

## **Ability: Language and Action – Abstracts**

### **Progressive Action**

*Nathaniel Baron-Schmitt*

Some action theorists have argued that there is no sharp distinction between intending to do something and being in the process of doing it intentionally (Thompson 2008). On this view, intention is identified with progressive action. We argue otherwise. What I am doing intentionally is determined not only by my intentions, but also by the world. We defend several principles governing the progressive that characterise this idea, emphasizing an analogy with counterfactuals. These principles sharply distinguish progressive action not only from intention, but also from wanting and trying.

### **Anatomy of an Anankastic Conditional**

*Milo Phillips-Brown (co-authored with Nilanjan Das)*

Anankastic conditionals—like the Harlem Sentence, ‘If you want to go to Harlem, you must take the A train’—suggest two natural, often-made hypotheses. First, that an anankastic is true just in case the action prescribed in the consequent is necessary for realizing the desire reported by antecedent; for example, the Harlem Sentence is true just in case taking the A train is necessary for going to Harlem. Second, that all anankastics obey modus ponens. Both hypotheses, we argue, are false. Imagine that if you go to Harlem, an assassin will kill you. In this scenario, ‘You must not take the A train, even if you want to go to Harlem’ is true, but the Harlem Sentence is false, even supposing that taking the A train is necessary for going to Harlem. Further suppose that you are unaware of the assassin; you want to go to Harlem because you believe it would be fun (but you want to avoid death more). If the Harlem Sentence obeyed modus ponens, we could conclude that you must take the A train. This conclusion is clearly false; you must avoid taking the A train. We provide a theory of anankastics – and an accompanying compositional semantics – that captures why the two natural hypotheses are false, explains the role of anankastics in practical reasoning, and identifies a restricted version of modus ponens that anankastics do obey.

### **Trying Without Fail**

*Ben Holguín*

An action is *agentially perfect* if and only if, if a person tries to perform it, they succeed, and, if a person performs it, they try to. We argue that trying itself is agentially perfect: if a person tries to try to do something, they try to do it; and, if a person tries to do something, they try to try to do it. We show how this claim sheds new light on the logical structure of intentional action, on the question of whether basic actions are tryings, and on the notion of “options” in decision theory. On the way to these central ideas, we argue that a person can try to do something even if they believe it is impossible that they will succeed, that a person can try to do something even if they do not want to succeed, and that a person can try to do something even if they do not intend to succeed.

## **Four Arguments Against Minimalism about Action**

*Mikayla Kelley*

Contemporary philosophy of action has focused primarily on species of action, such as intentional action and free action. In this talk, I'll consider the genus – action in the broadest sense – and, in particular, minimalist theories of the genus. A theory of the genus is minimalist roughly when it entails that there is agency all over the animate and inanimate world. I'll offer four arguments against minimalist theories of the genus. I'll then diagnose why minimalist theories are subject to these arguments, which will pave the way for a “success condition” on action in the broadest sense. With the success condition in hand, we come to see why all agents are morally significant.

## **Able to Become Able<sup>[SEP]</sup>**

*Mike Deigan*

Sometimes one is not able to  $\phi$  but is able to become able to  $\phi$ . It is a common occurrence in such cases that one intentionally becomes able to  $\phi$  and then, predictably, goes on to intentionally  $\phi$ . But this means that at the beginning there was something that one could do that would lead to one's  $\phi$ -ing, and not as a matter of luck. Why, then, didn't one count as having been able to  $\phi$  from the beginning? This is the Puzzle of Eventual Success. I show how several leading theories of ability ascriptions struggle to solve this puzzle, then go on to suggest a solution.

## **Diachronic Rationality for Causalists**

*Melissa Fusco*

I present a hybrid decision theory, coinciding sometimes with (traditional) Evidential Decision Theory, but usually with (traditional) Causal Decision Theory, which is inspired by recent work on unified approaches to the probabilities of conditionals. On this theory, close attention is paid to how one might (dis)confirm chance hypotheses under the umbrella of the Principal Principle, and the partitionality of options fails in an important way. This raises general questions about how to think about cases where our abilities do not divide the space of outcomes into mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive sets.

## **Active and Passive Powers and Their Manifestation**

*Maria Alvarez*

The distinction between active and passive powers is familiar, going back to Aristotle's contrast in *Metaphysics* Book *Theta* between a capacity that is ‘an origin of change in something else’ and a capacity that is an origin in ‘what is itself affected of being changed and acted on by something else’. In this paper I assess the status of this distinction by examining what constitutes the manifestation of an active and a passive power, respectively.