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INTENTIONS AND INTENTIONALITY

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# Intentions and Intentionality

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**M**ichael Thompson advances a “naïve action theory” as an alternative to the “sophisticated” accounts of action displayed by ordinary folk psychology. While the latter explains actions in terms of mental states conceived as propositional attitudes like beliefs and desires, intentional actions figure in the former equally as grounds and as grounding (Thompson 2007: 90).<sup>1</sup> In fact, in naïve explanations, an action is rationalized by another action of which the action to be explained is a proper part, so that no mental state is postulated as its cause. According to this reading, one will answer a question like “Why are you flipping that switch?” by saying “Because I am turning the light on” rather than “Because I want to turn on the light”. If successful, this explanatory strategy will re-conceptualize actions so that psychological phenomena like intending, wanting, desiring to do x come together with doing x intentionally, dispensing with the psychological vocabulary of mental *states*. The claim is ambitious in that it does not simply suggest that folk psychological explanations can be reformulated in a language in which mental states are absent – that is, that the same etiological content can be conveyed in both ways – but that folk psychological explanations cannot be defended and the explanatory role of mental states like wanting, intending, desiring is taken up in naïve explanations by “the progress of the deed

<sup>1</sup> M. Thompson, *Life and Action: Elementary Structures of Practice and Practical Thought* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press 2008). Page numbers in the text are to this book.

itself’ – so that the latter are not just equivalent, but prior to their sophisticated counterparts (90-1).

In what follows I will defend the plausibility of intentional psychology and folk psychological explanations. I will do this in two ways. First I will question that naïve explanations are more naïve than the ones provided by folk psychology and suggest that the latter are phenomenologically prior to the former. Second, I will focus on the role of intentionality in action theory and suggest that folk psychology provides a better answer than naïve theory to the question of what makes actions intentional.

## I

### How naïve?

The contrast between naïve and sophisticated explanations plays a paramount role in Thompson’s approach. Yet a lot depends on what one considers naïve. I will try to show that folk psychological explanations may be no less naïve than Thompson’s alternative, and they provide a description of actions that is more adequate from the agent’s first personal perspective.

The point about naiveté does not seem to be a matter of ontological parsimony, as Thompson’s theory displays an understanding of actions that involves mereological relations between parts and wholes, as well as a specific metaphysics of events and processes. The basic idea of naïve theory is that an action is explained by locating it in the progress of an unfolding event so that the *explanandum* occurs as a part of the developing whole—the *explanans*. According to this reading, the function of “practical-psychical” verbs routinely used to rationalize actions—to intend, to want, and the like—is not to express a mental *state* working as their efficient cause, but to express “certain forms of

imperfective judgments” that locate actions in the progress of the whole event by which they are explained. In such judgments, the representation of an individual—e.g. Martha—and the representation of an action—e.g. walking across the street—are combined so that the action is explained by judging that the individual is doing A because she is doing B—e.g. Martha is walking across the street because she is going to school (129 ff.). In other words, we can construct the opposition between the folk psychological theories of action and the naïve theory of action by saying that in the former actions are explained by entities of a different kind—mental states—while in the latter actions are explained by entities of the same kind.

Thompson presents two main arguments for the priority of naïve theory. The first is based on the primacy of ordinary pre-scientific time consciousness, which is supposed to be expressed by imperfective verb forms. The second is aimed at showing that it is possible to imagine a form of life in which sophisticated explanations are unknown and that the correlated vocabulary can be developed starting from a language with no words for mental states. I will not question the second argument, as it seems plausible to me, if the first succeeds.

The crucial point of the first argument is that once we see that the progressive imperfective verbal forms like “I am walking to school” are true to our ordinary time-consciousness, it becomes clear that the vocabulary of propositional attitudes is unfit for expressing actions in the present tense. The point is that a present perfective form like “I walk to school” expresses an habitual sense and therefore cannot be used to construct a propositional attitude expressing the “fugitive thought-content” corresponding to the imperfective form – the proposition occurring as its object in, say, “I want that I walk to school” would in fact express a habitual sense (128).

