GHEORGHE ŞTEFANOV **Opposing Actions**

Our abilities to communi-cate are the product of our evolutionary past.

IN WHAT follows I want to submit to your attention a philosophical puzzle and suggest a way in which it could be solved. I find this particular puzzle interesting because it brings to philosophical attention one way in which our linguistic practices are intertwined with our non-communicative actions.[1]

We start with the following scenario. Peter ends his three days visit to Quentin's country house by bidding him farewell. However, after saying goodbye, he takes his luggage into the guest room and starts unpacking. When asked, Peter replies that he did not change his intention to return to his own home and does not wish to postpone his departure. In the meantime, he continues to do things that cannot but prevent his leave—he removes his shoes, tears off his train tickets, locks himself into the guest room and intentionally breaks the key.

After witnessing Peter's behavior, Quentin expresses his belief that Peter is acting irrationally, because he is contradicting himself. Peter retorts (from behind the locked door): 'I take it that the mark of irrationality is contradiction. However, the sentences uttered by me during the last half an hour did not contradict each other. Moreover, were we to apply the concept of con-

Gheorghe Ştefanov
Lecturer at the Faculty of Philosophy, Bucharest University. Co-author, among others, of the vol. **Ludwig Wittgenstein în filosofia secolului XX** (Ludwig Wittgenstein in 20th century philosophy) (2002).

tradiction to actions and say, for instance, that killing somebody and saving that person's life are contradictory actions, we would still agree that the actions I have been performing for the last 30 minutes did not contradict each other. Since there is no contradiction either in my words, or in my actions, I cannot be acting irrational.'

Peter and Quentin cannot be both right, but if they were both wrong, we would be left with no puzzle. Let us, then, start by examining the possibility that Quentin is wrong.

One could say that Peter's behavior is indeed odd, but should not be termed 'irrational,' since, rule-following considerations aside,[2] it cannot be shown to break any logical or semantic rules. Nevertheless, Peter's case seems to bear a strong resemblance to that of a person affirming and denying the same statement.

The difference, might be replied, lies in the fact that while a statement could be true or false, a non-communicative action does not have such semantic properties. However, we should note that if, for instance, a person invites someone to enter her room and forbids the same person to enter her room, then she seems to act irrationally even if what she says cannot be true or false.[3]

One could still be unconvinced. 'The important difference,' the skeptic might say, 'is that Peter's actions do not have a meaning. They can be interpreted, of course, but in themselves they cannot bear any semantic properties at all. Peter should not have accepted to speak of contradictory actions in the first place. One action, like killing somebody, can impede another action, like saving that person's life, but we are not supposed to speak of a contradiction in such cases.'

Now, there are indeed many actions the performance of which impede the agent to do some other actions. Perhaps I cannot drink tea while I am brushing my teeth, but this does not mean, of course, that teeth brushing contradicts tea drinking. The fact that two actions obstruct each other does not mean, however, that they could not oppose each other in a different way, similar to the way in which uttering the sounds of sentence A, in a certain context, is opposed to uttering the sounds of $\sim A$.[4] If one is picky about words, we do not have to call this opposition a 'contradiction.' We only need to agree that performing such opposing actions is contrary to reason and, in addition, that a non-communicative action could oppose a verbal (or communicative) action.

This might still not suffice to convince the skeptic, who could reply that such an opposition would render somebody's words (or actions) meaningless (or pointless), so it should not be counted as an instance of irrationality. Such a strategy, however, does not seem very convincing, since it could be applied in a similar fashion even to the case of a person expressing contradictory beliefs.

The difference between 'Peter has done something irrational' and 'Peter has done something meaningless' seems to hang, in this case, only on a choice of words. After all, one could say that doing meaningless things (or at least doing both meaningful and meaningless things) *is irrational*.

Another way in which someone would criticize what Quentin says about Peter in the previous scenario is the following. 'Quentin is right,' such an interlocutor would concede, 'but for the wrong reasons. Peter does not contradict himself. His behavior is irrational simply because he does not act in accordance with his declared purpose, namely to leave Quentin's house immediately.'

Still, Peter's case is different from that of a person who, for instance, expresses her intention to quit smoking but does not do anything about it. It is not that Peter does not act in accordance with his declared purpose. He acts *contrary to it*. On the other hand, what is it to act 'contrary to a declared purpose'? Declaring a purpose can only be done by performing various speech acts, which, in turn, are but verbal actions. It seems that we are still talking about non-communicative actions opposing communicative actions, after all.

