

Von Wright's theory of action and the "Logical Connection Argument"

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I want to focus on von Wright's defense of a teleological action theory against causalism as he develops it in his *Explanation and Understanding*. At the center of it is von Wright's version of the *logical connection argument* (LCA). Originally developed by A. Melden, von Wright thinks that it is sufficient to show that causal theories of action are mistaken – if the LCA would be stated correctly. Melden's version of the LCA roughly states that we cannot identify and describe an intention independently of the action intended. Thus, according to Melden, intentions and actions are connected conceptually or "logically". Causes on the other hand can be identified and described in a logical independent way from their effects, like a spark and the subsequent explosion of the gun powder barrel. Stoutland objects against Melden that even if intentions and actions could not be characterized independently from each other, it does not follow that there is a "strong" logical connection between intentions and actions, i.e. that when an intention occurs, the relevant action will be performed as well – as a matter of necessity. If the LCA is presented this way then it is clearly false, for not all intentions to do A are followed by the action A of the agent.

I think, it was this point of Stoutland's that lead von Wright to an implausible claim in his otherwise mostly correct defense of a teleological action theory: Von Wright holds that we can ascribe the intention to an agent to kill a tyrant - although he does not do it when the time to act has come and although he is not paralyzed and has not changed his plans. But I think von Wright is mistaken here and I argue that there *is* a strong logical connection between intention and action – in a certain sense and under certain conditions.

The conditions are: The agent must have the *opportunity* to execute his intention. Our actual use of the expression "intention" (or "will") is such that we would take back the ascription of an intention to an agent if he does not ultimately perform the action although he has the opportunity to do so. "Opportunity" here just means that he has the required skills to perform the action, he has not forgotten about what he was up to do and has not been hindered physically or psychologically and the time to act has come. So, a case like the one of the agent who honestly claims to have the intention to kill the tyrant and is not hindered by anything is conceptually impossible. This is no "dogmatism" as von Wright says, but a conceptual truth about our expression "intention". In fact, von Wright contradicts his claim that the practical syllogism is logically conclusive, i.e. that the action follows from the premisses by necessity. I will argue that the practical syllogism indeed is conclusive, in the sense that someone who expresses an intention and the relevant means-end-belief *must* or *should* act. The action does follow with necessity from the premisses of the PS – not in the sense that the agent will have no choice but to act – but in the sense that unless the agent actually performs his action (when given the opportunity) he could not be said to intend the action. In short: by expressing an intention we can be said to be *committed* to act accordingly when we have the opportunity to do so – otherwise we would be insincere.