Linguistic evidence is hard to assess and Thompson concedes that different languages can convey the relevant aspectual distinctions in different ways, but claims that the underlying structure of predication can always be found at work at any level of speech, thought, and being, connecting the related linguistic, logical, and ontological categories (128). Here we are at the methodological foundation of Thompson's approach. By tracing ontological distinction back to distinctions among judgment forms, Thompson apparently extends the realm of the a priori from logical truths to truths involving material or "contentful" concepts like life, action, practice (14-15). In the case of action theory, the insight we are asked to share is that the aspectual form used to express the "fugitive thought-content" that represents present actions is bonded to the first-personal time awareness displayed by the agent in the process of acting. This is what the "manifest image" reveals about the general form of the straightforward rationalization of actions as pertaining "to the essence of what we might call ordinary, natural or pre-scientific event-consciousness":

Perfective aspect cannot be combined with the present tense. If I insist on knitting together the first person and an event- or process- description like 'walk to school', meaning thereby to produce a report on current events, all I can manage is the progressive, and thus imperfective, proposition 'I'm walking to school' (125).

We can now ask how much this is true to the phenomenology of intentions and in particular whether folk psychology is really sophisticated in a way that precludes the possibility of a theory of action true to our pre-scientific time consciousness. Clearly here the contrast between the manifest and the scientific image is different from the case in which natural sciences are contrasted with ordinary experience. *Prima facie*, beliefs, desires and the like are not deep microphysical structures inaccessible to ordinary

experience. On the contrary, they are located at the phenomenal level of macroscopic naïve objects, properties and states of ordinary experience. That is to say that they are accessible to first personal experience in a way that does not involve a sophisticated theoretical apparatus. Certainly there are accounts of folk psychology that take folk psychological concepts to be theoretical posits used to explain behaviors in the third person, by mastering a body of law like generalizations ranging over propositional attitudes. Folk psychology in this case would in fact work like theoretical physics, by positing unobservable entities to explain behavioral phenomena. This is not the place to discuss such accounts, but there is some reason to doubt that folk psychology works that way—in particular, the so-called theory-theory of mind does not seem to fit with the evidence coming from recent research on the cognitive and neural basis of mindreading.<sup>2</sup> There are alternatives to theory-theory, however.

Goldman for instance suggested that mental states are known non inferentially by detecting their phenomenal properties both in the case of sensory states and in the case of propositional attitudes—it is “not outlandish to suggest that there are distinctive ways it feels to believe something rather than to desire it, to hope for something rather than dread it, and so forth.”<sup>3</sup> And a lasting tradition considers the mind to be essentially phenomenal, so that mental states are given directly to us by the pre-reflective phenomenal awareness which goes along with our

<sup>2</sup> A. Goldman, *Simulating Minds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2006) and *Mirroring, Mindreading, and Simulation*, in J. A. Pineda (ed.), *Mirror Neuron Systems. The Role of Mirroring Processes in Social Cognition* (New York. Springer 2009), pp. 311-330.

<sup>3</sup> A. Goldman, “Consciousness, Folk Psychology and Cognitive Science,” *Consciousness and Cognition* Vol. 2, N. 4 (1993), pp. 364-382, p. 380.

first personal experience of thinking and acting.<sup>4</sup> Finally, a recent trend in the philosophy of mind stresses the connection between consciousness and intentionality. Searle claimed that intentional states are individuated in terms of the aspectual shape of their conscious occurrences.<sup>5</sup> Crane suggests something similar, taking the subjective character of minds to be essential to the structure of intentionality.<sup>6</sup> This has been emphasized in the debate on phenomenal intentionality and cognitive phenomenology. The claim is that there is at least a kind of intentionality that is constitutively determined by phenomenology and pervasive in our mental life, encompassing both non-propositional mental states like sensory perception and propositional attitudes, as long as their satisfaction conditions can be cashed out in terms of perceptual experience.<sup>7</sup> Apparently, the idea that phenomenal consciousness is—at least in some cases—constitutive of intentionality leads to the view that there is a specific phenomenology of cognitive states and processes, conceived of as rational transitions between psychological states—the idea being that every conscious state of thinking that P does have a “proprietary, distinctive, individuating phenomenology.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, according to these readings, folk psychological concepts are

<sup>4</sup> E. Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy* (Nijhoff, Den Haag 1982), § 80; S. Gallagher, D. Zahavi, *The Phenomenological Mind* (London: Routledge 2008), pp. 119 ff.