The die hard skeptic might have another reply at this point: 'Peter resembles a person who would resign priesthood before performing a religious wedding ceremony. He is irrational because he voluntarily invalidates a felicity condition[5] essential for the ceremony he is about to perform. In a similar way, Peter's actions are irrational because they undermine the felicity of his farewell.'

The skeptic's analogy could nevertheless be rejected. Felicity conditions have to be fulfilled *before* a speech act is performed. What an agent does *after* performing a particular speech act cannot change the felicity of that speech act. If I do not keep a promise after I made it, I could, of course, be asked whether I intended to keep my promise in the first place. But if I intended to keep my promise when I said 'I promise that...,' nothing I do afterwards could have the effect that I did not succeed in making my promise. Peter did succeed to bid Quentin farewell. What he did afterwards could not undermine the felicity of his speech act.

In fact, temporal order does not seem to be of much importance here. Had Peter started unpacking before he said goodbye to Quentin, his intention to leave might have been more easily distrusted, but he could still give assurance that he had the intention to leave. Peter's speech acts and his non-communicative actions are all successful. They just oppose each other, in a way similar to that in which two contradicting sentences oppose each other.

One could still try to object to this last thought by saying that it is not Peter's actions, including his speech acts, that contradict each other, but the beliefs that we can attribute to him based on what he says and does.[6] Thus, it could be said that based on Peter's farewell Quentin could attribute to him the belief that

'Peter will leave Quentin's house,' while on the basis of his non-communicative actions he could attribute to Peter the belief that 'Peter will not leave Quentin's house.' The contradiction, according to this view, holds between these two beliefs, not between Peter's actions.

To circumvent this final objection we could point out that an agent can intend to perform an action and act accordingly, without believing that she will do that action. A person could, for instance, try to stop a nuclear reactor from exploding by punching a random ten digit code into a computer, while holding not the belief that she will stop the reactor, but only the belief that it is possible (although extremely improbable) for her to stop the reactor.[7] To avoid the delicate matter of belief attribution, we could simply make it the case, for our puzzle, that Peter agrees only to hold the belief that 'It is possible that Peter will leave Quentin's house' and the belief that 'It is possible that Peter will not leave Quentin's house.' While Peter's beliefs would not contradict each other in this case, his actions would still oppose each other, entitling Quentin to the claim that they are, after all, irrational.

Perhaps now we can shortly turn to Peter's point. 'I have said nothing contradictory and my non-communicative actions did not contradict each other,' he says, and in this respect I cannot see how we could prove him wrong. What Peter seems also to suggest is that Quentin cannot justify the statement 'Peter's actions contradict his words' without explaining how a verbal action and a non-verbal action could contradict each other. This, too, seems acceptable.

I HOPE WE can agree now that we are facing a genuine puzzle. The next part of my paper is dedicated to finding a solution to it. However, since I do not think the solution is obvious, I will start by examining a few unsatisfactory approaches.

A first approach would be to regard the relation of utterances and non-verbal actions in descriptive terms. As such, an action could be described by speaking of the modification its agent intends to produce to the world. The description of an action could be, of course, negated. The negation could be uttered, thus producing a verbal action with a content that would seem to contradict the described content of the non-verbal action in case. The result would look like this:

(1) The agent A does action X.
(2) Somebody (maybe A) utters 'A did non do X.'

To account for the cases when a verbal and a non-verbal action oppose each other would be, according to this approach, to show that they are reducible to a case of the form (1)–(2). Unfortunately, this will not do. Cases of the form (1)–(2) normally occur when we lie about our own or other people's actions. Lying might be morally wrong, but is not an irrational behavior.

In addition, since an action could be described in more than one way, we could also have cases in which an agent rejects an alternate description of her action, without becoming irrational due to such behavior.

A second approach might be to take as a paradigm the cases when a non-verbal action produces evidence against a particular utterance. Such a case would be, for instance, the following:

(3) A says: 'There are no philosophy majors in this room at present.'

(4) B (who is a philosophy major at the moment of A's utterance, located in the same room as A) stands up.

The problem with such a case, however, would be that B's action, in spite of being performed by uttering no words, can still be regarded as *communicating* something which contradicts A's utterance.

To this one could reply that producing counterevidence to a statement S without an intention to communicate it might still be opposed to uttering S. The existence of such an opposition is nevertheless disputable, since a Popperian scientist could hold the opinion S while trying to falsify S, only to obtain a better corroborated statement in case of a failure. In addition, it is hard to see how such cases could account for all the situations when a speech act and a non-communicative action would oppose each other, given the irreducible differences between all types of speech acts and non-communicative actions.

