

Rosaria Egidi

## ACTION, MIND AND MATTER IN G.H. VON WRIGHT'S LATER WRITINGS

**Abstract**

*In the final years of his tireless exploration of the problems arising from “man’s place in nature”, von Wright turned his attention to the philosophy of mind as it relates to rational agency and to its role in the construction of the world of facts. This paper shall highlight (i) how the concept of human action, based on time-bound categories, allows us to reconcile determinism and free action, according to the Kantian concept of man as a “citizen of two worlds”, of the intelligible world in which he is a free agent, and of the phenomenal world in which he is a body subject to causality; (ii) how the intrinsic duplicity of the concept of human action enables us to resolve the is/ought dichotomy and – in accordance with the statements analysed by Wittgenstein in *On Certainty* at times as descriptions of facts and at others as rules of description – to conceive the deontic sentences both as descriptions of facts, i.e. as expression of existence of rules, and as prescriptions for human conduct; (iii) how the congruence of the two aspects, mental and physical, of human action is conceptual by nature and how therefore mental and physical, or mind and matter, do not contradict one another but are logically compatible.*

In the final years of his tireless exploration of the problems related to “man’s place in nature”, which saw him produce pioneering work in numerous fields of analytical research, ranging from probability to deontic logic, the theories of action and norms to the philosophy of law, and from ethics to his studies on Wittgenstein, the great Scandinavian philosopher Georg Henrik von Wright (1916-2003) turned his attention to the philosophy of mind as it relates to rational agency and to its role in the construction of the world of facts<sup>1</sup>. This paper analyses three of the key themes that defined Wright’s later reflections: the concept of free agency, the is/ought dichotomy, and the mind/matter relationship. The first theme turns on the philosopher’s concept of human action based on time-bound categories and on the attempt to reconcile determinism and freedom of action according to the Kantian concept of man as “citizen of two worlds”, of the intelligible world in which he is a free agent, and of the phenomenal world in which he is a body subject to causality; the second highlights the intrinsic duplicity of the concept of human action, enabling us to resolve the is/ought dichotomy and to conceive deontic statements, according to a typically Wittgensteinian formulation, both as descriptions of facts i.e. the existence of norms, and as prescriptions for human conduct;

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<sup>1</sup> These subjects and their links with his previous investigations of free action, determinism and the philosophical problems of deontics are at the heart of the essays that comprise his last volume: *In the Shadow of Descartes. Essays on the Philosophy of Mind* (von Wright 1998a).

lastly, the third theme addresses the question of the conceptual nature of the congruence of the mental and physical aspects intrinsic to human action and of the logical compatibility of the concepts of mind and matter.

There is no doubting the centrality of the theory of free action in von Wright's later work, at least until the mid-1980s, but even in the early 1970s the focus of his interests had gradually shifted from the relationship between action and causation to the issues of freedom and determinism. There are traces of it in his 1974 volume *Causality and Determinism*, which appears to conclude a journey that began in *Norm and Action* (1963) with the development of a "dynamic" concept of action, understood as the possibility of human intervention in the external world, as the result of a change or absence of change in natural reality. This concept underpins the well-known "actionistic" theory of causality, which marks the primacy of action over causation, reaffirming the fundamentally conceptual nature of the former with respect to the latter. By linking action to the concept of change and emphasising the close connection between *human action and the course of nature*, and accordingly the fact that human acts play a role in the construction of the natural world, von Wright aligned himself with a tradition which, echoing the positions of followers of Husserl and Wittgenstein, espouses the project – mostly definable as "antinaturalistic" – of a *humanisation of nature*, which he will bring to fruition in his later writings with his critique of the deterministic illusion.

According to von Wright, the kind of determinism that has to do with human action is based on time-bound categories or, as he says, on dynamic and non-static categories as expressed in the laws that govern the facts of the natural world. Intentionality understood as directionality towards the future is the hallmark of human action, and is the characteristic that delineates the validity of the propositions concerning "the study of man". The fact that action has its foundation in time also clarifies in what sense a theory of action implies the problem of determination or of the freedom to act and entails a kind of "foreknowledge". Ultimately, whether or not our actions are predetermined or we are destined to live in a certain way depends on how the present is correlated to the future. But in what sense is *determinism through foreknowledge* different from *determinism under laws*? We must then identify a definition of determinism that is valid for human sciences and not at odds with the meaning of freedom of action. As von Wright warns us at the beginning of *Determinism and Knowledge of the Future* (1982), the deterministic illusion originates in a misunderstanding of the concept of truth. A similar misunderstanding exists regarding the concept of *knowledge* and the idea that to know what will come implies the predetermined truth of its objects. We must, instead, distinguish *foreknowledge*, which falls within the domain of contingency, from knowledge determined by universal deterministic laws, in the same way as we must distinguish the time-bound concept of truth, built on experience, tradition and on shared and institutionalised forms of behaviour, from the concept of truth valid in the domain of logic and based on the atemporal validity of logical laws and on the causal context of the laws of nature. Once causality has been distinguished from contingency and *determinism under laws* from *determinism through foreknowledge*, their appurtenance to different uses becomes clear and even the two concepts of truth and knowledge stop interfering with and contradicting each other.

