ON ABILITY, OPPORTUNITY AND COMPETENCE:
AN INQUIRY INTO PEOPLE’S POSSIBILITY FOR ACTION

INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to say that a man is able to perform an action? Is it true, as
the standard philosophical analysis of ability indicates, that this man is in a state
which is such that he would perform the action if he were to try? Is the
counterfactual conditional the proper form for the analysis of the notion of
ability?

In this paper I shall seriously question such a contention and instead argue
that there are various versions or layers of ability which are logically weaker
than the counterfactual conditional suggests. At one level of analysis this is
common knowledge. There is a traditional distinction between a person’s
internal possibility for action, his or her ability, and the person’s external
possibility for action, his or her opportunity. It is only when the person has
both ability and opportunity, it is claimed, that all grounds are present for the
counterfactual conditional to hold true. My purpose in this paper, however, is
to question also this statement. I shall in particular argue that competence and
skill are species of ability which do not fulfil the traditional conditions. During
the course of this argument I shall also investigate the traditional distinction
between ability and opportunity and point to the logical interdependence
between these notions.

My discussion is focused upon ability in the context of intentional human
action, but several of my observations can be shown to be valid for other
notions of capability and power as well.\(^1\) The notion of ability which is under
scrutiny could then be formally characterised in the following way: \(A\) is able to
perform \(\varphi\) (where \(A\) is a human agent and \(\varphi\) is an intentional action) if, and
only if, \(A\) would do \(\varphi\) if \(A\) were to try to do \(\varphi\).

SOME EXAMPLES OF ABILITY

At any moment of the day \(A\) and \(B\) think that they have the ability to do many
things. \(A\) tells his mates that he can walk 25 kilometres in one day, that he can
climb the mountain Kebnekaise, that he can count to a billion, that he can cook
his own dinner without assistance and that he can win a lottery. \(B\), on the other
hand, claims that she can write a book about the notion of health, that she can

grant a licentiate’s degree to her students, that she can play football and that she can feel anger.

Most of the things that these people can do qualify as intentional actions. The word “can” in the contexts of anger and of winning the lottery, however, is a “can” of mere possibility. The locutions can be translated into “it is possible that A will win in a lottery” and “it is possible that B will feel anger”. A and B do not, however, (normally) intend to feel anger or intend to win a lottery.

Consider now the examples where the ability refers to intentional action. A quick glance then shows that the suggested analysis of “ability to perform an intentional action” is not adequate as it stands. Indeed, we may easily find interpretations of all the locutions such that the following holds: A or B would not do X, even if A or B were to try. It seems, however, still quite acceptable, according to these interpretations, to claim that A and B have the ability to perform their respective actions. Consider the following cases:

A can walk 25 kilometres, but if he tries today he will not succeed because his boots are being repaired.
A can climb the Mount Kebelekaise, but if he tries today he will not manage because he is 1000 miles away from the mountain.
A can count to one billion, but if he tries today he will probably not succeed because he is so tired that he will fall asleep after having counted to a couple of thousand.
A can cook his own dinner, but if he tries today it will not work because there is no food in the refrigerator.
B can issue a licentiate’s degree, but this term she is on a sabbatical leave so at the moment she is not entitled to do so.
B can write a book on the nature of health, but she is at present not feeling well, so there is little chance that this book will materialise this year.
B can play football but she has broken her leg so she won’t play any football this month.

What then is the point of saying that one is able to do all these things? What is the information conveyed and in what way is this information related to the counterfactual: if A were to try to do φ, then A would do φ?

Part of the analysis here is, as I have mentioned, commonplace. The counterfactual constitutes the analysis of a very strong notion of “can”, viz. the notion of practical possibility. This notion refers to the situation when all necessary conditions — which together with trying are sufficient for a particular action — are materialised. When it is practically possible for me to do φ, then it is true of me that, if I were to try to do φ, then I would do φ.

Obviously the “can” used in the above examples is a weaker version of “can”. It shall be my particular task in this paper to distinguish between and