt explanatory route to unearthing how acts of communication on social media come to mean something to us *socially* and how we relate to them as social actions.

To counter atomism, and explore an alternative to the isolationist starting point, chapter 3 introduced a holistic perspective on action, enriched by senses of sociality. One possible alternative starting point is thus to consider why and when the understanding of actions is relevant in everyday life. My answer being, that it is *because* human beings are social that actions, their conceptions and how we talk about them have become a means for social organisation, via what is perceived and conceived of as actions. Social holism is a way of dwelling on how one has come to see *that* in *this* context as an instance of an action. The purpose of the theoretical part of this thesis has been to demonstrate how philosophers deny the socially holistic 'Gestalt' (as I have explored in chapter 3) of actions and simultaneously rely on it. With bringing the analogy to Gestalt to bear in chapter 3, as the first step to formalising what an alternative could look and feel like, I created the conceptual space for a broad array of perspicuous perspectives on aspects of actions. Choosing actions at the intersection of being performed alone, yet social in some sense was one move to dissolve the basic and isolated paradigm relied upon in collective atomism, into paradigms of social actions. This shift allowed me to bring the nuances that lie between 'walking together' as an instance of collectively performing an action and 'posting', 'liking' and 'sharing' as instances of actions relying heavily on senses of sociality. Although realised by finger movements, or as I have called them click-acts in chapter 5, of individuals, the latter are paradigms of social actions. To better understand the things we do on social media then, we do not need a new theory of action or kinds of actions, but we need a shift in which it is acknowledged that most of actions performed individually are social in some sense. For paradigms and case examples, one only has to look at

how these actions are embedded in the process of meaning creation. How clicks on Facebook have become relevant social actions is a phenomenon that unfolded – at least to a certain extent - in front of all our eyes and thanks to all our doings. We are all in the business of finding the right sense to understand each other's actions and rendering them meaningful. Evoking actions in terms of a Gestalt that strikes us has been one way of making the tools of understanding them accountable.

Intelligible action (or the contrary) is summoned into a Gestalt that is made out against the background of its immediate situation. What is *seen* as an action is thus dependent on context, both situational and – as I went on to elaborate in chapter 4 - social. Senses of sociality I argued to be based on social enculturation and shared knowledge in an agential community. Part and parcel to understanding actions is the conception of them as being ordinary 'doables', accepted in the community one lives in. In a sense then, our sociality is not only an active part to our perceiving actions, but more importantly so, to conceive of them as ordinary, recognisable and intelligible things to do. With the analogy to Gestalt psychology as a holistic way of perceiving the world around us, I pave the way for a holism about actions. I explore the phenomenology of recognising or seeing actions as meaningful units of conduct as a holistic process. In a sense, our perception summons features of the world around us into the Gestalt or the meaningful whole, i.e. an action. What counts as an action in any given situation thus, is dependent on the very situation, the seer and the seen, it can include bodily movements and changes in the environment or the opposite, but whatever is contained is seen, recognised and understood holistically. The argument from the Gestalt analogy moves our enquiry away from the concept of action in abstraction, towards an understanding of action as perceived in its holistic quality. It is the first step towards an embedded idea of actions in which seeing them as an action is part of the phenomenon. What we see as an action in a situation is dependent on what the situation is. We see actions primarily in the immediacy of their holistic qualities and subsequently express this striking in the form of a particular description. The knowledge or insight one has into a situation will help an agent to identify what the action is. It includes the possibility of error into our perception of error, for example in having to 'repair' what we initially thought to be an instance of 'a mad woman walking down the street' to 'a woman making a phone call' (as demonstrated in the example of *The Lady in the street* in chapter 3). Actions viewed as an immediate way of experiencing a Gestalt, allows for 'updating' the perceived, according to the information one has. Accordingly, explanatory accounts could vary. In accounts of the philosophy of action, explanations of actions most commonly run from a description of a bodily movement of an individual towards a richer description alluding to the context or situation, e.g. from an arm moving towards a poisoning or

from a finger movement towards a posting. Holism at this stage contrasts directly with atomism, for it allows for a take on actions guided by how they strike us in everyday life situations: we do not see an arm moving or a finger moving, we see someone pumping or typing and from there we can 'update' to either the movements or the poisoning. Only with considerable effort can we make ourselves see a finger moving or a leg bending.

