

ANALYTICAL ACTION THEORY AS A CONCEPTUAL  
BASIS OF SOCIAL SCIENCE

*Comments On Raimo Tuomela's Paper 'Social Action'*

In '*A Theory of Social Action*' (Dordrecht, 1984) Tuomela has presented the first elaborated attempt at specifying the foundations of social science in a way explicit and precise enough to meet the standards of contemporary philosophy of science. The theory is not meant to cover social life completely. But it is meant to cover that part which is presumed to be most genuinely human and therefore most important to us, viz. action. Starting from a precise and comprehensive definition of 'social action' Tuomela's theory claims to account for a wide range of concepts used by social scientists (including 'norm', 'role', 'group', 'organization', 'community', and 'society') and to clarify what 'explanation' in social science amounts to. The paper under discussion exhibits in a concise way the fundamental conceptual apparatus and shows how it applies to three representative examples of social action.

To what extent Tuomela's foundation is empirically adequate must of course be assessed by social scientists inquiring step-by-step into its theoretical ramifications and applications. Yet his account of social life is rather formal und presents heavy reading for people other than philosophers. Hence social scientists are not likely to look at it more closely unless they are convinced that the general theoretical framework makes further study of the book worthwhile. But Tuomela's theory of *social* action relies on the analytical account of *individual* action to which he has also made important contributions.<sup>1</sup> Analytical action theory in turn, for all its modifications and refinements, is deeply rooted in traditional philosophical reflection on human acting and reasoning which differs largely in method and content from modern social science. Being myself a philosopher I am inclined to believe that this conception is sound. Although I consider a variety of details to be in need of discussion and though I am certainly dissatisfied by some explications of central concepts (e.g. the Sellarsian account of belief and intention), I am convinced that Tuomela's approach to social action is correct in essence. Realizing, however, that many sociologists are likely to be sceptical about what appears to them as 'traditional individualism' I think I should try in

these comments to further appreciation of his approach by arguing for it from a more general point of view. So I shall briefly set forth the philosophical and, more specifically, the analytical approach to individual (1) and social action (2) and defend it thereafter against some major objections that have been or are likely to be raised by social scientists (3).

1. *Action* is suitably construed as as species of *behavior*, which is meant to cover bodily movements plus their physical, conventional, or other consequences.<sup>2</sup> Following etymology as well as traditional philosophical thought the differentiating mark of actions is 'activity': a behaving man or animal is 'acting' precisely when *he* is the *author* of his behavior.<sup>3</sup> Trying to explicate this relation of 'authorship' is one of the fundamental tasks in the philosophy of action. Whether or not 'agency theorists' (like Reid, Chisholm, and R. Taylor) are right in claiming it to be ultimately unanalyzable, most philosophers will agree that it is at least a necessary condition of a man's being the author of his behavior that it does not happen 'against his will'. Action is behavior performed *willingly*. Although we cannot think of 'willings' as peculiar mental events causally antecedent to bodily movements (see Thalberg's paper above, Sections 3-4), we may identify them as a species of 'wants' or 'pro-attitudes' (in Davidson's more neutral designation), viz. those of them that happen to be causally operative. Thus actions become 'pieces of behavior cum consequences' caused, among other things, by wants of behaving men.<sup>4</sup>

Obviously this definition needs further explication. There is the well-known problem of wayward causation, and even more important is the problem of agency. If a man's causally operative wants and beliefs are manipulated from outside or are neurotic, *he* is scarcely the author of his behavior. What he is lacking is *freedom* of a certain kind and degree. Now, even though they may not be jointly sufficient, there are obvious necessary conditions of the freedom in question, conditions philosophers have long ascribed to human actors in the proper sense: looking for and eventually choosing among various means to an end wanted; weighing means as to their efficiency; taking account of long-term consequences and side effects; developing, accepting, or rejecting wants according to wants of a higher order extending to the distant future or to the fulfillment of some rule or norm; balancing strength of wants and (believed) probability of realization; and various other abilities and activities conjoined or antecedent to overt behavior. Obviously freedom in this sense allows for degrees. Accordingly there are different degrees of agency and different resulting types of action. Yet common to all of them is their will-

fulness or (as one may say in cases of teleological action) *intentionality*. This is what makes them actions independent of the degree of freedom involved. Every other kind of behavior, even of grownup and fully socialized human beings, is non-active *mere behavior*.<sup>5</sup>

