Passive Action, Roles, and Agency

Action passive, rôles et qualité d'agent

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Abstract:

The concept of passive action – an apparent oxymoron – was forged in the field of the philosophy of action in order to challenge a certain conception of intentional action. However, two difficulties seem to limit its explanatory scope, even if the adjective "passive" is often used to describe an action: on the one hand, this concept does not lend itself to a comprehensive definition; on the other hand, it is in practice difficult to separate, in the description of certain human actions, which part of the action is active and which part is passive. This paper seeks to show that the concept of passive action can be used to explain a type of situation in which the member of an organisation performs, in the context of his role, an unethical action that he would prefer not to perform in a non-professional context. Our analysis leads us to distinguish four possible configurations of passive action in which the concept of passivity is associated with trust, indifference, impersonality and conformity.

Key words:

Passive action, passivity, human agency, professional role, trust, indifference, impersonality, conformity, docility

Résumé:

Le concept d'action passive – un apparent oxymore – a été forgé dans le champ de la philosophie de l'action afin de mettre en cause une certaine conception de l'action intentionnelle. Cependant, deux difficultés semblent limiter sa portée explicative, même si l'adjectif « passif » est souvent employé pour décrire une action : d'une part, ce concept ne se prête pas à une définition générale ; d'autre part, il est en pratique délicat de distinguer, dans la description de certaines actions humaines, ce qui relève de l'activité et ce qui relève de la passivité. Cet article s'attache à montrer que le concept d'action passive peut être mobilisé pour expliquer un type de situation dans lequel le membre d'une organisation accomplit, dans le cadre de son rôle, une action non éthique qu'il préfèrerait ne pas accomplir dans un contexte non professionnel. Notre analyse nous conduit à distinguer quatre configurations possibles de l'action passive dans lesquelles le concept de passivité est associé à la confiance, l'indifférence, l'impersonnalité ou le conformisme.

Mots clés :

Action passive, passivité, qualité d'agent, rôle professionnel, confiance, indifférence, impersonnalité, conformisme, docilité

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to explore the concept of passive action. The expression "passive action" seems to be an oxymoron without real substance, unless it is considered as a metaphor describing a certain type of action. It could be used to designate situations in which an employee, in the course of his professional role, would be required to commit an action that, if he were in a non-professional context, he would prefer not to commit. Let us imagine this employee, a market researcher, is conducting an opinion survey on behalf of a client who wishes to remain anonymous. To the people he interviews, the market researcher lies both about who commissioned the study and what the study is about. In a non-professional context, however, he would not tell such a lie. At first glance, it seems that the professional lie of the market researcher could be qualified as a "passive action."[1] This would reflect the fact that, at the same time, he was acting freely and intentionally (he was "active") and he was under some kind of constraint related to his role (he was "passive").

We will use the example of this market researcher to illustrate different aspects of passive action. The debate about this concept has taken place in the field of philosophy, especially philosophy of action – the expression "passive action" was apparently first used by philosopher Alfred Mele (1997). The issues discussed cover in particular the delimitation between action and inaction, the factors that can constrain agency, and how the idea of passive action can shed light on certain theoretical conceptions of intentional action, in particular confirming or refuting causalist theories of action that assert that the relationship between reasons for action and intentional action is causal in nature.

The aim of the present paper is not to enter into these debates. It is to try to characterise passive action by bringing a third actor into the discussion: the concept of role. Combined with the concept of role, the concept of passive action could help to explain some types of unethical behaviour within organisations.

Much of the field of business ethics deals with this issue. In this article, it is impossible to carry out an exhaustive review. Let us mention, however, the portraits of immoral and amoral managers (Carroll, 1991); the notion of bounded ethicality, which compels ethical decision-making because the subject protects his self-image (Chugh et al., 2005); moral amnesia in the sense of a voluntary limitation, on the part of the manager, of the expression of his moral beliefs (Bird and Waters, 1989); ethical fading, which refers to the fact that a person does not realise the moral consequences of his choices and makes decisions without taking ethical criteria into account (Tenbrunsel et al., 2010); the supposed existence of a compensatory psychological mechanism that would lead people to manage moral "debits" and "credits," as if they were keeping moral accounts (Zhong et al., 2010); moral disengagement or deactivation of moral control mechanisms (Bandura et al., 2000; Moore, 2008); and, finally, the influence of

organisations' ethical climates, which include norms that affect decisions (Victor and Cullen, 1987; Martin and Cullen, 2006). Let us add to this partial list the impersonal nature of business life which, according to Robert Jackall (1988), "helps managers to achieve the distance and abstractness appropriate to and necessary for their roles" (p. 127).

Jackall's reference to roles is quite suggestive. He adds that "impersonality provides the psychological distance necessary to make what managers call 'hard choices'" (p. 127), citing comments from managers who wonder whether they should commit immoral action in certain choice situations. They ask themselves this question because the imperative of fulfilling their role as managers leads them to asking themselves what the right way to act is.

It goes without saying that roles constrain the agency of those who assume them. This is both a fact and part of the normative definition of a role. According to R. S. Downie (1971), the roles are, de facto, "patterns of expected behaviour with certain effects," or, if considered in a normative way, "clusters of rights and duties" (p. 127). Meeting expectations and respecting the rights attached to one's role constrain, by construction, individual agency.

As part of his arguments about the relationship between people and their roles, Downie discusses the moral disagreement in which a role-holder may find himself. The distinction he proposes could apply to the example of the market researcher above. The latter could hesitate between two extreme positions. The first, which Downie calls the "ignore-your-attitude" view, assumes that he does not involve his personal moral beliefs in his professional decision-making. The second position, the "resign-if-you-disagree" view, is at the other extreme in terms of responsibility. From this perspective, the market researcher is morally responsible for the decisions he makes within his role, in accordance with the principle that "the individual ought always to think and decide for himself what he or she will do" (p. 140). In the first case, the market researcher does not have full agency and responsibility. In the second, he has full agency.

Downie brings some restrictions to the "resign-if-you-disagree" view. Its application must take into account the moral importance of the case in question, the instability that would be caused by a resignation, both for the person and for his organisation, and the fact that a much less scrupulous person could fill the position left vacant.

