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## **Dispositions and Conditionals in Simple Agents and Collective Agencies**

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### **Abstract**

The analysis of conditionals and dispositions as the concepts inherent to the actions, when it is applied to both simple agents and collective agencies, allows investigating in detail the role of intentions, volition, and consciousness in actions. The main objective of this article is to investigate the differences in proposed conceptions of the conditional analysis of actions and approaches based on dispositions, especially those dealing with the approaches to simple agents and complex agencies. The differences between dispositional nature of simple and collective agencies entail additional empirical challenges related to the volition and intentions in collective agencies, as well as the necessity to provide a precise distinction between simple and collective kinds of agency.

**Keywords:** agency, action, volition, collective agencies, compatibilism, conditionals, dispositions

### **1. Introduction**

The understanding of differences between the means of expressing volition and intention among the simple agents of social reality and those of a complex nature, including social institutions and groups, stands in direct correlation to the dispositional or conditional qualities that they are inherent of. In the context of analytic philosophy, the question of correspondence between volition, as well as the mere phenomenon of free will, and dispositional properties of a certain agent has always born special significance. On the other hand, it is also essential to consider that the very methodology of analytic philosophy widely applies conditional analysis to a plentiful of analyzed objects, including dispositions in interacting agents. Whereas conditional analysis is a traditional means of studying dispositional properties of agents, the main objective of this article is to investigate the differences in proposed conceptions of the conditional analysis of dispositions, especially those dealing with the approaches to simple agents and complex agencies, as well as to review the critique of such analysis.

The differences in understanding dispositional and conditional properties of agency occur due to the very variations in agency conceptions and recognition of different kinds of agents, as well as an ontological framework of an agency. In such a way, for the different definitions of merely interacting entities or agents with the intentional properties behind them, there are various conceptions explaining the structure and metaphysics behind both simple and collective agencies. Although the usage of conditionals for explaining some aspects of actions as a prerogative of agents was largely common in analytic philosophy of the second half of the twentieth century due to its ties and correlations with the linguistics, there is also a substantial amount of critique related to the identification of the grammatical and syntactical representation of the actions and events in the language compared to the actual nature of agency. Among the alternative approaches, there is so-called oversimplification intended to disregard grammatical features used in language to mark which of the events can be considered actions, as well as dispositional approach, attributing the differences between various events, in which a certain entity is involved to the dispositions of its nature and mind. The comparison between the conditional and dispositional approaches is of a special interest in the context of differences between simple agents and collective agencies since, in such a way, it is possible to analyze the role of intentions, volition, and consciousness in the process of an action.

## 2. Literature review

The mere investigation of an agency as a phenomenon begins with the conception of action. In the framework of analytic philosophy, the core standard theory of understanding the correlation between the action and agency, in which the latter possesses causal properties can be observed in the works of Davidson and Anscombe. While the approaches proposed by Davidson can be related to some conceptions of intentionality (in particular, Davidson considers intentions to play a major role in the process of reasoning), at this stage, in the analytical philosophy of action, unlike philosophy of mind, there is somewhat less attention attributed to the desire-related and belief-related conceptions (Davidson, 2001, p. 26; Clarke, 2009, p. 323).

On the other hand, from the point of view of the philosophy of action, the conception of conditional analysis of action appears to be somewhat restricted. There is a dominant opinion among the adherents of the traditional standard theory of action addressing the issue of analysis conditional aspects of events and actions. In particular, it is essential to note that Davidson (2001) underlines that, in the process of finding the distinction between a mere event and an agency-motivated and intention-driven action, it is reasonable to confine to “the neglect of distinctions hinted by grammar and common sense, recourse to disguised linguistic legislation” (Davidson, 2001, p. 45). In a similar manner, Anscombe also suggests that it is possible for a human thought to create concepts, including the idea of being self-conscious of one’s own intentions, out of the material world (Anscombe, 2016, p. 339), viz. intellect can produce intentions towards objects. Intention-driven paradigm is also closely connected with identifying distinction between volition of mind and neural causes, especially if we are rendering Aristotelian account of agency as Anscombe describes it (Runyan, 2013, p. 54). Such perspective of viewing agency can be rendered as the framework of compatibilism and is associated with concepts of volition and freedom of will. On the other hand, in determinist conceptions of agency, the conditional approach is one of the factors presupposing the threat to free will since, in some ways, if following the definition of action given by Danto (1963), they deny an agent the power to be the cause of an action.

One of the major challenges concerning the application of conditional analysis of dispositions inherent to agents, according to Clarke (2009) is that, especially in case of determinist perspective, such analysis was not able to monitor the change in disposition “in just the circumstances that might trigger its manifestation” (Clarke, 2009, p. 324). In such a way, the more complex the agency is the more circumstances affecting actualization of its inherent dispositions there are. In the case of collective agencies, represented in the form of social groups and institutions, the amount of all the potential triggers and hindrances for each proposition of conditional analysis can be impossible to adequately calculate.

