

Don't Think! Just Act!

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Kenzo saw a slight movement of his opponent. "Now is the time to strike!" he thought. He started moving. But before he had time to raise his *shinai* (sword) he was struck on the *men* (head) by his opponent. "Ippon!" the judge called.

Kenzo stepped back to face his opponent again. He took a deep breath. This time he would succeed in his counter-attack. He had been taught by his *sensai* (teacher) to enact the *Shinkageryu* philosophy: waiting for his opponent to make a move, then counter-striking at exactly the same time. He waited and watched his opponent. Suddenly his opponent raised his *shinai* to strike. Kenzo immediately saw his opponent was exposing his *do* (side of abdomen). "I can see an opening," he thought, "I should now counter-strike!" But before he had time to strike, his opponent struck him on the *men*. "Ippon!" the judge called.

How can Kenzo successfully enact the *Shinkageryu* philosophy of "waiting" and counter-strike at the same time? If he realises his opponent is about to move and thinks, "Now is the time!" it's too late. But if he doesn't think it's the right moment, how can he act at

all? It's easy for his *sensei* to say, "You just have to do it!" The question is: how is this possible?

The Problem

Let's begin with a seemingly simple question: What is it to act? One of the most common replies is that action is 'intentional'. That is, it's not just an instinct or a reflex – like flinching at a punch, or grunting at a blow. Most philosophers accept the idea that an action is intentional if it is done for a reason. An action is intentional if, when someone asks you "Why did you do that?" you explain your action using reasons. For instance, if someone asks you "Why did you parry the opponent's *shinai* upwards?" you might answer, "Because I wanted to strike *kote* (forearm)." In giving this as a reason, you show how your action makes sense; you did a certain thing (parry upwards) so that you could achieve some other thing (strike *kote*). And, in giving this as your reason, you accept that striking *kote* is something *you* did.

Donald Davidson famously argued that this sort of explanation of action is a *causal* one. (*Essays on Actions and Events*, Clarendon Press, 2001) That is, when you answer the question "Why did you parry the opponent's *shinai* upwards?" with the reason "Because I wanted to strike *kote*", you are revealing the *intention* that *caused* the action. Your intention is a combination of a desire for something ('I want to strike *kote*') and a belief about how to get it ('if I parry the *shinai* upwards, I will be able to expose the opponent's *kote* which will make it easy to strike it'). For Davidson, an intentional action, is caused by both a desire and belief – when combined, they are an intention.

Other philosophers have argued that there is *more* to this story. Some say that an intention that causes an action is not *just* a combination of a want and a belief. Instead, it must involve some reasoning and choice: *you* bring the want and the belief together. For example, think of all the things that you might want (e.g. to eat chocolate, to sleep all day) and then think of all the things that you believe you could do to achieve them (e.g. go to the shop, stay in bed). But simply wanting certain things, and having beliefs about

achieving them, doesn't automatically make you *do* them. According to these philosophers, *you* need to bring these desires and beliefs together by *thinking* about them and forming an intention. You first think about the best thing to do, and then *choose* to do this. So, in our *Kendo* example, you must first think about and choose to parry your opponent's *shinai* upwards in order to strike the opponent's *kote* before you actually do this for your behaviour to count as an intentional action.

At this point, Takuan Soho might walk behind us and strike us with his *keisaku* (or *kyosaku*, a wooden stick). Takuan was the 16-17th century Zen Buddhist who provided Zen teachings to some of the sword-masters of his time, including Yagyu Munenori and Miyamoto Musashi. (See Nobuko Hirose, *Immovable Wisdom: The Art of Zen Strategy. The Teachings of Takuan Soho*, 1993.) He would yell at us: "Don't think! Just act!" Even if you have never heard of Takuan, a command like this should be somewhat familiar to you—your teacher in *dojo* may have yelled it at you many times.

But doesn't this sound strange? As we have seen, an action is caused by an intention. And we act, only because we form an intention with reasoning and choice. If there is no thinking and choosing, how can there be intention? If there is no intention, then we can't appeal to it in giving reasons for why we acted the way you did. And if we can't give reasons, you can't say the action was something *we* did (rather than it being an accident). And if you can't say that the action was something *we* did, then we can't say the action is something for which we are responsible. If Takuan's right, action, intention, cause and responsibility go out the window. Surely, this is crazy!

Yet it's not. In fact, Takuan's ideas are quite reasonable. But how, as martial artists, should we understand the message: "Don't think! Just act!"? How can our spontaneous attacks and parries be intentional actions, without involving thought at the time? To answer these questions, we need to return to Takuan.

Takuan Soho

In *dojo*, “Don’t think! Just act!” is often explained in terms of *mushin* (no-mind). As any serious martial artist can testify, the word “*mushin*” can be frequently heard in *dojo*. It is *mushin* that students of martial arts (*Kendo* in any case) are told to attain. It is this idea that our *sensei*, Takuan, introduces.