However, the explanatory power of these distinctions – which are well known to practitioners and observers of the economic world – is rather weak, with the possible exception of the moral importance of the problem at hand. Thus, the market researcher may have considered that lying to participants in an opinion survey was not a significant moral problem, even if he disagreed with this practice. We will see, in the first section of this paper, that such a representation could be inspired by a more general vision about the moral functioning of business life, referred to as the "separation thesis."

The main aim of this paper is to explore the way the concept of passive action can describe, or even explain, cases such as that of the market researcher. These cases fall under Downie's "ignore-your-attitude" view. If the market researcher's act of lying is described as a passive action, then it is necessary to define the criteria that make it possible to affirm that his action is passive. Our approach does not depend on a preliminary conception of passive action. Rather, it consists in identifying the intuitions and concepts that can specify how an action can be described as "passive," then in comparing them with the significant case of the market researcher. At the end of our investigation, we will distinguish four configurations of passive action that depend on the influence of the agent's role and whether or not the passive action results from the agent's choice to "abandon" his agency.

Although it has been mainly discussed in the philosophical field, the problem of passive action responds to important issues in the academic fields of management sciences and business ethics. These issues include how to ensure, within organisations, two normative principles: firstly, that employees of an organisation feel and assume de facto moral responsibility for the actions they perform in their role (Margolis, 2001; Hannah et al, 2011); secondly, the fact that they feel that their personal values are not challenged by these actions (Card, 2005), which amounts to a situation of high value congruence between the employee's values and the values of his organisation or professional environment (Ostroff et al., 2005; Edwards and Cable, 2009). This intuitively means that, if an employee performs a passive action and if such an action testifies to the violation of these two normative principles, he will not be able to assume moral responsibility for his act and will experience a conflict between his personal values and those that dictate the acts performed in the course of his role. One purpose of this article is to conceptually clarify the nature and validity of these effects. Thanks to the example of the market researcher, the typical structure of which has been discussed within the management sciences (e.g. Shepherd et al., 2013; Sheehan and Schmidt, 2015), we will draw practical conclusions at the managerial level.[2]

The paper is divided into four sections. The first one offers some philosophical perspectives on the concept of role, in order to establish initial conceptual links with the concept of passivity. The second section is devoted to the concept of passivity as such. The third addresses the problem of passive action, as discussed in the philosophy of action. The conclusion of our conceptual analysis is presented in the fourth section.

1. SOME PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACHES TO ROLES

Philosophers reflected on roles either indirectly, that is, as an instrument of their views, or directly, as a central concept.

Let us start with indirect approaches and, specifically, with Friedrich Nietzsche and Jean-Paul Sartre.

In aphorism 356 of *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche (2001) argued that "the individual [in modern times] is convinced he can do just about anything *and is up to playing any role*; and [that] everyone experiments with himself, improvises, experiments again, enjoys experimenting, where all nature ends and becomes art" (p. 216).

Nietzsche does not refer to bad faith, as Sartre will do 60 years later, but to a loss of memory. Most people do forget that they did not freely choose the roles they play, especially their professional roles: "They have forgotten," Nietzsche says, "how much they were determined by accidents, moods, and arbitrariness at the time their profession was decided." The result is that "the role has actually become character, and artifice, nature" – and this is especially because they are "victims of their 'good performance'" (pp. 215-216). We notice the "determination" that leads to occupying a role. It can be understood at first glance as a sign of the passivity of the role-holder. Depending on circumstances ("accidents, moods, arbitrariness"), he does not seem to benefit fully from the status of agent.

Being a victim of one's 'good performance' in a role could be considered in Sartre's story of the waiter in *Being and Nothingness*. This would mean that, through the skills he has developed, the role-holder has *become* a waiter, instead of being "what he is" (1984, p. 59). Sartre's description of the waiter in the café is an evidence of bad faith, that is, of a way to escape freedom and the responsibility and anxiety which would result from it. Such an avoidance of responsibility may happen by means of a role.

Sartre's descriptions of the waiter's behaviour as such are informative, especially two features. Firstly, a controlled exaggeration, through which the waiter tries to imitate the type he wants to embody. "His movement is quick and forward," Sartre says, "a little too precise, a little too rapid. He comes toward the patrons with a step a little too quick" (p. 59). Secondly, a sense of controlled equilibrium, which stems from the fact that, when playing his role, the waiter is like a "tight-rope-walker" (a funambulist): "[He tries] to imitate in his walk the inflexible stiffness of some kind of automaton while carrying his tray with the recklessness of a tight-rope-walker by putting it in a perpetually unstable, perpetually broken equilibrium which he perpetually re-establishes by a light movement of the arm and hand" (p. 59). In Sartre's view, the search for an equilibrium manifests the fact that the waiter *cannot be* the abstract "person possessing rights." The waiter "can only play at being him; that is, imagine to himself that he is he." He is a waiter in the mode of being what he is not (p. 60). Of course, Sartre places the ideas of control and equilibrium in the context of his philosophy, but he also presents them in a descriptive way. He describes the way the waiter behaves in his role. Interestingly, for our purpose, we notice the possible conceptual link between the "automaton" and the idea of

passivity, since an automaton refers to a "person who acts mechanically, either unconsciously or under the impulse of an external will."[3]

Nietzsche and Sartre have influenced philosophers who directly dealt with roles as an object of study, especially at a time when sociologists, anthropologists and social psychologists were discussing about their nature. The work of Dorothy Emmet (1966) is a good example of a social and comprehensive approach to roles. In Emmet's view, roles fulfil a stabilising function which makes society possible. If human interactions happened only between singular individuals qua individuals, i.e. in the absence of any organised social system, then "empirically, this [would] not seem to be viable" (p. 13). In this case, in fact, anarchy would govern human population. But encounters between singular individuals never happen. The sort of relations which happen in human societies are based upon types, i.e. upon people having statuses, roles and common names. This is why Emmet explains that "a role is a capacity in which someone acts in relation to others" (p. 13).