## 3. Results

The conditional analysis in understanding action and agency aligns with determinist perspectives rather than compatible ones, in a way that it associates the dispositions inherent to the agents with the actions themselves, thereby sparing the agents volition and ability to express will and control and rendering those disposition (rather than agents) as causes of action. Hyman (2015) also supports the idea that there is no direct correlation between the mere intention and action since disposition to block the intention and not to let it manifest itself into action can be stronger than the disposition to act, even though it cannot be adequately represented in conditional analysis.

Another way of looking at the problem is to define the distinction between the “intentional intrinsic or intrinsic to action” (Coval & Campbell, 2012, p. 15). Such approach would not fully align with either Davidson’s or Danto’s views on what an action actually is and would also require a rigorous definition of how intentional and unintentional actions should be discriminated. Such approach again does not solve the question of which actions should be considered incidental, i.e. those that happen qua act and not qua intention (Coval & Campbell, 2012, *ibid*). Moreover, such approach can eventually lead again to a rather mechanical determinist way of looking at action. Therefore, any pragmatically-oriented approach would require means of discriminating “human rationality from machinic processes names primarily a pragmatic fiction to identify distinct forms of agency and the possibility to assign different kinds of entities to them” (Passoth, Peuker, & Schillmeier, 2012, p. 7).

Given the fact that causal, compatible theories of agency have a wider spectrum of defining the degree of an agent's participation in an action, the extent to which it is a cause of a given action, they have bigger potential for application in defining variations between complex and simple kinds of agency.

Although the focus on the dispositional properties rather than their conditional analysis provide the ground for the role of free will as a part of an action, the indeterminist theories struggle to define precisely the boundaries of actions and mere happenings. For instance, it specifically concerns the so-called problem of disappearing agent.

The case of disappearing agent would be of a special interest in terms of simple agents that interact with the more complex structures since it provides the idea of the extent to which circumstantial disposition non-related to the agent itself can affect the intensity and the mere possibility of an action to the degree that it seems event-causal (Hornsby, 2004, p. 10). In a certain way, the problem of a disappearing agent, the boundaries between an action as such and a happening signify the numerousness of various dispositions involved in the action of a simple agent.

Clarke (2009) also proves that, within the conception of new dispositionalism, the disposition not to act is impossible since attempts not to act themselves are an act of trying not to act and not to affect outer events and manifestation of volition. Such presupposition leads us to the question how free will and disposition to mask the actions, as well as trying not to act as a type of action, can manifest themselves in the case of multiple simple agents forming a collective, more complex, agency.

Although the main question of collective agency is more or less clear, and it concerns the fact whether it can be reduced to the actions and intention of simple agents constituting it, the question of defining dispositions that form the basis of collective agency is far less researched in the framework of analytical philosophy.

Searle (1990) in his work *Collective Intentions and Actions* addresses the issue whether the mental components such as beliefs and intentions themselves that are part of the action should be attributed to each individual of a group or to the group on a whole (Searle, 1990, p. 405). In a similar manner to the one, in which Clarke describes the disposition of an agent constraining itself from acting, Searle refers to collective behavior as to something more complex than the sum of simple agencies. Thus, there are also mental capacities of individual and collective agencies that allow the intentionality to occur, the dispositions that do not manifest themselves otherwise than in the situation of collective agency.

Another conception that complies with the idea of dispositional rather than conditional analysis of agency and, therefore, fits into the framework of the standard theory of action, is the idea of team reasoning introduced by Gold and Sugden. From the point of view of team reasoning, a collective agency is more of a functional rather than spontaneous phenomenon. Without any ontological claims, Gold and Sugden (2007) attempt to address empirical challenges related to the role of volition in the situation of action by analyzing it in the context of the phenomenon of collective agency (Gold & Sugden, 2007, p. 116). In other words, free will actualizes itself as a means of reasoning and triggering or constraining certain disposition in individual agents when they form a collective agency. In such a way, in the situation of collective intentions, the collective reasoning guarantees that various individual agents' beliefs or intentions are in harmony, which can only, however, be achieved by a disposition of each individual to concur to the collective reasoning.

#### **4. Conclusion**

When dealing with the differences between the individual and collective agency, compatible theories of agency have a wider spectrum of defining the degree of an agent's participation in an action. Due to the specifics of how they view causal relationships in between an agent and an action, they have bigger potential for application in defining variations between complex and simple kinds of agency. The dispositional rather than conditional analysis is the main means of defining differences in intentions and beliefs in simple and collective agents, especially, in the context of the question of free will. The dispositional approach allows distinguishing beliefs and intentions of a whole rather than a sum of individual agents' intentions. Therefore, there are some mental capacities of agencies that allow the intentionality to occur within the dispositions that do

not manifest themselves otherwise than in the situation of collective agency. In such a context, free will can be perceived as a tool of collective reasoning which prioritizes the collective intentions and beliefs leading an agent to act. However, it does not imply the conflict between individual agents' volition and their interaction within a collective agency since reasoning, in this case, is more of a functional rather than spontaneous phenomenon.

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