In an essay from 1980 titled *Freedom and Determination* von Wright will illustrate this conclusion, recalling Kant's concept in *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* of man as "citizen of two worlds", of the intelligible or noumenal world, in which he is a free agent, and of the phenomenal world in which he is a body subject to rigid causality<sup>2</sup>. In the same essay Kant declared that the inconsistency between the natural laws of the phenomena and the freedom of the practical use of reason is an "illusion" (*Täuschung*)<sup>3</sup>. It is therefore the result of an inappropriate transfer to apply the principles of an atemporal logic to propositions that are contingently true or false, such as those concerning *foreknowledge*. In the domain of contingency the application of principles that are valid *semper et ubique* such as the laws of logic and universal determinism is simply nonsensical. That all the truths, including the "future truths", are already written in the stars or in the mind of God or have been predetermined by cast-iron laws is the result of the deterministic illusion. However, once the distinction has been made, even this illusion disappears and contingency regains its proper role in the truth system.

In his broad-ranging essay titled *On Human Freedom* published in 1985, the masterful summary of his work on free agency, von Wright employs two arguments to denounce the inadequacy, and in a certain sense obsolescence, of the "classical" formulations of the problems of *freedom-of-the-will*, at least from Kant to Schopenhauer. First, he rejects the voluntaristic conceptions that obscure the existence of the agent's intentional and motivational background, and in particular of the conditions, institutions and practices of the society to which he belongs, in other words of his "reasons" for acting. Second, he separates the context to which the concept of freedom is ascribed by the scientific and theological contexts within which it had originally been debated: defining it in relation to the traditional ideas on natural determinism or the omnipotence of God means creating undue tension between the physical aspect of the action that determines it causally according to the "cast-iron laws" that govern the natural world, and the elements of freedom and responsibility that we instead attribute to human action.

Analysing the meaning of the concept of *free action* in *On Human Freedom*, von Wright returns to the theme of action as *logically contingent* in the sense of expressions such as "he could have neglected the reason or omitted the action" or "he could have acted differently", which does not have the same sense as the pronouncement "it is *logically necessary* that he must take or fail to take the action". While the meaning of "logical contingencies" attributed to the execution or omission of actions appears to go some way towards dissipating the air of fatalism that is typical of some traditional theories of free will, we perceive that the meaning of "I could have acted differently" has a stronger sense, linking this phrase to the concept of reasoned action:

"That an agent acted for a certain reason normally means that something was, for this agent, a reason for doing something *and* that he set himself (chose, proceeded maybe upon deliberation) to do this thing *for that reason*. To say this is to intimate that he could, in fact, have acted otherwise [...].

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<sup>2</sup> I. KANT, *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*, in ID., *Kant's gesammelte Schriften*, Akademie-Verlag, Berlin-Leipzig 1900ff., vol. 4, p. 457, where he presents the arguments for man's membership of the two realms of *Sinnenwelt* and *Verstandeswelt*.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 456.

Normally, it is, as one says, “up to the agent” to act or not on given reasons. Action for reasons is *self-determined*” (von Wright 1985a, p. 11).

In von Wright’s language the concept of “self-determination” is a trait of action based on reasons and therefore, by definition, also on free action. An expression of this sort can, however, risk being misunderstood; it is therefore useful to reprise two arguments presented in *On Human Freedom*. The first has to do with the type of explanation offered in terms of reasons; the other with the radical subjectivism in which the explanation of *actions for reasons* appears to be involved. The explanations based on reasons have an *evaluative* purpose, whose precondition for assessing an action (judging it to be good or bad, just or blameworthy) is to include it in the motivational background. In this way von Wright’s well-known argument is reiterated, whereby the relation between actions and reasons is not causal but “conceptual”, based in other words on the understanding of the meaning of the concepts it implies. The second argument is centred on the objection to the idea that there is a “supreme judge”, nominated as the one who can best understand human action. By saying that the “truth” of the action based on reasons can be understood starting from the self-determination of the agent, von Wright claims that this has no subjective or objective foundation; it is not the exclusive possession of the subject or of an external observer and accordingly does not depend on the authority of the first or third person. The “truth” of the actions based on reasons derives from the context to which they belong, and for understanding a context no one person can be designated *a priori* and definitively as the best interpreter (*ibidem*, p. 26).