A given role depends on a social situation and the relations it involves. It is "a way of acting in a social situation which takes account of the specific character of the relation, and which is considered appropriate in a relation of that kind" (p. 14). Emmet insists upon the fact that participants in a social situation view it as a set of relations with mutual expectations and feelings such as trust and affection, and this is how any role relation should be considered. To understand a role is both to understand the description of the situation in which it operates, and to understand that this role also possesses a normative dimension derived from that description – which Emmet expresses through the idea that a role has "some notion of conduct as appropriate or inappropriate built into its description" (p. 15). From a moral perspective, too, the concept of role is central. This is because, when people deliberate over what they ought to do, they take into account the way they see their roles as well as the conflicts between their roles and the rules which are associated with them (p. 15). Thus, in order to understand the effect of the market researcher's role on his choice to lie to the interviewees, it is essential to understand, on the one hand, how he mentally represented his situation and, on the other hand, how he represented the duties arising from his role.

There is another philosophical way of approaching roles which is rather different from the previous ones. It rests on the idea of "representation," which is derived from what Thomas Hobbes (1996) argued in chapter 16 of the *Leviathan*: "Of Persons, Authors, and Things Personated" – to "personate" meaning: "to act, or represent himself, or another" (Wolgast, 1992, p. 9). The idea is that the person who occupies a role may represent another person. As Elizabeth Wolgast (1992) says about the ethics of artificial persons: "representing others, onstage (as an actor) or in professions, means having a role: that is Hobbes' idea" (p. 40). In this case, the role-holder is an agent in the sense of a person who acts on behalf of another. In Hobbes' words, he is a "feigned" or "fictional" person, while "the person from whom an agent's authority derives" is a "natural person," a person who acts on his own. The one who represents

is the actor; the one who is represented is the author. When we are agents, Wolgast argues, the scope of our actions is limited by definition, due to the constraints imposed by the fact that we represent someone else. Moreover, except for some special conditions (for example if the author is a child or an incompetent individual), the author is responsible for the actions of the actor (Wolgast, 1992, p. 10). The issue of responsibility is of course a major side-effect of the idea of representation (Margolis, 2001; Williams, 2012).

The relation of representation between the natural person and the fictional person (the "principal" and the "agent" according to the agency theory[4]) is embodied in organisations. A typical example is that of formal organisations. This type of organisation represents a management philosophy that determines, in particular, what a manager's ethical behaviour should be. It is in this context that John Boatright (1988) defines it.[5] A formal organisation "is a hierarchically arranged set of positions or roles, each with well-defined sets of rights and responsibilities." And "these rights and responsibilities in turn are determined principally by the goals of the organization and in particular by the most efficient means of achieving these goals, which is the ideal of rationality" (p. 308).

Boatright was inspired by an article published in 1970 by philosopher John Ladd. He dealt with the features of action and moral agency in formal organisations. In such settings, every action should aim at achieving an organisation's goal. Decision-makers act on behalf of their organisation. The responsibility for actions which would be inconsistent with this goal should not be assigned to the organisation, but "to the individual officers as individuals" (p. 496). Thus, Ladd argues, there is "a clear-cut distinction between the acts and relationships of individuals in their official capacity within the organization and in their private capacity" (p. 488).

Ladd's statement announced two opposing theses that will be proposed in the 1990s in the field of business ethics. The first one, the "separation thesis," states that the morality of business life is less demanding than that of general morality (Freeman, 1994). Thus, a role-holder may derogate from certain moral standards that would be respected outside the professional sphere. This de facto moral tolerance ends up being judged as part of the "nature of things." In addition, it legitimises the idea that professional roles are morally separate from non-professional roles.[6] From the outside, the result is that the role-holder does not appear to act fully as an agent because he appears to be passively submitted to the morally degraded norms of action described in the separation thesis (Klikauer, 2010). In addition, he seems to hold incoherent beliefs. In the case of the market researcher, it is the belief that lying is wrong and the belief that lying in a professional context can be part of the requirements of his role. But from the agent's own point of view, these beliefs may not seem inconsistent precisely because of the idea of separation.

It is to this separation that the thesis of integration is opposed. Robert Solomon (1992), who defended it – without explicitly using the expression[7] –, advocated the integration of the roles played by a person. This means that his

moral dispositions (or moral virtues) should be exercised in the same way, regardless of the roles in which he finds himself. Such a person is, in a defining sense, a person of integrity. Solomon stated, indeed, that "integrity represents the integration of one's roles and responsibilities and the virtues defined by them" (p. 328), before adding that "the name of that integration is *ethics*, construed in an Aristotelean way" (p. 330).

Ladd insists also upon the *impersonal* dimension of the role occupied by the organisation's employees: "Their role is – *that is, is supposed to be* – impersonal" (p. 492). What does "impersonal" mean here? With regard to agency, it means both that the "personal interests or convictions" of the decision-maker are not ingredients of the decision, and that the role-holder is "morally neutral," as "the values to be taken as data [in his decision] are not those [which] would guide the individual if he were a private citizen" (p. 492). In other words, if the action of the role-holder is well performed by him, it does not belong to him in his own right. The hypothesis that he may not be the real subject of his action suggests that his action includes a passive dimension, at least if a conceptual relationship between passivity and impersonality is assumed.[8]

These developments suggest that actions performed in a role can be described using different notions related to passivity: "automaton," "determination" of an action "by the goals of the [formal] organization," de facto submission to the "separation thesis," impersonality of actions performed in a role, in the sense that the person performing them is not really his author. Do these criteria apply to the market researcher who misleads the people he interviews? It seems difficult to say that he acts like an automaton, but it is reasonable to argue that the reason for his action comes essentially from the directives of his organisation (Tyler and Blader, 2005). It could also be argued that the market researcher applies morally degraded norms, those postulated by the separation thesis (e.g. empirical rules such as "Everyone in the industry does it" or "We've always done it that way), and that he represents his relationships with interviewees in an impersonal mode and not in a personal mode (Martin et al., 1998). But are these descriptions enough to affirm that the researcher has committed a "passive action?" To try to answer this question, it is necessary to explore the concept of passivity.

2. PASSIVITY

There are many ordinary ways of talking about passivity. Passivity (from Latin *passivus*: likely to endure, to suffer[9]) may be defined as the absence of activity, but this may mean three things: (i) to be "acted upon by an external agency," (ii) to be inert like an inanimate object, (iii) to "endure without resistance."[10] In this section, we discuss these three meanings, as well as more precise conceptions of passivity, based on the fact that the agent is overcome by something (typically an emotion), performs routine actions or acts involuntarily.

