ABSTRACT. The first half of this paper is an attempt to conceptualize and understand the paradoxical notion of “passive action”. The strategy is to construe passive action in the context of emotional behavior, with the purpose to establish it as a conceivable and conceptually coherent category. In the second half of this paper, the implications of passive action for causal theories of action are examined. I argue that Alfred Mele’s defense of causalism is unsuccessful and that causalism may lack the resource to account for passive action. Following Harry Frankfurt, I suggest an alternative way of understanding the nature of action that can accommodate passive action.

The seemingly paradoxical phrase “passive action” was coined by Alfred Mele\(^1\) to describe a kind of action introduced by Harry Frankfurt in his well-known paper “The Problem of Action”.\(^2\) Actions are generally understood as things that we voluntarily do, perform, or bring about, instead of things that we undergo or merely happen to us. Thus activity is the hallmark of human action and agency. How is passive action possible? In Frankfurt’s original article, passive action is simply depicted with an analogy (which will be discussed below). In his paper titled “Passive Action”, Mele presents a few \textit{ad hoc} (but misguided) examples of passive action (1997a). So we are faced with the questions: Are there passive actions? If so, are they significant? If passive actions do not exist or only occupy a rather peripheral role in our lives, we have good reasons for not taking them seriously.

In the first half of this paper, I will show that passive action is possible. There are passive actions, and they are significant. My line of reasoning will run as following: passivity is a central feature of emotion; emotion can have a profound impact on action; therefore some emotional actions can be passive actions. Since emotion is a pervasive dimension of our real life, passive actions as emotional actions are significant. By construing passive action in the context of emotional behavior, I hope to establish passive action as a conceivable and conceptually coherent category.
Frankfurt appeals to passive action in an attempt to undermine causal theories of action, or “causalism”. Mele argues that passive action does not constitute a special problem for a relatively standard causal theory of action. The second half of this paper will examine the implications of passive action for causal theories of action. I will argue that the case of passive action poses a real challenge to causalism, and that Mele’s defense is unsuccessful. To properly account for passive action, it seems necessary to develop alternative approaches to understanding the nature of human action. I will further consider an alternative to the causal approach proposed by Frankfurt.

I. MAKING SENSE OF PASSIVE ACTION

Intuitively, actions are the paradigm of the active. At least most intentional, deliberate, and effortful actions are. Human agency is active in character. In contrast, some mental phenomena, such as the occurrence of some emotions, feelings, and desires, seem passive to us: their occurrence, development and cessation are not directly subject to our voluntary control. Although it is a matter of controversy how to draw a non-arbitrary distinction between the active and the passive,\(^3\) it is conventionally held that passivity is a feature of emotion.\(^4\)

The Passivity of Emotions

What are the differences between a genuine, spontaneous smile (e.g., smiling after hearing a joke) and a voluntary smile (e.g., smiling in front of camera)? First and foremost, they evoke different qualitative feelings. When we only smile politely, we cannot fool ourselves even if we can fool others. We know exactly what a true feeling of joy is, which is absent in a voluntary smile. In other words, we simply cannot generate certain emotional feelings at will: they are not subject to our direct voluntary control. Secondly, there are some subtle differences of facial expression between the two kinds of smile. While a smile of real joy requires the movement of both the muscles around the corner of the eye and of the mouth, we can only activate the latter by our will.\(^5\) Thirdly, the neural underpinnings that support spontaneous and voluntary facial expressions...