A third approach to explaining the kind of opposition we are interested in would be to try to model such opposition on the cases of opposing speech acts. After all, ordering a person to do A and ordering the same person to refrain from doing A seem to be opposing actions. The speech act approach also allows us to get beyond cases were the opposition resides in the logical contradiction between the contents of the same kind of actions. Accepting the invitation to do A and rejecting the invitation to do A also seem to be opposing actions, even if they are different kinds of speech acts. The strategy of this approach would be, then, to replace one of the opposing speech acts with a non-communicative action contrary to the intended effect of the other speech act.[8] For instance:

(5) A rejects B's invitation to perform action X by uttering: 'I refuse to do X.'

(6) A does X nevertheless.

While I do not think that the third approach is completely misguided, I am still afraid that it might not be satisfactory. We could imagine cases where an action does not oppose another action by being contrary to that other action's effect. If I invite Robert to enter my home, the intended effect of my action, considered as such, could only be that Peter enters my home. If, on the other side, I do something to prevent Robert from entering my home (by locking my front door, for instance), my second action is contrary to the effect of the first one. However, both my actions could be part of a series of actions by which I

might want to play a practical joke on Robert and since my aim could not be achieved by performing only one of them, they cannot oppose each other.

In a similar way, if I want to exemplify the concept of a logical contradiction, I have to utter both A and $\sim A$.[9] Uttering any of them prevents the regular intended effect of uttering the other one, namely, to determine an interlocutor to form the belief expressed by the uttered sentence. However, since my purpose—to give an example of a logical contradiction—can only be achieved by uttering both, the actions of uttering A and $\sim A$ cannot oppose each other as they are performed in that particular series.

Another example might be helpful here. If I assume that A, then I would contradict myself by asserting $\sim A$. Still, if I use a *reductio ad absurdum*, I will argue for $\sim A$ by assuming that A and showing that my assumption leads to contradictory conclusions.

Let us now return to our puzzle. According to the third approach, Peter's behavior is irrational because his non-communicative actions are contrary to the intended effect of his speech act—saying goodbye to Quentin. I will leave the details aside for now and assume that the third approach could be applied in this manner to the case in question. Were Peter to reply that by saying goodbye to Quentin and doing all the things he did afterwards he wanted to puzzle Quentin before leaving his house, we could not count his behavior as irrational anymore. Yet, according to the third approach, we should still think that Peter acted irrationally, since his actions opposed each other. This, I believe, is where the third approach fails.

I think we are prepared now for solving our puzzle. For this, let S be a series of actions, $A_1,...,A_n$, all of which are mentioned when we detail the description of an activity performed for achieving a certain purpose, namely P. Now we can introduce the following definitions:

(D1) An action X is *opposed* to an action A_k given the series of actions S with the purpose P IFF A_k belongs to the series S and if X were part of the series S, then X would make it unattainable for the agent or agents of $A_1,...,A_n$ to achieve P by performing only $A_1,...,A_n$.

(D2) An action A *normally opposes* an action B IFF A opposes B for most of the series $S_1,...,S_n$ to which B belongs.[10]

(D3) Two actions, A and B, *normally oppose* each other IFF A normally opposes B and B normally opposes A.[11]

(D4) Two actions, A and B, *normally contradict* each other IFF A and B are performed with the intention to communicate something and A normally opposes B and B normally opposes A.[12]

(D5) Two actions, A and B, *logically contradict* each other IFF they normally contradict each other by virtue only of their logical form.[13]

Since (D1)–(D3) do not discriminate between communicative and non-communicative actions, we will have no difficulty to apply those definitions to mixed cases, like the one displayed by Peter's behavior. In addition, the progression from (D1) to (D5) can show us in which sense Peter's case is related to the case of logical contradictions, the later being, in fact, a species of the more general class of cases to which Peter's case belongs.