The self-determination of actions is clearly the cornerstone of the very special version of compatibilism proposed by von Wright in *On Human Freedom* as the solution to the problem of congruence or mental and physical parallelism, which the classical thesis of compatibility left open. I call his version of compatibility “very special” since it bears no relation to the prevalent use of the term, in other words to the meaning of a relationship of peaceable coexistence, stability and almost of reciprocal indifference of its terms. On the contrary, the compatibility and possible conciliation of which von Wright speaks is the name of a relationship that is anything but pacific, anything but painless, perhaps of a balance constantly pursued but never attained. The fact that human action is both free and determined is already in itself the sign of radical ambiguity, instability and dramaticism intrinsic to man’s condition in the world. In the same way, the parallelism announced in *On Human Freedom* bears traces of this pervasive *Stimmung* and is also a special version of what is traditionally understood as psychophysical parallelism. For von Wright the concept of *action for reasons* is closely connected to the concept of “somatic change”, which is another way of saying that the actions based on reasons also have a physical aspect: “a concept of action which is completely detached from somatic change would no longer be *our* concept of action” (*ibidem*, pp. 28-29). The parallelism or congruence of the mental and bodily aspect of the actions is accordingly a dynamic vision of man as an agent who is at once subject and object of the natural forces he controls and by which he is controlled, of a creature who, as he puts it in his 1976 essay *Determinism and the Study of Man*, is both slave and master of his own destiny (Sect. XII). In short, von Wright’s idea of compatibility is rooted in his conception of the human

world and of the dialectical relationship that connects him to the natural world: man without nature could not be free, nature without man would be mutilated.

The critique of dualisms, which began in *On Human Freedom* with the announcement of the theory of compatibility and the dissolution of the deterministic illusion, will be extended, as we set out to clarify, to the is/ought dichotomy and later to mind and matter. In his 1985b essay von Wright takes a new stance with respect to the conclusions of the well-known debate on the “is/ought question”, distancing himself both from the classic positions of Hume, Poincaré, Weber, Kelsen and Hare, who support the separation of the two notions, and from the more recent conclusions of those who challenge it, such as Max Black (1964) and John Searle (1964). In addition to finalising the deontic arguments, set out in the early phase of his thinking, the arguments advanced by von Wright also bear the mark, so to speak, of Wittgenstein’s influence, in other words of the acknowledged duplicity of use intrinsic to the expression of certain statements that according to the version of *On Certainty* at times present themselves as “descriptions of facts” and at others as “rules or norms of description” (Wittgenstein 1969, §§98, 167, 309 and 319).

These arguments are both *critical*, highlighting the difficulties of supporting (as Kelsen did in his 1979 book) the theory of the separation of “is” and “ought” along with the possibility of building a logic of norms, and *constructive*, as when von Wright demonstrates how this is possible so long as the intrinsic ambiguity of the normative formulations are clarified, and accordingly the use or interpretation, at times descriptive and at times prescriptive, which these can be accorded. A deontic announcement, for example a legal provision, is undoubtedly widely understood as a prescription, a rule, norm or model for the conduct of individuals, but can also be interpreted as a declaration of the existence of a prescription, rule, norm or model prescribing this conduct, and accordingly as the description of a fact, in other words the existence or effectiveness of a norm. In this sense the distinction between “is” and “ought” is comparable to that between description and prescription (von Wright 1985b, p. 135).

The deontic statements in their prescriptive usage, which von Wright calls “norm-formulations”, are expressions of norms (orders, prohibitions, permissions, commonly rendered in the indicative form of the verb, for example “no smoking”). As prescriptions the norm-formulations are neither true nor false and therefore cannot logically follow from descriptions, nor can they be derived or inferred from other descriptions. This differs from the descriptive use that can be made of statements such as “smoking is forbidden”, according to which this phrase must be understood as a declaration or description of the fact that the no-smoking rule is in force. In this case the deontic statement, designated by von Wright as norm-proposition, can instead be true or false<sup>4</sup>. The fact that the prescriptions are neither true nor false is not a problem for the construction of a deontic logic because this is not about logical relations between prescriptions or norms but between ideal states, whose descriptions are implicit in the norms (*ibidem*, p. 139).