Holism alone, however, is not enough to account for the ways in which we recognise and understand actions. Perceptual holism is only one half of the equation, where I have argued sociality is the other. A perspicuous perspective on actions thus, from where on a variety of nuances of and interest in the subject of actions can be highlighted, introduced as the view from social holism. Where questions about what an action is and what it means in a socio-cultural environment meet, the enquiry of actions can be guided by our ordinary engagement with them. It is thus that I envision my enquiry to be *ordinary action philosophy*. I am not so much invested in social holism as a positivistic theory replacing atomism or any other isolationist account, as I am invested in finding a point of view from which a variety of inquisitive aims to the exploration of actions can be taken to enrich our understanding of them. Social holism thus, is a starting point for unpacking the assumed paradigms to search for those that lie within rather than on the outside of sociality.

One of the effects of unpacking the paradigms of atomism is that the conceptual boundaries of 'collective action' are smoothed. Just as action per se, performed paradigmatically by an individual, I have criticised the homogeneity with which 'collective action' is invoked as a phenomenon in the literature. In chapter 4 of this thesis, I highlighted senses of sociality to actions that are dismissed in atomism and collective versions of it. I showed that even if one acts alone in isolation, it is arguable that they can be social in one or more senses. Rather than continuing to think of individual and collective action as clearly divided, I suggested that the understanding of actions might be less easy to be detangled than suggested in theories of action. I proposed moving towards understanding actions as social in one or more of the senses I introduce, to avoid the problems theories run into when atomistic assumptions, i.e. that the paradigm of action is isolated (both from situation and sociality) and basic, lie at the heart of the approach. Where a paradigm of action as performed in isolation is left behind, one can allow for actions to be social in at least one of many thinkable senses of sociality<sup>102</sup>, three of which I have entertained in chapter 4: firstly, I introduced the concept of *doables* as a sense of sociality. It integrates ideas about how one learns to see or recognise actions. The concept of doables demonstrates how actions and their

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<sup>102</sup> As an alternative to understanding sociality as weaving through collective and individual action, I remind the reader of Preston's (Preston, 2016) argument that wishes to treat collective and individual action as equiprimordial as a starting point for investigation.

understanding are tied to a community of agents that share in practices of ordinary doables. Doables are therefore possible actions which are understood as ordinary, shared (e.g. via language), recognisable, accountable and intelligible. Whereas a hypothetical Mowgli abandoned at birth on a lonely island might well perform actions, for him to 'share a picture' or 'post', requires senses of sociality that he simply could not have in total isolation. Secondly, I considered an *interactive sense*. Interaction is a common phenomenon, take the example of two agents parking a car into a tight parking space. What one sees is a socially interactive action. The instructions given by the person standing outside of the car – may they be based on body or verbal language – have a direct and ad hoc influence on what the driver will do next. Although it is possible to describe this action in terms of the turns taken by each of the involved agents, in another sense, they interactively realise the parking with the parking being the trajectory. Thirdly, I explored a sense of **social enabling** pertaining to many of our actions. This sense of sociality involved in understanding human action focuses on examples of action which are under the control of one agent but involve other agents to succeed. They are, as I have argued, socially enabled. This sense of enabling is not to be confused with causal enabling. Ordinarily, social enabling is acknowledged at the level of understanding an action. Take building a house or shopping online for example. These actions seem to admit of the possibility for other agents to enable their accomplishment, without losing a sense of individual ownership.

It is also in this chapter, that I consider unlikely allies from sociological disciplines which approach actions from entirely social premises as social actions. Ethnomethodology, after the Winchian idea of what social science could be, investigates interpersonal meaning creation from a social organisational starting point, not unlike the view from social holism. In highlighting how meaning is carefully crafted and produced in an intersubjective situation, in which a common social ground is assumed, helps to strengthen conceptions of actions as a currency to bring about ordinary everyday life. We often rely on the immediacy with which we recognise actions, knowing how to react to them and elaborating on the trajectory of our interaction as we go along. Starting from the viewpoint of social holism thus, does not only take the pressure away from having to explain genesis of sociality in action, it takes social action to be the norm from which isolated actions are the exemptions that ask for further explanation.

