

The costs and benefits of doing something halfheartedly: comments on Joshua Shepherd's "Halfhearted Action and Control"

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1. Joshua Shepherd offers an account of halfhearted action according to which an action, A , is done halfheartedly if one's overall motivation for A is weak. In addition, Joshua explicates the notion of motivational weakness in terms of how our performance of an action (and specifically, our control over it) is affected. Halfhearted actions are actions for which our overall motivation is weak and because we are only weakly motivated to execute them, our execution of them is adversely affected. We do such actions, it seems, not only with half a heart but also with half a mind.

Joshua's essay is rich and suggestive. It articulates a novel account of halfhearted action by specifying its relationship to motivation, control, and attention. What is more, the essay opens up avenues for future research on halfhearted action and shows how recent work on cognitive control, effort, and fatigue is of relevance to philosophy of action. I agree with much of what Joshua says in his essay. Yet I wonder whether Joshua's account is the only account of halfheartedness. Inspired by Joshua's essay, I consider whether the motivational character of halfhearted actions could be understood in terms of a cost-benefit analysis.

2. Motivation lies at the heart of halfhearted action. This observation is obvious, perhaps so obvious that it need not be stated. After all, to do something halfheartedly is, as the name itself suggests, to do it without being fully committed to it. What is less obvious, however, is the manner in which the motivational character of halfhearted action ought to be explicated. Consider, for instance, the following gloss on halfhearted action. An action is halfhearted just in case "[y]ou both want to do something else, and you do not want to do the thing you are doing" (259). According to this proposal, halfhearted actions are individuated in terms of their motivational character and they involve both (a) a desire to not do x and (b) a desire to do y (where y is an action other than x). Intuitive as it may first appear, the proposal won't do.

First, the proposal appears incapable of individuating the actions under consideration. Stuck in a frustrating situation one could wish to do something else while at the same time wish not to do what one is doing. Doing something out of frustration and doing something halfheartedly are not the same (Amsel, 1992). Or consider cases of (state) boredom. Boredom is individuated partly in terms of its motivational components (Fahlman et al., 2013). To be bored with one's activity is to wish to do something else than what one is currently doing. Stated otherwise, in a state of boredom one desires *both* to do something else and not to do what one is currently doing. Thus, looking at halfhearted actions and boring actions from the perspective of motivation, they come out very similar. But not all halfhearted actions are boring. For one, boredom is intimately connected with the perception of meaninglessness. Bored individuals report that they find their situations to be meaningless (Barbalet, 1999; Fahlman et al., 2013; Fiske & Maddi, 1961; Perkins & Hall, 1985; Van Tilburg & Igou, 2012). Boredom, in turn, motivates meaning re-establishment strategies—one attempts to escape boredom by searching for ways to endow one's situation with meaning (Van Tilburg & Igou, 2011, 2012; Van Tilburg et al., 2013). Yet, it is hard to point to an intimate connection between halfheartedness and the perception of

meaninglessness. Some meaningless (but not necessarily boring) tasks can be performed halfheartedly such as washing dishes and cleaning the car. But so could more meaningful ones. Playing with one's children need be neither boring nor meaningless, even though it may be done in a halfhearted way. In addition, boredom comes with a distinctive phenomenology: it is aversive through and through (e.g., Harris, 2000; Mikulas & Vodanovich, 1993; Pekrun et al., 2010; Vogel-Walcutt et al. 2012). Halfhearted action however appears to lack the tangible phenomenology of boredom. To halfheartedly do the dishes one need not suffer through the cleaning process.

So, a two-fold motivational characterization of halfhearted action (as an action that involves a desire to not do the action and a desire to do a different action) falls short of individuating halfhearted action. In response, one could give up the requirement that halfhearted action is individuated solely in terms of their motivational character. Halfheartedness is not a purely motivational phenomenon. That's possible, but even if such a concession is made, there is another reason to be dissatisfied with this motivational characterization. The proposed account threatens to make intentional and free halfhearted actions irrational. If I do not desire to do x , then why am I doing x ? What explains the fact that I am motivated (albeit weakly) to do x ? Furthermore, aren't my desires reflective of the values that I assign to the world and to my actions? If so, and if I'm not coerced to do x , then by doing x , I'm doing, it seems, something that goes against my perceived values. I may grade assignments halfheartedly. Yet I still do the grading *because* I believe that I have something to gain by doing it (or at least something to lose by not doing it).

3. This last observation suggests a potential way out. The above two-fold motivational characterization of halfhearted action seems too simplistic. One way out of the problem then is to add complexity to it. Thus, a suggestion arises: to capture the character of halfhearted action through its motivational profile one would need to postulate a three-fold and not a two-fold motivational structure. Hence, to do x halfheartedly is (a) to desire to do y ; (b) to desire to do x ; and (c) not to really desire to do x .

Is this understanding of halfhearted actions better? In some ways, it is an improvement. First, by including (b) – i.e., a desire to do the halfhearted action in question – our halfhearted action becomes rational, at least in the sense that it is in line with one's values. Second, the conflict between (a) and (b) captures something important about halfhearted actions, namely, that the notion of halfheartedness is a contrastive one. If there is no y such that is different than x and which we desire to do, then it is hard to see why we would do x halfheartedly. Relatedly, if we desired to do nothing but x , then why wouldn't we really want to do x ? Third, the conflict between (b) and (c) explains the ambivalence that we feel toward the halfhearted action. Even if we do the action, we don't really want to be doing it. *

[* Could this stem from the fact that we are not *intrinsically* motivated to do the actions that we do halfheartedly? Maybe.]

