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James Robert Wood  
*Trinity College Dublin*

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## DOING THINGS WITH ACTS

James Robert Wood

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*Actions and Objects from Hobbes to Richardson* by Jonathan Kramnick. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010, Pp. 307. \$65 cloth, \$24.95 paper, \$24.95 e-book.

Jonathan Kramnick's absorbing new book explores how philosophers, poets, and writers of fiction grappled with the conceptual problems surrounding the nature of human action between roughly 1650 and 1750. Kramnick presents action as an interface between the world and the mind. In a typically aphoristic phrase, he observes early on in the book that "*Actions extend mind into the world*" (3, his emphasis). A commonsense account of action might be to say that actions occur when people decide to do something and then perform physical motions that cause things to happen in the world. Kramnick, however, is especially interested in writers who investigated the possible reversibility of this sequence, thus bringing "the world into the mind" (5). Against standard narratives of deepening interiority, Kramnick shows how writers from Thomas Hobbes to Samuel Richardson emphasized the role of external causes in the shaping of intentional acts.

Kramnick's book is exemplary for the clarity with which it divides up the spectrum of philosophical positions on human action. Probably the most important crux for Kramnick's authors was the problem of defining the difference between intentional acts and physical events. This difference is nicely illustrated in the beginning pages through the contrast between the historic appearance of Halley's Comet in 1682

and the cutting of Belinda's hair in Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* (1714). Asking why the Baron cut Belinda's hair involves issues of intention that are irrelevant when we ask why the comet returned to the skies. The distinction between intended actions and physical events might seem simple on the face of it. But describing and accounting for this difference turns out to be exceptionally difficult.

The problem of action is bound up with the problem of consciousness: the puzzle of explaining how it is that some clumps of matter seem to possess consciousness whereas others do not. Kramnick is especially interested in the counterintuitive conclusions to which thinkers were sometimes driven by their efforts to explain consciousness and its connection to intentional actions. At one extreme was the position that consciousness is an illusion and nothing and no one really has it. The other extreme was the position that everything in nature possesses at least some consciousness. In both cases, the distinction between the things that people do and the things that things do disappears. Many writers, however, found themselves somewhere along the continuum between the two extremes, often reaching the compromise position that consciousness is a property that emerges from particles that are not themselves conscious.

The upshot was that the actions of conscious agents could not

be easily disentangled from the nonconscious world that enfolded them. The idea that the Baron's decision to cut Belinda's hair might not be so different in nature from the return of Halley's Comet had to be taken seriously. Pope himself points to the possibility that the "am'rous Causes" operating on the Baron may be just as irresistible as the gravitational forces operating on Halley's Comet. Kramnick shows how writers tried to account at once for the mind-bound nature of intentional actions and also for their implication in a causal network that extends outside the mind into the world beyond the self.

Kramnick's method is to focus on a series of cases in which a problem about the nature of action emerges in a text or in the space between texts. He begins with the debate on free will between Hobbes and John Bramhall in which Hobbes contended that the will behind any human action can be traced to antecedent causes in the world, whereas Bramhall argued that the will is formed independently of these causes. Kramnick then turns to the problem of consciousness by way of the dueling translations of Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura* by Thomas Creech (in 1682) and John Wilmot, the second earl of Rochester. Kramnick suggests that Creech's and Rochester's translations are influenced by the translators' differing ideas about the existence of consciousness.

Whereas Creech's Lucretius shows consciousness emerging from insensate particles, Rochester tends to put Lucretius into reverse, having consciousness dissolve back into the particles from which it emerged. Kramnick turns over the next chapter entirely to Rochester's poetry, reading his philosophical and sexual verse as attempting "alternately to fit mental states to actions after they have already happened or to get rid of both entirely" (140). The following chapter on John Locke returns to Kramnick's overarching concern with how positions on action are worked out in conflict and conversation with others, tracking how Locke revised his ideas on action in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) following his discussions with Irish philosopher William Molyneux.

The last two chapters turn from poetry and philosophy to prose fiction. Kramnick reads Eliza Haywood's *Love in Excess* (1719–20) and *Fantomina* (1725) as fictions about the problem of determining the presence of consent in intimate relationships. Both of these amatory fictions stage sexual encounters between men and women where the woman's conscious consent seems ambiguous, at best. Kramnick's argument is that the style and narrative techniques of Haywood's early novels develop a picture of consent that is in many respects comparable to Locke's account of tacit consent in the *Two Treatises of Government*

(1690). For Locke, the consent of the governed is not located primarily in the conscious intentions of individuals but rather inferred through their participation in civil society. Likewise in early Haywood, according to Kramnick, consent does not inhere in the mind but "hovers in the world or on one's skin or between bodies or over different slices of time" (193).

The last chapter will play a key role in the ongoing critical debate on Richardson's *Clarissa* (1748). Whereas William Warner and Terry Castle have read the conflict between Clarissa and Lovelace as a struggle between two mutually incompatible accounts of interpretation, Kramnick understands their contention as one between two mutually incompatible accounts of action. Clarissa holds that the will to perform an action is formed independently of external circumstances. To the charge of doing terrible things—for example running away with Lovelace, having sex with him, and, in the end, willing herself to die—she characteristically replies that she has not acted in any of these cases since she formed no intention to do any of these things. Whereas Clarissa believes that an action without an intention is no action at all, Lovelace treats actions as primary and intentions as immanent within them. Kramnick thus reads Lovelace's machinations throughout the novel as "attempts to arrange Clarissa's

environment to make it appear as if she has consented, or, what is the same, to make it so she *has* already consented” (216, his emphasis). The chapter ends with a reconsideration of the conundrum of whether Clarissa commits suicide, in which Kramnick does not so much supply an answer as show how the answer depends on the implicit theory of action that the reader brings to the book.