<sup>5</sup> J. Searle, *Intentionality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1981) and *The Rediscovery of Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1993).

<sup>6</sup> T. Crane, *Elements of Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2001), p. 31.

<sup>7</sup> T. Horgan and J. Tienson, *The intentionality of phenomenology and the phenomenology of intentionality*, in D. J. Chalmers (ed.), *Philosophy of mind: Classical and contemporary readings* (New York: Oxford University Press 2002), pp. 520–532, p. 520, p. 525.

<sup>8</sup> D. Pitt, “The Phenomenology of Cognition or What It Is Like to Think That P,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* Vol. 69, N. 1 (2004): pp. 1–36, p. 5.



phenomenal concepts. They do not—not primarily at least—introduce mental states as theoretical posits to explain behavior. Rather they draw on our first personal experience of thinking and acting. In a sense they are presupposed by the very idea of a manifest image, as they are constitutive of the naïve experience of the world. In this context, the role of a “scientific image” should be played by some kind of neurophysiological mental processes, which dispenses with propositional attitudes.<sup>9</sup>

From this point of view folk psychological concepts are not very sophisticated, at least no more than the mereological and ontological concepts displayed by Thompson’s proposal. Phenomenal consciousness seems to convey the most immediate and naïve experience we can possibly express. Thus, if the connection between consciousness and cognition is taken seriously, folk psychology is not primarily a theory, but a phenomenal experience about which speakers can be credited with pre-reflective, direct, non-inferential knowledge.

What if we look at Thompson’s naïve explanation of actions from this point of view? Speakers are supposed to answer questions like “why are you doing A?” by mentioning an action B that includes A as its proper part—“because I am doing B”. This however does not tell how the speakers experience the action from their first personal point of view. The idea that the first action is part of another, larger action which develops over time suggests that the agent is acting according to a plan. That is, the fact that I am intentionally doing A because I am doing B—as far as B is not yet completed—implies that I am doing A as a part of an action or activity I am pursuing over time. I can answer the question “why are you writing that sentence” by saying that I am writing a paper. That may be all one needs to know if she is

<sup>9</sup> J. Churchland, “Eliminative Materialism and the Propositional Attitudes,” *The Journal of Philosophy* Vol. 78, N. 2 (1981), pp. 67-90.

asking the question in the second person? But if we look at this from a first personal point of view, say *my* point of view, it looks like I see myself engaging in a lasting activity in which I coordinate different actions. As Bratman observes, in such cases I don't see myself simply as a "time-slice agent"; rather, I see my action as that of an agent coordinating his/her own past and future actions.<sup>10</sup> My doing A is planned consistently with my past and future actions, and my beliefs about the relevant features of the world. I recall my past actions, plan future ones, think about how they can be carried out. In doing A because I am doing B, I am thinking about what B should look like and trying to make A to cohere with it—as I am writing a sentence because I am writing a paper, I have the paper in mind, and many of the other things I need to do to get it done. At this point it seems natural to see my doing B—and my doing A as a part of B—as guided by a future oriented intention—which may eventually be part of a larger plan. And it is natural to see this as a psychological process. Not only there must be some psychological continuity in the mental life of an agent, but there must be a systematic connection between intentions and actions, as an intentional action is likely to be understood by the agent as the execution of a prior intention to act.<sup>11</sup> We need not to enter into the complexity of the psychological ties that keep agents and plans together. The point is that this is a very natural and simple way to describe what is happening as we act intentionally. As a psychological alternative to Thompson's proposal, this seems perfectly naïve. It does not work as a theoretical framework superimposed on the phenomena to explain observed behaviors, and it does not itself conflict with Thompson's idea that actions' rationalizations are connected with our pre-scientific time-consciousness. Moreover,

<sup>10</sup> M. Bratman, *Structures of Agency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2007), pp. 28-29.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

it seems to express more adequately the first personal awareness of what is going on in the temporal unfolding of actions.