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<sup>4</sup> On the distinction between norm-propositions and norm-formulations see also von Wright 1963, pp. 9-10.

The old problem of two separate realms of “is” and “ought” is accordingly recast by von Wright in the idea of a double use, prescriptive and descriptive, of the deontic statements, an idea which safeguards the difference but excludes every ontological interpretation of the two notions. To the question of whether the prescriptions can logically follow from the descriptions, in other words whether the *ought-sentences* can be derived from the *is-sentences*, von Wright gives a negative answer, because the prescriptions are neither true nor false and therefore cannot serve either as premises or conclusions of an inference. However, here too there is a core of truth that must be preserved because the bridge between “is” and “ought” can be built, not in the sense of establishing between them a deductive link of implication but in the sense that Kant indicated as the regulative function, belonging to the imperatives, to approximate the real conduct of men to the ideal (*ibidem*, p. 140).

The different prescriptive and descriptive use of “duty”, codified in the essay *Is and Ought*, is refined in the subsequent essay *Ought to Be, Ought to Do* as the distinction between “having to be”, belonging to the norm, and “having to do”, belonging to the practical necessity of action or of “technical duty”, as von Wright puts it (1996, p. 155). It is therefore clear that, unlike the norms that prescribe what must or can *be*, in other words the ideal state of things that should, for example, reign within a society and which, as such, is immune from truth and falsity, the announcements that affirm what must or can be *done* to follow the norm, are true or false. Put briefly, the *having to do* is descriptive, the *having to be* is prescriptive (*ibidem*, p. 156). Like the normative propositions that declare the existence or being in force of certain norms, having to do also falls within the category of deontic statements of a descriptive kind, which are true or false and obey the laws of logic that are valid for every kind of proposition.

Closely linked to the results of the analyses conducted of the normative discourse is the investigations which, from the late 1990s onwards, von Wright conducted into the evaluative discourse. In an essay published posthumously in Italian, *Valutazioni o come dire l'indicibile* [*Evaluation, or How to Say the Unsayable*], he addresses this theme in relation to the theory of action and duty. The intention of the essay is to assert, contrary to the well-known theories of the *Tractatus*, the “meaningfulness” of the normative discourse, while acknowledging – in this instance in agreement with Wittgenstein – “that it is unsayable”. Like to the “duties”, all ontological significance is also denied to the “values”, whose appurtenance to an alleged, mythical reign of separate entities, postulated by many of the traditional philosophies of value, is rejected. Instead von Wright even proposes to eliminate not only from the philosophical lexicon but perhaps also from the everyday language the term “values”, since what are normally called “values” are instead “objects of evaluation”, “things that have been evaluated”. Human evaluations presuppose a person that assesses and looks at an object that is assessed and has a temporal, historical value, inasmuch as the same object can be assessed at different times in different ways, even by the same person. Evaluations are accordingly emotional attitudes, inevitably subjective and relative, and therefore neither true nor false. However, the evaluation of an object normally appears in the behavioural reactions of a subject towards an object; so reactions of this kind are affirmations, made by the person, that something is beautiful, good, pleasant. Affirmations, these, which are indeed true or false (von Wright 2007, p. 162). The evaluative discourse is therefore related to the

normative one insofar as it is part of the same, characteristic ambiguity. Affirmations such as “it is beautiful”, “it is good”, “I like it”, which express my assessment of something and at the same time are statements about my assessments, are similar to normative pronouncements that express, on the one hand, what one must or must not do (permissions, prohibitions) and, on the other, intimate that permissions, prohibitions, etc. have been issued or are facts, that “they exist” (*ibidem*, p. 166).

In the philosophical lexicon the behavioural reactions of a person are called “value judgments”. However, their expression in the grammatical form of subject-predicate judgments is misleading because they do not correspond to the logical form. They have only the appearance of “judgments”; in reality they are pronouncements that can be made in the first person. The evaluative pronouncements that we claim to use as judgments expressing facts, i.e. evaluations, *say* nothing in the Wittgensteinian sense. They are not, however, meaningless since they can be used to *assert* that judgments have been made, that evaluative assessments exist, and in that case, even if they cannot be expressed verbally, they “show themselves – claims von Wright – in behavioural reactions, which are the only criteria for deciding their presence or absence. This is the way in which the Wittgensteinian conception of the evaluative discourse can be understood, as an attempt to say the unsayable” (*ibidem*, p. 165).

