

Book Review

The Shape of Agency: Control, Action, Skill, Knowledge
(By Joshua Shepherd)

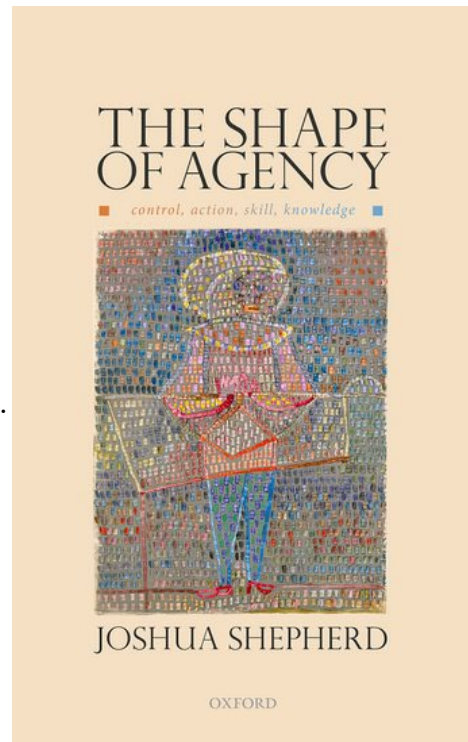
A Review by
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Front Cover

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It is not quite often to read a whole book dedicated to topics in metaphysics of agency with an interesting discovery of basic nature of relationship between human agents and their actions. However, this present book written by Joshua Shepherd can be considered a good one to tell us readers about that sort of discovery in a philosophical way. Shepherd begins his book with a rejection of the assumption that non-agent can do no things (*p. 1*). It is for him to have a renovation of the contour of agency that could escape problems of traditional accounts. Why should he do that? It is because he considers that, in philosophy of action, agency has long been with the need of causalist accountability with regard to human intentionality. However, floods can do things such as drowning animals or damaging tourist sites without having any intention. Then, what could be provided as a new and sound causalist theory?

The nature of our common sense when the notion of agency is in our contemplation is for us to consider that an agency is made up of intention of causing some effect. When Mark deliberately thrust the knife straight into Sam's heart, it can be said that this time Mark was the agent of the action that the knife inflicted on Sam. In other words, Mark had the character of the agency back then. Sam died from this

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knife stabbing and Mark claimed that he was only deliberately stabbing Sam's heart with the knife for reasons he believed would heal Sam from suffocation, but he didn't have an intention to kill Sam at all. So, could it be considered that Mark was only the agent of knife stabbing but he was not the agent of killing Sam? The problem is whether it is plausible for us to bind the intent of an action with the intent of producing a consequence after the action. Those who judged Mark as both agents were often those who believed in the first place that Mark was fully aware that the act in which the such use of a knife would always be associated with the so-called intentional killing of the person who was done so by that knife. However, on the other hand it can also be considered that if in actual fact Mark was sincere with such a statement, that Mark intentionally used a knife in the belief that it was a cure for Sam's illness, but he did not intend to kill Sam, then accusing Mark of being a murderer would be unjust. It could be further questioned whether it was fair to have such a judgment against him. This fictitious story shows that the relationship of action and intent is not a relationship which could be easily explained by being based on the previous underlying assumption of causalist accounts.

What is provided here in this book is an interestingly new version of explication of agency that Shepherd is to bring forth with his emphasis of conceptualization of "control." The concept is explicated as the essential thing which is exercised for one to be considered an agent (Shepherd, 2014). In this present book, the concept of control is explained as some sort of system of one's behaviors. If said by a paraphrase according to my understanding, such systems are aggregate or cumulative plans based on the traits of behaviors of the individual which are selected from the decision making, practical reasoning, etc., for it to be appropriated with the circumstances. When an individual performs an action with or without the intention of producing a certain outcome, whether the effect occurs or not, such action is constitutively of a consequence with some perception of the doer herself that she is comprising what is known as a control in order for that action to take place. The control can be varied in accordance with the degree of individual's exercise power which is in the individual's possession. This is what can be called an agential phenomenon (*pp. 6-29*). When non-deviant causation is explicated in terms of control, it can be considered as the form of causation which is sufficiently normalized by the system of behaviors (*pp. 30-34*).

Moreover, an agent's intentional action can also be explained by the notion of control. When an action is performed with intentionality it means that it is performed in approximate accordance with the relevant plan-state of the agent (*pp. 63-64*). For an agent to have the thing which is called "agential excellence," there must be "some understanding of activities of planning" (*p. 106*). The understanding can be gradable according to the success of goal satisfaction (*pp. 125-126*). Finally, when an individual is saying she knows exactly well what she is doing, it can be considered that knowledgeable action is already recognized as a thing in her control. So, knowledgeable action can be explained as a category of intentional action (*pp. 159-162*).

Some previous writings by Shepherd have explained the theory in some minute details. Agential phenomena are to function in an integration with perceptual experiences especially with visual ones. That is the essential thing when one is paying an effort or trying to do something (Shepherd, 2016). Moreover, one's perceptual and motor systems play indispensable role for one's action to be guided with intelligence (Shepherd, 2018).

When things don't come out as planned, we may feel more ease when it is explained that many factors of the occurrence are not in our power of deliberation. Something else occurs without any intention. However, from this new theory offered

by the author, it is explained as the individual's control is to explain the intention of an action. It is not to be inferred that the thing occurred can also fully explain the individual's hidden intention, and that she is the very author of that action with her full-knowing intention exercised by her own control.

This book demonstrates a high level of attention to detail. The author can clearly see that problems in the philosophy of agency can be reconciled to any argumentative point, and has shown those arguments to be solved by the concept of his new theory. Such abilities are not commonly seen in the books we read on a daily basis.

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