First, note that meanings (ii) and (iii) are expressed in a passive voice. In the passive voice, the action is described not from the point of view of the subject, but from the point of view of the object that is the subject of the action. In the words of Reinard Zandvoort (1972), the passive voice consists "of one of the forms of *to be* plus the past participle of a transitive verb [which] may denote an action by the subject of the sentence" (p. 53). In general, transitive verbs can be used in the passive voice. Thus, "The husband cheated on his wife" (active form) can be easily expressed in the passive voice: "The woman was cheated on by her husband." In the previous section, we brought impersonality and passivity together. In grammar, the two terms are associated in the *passive impersonal* form, as in the following sentence: "It is said that the woman was cheated on by her husband." The purpose of the passive impersonal construction is to emphasise the importance of the verb rather than the subject of the action (Grévisse, 1980, p. 699).

The distinction between active voice and passive voice is relevant in the case of the market researcher. The verb "to deceive," which is transitive, takes both active and passive forms: "The market researcher deceived the people he was interviewing" (active form) and "The people interviewed were deceived by the market researcher" (passive form). But this does not tell us much about the passivity of the market researcher's action (lying to the interviewees), since, in the passive voice, it is the interviewees who are subjected to the action. If the action of the market researcher can be described as "passive," grammatical analysis cannot shed any light on it.

Meanings (i) to (iii) equate passivity with the absence of activity. But the line between activity and passivity is not so clear. Thus, Joseph Raz (1997) gives two examples which emphasise the difficulty to discriminate between activity and passivity: the bird-watcher, who is interested in wild birds, and the kleptomaniac, who has the irrepressible desire to steal things. The bird-watcher, Raz says, as he "keep[s] still in his observation hide-out, is active. [But] in a familiar sense he is of course passive" (p. 212). He is active because he is waiting intentionally, because he has an objective in mind. But he seems to be passive simply because he does nothing in the sense that he seems to produce no effect in the world. The second example is that of the kleptomaniac. Raz simply claims that "when shoplifting, a kleptomaniac is active in one sense, but passive in another" (p. 212). The kleptomaniac is active because he steals something in a shop, but passive because he acts out of an irrepressible desire, a desire which is out of his control.

The example of the kleptomaniac could be extended to a class of situations where a person is overcome by something which dominates his mind, as when Socrates explains to Protagoras what it means for people to be "overcome by pleasure and for that reason [failed] to do what is best, when one knows what it is" (Plato, 1991, p. 46), or as the example proposed by Harry Frankfurt (1987) of a person who loses control in the course of a conversation, and who says, when he regains his self-control: "The feelings just came over me from out of nowhere, and I couldn't help it. I wasn't myself. Please don't hold it against me" (p. 63).

It is possible to be overcome by an emotion in a situation, but emotion may be passive in a more general sense, that is, as Jing Zhu (2004) says, "in the sense that we are not able to directly generate, suppress and control [it] at will" (p. 297). Zhu notes that "an emotional process occurs automatically whenever certain triggering conditions are in place, independent of volitional and conscious guidance" (p. 297), and, of course, that "emotions can significantly affect actions in many ways" (p. 298).

Non-emotional and semi-automatic processes could also be included in the category of passive actions. This is the case of "routine, habitual, well-learnt, and spontaneous actions" (Zhu, 2004, p. 300), which could be summarised as scripts, i.e. "appropriate sequences of events in well-known situations" (Fiske and Taylor, 1991, p. 119).

Passivity might be attributed to a certain type of involuntary actions. As Aristotle (2004) puts it in *Nichomachean Ethics*, considering the case where a force is the external principle of the movement (the other cause of involuntary action being ignorance), "the agent or the person acted upon contributes nothing to it – if a wind, for example, or people with power over him carry him somewhere" (p. 37). Absence of contribution on the part of the agent, that is, absence of a principle *internal* to the agent, could be viewed as a sign of passivity. As Frankfurt (1987) remarks, external (i.e., an external principle or cause) would be a synonym for "passive," and internal (i.e., an internal principle or cause) would be a synonym for "active" (p. 59). The distinction might shed some light on the bird-watcher's case. The bird-watcher is not passive. He is active because what he is doing stems from an internal principle: observing and identifying birds.

Did our market researcher act like Raz's kleptomaniac? Has he been overwhelmed by an emotion? Did he perform a routine action? Or did his action obey an external principle that forced him to lie? The first three hypotheses do not seem valid for obvious reasons, but the fourth, which refers to an external principle, relates to the possible influence of the separation thesis on the representation that the market researcher could have made of his lie to the interviewees.

3. PASSIVE ACTION

Assuredly, the problem of passive action, whatever the background conception of passivity, raises questions with respect to agency. When an individual performs something, a condition of his passivity seems to be the absence of at least one of the features of agency, i.e. the absence of the capacity to deliberate and make authoritative judgments, based on a consideration of all the relevant facts in the situation, the absence of control over the process, and the

absence of a sense of the self (Rovane, 2004; Caldwell, 2012).[11] Do such failures refer to "passive action?" To answer the question, it is useful to examine some ideas from the philosophy of action.

According to the causal perspective of action – the mainstream view –, an action is caused by mental antecedents, typically a desire combined with a belief, or an intention.[12] An agent has a reason for acting which causally explains his action. A bodily movement, for example the raising of my arm, is an action if it has been caused in an appropriate way by a desire (to give a signal to my friend) and a belief (the belief that raising my arm is the best way to get my friend's attention).[13] If the agent's arm is raised, his movement will be qualified as non-intentional – but not necessarily as "passive," because this qualification would add something to the non-intentionality, for example the idea that the agent endures something.

But this is not exactly the point. The point originates from the account of "passive action" which has been proposed in order to undermine the causal theory of action. It is due to Harry Frankfurt (1987). His account of passive action is illustrated by the imaginary case of a driver who sees that his car is descending a gradient, and who does nothing – to be precise, his car "is coasting downhill in virtue of gravitational forces alone" (p. 75).[14] Indeed, he feels satisfied with the situation. Moreover, he controls the movement of his car, not in the sense that he regularly makes small adjustments, like the Sartre's waiter, but in the sense that he is "prepared to intervene if necessary" (p. 75).

In Frankfurt's view, what the driver does is an action – a "passive action," according to Mele (1997), but Frankfurt does not use the phrase – although it is not determined by prior causes, as the causal theory of action would require. The movement has been initiated, so to speak, by the car, not by the driver's prior combination of a desire and a belief, or by an intention. And during the action (that is, the period of time during which the car goes downhill), the driver may just observe, and no internal causal mechanism has to operate.