Already in *On Human Freedom* the link had emerged between the theory of free action and the “Cartesian” theme of the relationship between mind and matter, developed in the early 1990s in his collection of essays called *In the Shadow of Descartes*, and especially in the essays *On Mind and Matter* (1994) and *Notes on the Philosophy of Mind* (1998a).

The problem of the “mysterious” nature of the convergence of mind and matter in the action is at the center of philosophical thought since Descartes and of all attempts to shed light on obscure points of the Cartesian legacy and the conception of two substances that nevertheless interact. Von Wright rejects all forms of interactionism and of the post-Cartesian doctrines, presented as reductionist theories. His argument to prove that reasons for acting and neuronal counterpart do not interact is radical. Interactionism, as well as reductionism and identitism, which maintain the reduction or identity of the physical and mental aspects of the action, are the result of a conceptual misunderstanding of the congruence mind-matter, which von Wright calls “the reductionist illusion”. However, once clarified the alleged “mystery” of the congruence, the reductionist illusion will be removed.

The core of von Wright’s argument is that the connection between the physical and mental aspects of action is not of a causal nature but rather a conceptual one, a connection which spells out the idea that the two aspects are bound to the meaning of the human agency. It is in fact on the basis of the *meaning* of the concepts which determine the notion of “reason (or reasons) for action” that we understand the nexus between the intentional background of the agent and the causes of his muscular activities. This conception could be associated with a form of parallelism between the mental and physical aspect of action, or with a form of monism not dissimilar to Spinoza’s doctrine of the mind and body as belonging to a single substance, or even to the Russellian theory of neutral monism, provided, however, that this had not to be confused with the conception of psychophysical parallelism professed by scientific

psychology, whose investigations concern, instead, the “contingent” relationship between action for a reason or reasons and the neural chain of events of the agent.

According to von Wright, the nexus between the physical and mental aspect of action can be conceived as a dualistic relationship between mind and matter and matter and mind, which he calls “inversion of the conceptual roles of mind and matter” (von Wright 1994, p. 203). In *Notes on the Philosophy of Mind* he further clarifies that the argument of the conceptual nature of their congruence does not presuppose the adoption of a form of monism:

“The attribution of mental phenomena to a person depends on a conceptualization of some physical phenomena under the aspect of intentionality. Similarly, one could say that the attribution of qualities to physical phenomena requires a conceptualization *under an aspect of materiality*” (von Wright 1998b, p. 107).

The argument is summarised in *On Mind and Matter*:

“*A, the action, is M, the bodily movement, viewed (conceived, understood) under the aspect of intentionality. Viewing M under this aspect means relating it to the mental things R we call reasons for an action. This relation is not causal – although the fact that the reasons antedate the movements may create an appearance to the contrary*” (von Wright 1994, p. 142).

Von Wright observes that this dualistic relationship was at the heart of numerous misunderstandings, which in contemporary philosophy took the form of “reductions” or of “false identifications”, among which we can list the materialist misunderstanding and its variant: behaviourism, and the idealist misunderstanding and its variant: phenomenism.

In keeping with his earlier interpretation of the problem of the compatibility of freedom and determination, also in relation to the dualism of mind and matter von Wright affirms that the conflict is actually only apparent; in human action the two physical and mental aspects are conceptually congruent and accordingly do not contradict each other but are logically compatible. As we know, to von Wright’s way of thinking this notion of compatibility is, however, anything but peaceful. To arrive at the understanding that human action is simultaneously free and determined essentially means becoming aware of the tragedy of freedom. Similarly, when we discover the conceptual congruence of the mental and physical aspects of action, the dualism of mind and matter are dissolved and the two aspects return to being harmonious (*when and if they harmonise*). But once again, this harmony – if achieved – comes at a very high price and that is the acknowledgment and acceptance of a paradox, in other words of a reality that is neither mental nor material and which is at the same time both mental and material, as expressed in a key passage in *Notes on the Philosophy of Mind*, which concludes von Wright’s critique of the reductionist illusion:

“And perhaps this is how things stand: materialism and phenomenism are both false, but one can reject them both with the right arguments only at the cost of acquiescing in a paradox. It would be like saying that reality (the real) is neither mind nor matter and that it is both mind and matter” (von Wright 1998b, p. 110).



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