Leaving pure action theory behind, Chapter 5 explored not only communicative actions on social media based on concrete examples, but most importantly of different aspects to these actions that are worth highlighting. How actions come to mean something to us can be traced by paying attention to how people have come to understand each other's actions. I entertained investigative approaches, framing the idea of understanding actions social holistically in different

ways. The first part of the discussion was concerned with the idea of uptake, for instance, i.e. the notion that many acts need to generate a sense of understanding in an *Other* to be complete. The idea of uptake taps into most of the senses of sociality entertained in chapter 4 and adds a particular angle on the actions that are the subject of explanation. Despite social media interfaces incorporating stylised acts of uptake via 'liking' or 'sharing', the idea of uptake sheds light on the argument that certain effects our actions have can depend on the actions of others. If – as considered – a post goes viral, one interesting question is 'Whose actions had which effect'? And is it better portrayed as the action of a collective, an individual or maybe both? Answers that become more apparent as a result of this thesis, include 'It depends on whose effect you are interested in.' and 'Well, in a sense it is individual, yet in many other senses it can be social in the following ways...'. These answers no longer evade the question but take into consideration which aspects of an action, such as a viral post, one is specifically interested in.

Another inquisitive angle one could take on social media actions is inspired by the ethnomethodological observation of turn-taking patterns in ordinary conversation. Ethnomethodologists understand and conceptualise the process of intersubjective meaning creation as a trajectory, i.e. how a sense of shared meaning is managed *through* time and *across* the conversational turns of individuals. Being able to direct one's own action to the actions of others is herein considered to be a demonstration of a mutual understanding, not only with regards to the conversational topic but also the wider community and practices. Acts of communication on social media could be framed as occurring according to these patterns, recognised and reflected as features in the interface design of social networking sites. This is a way of illuminating the ways in which people have come to use media in a socially acceptable, norm- and rule-governed fashion. A third possibility of highlighting the extent of resourcefulness in our social actions and interactions is how we use our knowledge about the world we live in and the people in it as an aid interpreting one another's and our own actions. The angles taken, entertaining uptake, turn-taking patterns or the shared background knowledge, serve as tools for enquiring and demonstrating the everyday methods of doing the things we do. They help to make aspects of a certain group of actions available to us, not because we would not know about them in the first place, but because they are so much second nature to us. It is like casting an eye on something that is lying in our midst. Naturally, angles can overlap or be used in combination.

What I hope to have shown in the exploration is that judging which way is the most appropriate way of understanding the action of another and oneself depends on a variety of factors that are not necessarily and fully entailed in the act itself. More dramatically so, many effects of actions lie beyond what is under the control of their agent. Which angle to take on any

given action is dependent on what one wishes to understand about that action. One aim of this thesis then, could be considered as presenting just how much what the action in question turns out to be, is dependent on the question about it one asks and the reasons for which one is asking. The answers one will receive will much pertain to the purpose of asking the question. Whereas many might agree to this when it comes to ordinary approaches to action, I think it applies to philosophical enquiries of actions too. This invites the question, which inquisitive aim analytic philosophy of action has in mind when understanding atomism as the only angle worth pursuing? The exploration chapter has given a handful of possible angles to be taken, possible only when one is willing to embrace the ordinary ways of enquiring actions, allowing for a variety of aspects of actions to receive immediate relevance. This relevance is incorporated in what the endeavour sets out to do. By starting from social holism, it becomes part of the enquiry to lay out according to which angle one asserts the phenomenon.