This example illustrates Frankfurt's strategy to undermine the causal theories of action. The main flaw of these theories, he argues, is the fact that the mental causes of action (desires and beliefs, intentions) occur before the time of action, and that there is no guarantee that they operate at the time of action. In Frankfurt's view, the unique criterion of an action is the fact that the movements occur "under the person's guidance, […] regardless of what features of his prior causal history account for the fact that this is occurring" (p. 73).

Frankfurt has been criticised on the ground that the antecedents of action are not separated from the time of action – and that Frankfurt's view was somewhat outdated. Thus, Zhu (2004) observes that "causal antecedents of action, either as reasons (e.g., appropriate combinations of beliefs and desires) or intentions, not only play a role in producing voluntary actions, but also have guiding, sustaining and controlling functions" (p. 304). One support for

such a view is that our reasons for action are embedded in plans that constrained our future actions. The possibility of passive actions is intuitively consistent with the idea that an agent seeks to accomplish a plan, i.e. a long-term intention or, in Michael Bratman's words, "an intention writ large" (1987, p. 8).

However, Frankfurt's argument relative to passive action is helpful as it indirectly suggests two features of roles in the context of organisations. The first one occurs before the action. It concerns both the prior definition of plans at the organisational level – plans being, in that case, collective commitments to actions: strategies, policies, objectives, lines of conduct[15] – and the earlier moment when antecedents of action are adopted by the role-holder. The second feature occurs at the moment of action. It concerns the guidance mechanism used by the role-holder to control the course of his action. A role provides in itself a pattern of behaviour that allows the incumbent to act in a certain way in situations of a certain type (Turner, 1990). It can thus be considered, mutatis mutandis, as fulfilling the function of the guidance mechanism postulated by Frankfurt.

To be sure, one could consider that role as a concept provides nothing new to the reflection about the logic of action in organisational contexts. Viewed as a pure job description (Downie's normative definition), a role would only reflect the strategies, policies and objectives of the organisation. It would be neutral and immaterial with regard to the generation and explanation of action. For example, depending on the causalist conception of action, the action of lying to interviewees could be described as resulting from the desire to satisfy the client's requirements and the belief that lying to interviewees allows this desire to be realised. The concept of role does not need to be mobilised in this description, and this would probably also be the case if the antecedents of the action were more precisely described.

Moreover, a role could be viewed as having no determinate influence on the role-holder's agency. In the introduction to this paper, we quoted Jackall (1988), who highlighted the constraints exercised by roles on managers' hard choices. But Jackall also states that, among the different meanings that the idea of "professional success" has among managers, one of them consists in having latitude to define one's role (Biggart and Hamilton, 1984), which is a positive manifestation of their agency: "For some managers," he says, "success means the freedom to define one's work role with some latitude, to 'get out from under the thumb of others'" (p. 43).[16] In such a case, role appears to be "an organizing construct, helping to define the individual's personality" (Frydman, 2016).

Jackall's observation underscores the importance of how a role-holder represents himself in his role. By helping to define it, he increases the value he places on his role. But this has an important practical consequence: that of increasing the credit that the manager gives to the reasons for action arising from his role. Since to some extent he configures his own role himself, the manager should be more sensitive to the duties imposed by his role. Suppose our market researcher had the opportunity to expand his role by taking over the relationship with clients within his

organisation, rather than limiting his activity to conducting opinion surveys. One of these clients asks him to conduct an opinion survey without telling respondents who he is or what the study is really about. To the extent that the market researcher has partly shaped his own role, he will be more likely to meet the expectations of his client, and, in this case, will be more willing to lie, even if, all things being equal, he would prefer not to lie.

The person's relationship with his role – whether or not he has the latitude to shape it according to his wishes or, which is another way of influencing his role, according to his qualities of character – refers to the general idea of responsiveness, on the part of the agent, to role-derived reasons.

The importance of responsiveness to reasons for action has been stressed by many philosophers,[17] but here it is appropriate to refer to Joseph Raz (1997), to whom I referred earlier. He establishes a connection between sensitivity to reasons, which are considered, for example, in a process of deliberation, and activity, by contrast with passivity. In his view, to be responsive to reasons is to be active: "We are active," Raz says, "when our mental life displays sensitivity to reasons, and we are passive when such mental events occur in a way which is not sensitive to reasons" (p. 218).

Raz is concerned with belief formation, but what he says is suggestive for the case of a role-holder in an organisation. For a role-holder, to be sensitive to role-derived reasons does not necessarily mean: "doing only what is prescribed by the role." It could (and certainly should) mean: "be aware of and sensitive to the direct and indirect implications of your role-derived actions on definite persons." In other words, it could mean that the role-holder could (and certainly should) escape an impersonal representation of his role, if he is to consider other people in a personal way (Jancic and Zabkar, 2002; Packard et al., 2018). Now, to have an impersonal representation of situations and of one's role could be interpreted as a sign of passivity in Raz's sense, and the actions which could result from it could be qualified as "passive actions." Thus, if the market researcher has been passive in carrying out his action of lying to the interviewees, it would be in the sense that he has not been sensitive in an appropriate way to the reasons for his action resulting from his role as market researcher. The "appropriateness" of the sensitivity to these reasons implies that the interviewees should have been considered as persons who themselves had reasons to participate in the survey (in a sense close to the Kantian conception of considering them as ends and not only as means). But it is also possible, as we have seen in the case where a role-holder has the latitude to define or shape his role, that his perception of the reasons derived from his role may be biased in the sense that he would have an impersonal representation of these reasons. This may have happened in the case of the market researcher.

4. CONFIGURATIONS OF PASSIVE ACTION

The above developments allow us to identify two types of passive action in the specific context of cases such as that of our market researcher. They correspond respectively to types 4 and 3 in Figure 1 below, which we will comment on in a moment. The first type, which we have discussed in particular in relation to the separation thesis, assumes that the agent is not sensitive to the reasons derived from his role, whereas these reasons are supposed to be accompanied by a personal, and not impersonal, representation of his relations with others. The passivity of the role-holder's action is assimilated here to conformity. The second type of passive action is the act of an agent who has helped to define or shape his role, and who, as a result, gives it a particular value or even idealises it. However, the representation he has of his role may lead him to strictly respect the expectations to which he must respond, by failing to consider moral criteria relevant in his situation. The passivity of this role-holder is understood as a moral blindness resulting from the idealisation of his role.