Kramnick’s book invites comparisons to Sandra Macpherson’s *Harm’s Way: Tragic Responsibility and the Novel Form* (2010). These books share certain concerns and deal with essentially the same period of English literature. Both Kramnick and Macpherson are impatient with what Macpherson dubs the “interiority thesis”: the story that has literature taking a turn inward into the self over the long eighteenth century. They are, however, quite dissimilar in their argumentative strategies. Whereas Kramnick’s argument draws on the philosophy of action, Macpherson’s is based on the legal concept of strict liability, which made perpetrators punishable for their harmful actions regardless of their intentions. Her argument, pursued with an attorney’s tenacity, is that strict liability underlies the sense of justice within the novel as a genre.

Kramnick’s argument against the interiority thesis does not rest on establishing the irrelevance of intention and therefore the

unimportance or nonexistence of interiority. Rather, he questions the assumption that intention and interiority necessarily go together. He shows that even mental states like consent and intent, which we might imagine as subsisting securely within the mind, were frequently understood in the period as having an existence outside the head. Kramnick takes care to note that the externalist reading of intentions was always in dialogue with a contrary understanding of intentions as formed by the self independently of outward circumstances. Whereas Macpherson holds that the novel offers essentially one answer on the question of action, defining recalcitrant writers like Henry Fielding as outliers, Kramnick makes no such claims for the univocality of any particular genre or the period that he studies. He emphasizes instead the differences between authors, between rival translations of a work, between successive editions of a text, and between the opinions of literary characters. If Macpherson is like an attorney in an adversarial system, Kramnick is more like a judge summing up the main arguments before the jury retires. Macpherson’s drive to make her novels fit one description of action sometimes (for this reviewer) results in a certain stretching of interpretation. But Kramnick’s very openness to the internal debates of texts seems to result in its own kind of stretching in the chapter

on *Clarissa*. After all, Richardson's text refuses to allow readers to hold Clarissa's and Lovelace's positions in suspension. Indeed, Richardson seems to have done everything he could with the editorial commentary appended to successive editions of the novel to persuade readers to take Clarissa's outlook on action over Lovelace's, even if successive readers have found Lovelace's libertine position seductive.

In keeping with Kramnick's general concern for opening up problems rather than resolving them, his book ends not with a conclusion but a question: "Has anything happened? If so, who or what is its cause?" (230). This final question will disappoint readers searching for a single takeaway thesis from Kramnick's book. It is, however, precisely because Kramnick's book is less thesis driven than Macpherson's that it can afford to be more ecumenical in its consideration of the diverse approaches to the problem of how minds fit into the world. Kramnick allows space for his writers (and his readers) to think. He frequently takes the individual sentence as his primary unit of analysis, showing how writers define the relation between actions and agents through syntax and style. In Locke's revised version of his chapter on action, for example, "the prose takes a dilatory form uncharacteristic of the first edition: each sentence wrangles into a multiple devolution of subordinate

clauses" (156). In Haywood's prose, "states of mind seem almost to overflow the sentence, in marked excess of the pronoun to which they belong. The effect is that the grammatical subject of the clause seems to traipse after her own mind" (184). As these examples show, Kramnick's couches his acute observations on prose style in a lively and luminous style of his own.

The close attention to the specific workings of sentences in *Actions and Objects*—both Kramnick's own and those of his writers—fits a book that deliberately turns away from grand literary-historical narrative in favor of a focus on the singularities of the individual author and the individual text. The book does offer a loose historical trajectory, which moves from "a new attention to actions amid dynastic anxieties and civil war to a concern with minds and behavior amid polite and commercial exchange" (12). But Kramnick tells us at the outset that his book will tell no linear story about how ideas about action changed over time: "My goal has not been to follow a single perspective as it grows to dominance, however, but rather to examine competing models of mind and action across the period and into ours" (viii). Kramnick's refusal to impose a *grand récit* on his materials enables him to avoid the perils of teleology. But *Actions and Objects* sometimes made me wish for the kind of large-scale "plot"

that undergirded Kramnick's previous book, *Making the English Canon* (1999). The absence of such a plot is not a bad thing in itself (why should we expect ideas about action to develop in one direction over time?), but some overarching issues are raised by Kramnick's book that ask to be worked out on a larger historical canvas. The question of sexuality, for example, arises again and again in the book, probably because it is in this area in particular that a simple dualistic account of the mind's relation to the body threatens to break down. One of the avenues for research that Kramnick's book opens up, then, is a wider rethinking of the history of sexuality through the problem of human action.

Like the best literary criticism, Kramnick's work forces us to reconsider the fundamental assumptions that we bring to texts. The reader emerges from *Actions and Objects* with a new sense of the foreignness

with which seventeenth- and eighteenth-century writers conceived of the links or lack thereof among persons, intentions, and actions. His readings succeed in raising a set of important questions about the ontology of actions that have either gone unasked or have been subsumed under the problematic of interpretation. The last two chapters on Haywood and Richardson in particular challenge the grounds on which those authors have been read. Kramnick's book invites its readers to rethink some of the basic stories that critics tell their students and themselves about literary history. *Actions and Objects* will be a key guide for critics searching for alternatives to narratives of rising interiority as they try to make sense of what happened to English literature and thought between Rochester and Richardson.

*James Robert Wood teaches in the Department of English at Trinity College Dublin. He is working on a book entitled "Enlightenment Anecdotes."*