Atomism as a philosophical point of view targets the reduction and abstraction of a minimalist concept of action. I, however, evoke philosophers as relying on the ordinary methods by which actions are seen, recognised and understood to pursue their goal. And bringing these methods, senses or ways of understanding to the relevance of actions under observation and study has been my suggestion as an alternative starting point. In a sense, even the descriptions used by philosophers for their atomistic analyses are based on 'ordinary' methods of identifying actions as an issue worth discussing. Recognising 'bread baking', 'omelette making,' 'killing', 'shooting', 'bombing', 'posting' and all the other examples given in discussion in philosophy reside in a Gestalt of them, and yet atomists have proposed a series of views denying the former. The purpose of atomism might not be to explain actions in relation to what they mean. I suggested, however, that actions are units of meaningful behaviour and the reason why conceptions of actions matter, has much to do with what the actions of others mean to us. After all, I am interested in how we actually use these concepts. Critical voices have argued that the alternative I suggest in this thesis, i.e. a perspective that is inspired by how we ordinarily deal and understand actions, is of sociological rather than philosophical nature as the latter is concerned with clarifying concepts that are blurred or unknown to ordinary people. I take inspiration from both philosophers and sociologists, however, who are equally convinced that many concepts are indeed known to us and their study should revolve around how we make ordinary use of them.

At this point, I take it to be necessary to address whether angles entertained are *merely* possible angles. Most angles I introduced in chapter 5 to the case example of Annie's post are possible in that they shine a light on which interest one could take in certain actions. I do however think that to discuss, research or understand actions, an inquisitive purpose is necessary. For if one

fails to address an action from a certain perspective, I like to think there is no action in any relevant social sense. In the Annie example, Dave makes her 'late reply' an action. Had he not done that, had he not been struck by a Gestalt in this way, there would not have been an action in terms of a meaningful unit of behaviour at all. Evaluating the world in terms of action, one might assume, enables us to make sense of one another. And from this evaluating one can hardly take a break. Even if I do not know someone and watch her on the street, I will at least be able to tell myself a story about what she is doing. The only requirement is to take an angle or understanding the action in the light of what is seen. In chapter 4.2 the interactive sense of sociality, I explore how interactivity can be immediately perceived as an activity pertaining between two agents. I gave conversations or parking a car as examples. And, with regards to groups, we seem to have a similar immediacy with which we understand them as doing something together or not. The latter, however, requires that an angle is taken on them: my examples include for instance that of a 'stream of refugees' versus 'some refugees' or 'individuals'. It depends on which of the possible angles one is interested in, in which way a Gestalt is segregated and explained.

The way in which actions are understood as collective is closely connected to a purposive and social perception of the action in question. Both collective action and individual action can be regarded as social action highlighted in different senses of their sociality. This does not in principle exclude cases of isolated and basic actions as suggested in the philosophy of action, but the latter is removed from the centre of the enquiry to the margins of exemptions that need extra careful explanation. This matters, because it changes the direction of explanation as demonstrated in Chapter 3. No longer is it assumed that the basic is prior to the complex, the constituent more important than the whole, and the understanding of individual action as preceding that of social action. On the contrary, most actions are social in one of the senses I presented and from there one can explain those actions performed together or alone.

Social holism of action as a starting point for the investigation of actions is a reflection on how we ordinarily deal with actions and what they mean to us and aims at the reversal from evermore abstract theories of action to an investigation that purposefully initiates contact with everyday relatable action and its treatment. The social idea of action presupposes an understanding of agents as living in a world in which conceptions of actions are methods or tools embedded in sociality, i.e. in which action doables are learnt, seen and recognised on an everyday basis. In the present thesis then, actions are looked at not from a perspective that aims at understanding physiological, causal, or psychological constituents of action, but as taking place in a meaningful world, in which acting relates to meaningfully and recognisably conducting oneself in one's community. What it means for something to be a doable action is deliberately made secondary,

to fully embrace when something becomes salient *as* an action and how this is manifested in interaction. They may happen in solitude and in thoughtful, intentional execution, but they can be equally mundane, relatively thoughtless and performed for no reason. This yields the rationale for starting the investigation from a point at which communal and collective understanding of how to act in a certain environment (and the exact opposite, i.e. how to provoke, express protest, etc.) are assumed. Acts on social media as explored in this thesis, have served as evocative examples for a new perspective on social actions, as well as bearing the possibility for reflecting on the purposes of theories of action as a whole. I have at no point insinuated that social media actions are a different kind of actions, but rather, that they may allow for a renewed exploration of the things we do and most importantly the things we do together. The multiple ways in which social media actions can be and are understood show what an intricate endeavour understanding each other is. And yet, human agents are incredibly resourceful in learning how to understand and interpret what an incident of a 'post', 'like' or 'share' was or meant, even if this sense considerably changes from an earlier or later encounter of another 'post' or 'like'. The discussion of effects of one's actions on social media, such as in the cases of viral phenomena or birthday party invitations, has further lead me to conclude that in some sense it is very hard to know what we did unless we experience its realisation and know why we did it.