However, one important point is missing: the fact that a person could *choose* to be passive in the sense of being submitted to the events, not intervening to thwart the course of events. It is a local and temporary choice, which does not concern the person himself, but the way he behaves in his role at a given moment and in certain circumstances. The market researcher was able to make such a choice, depending on the context in which he may have found himself.

In this case, the choice of passivity is not contradictory with agency, since, by definition, this choice *implies* agency. The outright *abandonment of agency* too, could be the subject of a choice, but a choice of a more fundamental nature than the choice of passivity. It could, for example, result from an aspiration for detachment, impassibility or withdrawal from the world, or show a posture of indifference of a sceptical or cynical – or pathological – origin. Perhaps masochism is also an example of abandonment of agency. But what about trust? Can the person who trusts someone not only choose passivity (this is a question in itself), or can he go so far as to abandon agency?

Let us go back to our market researcher. It is possible that his lie to the people interviewed in the opinion survey was influenced, or even determined, by the trust he placed in his supervisor. At the risk of oversimplifying, two hypotheses could be proposed to qualify his action as "passive:" he granted a legitimate, i.e. justified, trust to his supervisor, and, even if he would have preferred not to lie, he actually lied; or he granted a blind trust to his supervisor – viz. "too much trust, [...] trust without warrant, foolish trust" (Flores and Solomon, 1998, p. 206) – and lied almost without thinking, with a kind of obstinacy.[18]

Two criteria for passive action emerge from these considerations. The first depends on the origin of the passivity. It can be located either in the role-holder (he chooses or accommodates passivity), or in the description of his role. In the first case, it is internal, in the second, external. The second criterion concerns the hypothesis of an abandonment of agency. Of course, if we consider what the agency implies, this is a strong criterion, perhaps out of proportion to the situation of our market researcher, for example, but we are considering it in such a way as to draw conclusions from its comparison with the criterion of passivity. In a nutshell, two cases arise: either the agency's abandonment is intentional (the role-holder chooses indifference, for example) or it is not intentional.

The combination of these two criteria results in four configurations of passive action, applicable to the type of case in which the market researcher finds himself. They are summarised in Table 1.

		Abandonment of agency	
		Intentional	Non-intentional
Passivity	Internal (due to the agent)	1. Trust (implementer)	2. Blind trust (indifferent)
	External (due to the role)	3. Role idealisation (zealous)	4. Conformity (team player)

Table 1: Four configurations of passive action.

Let us consider the four configurations of passive action proposed in this table. The first one ("Trust") means that passivity is a consequence of the agent's strong trust in others – a reflective trust accompanied by a renunciation of his agency. Let us imagine our market researcher adheres to the directives of his supervisor, who is the object of his trust. For example, he feels that his supervisor has good reasons to ask him to lie to the interviewees, and that he is not in a position, based on his own experience, to realise the importance of these reasons. Moreover, the market researcher thinks that he has a lot to learn, and that the best way to learn is to follow his supervisor's directives

without restriction – hence his qualification as an "implementer." One could thus consider that his action of lying to the interviewees reflects docility rather than passivity, the latter resulting from the former.[19]

The second configuration of passive action ("Blind trust") refers to an indifferent agent, who is not affected, as a person, by his role, by the nature and consequences of his own actions, even by the requests made to him by his superiors. The cause of this indifference could stem from blind trust.[20] This blind trust could be placed in the organisation as a whole, not just in a supervisor. Although an "indifferent market researcher" may seem strange, his "indifference" is psychologically plausible (Pruden, 1973; Zhang and Frenkel, 2018). The main question, however, would be whether such a market researcher might prefer not to lie, as this preference would seem contradictory with his indifference.

We have already mentioned the third configuration of passive action ("Role idealisation"). Having had the latitude to define or shape his role, the role-holder gives it such a value that he is likely to exclude moral considerations from his deliberations – this is the moral blindness we have discussed. The abandonment of agency shown by him must be understood as insensitivity to the moral reasons imposed on his role. The combination of this insensitivity and attachment to his role (and status) leads him both to be zealous in the performance of his tasks and to form an impersonal representation of his role. Here, passivity is close to impersonality. Such a psychological situation evokes the over-commitment that has been highlighted in the literature on organisational commitment (Randall, 1987; Kinman and Jones, 2008).[21]

The fourth configuration of passive action ("Conformity") is that of an agent who adheres to his role without involving his moral convictions and, more generally, his critical mind. It is close to the "ignore-your-attitude" view emphasized by Downie. From the point of view of his organisation, he is considered a good team player, an employee on whom we can count because we know that he will not mix his personal convictions with his professional practices. However, his passivity as conformity could reveal an inconsistency about his own beliefs.[22] The consistency in the market researcher's beliefs could be questioned since, on the one hand, his role requires him to lie to the people he interviews, and, on the other hand, his values tell him not to lie.[23] We have seen, however, that the idea of "separation" can offer a form of legitimacy to the agent. It may offer him a way, if not to make his beliefs coherent, then at least to allow them to coexist.

CONCLUSION

The analysis we conducted has a number of limitations. The first concerns the independence of the two criteria that allowed us to distinguish four configurations of passive action. Of course, these two criteria should be independent. In our study, we assumed that passivity and abandonment of agency were separate notions. In any case, the two concepts are not equivalent as they do not have the same scope and implications. To attest to this, extreme and schematic descriptions can be given. A passive person would be a person who, by temperament (weakness, laziness, indecision or other), suffers the events and takes no initiative. A person who renounces his agency would be a person who refuses, by choice, to have to face or change the course of events. It would be a person who, in one way or another, would stand at the margins of the social world, or would withdraw from it. Can these incarnations of passivity and abandonment of agency overlap? Does passivity depend, at least to some extent, on a renunciation of agency? We have not resolved the issue in this paper.

Let us add a second limitation to our study. It concerns the fact that we have not, due to lack of space, delved into the concepts that we have invoked in order to characterise passive action, for example the concepts of docility and trust. Moreover, while we have mobilised moral intuitions, for example by using the idea of passivity to describe the conduct of the market researcher or by invoking the intuitive truth that would be conveyed by the thesis of separation, we have not discussed their reliability nor, more generally, their real place in the deliberations and actions of role-holders within organisations (Ogien, 2013).

