

INTRODUCTION TO “ACTION AND PRODUCTION”

Pamela Hieronymi

“ACTION AND PRODUCTION” was written by Stephen J. White, whose life was cut tragically short in the early spring of 2021, at the age of 38. He earned his BA at Pomona College, completed his PhD at UCLA, and joined the Department of Philosophy at Northwestern University in 2012, earning tenure in 2019.

White’s research spans ethics, philosophy of action, political philosophy, and epistemology. By focusing on the distribution of responsibility—on who is responsible for what and, in particular, how we are distinctively responsible for our own lives—he unearths striking insights in each field. Topics include how to reason responsibly to conclusions about what to do, how predictions about your own future actions might figure into such conclusions, and how ethical considerations might be brought to bear when thinking, responsibly and with others, about what is true. Responsibility—in particular, *taking* responsibility—becomes, in his hands, not only a way to avoid alienation from oneself and others, but a way to find harmony in living as oneself with others.

I will briefly sketch some themes from his published work. In “Responsibility and the Demands of Morality” and “The Centrality of One’s Own Life,” White approaches the well-worn issues of how to integrate the impartial demands of morality with our particular personal interests, projects, and attachments in a novel way: by thinking about responsibility. He notes that responsibilities bring with them something like rights: if I have a duty to ensure that your life goes well, then I should also enjoy some say over how you choose to live it. Thus, rights limit responsibilities: your right to decide, for yourself, how to live your life brings with it limitations on my responsibility for whether it goes well. As he put it in an unpublished research summary, “If one’s own judgment about what is worth doing is to have the right kind of authority in relation to one’s decisions about what to pursue, one must assume the primary responsibility for one’s own life.”

Thinking about how responsibility is apportioned between people contin-

ued to guide White's thinking in other, even less expected topics. In "On the Moral Objection to Coercion," White argues that the wrong of coercion is best understood by noting that the coercer imposes an illegitimate responsibility on the coerced (e.g., a responsibility to ensure that the coercer does not physically assault the coerced). Two papers co-authored with Berislav Marušić—"How Can Beliefs Wrong? A Strawsonian Epistemology" and "Disagreement and Alienation"—present novel accounts both of doxastic wrongdoing and the significance of peer disagreement by attending to the ways in which reasoning to belief is often a shared activity, requiring shareable reasons and accountability to one another.

A remaining constellation of published papers concerns how we can take responsibility for our actions, given that they extend across time. "The Problem of Self-Torture" considers the person who smokes themselves to death with the thought that "one more can't hurt." Thinking well about what to do requires conceiving of one's actions as part of a larger whole. The nature of that part-whole relation is the subject of "Intention and Prediction in Means-End Reasoning," where White argues that means to our ends are to be chosen *qua* means. The question of how our reasoning about one action relates to our choice of others animates both "Transmission Failures" and "Self-Prediction in Practical Reasoning." The present publication, "Action and Production," extends this line of thought to the tricky question of how the recognition of the aptness of one's own practical reasoning might become part of that reasoning. He aims to bring into view "how an agent might recognize and be moved by the ethical value of performing a certain action for certain reasons, without thereby treating this as a further end to be promoted."

To close, and in honor of Steve, I want to echo a thought that was voiced repeatedly both at the workshop held in his honor at Northwestern and at his memorial in September 2021: Steve was resolutely focused on what is good. That is not to say that he was Pollyannaish; he saw clearly what is awful, and its importance, and even its urgency. However, if you spent time with Steve, he would inspire joy and laughter, wonder and interest. He would focus your joint attention on what was good. As Louis-Philippe Hodgson put it at Steve's memorial:

Steve's career and Steve's life were cut short, and I don't think it would be at all in the spirit of Steve's outlook to pretend that this is anything less than tragic. But it is in the spirit of Steve's outlook to rejoice in the beauty of the life that he led, and in how much joy and light he brought to all who knew him, whether personally or professionally.

Philosophy was the third love of Steve's life. He is survived by the first two: his wife, Jessica, and his daughter, Lucy.

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White's collected papers, both previously published and unpublished work, are planned for a volume titled *Responsibility and Alienation*, edited by Kyla Ebels-Duggan and Berislav Marušić.

University of California, Los Angeles
hieronymi@ucla.edu

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