In the *Fudochishinmyoroku* (the Record of Immovable Wisdom) (*The Unfettered Mind*, tr. W.S. Wilson, Kodansha International, 1986), which is apparently a letter to Yagyū Menenori (the best known sword-master at that time), Takuan Soho addresses the question of where to *put* or *direct* our mind in the mist of our actions. “If you put your mind in the movement of your opponent’s body,” he writes, “your mind will be taken up by the movement of your opponent’s body. If you put your mind in your opponent’s sword, your mind will be taken up by that sword.” And so on: wherever you “put” your mind, it’s taken away from somewhere else. And at the same time, your mind stops. “When your eyes at once catch the sword of your opponent moving to strike you,” he continues, “if you think of meeting the sword in just that position, your mind will stop at the sword, you lose your movements and you will be struck by your opponent.” So what do we do? Takuan’s suggestion is simple: Don’t put your mind *anywhere*.

The mind that is not put on anything is what Takuan calls *mushin*. For Takuan, it is important to attain *mushin* in exchanging swords with an opponent. In *mushin*, the mind “does not stop in any place nor lack any one thing. Always let it fill up your whole ‘being’ like being filled with water, and it will appear in time of need.”

In order to understand Takuan’s teaching, we need to recognise two important points. First, Takuan tells us not to put our mind on any one thing, because there are other things we have to be aware of: the opponent’s leg movement, the distance between the tip of the opponent’s *shinai* and our chest, and so on. Moreover, your opponent is constantly moving and, hence, the situation is constantly changing. In short, being fixated on one thing means we’re not alert to possible dangers or opportunities. Second, Takuan sees

thinking as a kind of trap – we're taken up with the thought, and this can slow our responses. For instance, like Kenzo we might wait for an opening in order to counter-strike. When the opponent moves, we might see an opening. Exclusively focusing on this, we might think to ourselves “*there* is an opening” together with the thought “I should strike there”. This is reflective thinking, focusing on one thing, and consciously forming an intention to respond – Takuan thinks this stops our mind, and makes us slow. In the time we take to think, we give our opponent an opportunity to strike first

Action and Intention

So Takuan's *mushin* is a fluid mind, focused on the entire relevant situation, rather than any particular thing. And it doesn't involve reflectively thinking about how to respond.

But doesn't this do away with intention? If our mind's directed to nothing in particular, then there's nothing in particular that we intend to do. The spontaneous blows and parries of a *Kendo* master with *mushin* start to look unintentional, or might not even count as actions at all. But can this be right? Surely *Kendo* masters intend to do what they do? Are their actions all accidents? This seems like a very strange idea.

Things aren't so strange if we remember that an action is intentional if it can be explained in terms of reasons. A master can give lots of reasons why they act the way they do. In particular, if you ask them to explain themselves, on a particular occasion, they might say something like, “That is what Yagyū would do in that situation.” If you don't understand this answer, they might tell you a story like the following:

Think of the sword-master Yagyū Munenori. His skills with swords are immortalised. He is considered to be a model in swordsmanship – not because he's on posters or swap cards, but because his skills are fine enough to be replicated. Put another way, to be skilled with the sword is to replicate Yagyū: when you are a *Kendo* master, you will act as Yagyū would act.

Importantly, this offers us reasons. For any particular action, Yagyu's ways of acting are a *Kendo* master's reasons for acting. If asked to explain what they did, a *Kendo* master might answer, "I did what Yagyu would've done." In other words, the action was rational, because Yagyu would've done it. And with reason comes intention.

Training

Now, how does this help Kenzo? In trying to do the *Shinkageryu* move, "What would Yagyu do?" isn't really of any help. He wants to attain *mushin*, and respond in the way Yagyu would respond.

As usual, there is a short story and a long story that a master can tell Kenzo. The short story is: "Training!" It is through hard training that Kenzo can start acting from *mushin* and respond in the way that Yagyu would. Of course, everyone already knows this much. What's hard is explaining what the training does, and how it does it. Unfortunately, there is no general answer – not even a *Kendo* master can give a general answer to that question. Why? Because *mushin* must be cultivated, not simply thought about or discovered like a natural law. And no well-qualified *sensai* can tell you how exactly *you* do this. You have to find out in your own way based on your body structure, temperament, style and so on.

Still, there are a few things that a *sensei* can do to help Kenzo. For example, a good *sensei* can outline the various relevant features of the situation: the movement of the opponent, the distance between himself and the *shinai*, the position of the opponent's feet, and so on. Kenzo needs to train himself to "see" these subtleties, and their connection with responses. And he has to do this with increasing speed, so the perception and the response flow seamlessly. In other words, training fills the gap between knowledge of relevant features and appropriate responses on the one hand, and actually seeing, and responding to, all of these features at once, on the other. In other words, training allows us to "Do as Yagyu would do," without having to think about

them at the time. Training combines wide, keen perception, with appropriate action – and because it is based on a model (like Yagyū), it is rational.

