

What is an act?

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## **What is an act?**

*Decision and action, components and consequences of an act, and personal responsibility*

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### Outline of my argument

The main question is “what is an act?”

First I will show how the general public's idea of an act defines it as any action motivated by a conscious decision. Here I will elaborate on the interrelation of “act”, “action” and “decision” and their definitions.

I will then differentiate between an act's components and consequences. Considering several practical problems I will show how personal responsibility is inseparably linked to this topic. Next I will conclude that, considering the defining feature of an act being responsibility for and control over it, an act can only be defined as a decision. In conclusion I will then apply my definition of an act to five scenarios a-e of question 10, page 36, in the book "An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis" (Fourth Edition, John Hospers).

It should be noted that all ideas here discussed are done so under the highly controversial assumption that there is such a thing as free will (contrary to a deterministic worldview) and that human beings possess it.

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There is general confusion when it comes to distinguishing act from action, and what role decisions play. The common definition of act, action, and decision is the following.

A decision is a belief which results from mental activity, whether this is critical examination of relevant data, an evaluation of ones feelings, or other. Such beliefs are either a withholding of judgment, or holding of a positive/ negative belief concerning one topic or situation. An action is all of bodily movement and the withholding of it. When driven by subconscious or biological processes it is either life-sustaining, like the heart pumping blood, or involuntary, like a reflex. Both are, most of the time, not susceptible to conscious influence and therefore not considered an action. However, when they are being manipulated, i.e. conscious slowing of the hearts beating rate, they are considered an action. Together, action and conscious decision form an act.

Take the example of Bob. One day he overhears two people discussing a plan to break into his neighbors house. Bob has to make a decision: he can come to hold a positive belief ("I will do x about it"); he can come to hold a negative belief ("I will not do x about it"); he can come to withhold judgment ("I don't know what to do"; "I don't know if i should do something"). Respectively his actions might be the following: call the police or warn his neighbor; act, as if nothing happened; go about his day. The last two (non-)actions are identical in their outcome. The acts however are not. They differ in the decision motivating the action. Often this makes little difference. But in human interactions the motivation behind the act can make the difference between a trustful relationship and enmity. In the courtroom for example, motivation and intention behind an action do matter. A homicide can be judged as manslaughter when the defendant did not have the intention of killing his victim, or as murder when such an intention or motive can be proven. The action in question is the same, the possible belief that motivated it is different.

I want to take a closer look at the mechanism that governs how decisions, beliefs and actions work together and how they affect each other.

The decision making process is initiated when a conflict between beliefs is detected. This happens when a new piece of information is acquired that demands immediate reaction or contradicts existing information. The person then can accept or reject it. Whatever she decides to do it means the formation of a new belief or revision of an old one. A conscious decision always results in one or more beliefs about how to behave in a certain situation or class of situations ("When confronted with a lie, I will tell another"), or what position to take concerning a specific topic ("I do not believe in a god"). This can be seen as the development of default reactions that require little or no mental effort. Constantly deciding anew whether to have coffee or tee, whether to smoke or not to smoke, requires a huge amount of energy and is not as efficient as deciding on always having coffee or smoking only under certain conditions (like attending a party). This is the reason people have routines and rituals. They free up mental processing power that is better used to deal with new, unfamiliar situations.

An action is initiated when the person in question detects a situation that she has already formed a belief about. Whenever a familiar situation is encountered its governing belief and the corresponding default reaction are retrieved and put into play. If the person is aware of her belief she has a choice to go through with the recommended action or not. When she is aware of this choice the following is called an act because a choice had to be made and thus a belief ("I should do this") was formed. When she is not aware of it, she cannot be said to have performed an act. The kind of behavior that is not motivated by

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belief and does not require it can be observed for example in dangerous situations. The situation of a wolf coming at you is likely not to be governed by a belief recommending a specific action. And your reaction, running away or defending yourself, is not motivated by the belief "I want to be alive", even though you might hold that belief. It is triggered by the situation itself and falls under the category of reflexive and instinctive behavior. It is a decision your consciousness is not involved in.

I now turn to the distinction between an acts components and consequences. An act is composed of an action that is initiated by a decision. All that comes later in time and can be causally connected to the act, is considered a consequence of it. "Causally connected" means it is possible to find a direct link between the alleged cause and effect, that can in theory be explained scientifically.

Several things should be noted here:

One,  
this connection is never drawn with absolute values of truth in mind (see David Humes Induction problem), but with varying degrees of certainty. You then have to distinguish between scientific, legal, and random standards of evidential support, ranging from highest possible to medium and lowest possible in respective order. Popular verdicts, about elaborate scientific theories that might affect their life for example (evolution), most of the time place somewhere between random and legal. Depending on the populaces education and other factors like age or religious upbringing, its evaluation can go from emotionally motivated to highly informed. It is worth keeping that in mind when looking at situations where the causal chain between acts and events is incomplete or unclear.

Two,  
to certain events there might be a corresponding cause, but making it out as such, let alone finding it, is impossible. An example of current importance would be the "big bang", where it is not possible to go beyond the time where physics as we know them came into existence. Also it is possible to connect one action to a multitude of corresponding beliefs. Someone might help you because he is very altruistic but the expectation of a returned favor is a motivation just as likely.