A third limitation concerns the importance given here to the status of passive action as a research topic. The conceptual analysis we conducted assumed the legitimacy of this research topic and led us to distinguish four forms of passive action applicable to the type of situation envisaged (the “ignore-your-attitude” view). However, we have not studied the causal chain, i.e. all the factors, that could lead to such an action. In the introduction to this article, we mentioned different concepts (e.g. ethical fading, moral disengagement, ethical climates) that could shed light on the causes of passive action (see Palazzo et al., 2012). But other concepts would clarify the market researcher’s situation. This is particularly the case with weakness of will. Broadly speaking, a person who acts intentionally and freely against his best judgment commits a weaked-will action (Anquetil, 2008). Like passive action, but on a much larger scale, the possibility of weakness of will has been debated in philosophy, sometimes in business ethics (e.g. Sekerka and Bagozzi, 2007), but is rarely invoked in management sciences (see however Arjoon 2008). A research perspective would be to bring passive action closer to weakness of will, for example by drawing on a sufficiently documented real case. It seems to us, however, that passive action as a concept has an advantage over weakness of will: that of being less constrained by theoretical background questions and, as a result, of fulfilling a more important heuristic function.

However, in a context marked by a limited amount of theoretical and empirical research on passive action, we have tried to establish a preliminary typology of the idea of passive action. We believe that, despite the limitations mentioned above, this typology can shed light on actions that are considered unethical within organisations. The passivity of passive action can, according to us, be compared to four related concepts. In the order exhibited in Table 1, these are docility, indifference, impersonality and conformity. These concepts can be included in descriptions of a passive action, at least for the type of case considered, which is covered by the "ignore-your-attitude" view. Our market researcher lies to people interviewed at the request of his client, but he would rather not lie. His action could be described as "passive" because 1) he believes that he has a lot to learn and trusts his supervisor whose legitimate reasons for acting he presupposes: the passivity of his action (lying to interviewees) is due to, or conceptually close to, his docility; 2) he has blind trust in his supervisor, does not care about the legitimacy of his supervisor's reasons for acting and, more generally, shows indifference to the ethics of his profession: the passivity of his action is the result of, or conceptually close to, his indifference; 3) he feels totally at ease in his professional role, which has an even greater value for him as he has contributed and contributes to shaping it; furthermore, his role, according to him, is an integral part of his person and allows him to define himself to others; but this strong attachment leads him to having an impersonal representation of his role; the passivity of his action is conceptually close to impersonality; 4) having a compartmentalised vision of his life considered as a whole, he considers that his personal beliefs do not have to be applied in the exercise of his professional role, which is subject to specific moral norms; all and all, he believes that his own person is a sum of roles; the passivity of his action is conceptually close to conformity.

These four descriptions of passivity applied to an action can have empirical implications. We do not propose here a definition of passive action that would be comprehensive enough to include the four dimensions distinguished as a result of our analysis. If empirical research could make the two criteria we have considered operational and measurable, this could help to construct such a definition and shed light on certain types of human behaviour.

However, we believe that the conceptual investigation should continue. With respect to management sciences and business ethics, the idea of a "motivated passive action" (the word "motivated" applying to "passive") is rather suggestive – as is the opposite idea, and psychologically plausible as we have seen in the case of the bird-watcher, of "active passivity." This could be illustrated by the research stream that has examined the legitimacy of breaking moral rules under certain conditions (Brenkert, 2009). In the same vein, it would be possible to bring the concept of passivity closer to the concept of anomie, which refers to the lack of norms at an individual or collective level (Tsahuridu, 2006, 2011). More precisely, anomia (which covers the lack of norms at the individual level) could lead to a passive action due to the indifference of the agent (see configuration 2 above) insofar as the anomia "refers to a

state of amoral existence where there are no values to which one can refer and adopt for use in deciding and living and, as a result, people feel detached from society" (Tsahuridu, 2006, p. 166).

Passive action could especially inspire research projects, based on an employee's relationship to his organisation, that are conducted specifically in the management sciences. At least two avenues of research are possible. The first concerns the congruence value, mentioned at the beginning of this article, and its link with the employee's identification with his organisation (Marstand et al., 2018). Despite the generally assumed positive effects of such congruence, passivity is not excluded, especially considering the requirement that employees be aware of their values and have the ability to assess the values of their organisation, as well as their effective application (Posner and Schmidt, 1993; Posner, 2010).

The second research line, largely inspired by the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1985; Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Ashford et al., 2013), concerns identification of an employee with his organisation, supervisor or leader, role, or work. Thus, passivity as indifference (configuration 2 in table 1 above) could feed into research on an employee's neutrality in relation to his organisation, as in the study by Yucheng Zhang and Stephen Frenkel (2018) on the passive indifference of employees confronted with abusive supervision. The thoughtful or blind trust placed in a supervisor (configurations 1 and 2) could be related to the consequences of the dynamics of personal identification with a leader, or of the agent's identification with his role – "relational identification" (Ashforth et al., 2008, 2013, 2016). Although it can have positive effects, an employee's psychological closeness to his supervisor or leader can lead to moral disengagement. For example, Francesca Gino and Adam Galinsky (2012), who based their analyses on situations similar to those of our market researcher, concluded that "psychological closeness led to higher levels of moral disengagement about cheating" (p. 22). This type of research overlaps with research on affective organisational commitment, which could also be related to the notion of passive action (Pierro et al., 2013). Finally, the work on "occupational identification" could shed light on the idealisation of the role corresponding to configuration 3 or the conformity situation of configuration 4, since this particular identification concerns "the extent to which one defines him or herself in terms of the work he or she does" (Mael and Ashforth, 1992, p. 106).

Of course, these research perspectives would require starting from a preliminary definition of passive action, a working definition that could include the categories we have distinguished in Table 1, as well as Raz's (1997) idea of "sensitivity to reasons." But the malleability of *passivity* (which distinguishes passive action, as we have seen, from weakness of will, even if the latter is subject to various interpretations) and its relationship to *activity* is itself likely to promote conceptual and empirical discoveries.