## II

### **Intentions and intentionality**

A related point concerns the relationship between intentions and intentionality. It seems to me that, if we consider actions to be intentional, we need a theory of intentionality to account for their intentional features. Even if we accept the explanation of action to be naïve in Thompson’s sense—actions are explained by “the progress of the deed itself”—we need to qualify the claim that this is a theory of acting intentionally. As Thompson recognizes, the aspectual distinctions relevant to naïve action explanations are not specific to human actions (126). We may explain any process by saying that something is doing A because it is doing B—the tree is leaning because it is falling down, a missile is turning left because it is going to hit the target. So what is special in human actions? The special thing, in this context at least, is that human actions are considered to be intentional. What distinguishes the falling of a tree from my walking to school is that the latter is done intentionally.

This places a burden on the explanation of actions. According to a standard view, intentionality is a property of representations. Thus a theory of action that takes actions to be intentional must account for the representational features involved. Yet it is not clear how to locate them in a progressive account. A natural way is to proceed to transform the progressive account into a teleological account where a goal is represented as a future event or state of affairs: I can say that am walking down the street because I am going to school, but if I am asked to make explicit the intentionality of my action, I will probably say that I am

walking down the street in order to go to school. This is the answer Anscombe seems to have in mind as she considers intentional actions to be marked by a forward-looking motive.<sup>12</sup> Of course the teleology here is spurious. Going to school does not move my action as a final cause. It motivates it because it is represented as the goal I am pursuing by walking down the street. So if actions are intentional, we need to find a slot for the representation of goals. And it seems natural to look at some pro-attitude for which they provide an intentional content. This will make the explanation of action a piece of what Anscombe called a “philosophical psychology.” Talking of forward-looking motives amounts to talking about mental states that relate to a representation of a future event or a future state of affairs. In this context we don’t need to take a stance on the form of these representations and about the possible causal role of mental states. The point is that from the first personal perspective of agents, intentional actions involve a representation of goals and that representations must be attached to some attitude to count as a motive for action. This may not be needed for making sense of the fugitive thought content “I am walking down the street”. But it does not entail that a theory of action can generally work without intentional psychology. Future goals at least—or the future actions involved in an action plan—still need to be represented as the intentional objects of a psychological attitude.

And there is a reason for taking the representations involved to be propositional, at least in some cases. Intentional actions are often deliberate and deliberation involves reasoning. More specifically, it involves something like a practical syllogism. Here the major premise mentions something which is generally good

<sup>12</sup> G.E.M. Anscombe, *Intentions* (Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press 1957), p. 21, p. 23.

or desirable—say, dry food; the minor premise states that a particular thing is a token of what is generally good—that a certain food is dry; as for the conclusion, it is traditional to debate if it is a statement that something is good or the imperative that one do something, but we can ignore this issue. The point of interest in this context is that the representations occurring in a practical syllogism must be compositional in order for deliberation to work as a piece of reasoning. This suggests that deliberation should be constructed as a psychological process involving propositional attitudes, as the transition from premises to conclusions can be assessed as valid or invalid only if the practical syllogism is constructed as a concatenation of propositions like

X is good

a is a token of X

a is good/do a

Thus there is at least one reason to think that folk psychological explanations are on the right track. The explanation of action should mention propositional attitudes as the psychological states that rationalize action because deliberations must respect compositionality. On the contrary, if we take actions to be explained along the line of Thompson's relationships between parts and wholes, the whole explains the parts in the process of acting, so that the explanatory line goes from the whole to the parts and not vice-versa. As this part-whole relation is holistic rather than compositional, it is unclear how to make sense the deliberative process that at least sometimes motivates—and therefore to explain—actions.

In conclusion, let me say something about Thompson's general strategy. The idea of explaining something seems to me to

entail that the explanation should work with concepts that do not presuppose the *explananda*. Thus if we are to explain action, it we should not take the notion of action as an *explanans*, as it is the case in naïve explanations. In fact, Thompson may not be literally advancing a new kind of explanation, but rather inviting us—in a Wittgensteinian vein—to look at actions in a different way and change our attitude towards action theory. If one came to see that actions are explained in progressive terms, one would stop looking for *something* that explains action and rather provide a description according to which an action is properly located within the relevant whole-part structure. This seems to restate the traditional alternative between explanation and understanding, as rationalizing an action here is a matter of locating the action in a broader action context. By providing a “naïve explanation”, that is, we do not supply something by which actions are explained—for instance, a set of psychological states. Rather, we try to make sense of actions by providing the whole-part relation by which they are individuated.