Three,  
it is not clear what constitutes an event. In scientific inquiry the field broadens and an event can be something as small as two atoms colliding (and smaller), or as big as the expansion of the universe at a certain point in time. Here events also need to be clearly outlined and distinguishable from other events. Everyday life does not have these standards. In the context of human interactions events are things that fit a narrative like "he fell in love with her", which neither has a clear starting point nor a well defined end point.

These epistemological problems and unclear definitions regarding acts point to the underlying problem of personal responsibility. When I decide on an action I take responsibility for its possible consequences because I cause them. Here too we have problems. Effects can vary in their degree of removal from their causes. Suppose a driver on a highway yanks his wheel abruptly to the left in order to avoid a deer skipping across the street, and then hits a car in the other lane. Here the deer skipping across the street is the situation he is confronted with. Now, he yanks the wheel (effect 1), then his car hits

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another (effect 2). Effect 2 clearly is further removed from the initial situation in time (and space) than effect 1. Accordingly, the responsibility for effects further removed from their cause in either dimension is lesser, because the number of unforeseeable events grows exponentially with increasing distance in time and space. Responsibility therefore is never absolute but varies in intensity. It is dependent on the possibilities in which a person can influence any given situation.

There is however one entity that we do have full responsibility over. Arguably thoughts and decisions are under our most direct control (we are our thoughts and memories). We are able to avoid manipulation through others and can form, revise, recall and combine ideas. For example I can easily imagine flying around space. But actions and other body movements are less controllable and much more limited. Our bodies abilities are limited to the small realm of human possibilities which is in turn limited by the present technological possibilities of any particular point in time, whereas my mental abilities are confined in the infinitely more free realm of logical possibilities. And since a decision, acting as the cause, whether consciously made or not, always comes before the action, which is its effect, it is associated with the greatest responsibility a human can take on himself. This is because our thoughts and decisions are the original causes for our actions.

Humans, when interacting, can not determine each others decisions and beliefs with a claim to certainty, because it is always possible that additional claims like "She is a spy and is just acting nice to gain my trust" are true, however improbable they may appear to the individual. Although this is general knowledge and could undermine all relationships, people still trust and talk to each other (in varying degrees). They also do not withhold judgment where technically they are obliged to. For example: in judicial trials alleged murderers are convicted of crimes, though, technically, no action can ever be attributed to a specific person with absolute certainty. The "additional claim"-argument is applicable here as well: "All the evidence was placed there by someone else and the witness gave false testimony". The reason that judgments are still made and everyday life runs its course is practical necessity. It is exactly because we cannot have absolute certainty that we have to trust what has proven to be useful, what delivers the most consistent results. For common situations we have legal agreements on what amount of responsibility someone can take on. A doctor might be the cause for a patients death when performing the act of surgery, but he can not be held responsible for all such cases. This is due to the necessity that doctors regularly need to perform surgeries in order to help patients survive even though they might make mistakes in doing so. Legal boundaries however do not eliminate the doctors responsibility for his actions, they merely limit possible consequences like law suits.

Now that we have seen how personal responsibility is involved in an act, I turn to the implications of its role. As indicated above we have the most control over our thoughts and the beliefs, convictions, and decisions that are their results. When somebody says "I killed that man", he is therefore, when applying our strictest standard of humanly possible responsibility, only justified in claiming to have taken on personal responsibility for the effect of his decision "I will kill that man". In last consequence this means what is described as an act can only be the decision itself, as all that follows is not under ones full control, and failure in performing an associated action is, at the very least, conceivable. It is also open to external influence which lowers the persons responsibility for the outcome even more. So in judging a persons acts we effectively judge their decision of accepting a risk of effects associated with it.

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### **Evaluation of situations a-e**

a. *You kill someone while sleepwalking.*

Clearly there is no conscious decision behind this event and therefore it can not be called an act.

b. *You stab a person to death but have no recollection of having done so.*

I cannot determine whether this was an act or not. With no memory of the event it is impossible to tell even for me (the stabber), as I would be the only person with insight into my decisions.

c. *You do something unthinkingly, from sheer force of habit, without any reflection or premeditation.*

This is behavior governed by subconscious processes and without a decision behind it. It can not be called an act. In legal terms however the person might still be responsible for it.

d. *You do nothing at all, but let someone die of starvation when you could have fed him, or let him drown when you could have rescued him.*

As I am aware of the situation and the decision facing me, and have the possibility of saving the person, I am making a decision not to do so and therefore have made a conscious decision. This means I have committed an act and it is partly my responsibility for what happened to the drowning/ starving person.

e. *You fail to take care of your car, so when the brakes fail to function, your car hits a pedestrian who dies as a result.*

In this particular case I am not committing the act of killing the pedestrian as there was no corresponding intention behind it. I am however legally and personally responsible for the pedestrians death as it is reasonable to expect maintenance of my car from me.

Another thing: the pedestrian, by walking outside (and ultimately by being in the world) takes the risk of all possible things that could happen to him and I, as a car driver, accept the risk of dying or killing others every time I drive a car.

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