For our purposes, it doesn't matter whether we accept the provided motivational description of halfhearted action or not. I focus on the motivational character of halfhearted action in order to showcase its complexity and to suggest that our account of such an action ought to reflect it. Joshua's provided account of halfhearted action seems attuned to the motivational complexity of such action. As mentioned above, he understands halfhearted action as action

done with weak motivation. This captures the ambivalence of halfhearted action—the fact that we do something without really wanting to do it. Still, Joshua’s preferred way of spelling out weak motivation in terms of dispositions that underlie the execution of the action leaves important questions unanswered. Most importantly, I think, a characterization of weak overall motivation in terms of “degree of control an agent possesses over the action” doesn’t settle the issue as to why the motivation is weak in the first place nor does it explain why relaxing control (and thus affecting adversely the performance of the action) is an appropriate response. For many psychological states, the reason why those states arise is informative of their nature (and function). Something similar, I contend, may hold for the case of halfhearted action. Trying to figure out an answer to the question, “Why we do something halfheartedly?”, can help us understand what it is to act in such a manner.

4. I don’t wish to suggest that Joshua’s account doesn’t have the resources to provide an account of the why of halfhearted action. Still, I wonder whether we could approach halfhearted actions from the perspective of economic (or even neuro-economic) decision-making. In other words, could we understand such actions via framing them in terms of a cost-benefit analysis? Here is, in broad outline, a suggestion: a halfhearted action is an action that meets the following criteria: (a) it carries a small net utility and (b) the costs associated with its suboptimal performance are low. ** In other words, doing the action is somewhat beneficial to the agent. Yet, failing to do it optimally is not costly. Consider doing the dishes as an example of an action done halfheartedly. The benefit of doing the dishes is low but still greater than zero. I do stand to gain something by washing them—presumably, I will need to use clean dishes at some point. But clearly the benefits do not compare to those of other potential actions—socializing with friends, working on one’s writing, or watching the game. Also, I can do them halfheartedly because the costs of not doing such a great job are not high. *** Indeed, it appears that one would gain the same amount of utility if one were to do the dishes halfheartedly or meticulously. Such a cost-benefit analysis predicts *why* we do the actions that we do halfheartedly: we do them because they are beneficial. It also explains why we do them *halfheartedly*, i.e., why our performance is suboptimal. We do them halfheartedly because it makes economic sense. Finally, the proposed account could even explain why halfhearted actions feel effortful (Kurzban et al., 2013).

[** Perhaps in some cases we would need to add a third criterion: (c) not doing the action carries a cost.]

[***Breaking the dishes while washing them won’t count as doing the dishes halfheartedly.]

Ideally, one would like to find neurological support for such a model—some kind of neural mechanism that allows us to make sense of how the perception of utility may affect performance. The adaptive gain account presented in Aston-Jones and Cohen (2005) carries some promise. According to their account, the degree of task engagement is regulated by the perceived utility of the task. By task engagement the authors understand both the speed and acuity of responses to a task, and, task engagement, they hold, is driven by norepinephrine-induced neuronal gain. (The authors argue that the locus coeruleus-norepinephrine system plays an important role in helping to optimize task performance. For the details, see article). The account appears to be particularly well suited to explain the regulation of task engagement. When a subject perceives an increase in utility then there is an increase in

engagement. Conversely, a decrease in utility carries opposite effect: in a condition of perceived decreased utility, the subject becomes distracted and is motivated to do something else. Aston-Jones and Cohen review a plethora of findings that support their account and afford it neurological specificity.

According to this model, a halfhearted action will then be an action that carries some utility and thus the subject is motivated to perform it. However, the utility is low and thus engagement need not be too demanding. An understanding of motivation and action in terms of utility can account for the existence of suboptimal performances or halfhearted actions. In cases of low utility, it is more beneficial to do an action halfheartedly than fullheartedly (enthusiastically, or meticulously). Both actions bring about the same benefits but the latter costs more in terms of cognitive (and perhaps even metabolic) resources. Halfheartedness appears to be a happy compromise between not doing the action at all and doing it in a way that dispenses valuable resources.

4. “[A]nd remember, Sancho, that works of charity done in a lukewarm and half-hearted way are without merit and of no avail.” In Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, the Duches cautions Sancho of doing a moral act halfheartedly. But outside the scope of morality, the cost-benefit analysis suggests that halfhearted actions serve an important purpose in our lives and thus our capacity to perform actions halfheartedly is valuable to us. In some cases, it won’t matter whether we perform an act optimally or sub-optimally. In those cases, doing the action halfheartedly would yield a greater overall benefit than doing it otherwise. Lastly, and perhaps somewhat counterintuitively, if acting halfheartedly is in some cases rational—insofar as it makes economic sense—then an agent would be strongly motivated to act halfheartedly. I should, in other words, be motivated (strongly!) to do the dishes halfheartedly.

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