2. In proceeding from individual actions to actions involving several men or many, analytical as well as traditional philosophical theories draw on the assumption that these can be analyzed as relevant actions of individuals *interlocked* in various ways. It is precisely this 'individualist' starting point that 'interactionists' in the vein of G. H. Mead are too inclined to regard as ill-taken. Yet this approach to social action is essentially the same as that of Max Weber,<sup>6</sup> fits well with the delineation given by Turner (see pp. 82ff. above), and appears to be required even for a complete analysis of Mead's own favorite cases.<sup>7</sup> Thus the idea of constructing social out of individual action is not alien to sociology as such, but only to a particular kind of sociology.

Still it remains to be shown to what extent the analytical program is successful. In doing this it is crucial to note that there are *different ways* of defining social actions 'individualistically'. A rather unspecific definition such as Weber's (*loc. cit.*, §1; see also Tuomela p. 116) allows for cases even of simple one-actor actions involving other men as objects. These might not even be considered actors (as, e.g., in taking a seat in a streetcar some seats of which have already been taken). If they are (as in locking a door to prevent someone from entering), their actions are still not constitutive of the social action in question. We have to move on to complex actions containing two or more simple one-actor actions involving two or more different actors.<sup>8</sup> But again there are various ways of construction. If any interlock between the actors is missing (as in jamming a telephone line by two people coincidentally lifting the receivers), one cannot plausibly speak of 'interaction.' This is true also if the relation is asymmetrical, i.e. if only one or few of the actors involved are subjects *and* objects of actions (*A* throws a snowball at *B* and *B* dodges). There are cases where all actors are objects of the others' simple actions as well, but where the resulting complex action is merely a sequence of actions related asymmetrically (*A* hits *B* and *B* hits back). And even if the relations are symmetrical throughout, it is still possible that the simple actions are performed independently (*A* and *B* without rearrangement happen to photograph each other).

In some sense the actors are interlocked in these latter cases. Following ordinary and (loose) sociological talk one might even want to speak of

'interactions.' Yet it is plain that the connections are not tight enough to account for the most characteristic examples of human interaction: jointly pursuing a common goal, exchanging goods, talking to each other, or jointly carrying on a certain activity (e.g., going for a walk without a specified route, jointly enjoying a sunset). The success of the 'individualistic' approach to social action depends largely on its ability to account for the stronger interlock called for. Now, for the special case of *intentional action* Tuomela's concept of "we-intention" fulfills exactly this function. Although it is, I think, in need of further specification to become empirically applicable,<sup>9</sup> its general conception is sound: the actors are 'tightly' interlocked because of their mutual belief that each of them will contribute to the relevant complex action provided the others will do their part. The same kind of mutuality can sensibly be expected to cover *other forms* of social interaction.<sup>10</sup>

'Interactionists' may object that a mutuality based on attitudes of individuals merely seems to be that unless (a) there is no unactualized infinity of higher order ('loop') beliefs and intentions (cf. Miller below, pp. 143f.) and (b) all attitudes are objectively valid, i.e., the individuals are not caught in their subjective intentional frameworks. But condition (a) is surely too strong. All we need is a requirement to the effect that the attitudes of the interactors are on the same level; in everyday life we move up only a few steps of the hierarchy, but we are able to move on if this turns out to be necessary. Condition (b) is critical, as it concerns the problem (mentioned before, notes 7 and 9) of specifying empirical truth conditions for sentences about beliefs and intentions of others which interactors as well as action theorists can rely on. If a complete behavioral explication turns out to be impossible, there will, in everyday human life, be no complete intersubjective certainty about social attitudes and consequently about existing 'we-nesses'. But whatever degree of certainty one is willing to allow, there is, on the level of humans capable of intentional action, simply no other way to proceed than by mutually building up individual 'loop' beliefs and intentions. The idea that two 'I's' literally might become one 'We' is an old dream of European mysticism, including Plotinus as well as Hegel. However, in reality it is impossible to evade the external procedure by squarely 'jumping into' the beliefs and intentions of others.

