

Comments on “Against Capacity Views of Action and Control” by Malte Hendrickx

Brief Recap

An action is something that an agent *does* (e.g. The author gives a talk) rather than something that merely happens to them (e.g. The author sneezes).

According to *Control Views*, “what an agent does are those movements an agent controls.” (p. 1)
These come in two forms:

According to *Occurrent Control Views*, “only movements over which agents *exercise* control are under agential control.” (p. 1)

According to *Capacity Views*, the mere *capacity* to exercise control “as needed” is sufficient for agential control. (p. 1)

Malte Hendrickx argues that the latter views are mistaken; the capacity to exercise control is *not* sufficient for agential control of a movement (where agential control renders that movement an *action* of the agent).

Hendrickx offers a counterexample to Capacity Views: Homeostatic Breathing (and Blinking, Swallowing)

“These are neither actions nor typically under agential control but generated by bodily subsystems. Yet under normal circumstances, an agent has the capacity to control these movements at will.” (p. 2)

In other words, we do not usually breathe by exercising control over our lungs and muscles. (Passive) breathing is not, intuitively, an action. However, we do have the *capacity* to exercise control over our breathing. We occasionally exercise control when we take active breaths, for example during exercise.

Points for Discussion

I. Objection #3 Revisited: Individuating the Actions of Active vs. Passive Breathing

Homeostatic breathing is proposed by the author as a counterexample to Capacity Views of agential control. Hendrickx considers the potential objection that we can individuate “passive breathing” and “active breathing” as separate events. This objector alleges we lack even the capacity to control our passive breathing in particular, while we do have the capacity to take active breaths. So the example of breathing does not count as a counterexample to capacity views.

The author (Sec 5.3, p. 8):

What difference between active and passive breathing could be used to individuate them in a way that salvages capacity views? It cannot be the movements themselves since both passive and active breathing typically can use the same muscle movements to perform their function. It cannot be their purpose, which they share. It cannot be the information provided, which stems from the same mechanisms. It cannot be how the information is accessed, which presents the dilemma illustrated in 5.2... (underline added for emphasis)

I'd like to float again the possibility that certain kinds of active breathing (the ones we have the capacity to control) are kinds of actions distinct from passive breathing. We do, at least, find it very natural to speak of these as separate event types. ("active" vs. "passive" breathing)

What might individuate them? One suggestion: *Do they share the same purpose or goal??*

At least *some* certainly do not. For some active breaths, their purpose is e.g. to smell a fragrance, to follow directions in a yoga video, to provide a focus for meditation, to prove a point about our capacities...

Perhaps we do not possess even the capacity to intervene in the sort of passive breathing aimed at keeping our body oxygenated. This gives us a way to defend Capacity Views while distinguishing between active breaths (actions) and passive breaths (not actions).

II. A More Speculative Potential Worry: Could the author's general account of what it is to "exercise control" over movement M actually miscategorize the author's example of passive breathing as a movement over which the agent *exercises* control?

If so, then it would seem that even *exercise* of agential control is not sufficient to render a movement an action. This would be a surprising result.

According to Hendrickx (pp. 2-3):

1. For a movement M to be subject to control [on any theory,]
 - (a) M must be directed towards a goal G
 - (b) M must be such that it can effect G's occurrence
 - (c) A monitoring-mechanism must monitor information I about M's progress towards G
 - (d) A mechanism sensitive to I must bring about causal changes C that alter M in a way that increases M's likelihood of achieving G

2. For agents to be exercising control over M they must
 - (a) Have access to some of I
 - (b) Be attributed some of C based on initiation or changes to mechanisms that are sensitive to I

My concern is with condition 2a. The requirement that an agent have "access" to "some" of the relevant information sets a fairly low bar to be met. Note that an agent can have access to some information about a movement M's effectiveness in achieving its goal without having anything like *fully transparent access to all* of the relevant information, or to information regarding the detailed workings of the mechanism to alter M.

For illustration, suppose I'm driving a manual car. The movement of my arm to shift gears (goal: move to 3rd gear) is presumably a movement over which I exercise control. Various mechanisms in my body and brain track information (including sensory, visual, and auditory information) about whether my arm's motion is succeeding in bringing about that physical change in the car. As an agent, I have access to some of this information, even if the full details of the inner workings of my body are not consciously transparent to me. For instance, I can hear whether there's a smooth change of gear. 2a is met.

Condition 2b is also met, as we would hope; various changes in my arm's movement are attributable to me.

In the case of passive breathing, 2a and 2b both seem to be met, too. (??)

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The goal of that movement is keeping my body oxygenated. I have access, as an agent, to some information about whether my breathing is successful (2a). I know I would start to feel pain, weakness, or discomfort if it weren't.

Presumably the natural changes in my passive breathing are also attributable to me (2b). If we denied this on the grounds that we require the changes, C, to be caused by an agent's response *to the information, I, to which the agent has conscious access*, then my concern is that the bar would be set too high to allow for shifting gears to count as an action (which is, intuitively, an action).

In summary: If passive breathing turns out to involve an exercise of control, on this view, then even the exercise of control would seem to be insufficient for action. That would be a surprising result.

This problem can probably be avoided, however, by spelling out conditions 2a and 2b in more detail. So instead, we should revisit our account of what is required for an "exercise" of control.

How much, and what kind of, information is needed, in what form? Which changes need to be attributed to the agent, exactly?

Takeaway: Thanks to Malte Hendrickx for encouraging us to develop a more precise understanding of the difference between those movements over which we exercise control, and those which we have the capacity to control on occasion!