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[1] The fact that the market researcher lied about the subject of his investigation and concealed the identity of his client constitutes an action. At the very least, it is possible to consider, in the terms used by Bernard Williams (1985), that lying is, like other concepts of the same type ("thick concepts" like cowardice, brutality, or gratitude), "characteristically related to reasons for action," that it is, "summarily [...] action-guiding" (p. 140).

[2] This example is a tool for reflection in the same way as thought experiences, these "little fictions, specially devised in order to arouse moral perplexity" (Ogien, 2015, p. xiv).

[3] Source: The French CNRTL Dictionary, URL: https://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/automate.

[4] "An agency relationship [is] a contract under which one or more persons (the principal(s)) engage another person (the agent) to perform some service on their behalf which involves delegating some decision-making authority to the agent" (Jensen and Meckling, 1976, p. 308).

[5] See also Chester Barnard's classic definition – "a system of consciously coordinated activities or forces of two or more persons" (1966, p. 73).

[6] The separation thesis does not imply that morality is absent from business decisions. For example, Boatright (1988, p. 309) notes that "the fact that a person in a formal organization fills a functionally defined role and acts on behalf of the organization may entail that the language *of personal* obligation and responsibility has no place, but it does not rule out the use of all ethical concepts in the vocabulary of organizational decision making."

[7] Edward Freeman (2008) himself called for an "integrative revolution," arguing that "it's not useful anymore to separate questions of business and questions of ethics" (p. 163).

[8] Solomon (1992) has a conception of impersonality that comes close to this meaning: "I do think that we have employed policy talk as an exclusionary practice in our effort to provide impersonal solutions to large and seemingly impersonal questions" (p. 320). To this account of "impersonality," we might add two other meanings. Firstly, impersonality could denote the "impersonal demands of morality" which suppose to see oneself as among others or as equally important as others (Blum, 1973, p. 173). Secondly, and more significantly, the adjective "impersonal" could also be attributed to roles. Following Emmet, Lawrence Blum (1993) notes that the set of obligations which define a role "applies in the same way to *anyone* occupying the role but not to those who do not occupy it, […] independent of the occupant's particular personal characteristics" (p. 178). For example, every ship's captain has a particular set of obligations which is not shared by the passengers. This captain should, "after a disaster, [work] steadily for his ship and for the saving of the ship's company until the last possible service is accomplished, so that he is the last man to leave the ship, and is ready if need be to go down with his ship" (Royce, 1969, p. 861). But these two meanings are not directly relevant to our purpose.

[9] Source: Dictionnaire historique de la langue française Le Robert, 4th edition, Paris, 2010.

[10] Source: Merriam-Webster, URL: http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/passivity.

[11] Carol Rovane (2004), for instance, states that "what makes an agent an agent is that it chooses on the basis of deliberation, that choosing of this sort involves making all things considered judgements, and those judgements must meet [demands] of rationality" (p. 183).

[12] See Donald Davidson (1963), who discusses the desire – belief model and the role of intention; and, for a general review of philosophy of action, Timothy O'Connor and Constantine Sandis (2010).

[13] The example of the person raising an arm was discussed about the supposed volition that precedes the action (see Abraham Melden, 1961).

[14] "A driver whose automobile is coasting downhill in virtue of gravitational forces alone may be entirely satisfied with its speed and direction, and so he may never intervene to adjust its movement in any way. This would not show that the movement of the automobile did not occur under his guidance. What counts is that he was prepared to intervene if necessary, and that he was in a position to do so more or less effectively. Similarly, the causal mechanisms which stand ready to affect the course of a bodily movement may never have occasion to do so; for no negative feedback of the sort that would trigger their compensatory activity may occur. The behavior is purposive not because it results from causes of a certain kind, but because it would be affected by certain causes if the accomplishment of its course were to be jeopardized." (Frankfurt, 1987, p. 75)

[15] At the individual level, "plans […] are mental states involving an appropriate sort of commitment to action: I have a plan to *A* only if it is true of me that I plan to *A*" (Bratman, 1987, p. 29). A plan has a temporal stability: it is "a commitment to action not just at a time but also over time" (Bratman, 1999, p. 4).

[16] However, the "choice" to give priority to latitude in defining one's role is contingent on the manager's structure of motivation, which could very well be oriented to financial rewards or power.

[17] See for example John McDowell (1979): "A kind person has a reliable sensitivity to a certain sort of requirement which situations impose on behaviour" (pp. 331-332).

[18] Term used by Fernando Flores and Robert Solomon (1998) to describe blind trust (see p. 215).

[19] With regard to docility, which she analyses in a particular anthropological context, Saba Mahmood (2001) observes that "although we have come to associate docility with abandonment of agency, the term literally implies the malleability required of someone to be instructed in a particular skill or knowledge – a meaning that carries less a sense of passivity and more that of struggle, effort, exertion, and achievement" (p. 210).

[20] Hallvard Lillehammer (2014), who distinguishes four types of indifference, discusses the "blinkered indifference" type.

[21] In an article on the consequences of an employee's low, moderate or high commitment to his organisation, Randall (1987) noted, with respect to high levels of commitment, that "one of the most significant and unrecognized negative consequences of high levels of commitment is that highly committed employees may be more willing to commit illegal or unethical behavior on behalf of the organization. Often, if there is a conflict, highly committed individuals put corporate dictates above their own personal ethics or societal dictates" (p. 466).

[22] It is of course based on the assumption that the subject seeks to maintain internal coherence, as understood by Prescott Lecky (1945): "We conceive of the personality as an organization of values which are felt to be consistent with one another. Behavior expresses the effort to maintain the integrity and unity of the organization" (p. 82). In the words of David Velleman (2006), it corresponds to "the assumption that agents have a motive for doing what makes sense to them" (p. 226).

[23] It could be an ethical standard to which the market researcher would adhere in principle, for example the following one, which is one of the three fundamental principles of the ethical code governing his practice: "[…] When collecting personal data from data subjects for the purpose of research, researchers must be transparent about the information they plan to collect, the purpose for which it will be collected, with whom it might be shared and in what form" (ICC/ESOMAR International Code on Market, Opinion and Social Research and Data Analytics, 2016, URL: https://www.esomar.org/uploads/public/knowledge-and-standards/codes-and-guidelines/ICCESOMAR_Code_English_.pdf.)