The only way to avoid an analysis of social actions in terms of interlocked individual actions is to construe them after the model of *ordinary relations* between physical objects, e.g., a chemical reaction between two substances. On an unanalyzed macro-level it is common indeed to describe actions of groups or collectives relationally. 'Performing a string quartet', we may say,

is an unanalyzed four-place predicate applying to ordered sets with four members. But this does not prove an analysis to be impossible. As has been clearly seen by Weber<sup>11</sup> our talk of 'groups acting' etc. is a metaphor indicating our everyday unwillingness or inability to specify what goes on in detail, and Tuomela's "actions by proxies" (see p. 105 above) show how a specification might be given. If an analysis into individual actions is not possible, I doubt that we can speak of actions, i.e. willed behavior, at all, since I cannot see any nonmetaphorical sense in phrases like 'group want' or 'general will.'

3. Obviously an 'individualist' account such as Tuomela's needs further conceptual explication, especially if we want to move on from the internal (reflective) knowledge of normally socialized, articulate European or American grown-ups to external observations about adults of different cultures and languages, younger children, or animals. But I shall not dwell on these problems which Tuomela is well aware of and which *any* philosopher or social scientist taking account of intentional action will have to face. The *specific objections* of 'interactionists' to analytical 'individualism' focus on the alleged impossibility of accounting for social reality generally or at least some of its central parts. I shall consider four of them.

First, it is natural to object that the 'individualist' approach to individual and social action relies on unrealistic assumptions of *rationality*. As Tuomela himself has repeatedly pointed out (pp. 106, 112f., 116), much of actual human behavior is not willful, intentional, premeditated, or based on practical inference. In fact it is impossible for men to be fully rational in these respects. Rather, thinking over an action too long appears (under earthly conditions) itself to precipitate irrationality. But this proves no more than that much human behavior is not active, or active only to a lower degree (see pp. 130f. above). People respond directly or indirectly to external or internal stimuli, e.g., injury or emotion, or they behave or think in inherited or acquired routines that they cannot or do not alter. 'Individualist' philosophers of action will not deny that socialization plays an important part in this. But they will insist that rationality may be advanced, even though not infinitely and sometimes only by special efforts (e.g., psycho-analysis), by becoming conscious of social routines and then deciding whether to hold to them or to deviate. On the other hand sociologists are unwilling to consider all nonactive behavior as mere behavior that can sufficiently be explained on ordinary causal lines,<sup>12</sup> such as genetic information, secondary 'imprintings', S-R learning processes, standing dispositions, and actual stimulations. They are looking for some

'third' explanatory scheme in between causal efficacy and activity. Up to now, however, I have not met any example suited to confirm it, and the burden of proof, I think, is squarely on those trying to multiply 'theoretical entia'.

This holds true also, secondly, for the objection that the prerequisites of rationality (concepts, propositions, beliefs, intentions, rules of inference and argumentation, etc.) have to be *acquired*, phylo- and ontogenetically, by interactive processes which in consequence have to be considered more basic than interactions based on belief, intention, and reasoning. To what extent the respective abilities are acquisitional in fact and not maturational is unclear. But suppose social learning is crucial. It is still unproven that the learning processes are actions and not mere behavior, at least with regard to the learner. Once more the objection depends on the assumption of a 'third' type the necessity of which has not been demonstrated and which remains conceptually unspecified. And even if the assumption is sound in principle, it would not refute 'individualism' as a correct account of interaction *once* the prerequisites have been acquired.

Thirdly, it is objected that 'individualism' is inadequate to sociological *macro-phenomena* analyzed in terms of functional laws, independent of any reference to actions. Now, there are surely many relevant cases (e.g., Gresham's Law, or the Laws of Marginal Utility) that will allow, at least in large measure, for an analysis in terms of actions. These should be left out of consideration. But it may well be that the remaining set consists solely of macro-phenomena allowing for ordinary *causal* micro-reduction. The fact that weather forecasting today relies on macro-descriptions is surely no proof that weather is not made up of ordinary physical micro-events. And what reason do we have, if not the assumed intervention of acting (willing or intending) men, that the sociological cases are different? Anyhow, if part of our social behavior turns out to be explainable only by irreducible functional laws, that part is mere behavior differing, if at all, from the behavior of bees, termites, self-guided missiles, and refrigerators only by its degree of complexity. For let it not be considered that functional laws — whether technical, biological, or sociological — differ in principle from ordinary causal laws.<sup>13</sup> Macro- no less than micro-phenomena do not justify an alleged 'third' type.

