

ACTION AND REFLECTION (I)

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‘Action and Reflection (I)’ is the first of two studies. The present article focuses on action theory; the sequel will focus on reflection in relation to ‘second-order agency’. Both aim to show the relevance of categories developed in Mouw & Griffioen (1992), *Pluralisms and Horizons*, in steering clear of the Scylla of ‘methodological individualism’, and the Charybdis of collectivism. The historical survey with which this article starts shows that methodological individualism casts its shadows far beyond Max Weber, its originator. Also, it becomes clear that this position is hard to overcome as ‘communal agency’, its opposite, proves to be fraught with internal problems. In the systematic part the author elaborates an alternative solution by shifting to the communities in which action takes place. Here the categories of context, structure and direction are brought to bear.

1. *Prelims*

1.1 Introduction

I started this text with the intention to stay close to the worldview theme that was at the center of a study published earlier in this journal (Griffioen 2012). As this turned out to be less fruitful than anticipated, I broadened the subject to the theme of action—or, more precisely, action and reflection. The present study concentrates on action, whereas the focus will shift towards reflection in a sequel titled ‘Action and Reflection (II)’ (or briefly ‘Part II’).

Moving from a survey of worldviews to my present subject did not require a giant step, because my approach to the worldview phenomenon was already action-oriented (worldviews serving to chart courses of action, etc.). One shortcoming of the earlier publication, however, is that subjectivity only comes to the fore in connection with ‘assent’: the ‘amen’ endorsing a worldview position (2012, 29-33), while many facets of agency remain outside the picture.

In finding a way out of the labyrinth of conflicting views of action, categories developed in *Pluralisms and Horizons* (Mouw & Griffioen 1992) proved to be of great help. This is true especially for the sections dedicated to three different types of action. For convenience sake, I rubricated these types as Type 1, 2, and 3. Each of the types represents one of the basic categories of *Pluralisms and Horizons*: ‘contextual’, ‘structural’ (or ‘functional’), and ‘directional’.

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1.2 Dedication

It is altogether fitting to dedicate this essay to co-author Richard J. Mouw in commemoration of his retirement from the presidency of Fuller Theological Seminary, May 2013.

1.3 Theory of Action

Firstly, a disclaimer is in order. I have neither the competence nor the intention to offer a full treatment of action theory. Fortunately, many studies by other authors fill this gap. Of special interest to the readership of this journal are Bruce Wearne's publication on Talcott Parsons (Wearne 1989) and André Troost's studies on praxeology (see Troost 2012 for a survey).

I will take on a comprehensive approach to action, i.e. taking action as comprising willing, knowing, and imagining (cf. Dooyeweerd 1942, proposition 14), with emphasis on willing. Within the limits of this study, I see no need to differentiate explicitly between inner acts and outer-directed actions, as do Weber, Schütz, as well as Troost (Voegelin 2009, 446; Troost 2012, 269).

Without committing myself beforehand to a specific or regional theory of action, for instance to a social theory of action, the emphasis will in fact be on action in the social field. Thus, I stay in line with the earlier worldview essay. This means there will be little on (theories of) psychic acts, speech acts, logically qualified acts such as practical reasoning and theorizing, or legally qualified acts (as in theories about 'legal personality').

I will bypass the so-called 'theory of the act-structure', a crown jewel of Reformational Philosophy (Dooyeweerd 1942; Friesen 2007; Glas 1989, 2010; Troost 2012). Although its analysis of act-structures is indispensable for understanding the relation of acts to their substratum—the physico-chemical, biotic, and psychic sub-structures—, the purview of our present study is such that we need not dwell on it.

A subject I will only scratch the surface of is that of (theories of) subjectivity. A library could be filled with studies on 'self' and 'I' (for surveys see Frank 1986, 2011). This study will ignore most of it and only take a stance in some controversies. One pertinent controversy for this project is whether it is possible to consider action apart from its connection to an actor. On the one hand, there are those who reserve 'subject', 'agent' and similar categories for juridical and ethical discourse, while at more primitive levels of description preferring "an agentless semantics of action" (Ricoeur 1994, 56-87). The opposite position, which we subscribe to, is that every relevant act has "a name, a "who" attached to it" (Arendt 1958, 180-181). This means I will bypass issues of attributing consequences of actions to specific individuals. These whodunnit-issues are important—not just practically but also theoretically (as Ricoeur's study shows). However, as the focus of the present study is on