I have tried to lead the focus away from the metaphysical claim to what an action is to a perspective in which an action is what we make it out to be. This, however, is not arbitrary, but the result of being a social agent in a community of agents, in which understanding others is intertwined with being able to make out their conduct as meaningful units of behaviour. I have also tried to be sensitive to the distinction of explaining a posting versus explaining the meaning of a post in its role in a communication held on social media, and argued that the latter has barely received attention although ordinarily our attention might be much more drawn to explaining the latter, rather than the former. This does in no way deny that one cannot still pursue an investigation of the turns taken as single instances of actions, as for example exemplified based on conversation analysis in Ethnomethodology, but it credits the ordinary social take on actions. The intensity with which mechanics and isolationism are attempted to be explained in philosophical views, have resulted in a paradigm of action that is not necessarily part of our ordinary experience of action and my thesis has shown a way of escaping this perspective.

If we understand actions as carriers of implications directed at a social reception, whether that is another agent, a community, or even just oneself, the understanding of actions is shaped differently. When I am uttering words or typing the keys of my keyboard, I am certainly performing a bodily movement, at best intended and desired, but how this doing becomes pragmatically and

socially relevant as an action is not contained in this explanation. Socially, my actions have implicature that is not tied to a type of physiological embodiment. When asking someone what they are doing and receiving the answer that they are 'talking to a friend' is in no way outrageous, not even if they are the only person in a room sitting in front of a computer. 'Talking to a friend' is an action that one can perform in many ways, even without speaking out loud. But one could equally ask how this conversation is possible on a technical level, in which mentioning the infrastructure of the internet, as well as the capacity to type messages on a keyboard that appear on an interface, might be the right thing to mention. The problem is that speaking to a friend and having understood how a computer works do not necessarily point to the same sense of an action. This divergence shows that there are different senses on the basis of which one can discuss an action.

My enquiry has created a space to take an interest in a variety of aspects of actions, each of which might help us to reach a better understanding of the phenomenon of social actions, piecing together a collage of a phenomenon. Although I have not argued so, I take it that these considerations could take effect with regards to metaphysical and ethical questions around actions. Online actions, in particular, posit new challenges and opportunities to reflect on what one can intend and who has which effect. As explored in chapter 5, depending on the light in which we entertain an action we come to different ethical and moral conclusions as we are in the business of entertaining actions in a certain light, or from a particular angle. To square with atomism, a useful frame or angle for basic and isolated actions could, for example, be employed in theorising how to teach robots and artificial agents not only to perform an action of this or that type but also how to identify the relevant chunks of actions where human action and interaction is fed into a machine learning algorithm as the data source. In this context, abstract thoughts about action individuation will become relevant in a way in which it is not immediately relevant in human-to-human interaction.

What I take the exploration on acts of communication on social media to show is a possibility in which philosophical, sociological, psychological and media-theoretical perspectives meet. Philosophers, especially those concerned with social action, need to be reminded just how social the concept of action is. The things we do on social media require agents to be familiar with the ordinary methods of making sense of one another. Sociality envelopes most of what we do. Philosophical models that wish to understand and explain social action need to reflect this. Especially in a world in which many of the things we do, together or alone, are done online, we need a perspective on action that can speak to the phenomenon, as well as other disciplines. My work has shown, based on the mismatch of a metaphysical theory of action and a deeply social

phenomenon such as communicating on social media that it struggles to account for, that a reflection on the paradigm of action is necessary. Embracing a socially holistic view on actions, with social action as a paradigm that can be highlighted in a multitude of different, perspicuous aspects builds the foundation for the very possibility of a social, psychological and ethical exploration of the things we do online.

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