Intentional Action

But is this *really* rational? And can it give us genuine intention? We can see how training combines perception and response, but there's still something confusing about *mushin* here.

A *Kendo* master might give a reason “That's what Yagyū would do” for enacting *Shinkageryū* move. Yet, when we ask a *Kendo* master *why* he did what he did, this answer doesn't seem entirely satisfactory. It looks like the master is telling us why he thinks what he did was the right thing to do in that situation. And fair enough: perhaps he parried the right blows, and landed his own. But we want to know what *reason* he had in mind when doing what he did.

Now, we know that the master didn't have any particular reason “in mind”. Instead, he acted from *mushin*. How can he be rational, but not have any reasons in mind?

In fact, the master can give lots of reasons for his actions. For instance, if someone asks, “Why did you move slightly to your right as you struck the opponent's *men*?” a master might say, “Because the distance between the opponent's *shinai* and my chest slightly changed.” He might also say, in response to the very same question, “Because the opponent's *shinai* moved slightly.” If someone asks, about the very same response, “Why did you strike the opponent's *men*?” a master might say, “Because it was the most effective blow in this situation.” A master can also refer to his understanding of the relationship between his response and the situation in refusing certain questions. For instance, if someone asks “Why did you leave your *men* exposed and vulnerable to your opponent?” he might reply, “I didn't. I was tempting him to strike my *men* so that I could counter-strike his *do*.”

In providing any of these reasons for his action, the *Kendo* master is demonstrating that he accepts the action as his own. For this, it doesn't matter *what* exactly he says in giving a reason. Different answers are often required for different people or situations – you might explain a match one way to a rank novice, and another way to a competent beginner. What's important is this: giving a reason is a way of accepting responsibility for the action. Even if the *Kendo* master says, "I didn't do that, I did this" he is still affirming that what he did was intentional. He is showing you his reasons, and thereby accepting responsibility, even though he had neither "in mind" at the time.

A master might also say in reply, "Because that's one way to enact *Shinkageryu* philosophy and that's what Yagyu would do in that situation." This is the most general form of reason a *Kendo* master can give for his actions. But its generality doesn't make it simple or easy. On the contrary, his understanding of this reveals the richness of his experience and his competence in *Kendo*. He could see exactly what the situation was; could see exactly what should be done in that situation, and responded in exactly the right way. And, in fact, if this answer makes sense to you, without requiring further explanation from the *Kendo* master, this shows *your* level of accomplishment in the art of *Kendo*.

A *Koan*

So, how can Kenzo strike his opponent before being struck again? If he thought to himself "Now is the time to respond!" his opponent would strike him. If he didn't think this to himself, how could he even be acting in the situation?

If you thought that the solution to this *koan* is to provide Kenzo with a set of instructions as to *how* he can come to act without thinking, then we haven't given a satisfactory solution. In fact, there are no how-to instructions to give Kenzo. He needs to find his own way of attaining *mushin*.

What we have shown, however, is that this kind of *how* question (how can I do that?) is different from a *why* question (why did you do that?). Asking *how* Kenzo can act spontaneously, or *how* a *Kendo* master can do that, is asking about the mental processes behind this kind of action. But it is exactly consideration of mental processes that Takuan urges us to leave behind. In order to answer a how-question, we need to somehow be aware of the mental operations that made us act at the time – otherwise, how would we know in order to answer the question? But if we are paying attention to the mental operations of *mushin*, we can't act with *mushin*!

Yet we *can* answer why-questions – we just have to remind ourselves that they're not how-questions. If we are asked, "Why did you move slightly to your right as you struck your opponent's *men* (head)?" we might reply, "Because I thought that moving to the right would give me room to strike". This kind of answer seems to confuse a how-question with a why-question. It sounds like we're saying "My *thought* made me do it." And, for this to be true, some thinking needs to be in the mind. But our discussion of Takuan has revealed that this isn't the case. We can identify why we acted, without detailing how, or thinking about it at the time. In fact, we're trained to leave the thought about mental operations behind so that, eventually, we can respond without thinking.

So, to sum it all up. By providing a reason, we own up to our actions and demonstrate that what we did was intentional. The reasons we give, and the reasons of others that we immediately understand, demonstrate how accomplished we are as *Kendo* practitioners. All this requires rational, intentional action. But not always reflective, calculative thought: to be a *Kendo* master is to act from a deep understanding of *Kendo*, with mindfulness of the complexity of the situation to which one is responding. And just how deep one's understanding of the art of *Kendo* is will be exemplified by what one does, and is demonstrated by one's reasons for action, and in one's comprehension of the reasons of others.