What class is that? If we suppose that all Peter's non-communicative actions in the scenario above (unpacking the luggage, removing his shoes, tearing off the train tickets, locking himself into the guest room and breaking the key) form a part of the same series of actions, most of the series of actions that this sequence can be integrated into would have as purpose that Peter continues to stay in Quentin's guest room. In this case, Peter's farewell would normally oppose his sequence of non-communicative actions. On the other hand, any of Peter's non-communicative actions in that sequence (and also the entire sequence) normally oppose bidding a host farewell, by making the final or intermediate purpose of most of the series of actions which include farewells, namely, that the agent leaves the place were his interlocutor is located at, impossible to obtain. Since this is the case, we could say that Peter's communicative action (bidding Quentin farewell) and his non-communicative sequence of actions normally oppose each other. In addition, it could be said that each of Peter's non-communicative actions normally oppose Peter's speech act, while the converse might be more difficult to establish for some of the actions in that sequence.[14]

In short, my proposed solution to the puzzle is this. Performing two actions of which one normally opposes the other as defined by (D2) is irrational. There could be exceptions to this. Peter could be playing a practical joke on Quentin, for instance. The addition of an utterance by which Peter would acknowledge that to Quentin would make his behavior rational. As it is, however, his behavior could be termed irrational.

I TURN NOW to considering a few potential objections to my solution. First, one could point out that there are cases when someone's behavior could be termed irrational while escaping my account. For instance, the act of thanking someone for executing an order could be considered irrational,[15] without opposing any of the actions from the series the order could belong to. To this I would reply that here I consider only the cases in which a behavior is considered irrational due to its including the performance of some opposing

actions. This does not mean that I exclude other cases in which an agent could act irrationally.

A better candidate for a counterexample to my approach would perhaps be the following. Suppose that I leave my office with the intention of getting home as soon as possible. In addition, let us say that there are only two possible routes from my office to my home. Once I take one route, I cannot switch to the other. Now, if I could choose the route to my home through a single action and I acted to take the longer route, my behavior would be irrational. The objection, in such a case, would be that since my action (taking the longer route) was the first in a series of actions, there are no other actions which it could oppose. This case, however, cannot be dismissed as an irrelevant case, since its resemblance to the Peter–Quentin puzzle is obvious.

There are at least two possible replies to this. One is to say that my taking the longer route was preceded by my saying to myself 'I will get home as soon as possible' and so it opposes that particular speech act, given the series of actions that speech act normally belongs to—the actions required by taking the shorter route home. This reply, however, could be easily dismissed, by pointing out that one can intend to attain a certain aim without expressing any intention and also that intending should not be considered a mental act, on pain of an infinite regress.[16]

The other possible reply, which I think is the right one, is that for an action A to normally oppose an action B, in the sense made explicit in (D2), B does not have to be temporally anterior to A. The action by which I set myself on the longer route home, let us call it L, normally opposes at least the first action in the series of my taking the shorter route home (S), since, regardless of what I aim to achieve by S, I cannot do S without reverting L's effects.

Other counterexamples to definitions (D1)–(D5) could perhaps be imagined, but I wish to consider now a more general objection. According to this, my solution seems to suggest that logical rules are, roughly speaking, just topic-neutral pragmatic[17] rules for verbal actions, descending, in some way, from more or less topic-neutral pragmatic rules for non-verbal actions. Since such an idea seems unacceptable, the objection would go on, there has to be something wrong with my solution.

Here I would concede that my proposal to deal with cases of opposing actions rests on at least two assumptions. The first is that the only way in which we could explain language acquisition properly would be to study the ways in which our uses of objects and words are related to each other, the later uses having evolved from the former ones.[18] The second is that although a logical notion such as negation—regarded as a truth function—is acquired when we operate with words alone, its uses are strongly related to other cases, like that of

illocutionary negations, the case of verbal and nonverbal rejections of different kinds, that of non-communicative actions performed to avoid certain things to happen, the case of opposing actions, and perhaps other cases, some of which do not require us to use words at all. These assumptions seem to me the most consistent with the idea that our abilities to communicate are the product of our evolutionary past.[19]

However, I am not sure that either my assumptions or my solution to the puzzle presented here imply what my imaginary critic says, but even if they do, I see no alternative to accepting such consequences.

