
What makes an intentional action spontaneous?

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Résumé

In everyday talk, we distinguish between spontaneous and non-spontaneous intentional action. The passerby who rushes over to a collapsing person acts spontaneously, while the person who executes their long-held plan does not. In both cases, the action is intentional, but only one is spontaneous. What makes an action spontaneous? Perhaps it is the speed at which the decision is made; or the fact that it is part of a natural process; or perhaps that it is immediate, in some sense. I will argue that spontaneous actions are those done immediately. My argument proceeds by elimination. Speed of decision has no bearing on the character of an intentional action and natural processes may not be intentional. Following this, I aim to interpret what is meant by ‘an intentional action done immediately’. Interestingly, spontaneity has received little attention from philosophers. In *Intention*, Anscombe discusses in passing spontaneous actions as those done without practical reasoning—the agent moves directly from a consideration to action. Anscombe gives us a clue to understand the immediacy, and so spontaneity, of some actions. There is a lack of mediation between the reason for which an action is done and the action. It is the immediate relation between reason and action that renders it spontaneous. This characterisation of spontaneity is not beholden to Anscombe’s theory. I will briefly show how this characterisation applies in Anscombe’s theory, Davidson’s theory, and Bratman’s theory. When we consider singular action, this characterisation of spontaneity offers a principled way of distinguishing spontaneous actions from non-spontaneous ones. However, when we consider joint action, the results are more consequential. Even though there appear to be many spontaneous joint actions, some theories of joint action cannot accommodate them because agents cannot independently move from a reason to action without the mediation of other agents.

Mots-Clés: intentional action, spontaneity, reason, immediacy

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