Finally, there is the objection, raised most forcefully by Habermas,<sup>14</sup> that philosophical 'individualism' is confined to *teleological* ('instrumental', 'strategical') action. Is this really so, and if it is, is it really detrimental? Analytical action theorists will readily allow for one kind of nonteleological

action, viz. 'basic actions' performed without further intentions.<sup>15</sup> All other actions, setting aside mere behavior and lacking any 'third' type, will prove intentional and hence teleological. Presumably Habermas would not deny that cases like Tuomela's first example (carrying jointly a heavy table) are teleological and can be adequately accounted for on 'individualist' lines. But he would attack the two other examples referring to social norms or rules (voting) and linguistic communication (why-questions). Note, however, what Tuomela intends to do and what not: He wants to account for the social uses of concepts mastered already by individuals; he does not want to explicate completely the semantics of questions or the meaning of terms like 'rule' and 'norm'.<sup>16</sup> Now, individually following (i.e. not just conforming to) a linguistic or other rule or norm is surely teleological, as it consists, pace Ryle and Wittgenstein, in knowing theoretically the qualitative standards to be met and trying intentionally to meet them *in praxi*. Habermas might recur to the second objection of 'interactionists' considered above, arguing that this individual use is parasitic on prior acquisition of rules and norms which is irreducibly social and nonteleological. Even if true it would not prove 'individualism' to be inadequate with regard to the actions of adults. And there are obvious 'individualist' ways to explicate the concepts in question and to account for their genesis phylo- and ontogenetically. Perhaps Tuomela's condition of 'pressure' (see p. 121) can be used also for a reductive analysis of individual 'oughts'. At any rate David Lewis has shown how to construe rules and norms out of interlocked individual wants and beliefs, and philosophers like Grice, Schiffer, and Bennett have done their best to show how this applies to linguistic meaning. The only *fatal* objection to them would be that beliefs, wants, and propositions are language-dependent in principle. But I have argued elsewhere<sup>17</sup> at length that claims like these are unproven and unprovable up to now and in fact more than doubtful.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See especially Tuomela, R.: *Human Action and its Explanation*. Dordrecht 1977.

<sup>2</sup> For the sake of simplicity I shall ignore purely mental actions (like soliloquies or active imaginations). Also I shall not inquire into how individual actions are constituted out of bodily movements and consequences and what consequences are to be taken into account (Goldman, A. I.: *A Theory of Human Action*, Englewood Cliffs 1970, cf. 2). Note, however, that 'convention' is taken as covering norms and rules.

<sup>3</sup> Surely one reason for this conceptual distinction (though not the only one, pace Nietzsche) is our restriction of moral and legal responsibility to men who are the authors of their deeds.

<sup>4</sup> Unlike Thalberg (Section 5) I think the 'reasons-causes-debate' is settled, since 'reasons'-explanations and 'causes'-explanations of actions are not mutually exclusive. In having seen this, Davidson (see his *Essays on Actions and Events*, Oxford 1980, 3ff.) is far from being the first. The essentials of the solution are present already in Max Weber's distinction between 'Sinnadäquanz' and 'Kausaladäquanz' (see *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, Tübingen <sup>5</sup>1980; English transl. edited by Roth G. and Wittich, C.: 1978, *Economy and Society*, University of California Press, §1. note I, 7).

<sup>5</sup> Note, however, that 'mere behavior' is a general term allowing – more even than 'action' – for various gradations and subdivisions. Moreover, it does not prejudice the question of possible explanation: it may be explained causally, but it may also turn out to be mere caprice or chance.

<sup>6</sup> See Weber <sup>5</sup>1980, English transl. 1978, *loc. cit.*, §1ff.