❑

Notes

1. It was Ludwig Wittgenstein's suggestion, I believe, that a better understanding of the ways in which 'language meshes with our life' could be philosophically enlightening (see, for instance, Wittgenstein 1974, § 29).
2. See Wittgenstein 1953, §§ 185–242. What I have in mind here is Wittgenstein's idea that any behavior could be put in accordance to the linguistic expression of a rule if we interpret the linguistic expression in a certain manner.
3. See Searle and Vanderveken 1985, 161–163.
4. Trying to protect your enamel (by brushing your teeth, for instance) and intentionally destroying your enamel (by drinking something you know to be destructive for your teeth) would perhaps make an example of actions which do not only obstruct, but also oppose each other.
5. The *locus classicus* for the concept of felicity conditions for speech acts is Austin 1962.
6. I am grateful to Andrei Buleandră for pointing out to me that Davidson's 1963 view could produce such a critical reaction.
7. I am borrowing this example from Mele and Moser 1994.
8. A different strategy would be to consider that an action A opposes an action B if (and only if) A reverts the intended effect of B. My diagnosis of the third approach applies to this version as well.
9. It might be useful to note here that one can give an example not only by mentioning two contradictory sentences, but also by using them, as in: 'The Earth is round. The Earth is not round. See, I have just contradicted myself.'
10. For instance, pulling out a nail normally opposes hammering the same nail, the notable exception being the series of actions by which we could use the procedure of hammering the nail and pulling it out afterwards to prepare the place for the insertion of a screw (in absence of more appropriate tools for this task).
11. Some opposing actions do not normally oppose *each other*. Putting some pesticide in a pot of boiling water normally opposes putting vegetables in the same pot, since most of the series to which the second actions belongs have cooking as their purpose. Suppose now that most of the series including the first action aim at preparing

a pesticide solution to be used in farming. Adding some vegetables to the solution would not render it ineffective for the purpose we have in view now.

12. Asserting that an object is red and asserting that the same object is green, for instance, *normally contradict* each other. The two assertions do not, however, *logically contradict* each other, since the topic-neutral rule of exclusion—attributing a property to an object excludes attributing another property of the same kind to the same object—does not hold (it works for color property attributions, but not for taste property attributions, for instance).

13. To avoid circularity, (D5) should be further developed by specifying what makes an uttered expression relevant to the logical form of the utterance in which it appears, without involving the concept of 'logical' anymore. Since the question 'What makes an expression a logical constant?' is not essentially related to my interests here, I set aside this topic for now.

14. Tearing off my train tickets, for instance, as a means of preventing myself from taking the train, could be part of several series of actions by which I aim to regulate, for whatever reasons, my transportation habits. My bidding farewell to my host seems to be neutral to *this purpose*.

15. See Searle and Vanderveken 1985, 148–149 (5.1.2). It is, of course, disputable that flouting a pragmatic rule should always be considered irrational.

16. See Ryle 1949, 65–66. Ryle's infinite regress argument against volitions would also apply to intentions if they were considered mental acts, i.e. a type of actions. This suggestion, I believe, was developed in Anscombe 1957, 28–29 (§ 19).

17. The term 'pragmatic' is used here in relation with the philosophical tradition of pragmatism, having nothing to do with the field of pragmatics in linguistics and in the philosophy of language.

18. Since it is the philosopher's job to provide the conceptual tools for such a study, I cannot but hope that my paper is, in this respect, a step in the right direction.

19. See, for instance, Jackendoff 2010, 71–72.

References

Anscombe, G. E. M. 1957. *Intention*. Second edition. Cambridge–London: Harvard University Press, 1963.

Austin, J. L. 1962. *How to Do Things with Words*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Davidson, Donald. 1963. Actions, Reasons and Causes. *Journal of Philosophy* 60 (23): 685–700.

Jackendoff, Ray. 2010. Your theory of language evolution depends on your theory of language. In *The Evolution of Human Language: Biolinguistic Perspectives,* eds. Richard Larson, Viviane Déprez, and Hiroko Yamakido, 63–72. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mele, Alfred R. and Paul K. Moser. 1994. Intentional action. *Nous* 28 (1): 39–68.

Ryle, Gilbert. 1949. *The concept of mind*. London–New York: Hutchinson's University Library.

Searle, John R. and Daniel Vanderveken. 1985. *Foundations of illocutionary logic*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1953. *Philosophical Investigations*. Eds. G. H. von Wright, R. Rhees, and G. E. M. Anscombe. Transl. G. E. M. Anscombe. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

——. 1974. *Philosophical Grammar*. Ed. R. Rhees. Transl. A. Kenny. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Abstract
Opposing Actions

Starting with a philosophical puzzle, that of a situation when a speech act and a non-communicative action contradict each other, and suggesting a way in which it could be solved, the paper looks at the manner in which our linguistic practices are intertwined with our non-communicative actions. The author proceeds on the basis of two assumptions: the only way in which we could explain language acquisition properly is to study the ways in which our uses of objects and words are related to each other, and secondly, although a logical notion such as negation—regarded as a truth function—is acquired when we operate with words alone, its uses are strongly related to other cases, like that of illocutionary negations, the case of verbal and nonverbal rejections of different kinds, that of non-communicative actions performed to avoid certain things to happen, the case of opposing actions, and perhaps other cases, some of which do not require us to use words at all.