

Agency: What is it Agents Exemplify?

Introduction

One might think that our deeds are our acts, but not everything we do amounts to actions. One issue is therefore this: How do we distinguish our actions from other things we do.

Donald Davidson gave the standard answer to this question: Our actions are those things we do intentionally, i.e. those events that can be described in such a way that they can be characterized as intentional under some description.

This Davidsonian reply is thin. It leaves out a further elucidation of what we mean by being “intentional”, and it does not say much about the role of the agent in the production of the action. There is a further issue here. All physical actions are bodily movements, Davidson claims. What is the content of his claim?

There is a difference between *what we do*, which might be melting some

chocolate, and *what happens to the chocolate*, the melting of the chocolate. The first thing is something we do. What we do is captured by a transitive reading of the verb melting, what happens to the chocolate is captured by an intransitive reading.

Implication: There is a corresponding difference between a transitive and an intransitive reading of moving a hand, and the hand’s movement. The second is something that happens to the hand, the first is something we do.

This is controversial. Those who like this distinction, normally belong to one camp among action-theorists. That is the camp of the conceptually rich. There are broadly speaking two conceptions of agency today: The conceptually rich and the conceptually poor. Let us now turn to them.

The conceptually poor: D. Dennett

What we mean by intentional: We are intentional systems.

Intentional systems are organisms that can be successfully described in the specific way that uses concepts like belief and desire. Successfully here means that we gain a lot of predictive power we could not otherwise have. In a thermostat we achieve nothing, in animals and people we do.

This marries into a causal-functional naturalism in the philosophy of mind: beliefs and desires are to be individuated by and identified with the causal-explanatory roles they play. Intentional behaviour/action is then explainable by reference to such beliefs and desires. This is the main picture we meet in decision-theory and social science.



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Actions are then bodily movements (in the intransitive sense) caused by belief-desire pairs (“reasons”) *in the right sort of way*. The concept of reason is thought of as something that can be reduced to a belief-desire pair – the concept is in this sense psychologised.

Advantage: It keeps things simple and straight.

Problems:

One cannot say anything about what the right sort of way is. This fact cannot really be explained, and this might be thought of as disturbing.

One seems possibly not to have available any contact with reasons as normative, and the contact with the normative is at best achieved through the contents of the beliefs and desires. But if one only has a causal-functional approach to content, the contact with the normative may be completely lost.

The role of the agent is limited to being the subject to whom these mental states are ascribed. The further role of the agent, if there is one, is then hidden in the phrase of causing the bodily movements in the right sort of way. But it can only amount to a role in the causal history of the action; there is no role in the action itself, the product of this history.

The conceptually rich: E. Anscombe:

Agents act and exemplify agency in their (transitive) bodily movements when two requirements are satisfied:

a) The agent has non-observational knowledge of what is being done (under a description). The phrase “what is being done” here appeals to the transitive sense of moving a part of one’s body. What one knows can in central cases be thought of as the intention in moving that part of one’s body.

b) This requirement accounts for the sense of “intention”. It goes like this: If asked why one did it, one can give a reason. The reason is what motivates the intention by virtue of what supports a practical conclusion in favour of doing it. One knows what one is doing in this sense.

The agent is the agent of this (transitive) bodily movement, and is that by virtue of knowing non-observationally and practically what is being done, and knows that by virtue of being the subject of the piece of practical reasoning behind the action. The agent therefore exercises a sort of control, but it is rational control.

Note the following:

This conception of reason is not psychologised. It is a normative concept, and is seen as having a causal role insofar as it can be appealed to in an explanation of behaviour. The concept of reason is *sui generis*, even if it can be employed as a causal-explanatory concept. Its being *sui generis* means that it cannot be captured by causal-functional roles.

Nothing is said to the effect that what is known needs to be conscious, or directly present to consciousness. What you know is not necessarily transparent in that sense.

Problems: A very heavy burden is placed on the concept of knowledge, and the normative concept of reason. One might here be explaining the clear by the obscure.

Advantages:

There is a clearer role for the agent in agency – the agent is present in the action by controlling it rationally.

The notion of reason is irreducibly normative even if causal.

One has no need to speak of causing something the right sort of way. This is taken care of by the link between the reason and what one knows non-observationally.

Concluding perspective:

The conceptually rich view is much better. The need to introduce the irreducible “right sort of way” shows that one is trying a reduction of action to (intransitive) bodily movement with the right kind of cause, where no reduction can be had. Perhaps more importantly, there are many reasons with little or no causal-explanatory role. They are still reasons. We must give up a causal-functional approach to reasons; that approach can, at best, only capture reasons that do causal-explanatory work.

The resources of the conceptually rich approach are striking. The distinction between the transitive and the intransitive readings of bodily movement is available for all naturalists.

Non-observational knowing what you are doing can, I think, be ascribed to creatures with little sensitivity to reasons in the normative sense. Knowledge is naturally seen as prior to belief anyway. Animals have it abundantly.

Reason-sensitivity comes in degrees as humans mature, and can be thought of as a gradual concept.

Positive claims: Biology can interact profitably with the conceptually rich approach, not only with the conceptually poor.

Psychology might be interested in this for many reasons. We could try these two conceptions out on a number of pathological cases from psychology. My bet is that the conceptually rich approach will be helpful when conceptualizing both development stages and failures, and a number of puzzles and pathologies.

Social science in general will benefit from buying into a rich and substantial approach to reason and normativity. As it is practiced today it invites a deep scepticism about normative truths (it is all a matter of taste, they think), and this does great harm.

Philosophy will be challenged by this approach, because it goes against dominant ways of thinking about mind and body. But in my view it relates fruitfully to philosophical issues like freedom of the will.