<sup>7</sup> This is evident, e.g., from Habermas's reconstruction of Meadian interactions in terms of 'Absichten', 'Erwartungen', 'Enttäuschungen', 'Verstehen', and related concepts (see his *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, Frankfurt 1981, vol. II, 19ff.). These terms are traditionally considered to be ineradicably 'mentalistic'. Yet Habermas needs a behavioral explication in order to account for the allegedly irreducible 'sociality' of symbolic and rule-governed interaction. The explication is missing, and I doubt that a satisfactory behavioral account of intentions, expectations, etc. is possible at all. But if it is, the most promising way to proceed is surely by using the theoretical apparatus of Gricean intentional semantics (a theory which, ironically, Habermas brushes away offhand, *loc. cit.*, vol. I, 371). The concept of 'mutual belief', for example, used in intentional semantics as well as in Tuomela's theory is an excellent theoretical tool for possibly explicating Mead's rather vague notion of "taking the attitude of the other."

<sup>8</sup> Note that not all complex actions are multi-agent and social, e.g., 'hop, step, and jump' in athletics.

<sup>9</sup> Firstly, specifying empirical truth conditions for clauses (i)–(iii) of (WI) (see p. 111) is no easy task, I think, as it involves behavioral explications of intentional terms (see note 7). Secondly, supposing this to be done and (i)–(iii) to be verified for some individual  $A_i$  at time  $t_i$ , it is still doubtful whether this is evidence enough to derive unconditional intentions or actions of  $A_i$  at  $t_i$  or perhaps  $t_i+j$ . Tuomela thinks it is, under "normal conditions" (pp. 111f., 117), by which he means to exclude *akrasia* and, by clause (3) of his definition of 'intention' (p. 124 note 3), competing wants. I doubt whether both cases are in fact empirically 'unnatural' and, if taken into account, whether they will not call for substantial conceptual revisions. Also there is a general problem concerning (i). Naturally  $A_i$ 's intention to do  $X$  if (he believes that)  $p$  is to be construed as an unconscious 'standing' intention that needs to be actualized to be effective. But we cannot assume outright that  $A_i$ 's actual belief that  $p$  is sufficient to do that. And if the intention is taken to be some conscious maxim of  $A_i$ 's, there still remains the well-known problem of applying general rules to particular cases. In short, I think (WI) is an idealization capturing some – surely the most essential – features of joint intentional action, but is not sufficiently specified to be applied directly to relevant materials of empirical social science.

<sup>10</sup> In addition to intentional social actions Tuomela refers to social actions due exclusively to a "social belief" (pp. 114f.) or "we-expectation" (p. 116). But it is unclear to me what exactly these concepts apply to. Tuomela's examples are: a crowd's panic reaction to a common stimulus, crazes, and hostile outbursts. Yet it is certain that these are really

actions, i.e., *willed* instead of irrational, unreflective behavior? And if so, is it certain that the basis of each individual will is a *generalized* belief and that the resulting common behavior is not to be construed after the model of Weber's example of people simultaneously opening their umbrellas (see Tuomela p. 116)?

<sup>11</sup> See Weber, <sup>5</sup>1980, English transl. 1978, *loc. cit.* §1, note I, 9.

<sup>12</sup> Provided it can be explained at all; recall (note 5) that 'mere behavior' covers caprice and chance.

<sup>13</sup> See Nagel, E.: *The Structure of Science*, New York 1961, 401ff.; Woodfield, A.: *Teleology*, Cambridge 1979, part III.

<sup>14</sup> See Habermas, 1981, *loc. cit.*, vol. I, 126ff. and this volume below pp. 154ff. Although I am rather sympathetic to Habermas's critical attitude toward societies founded exclusively on individual, if interlocked, interests of its members, I do not think that this calls for a 'transcendental critique of teleological action', let alone a fundamental revision of action concepts.

<sup>15</sup> Again there is some irony in the fact that the only unambiguous examples of nonteleological action, viz. basic actions, are not acknowledged by Habermas (1981, *loc. cit.*, vol. I, 145ff.).

<sup>16</sup> This is evident from the appearance of 'ought' in clauses (a) and (b) of definition (N), see p. 120, and from the appearance of 'why' in clauses (a) and (b) of (\*) and (\*\*), p. 122, respectively.

<sup>17</sup> Seebaß G.: *Das Problem von Sprache und Denken*. Frankfurt 1981.