

What is a theory of intentional action?

PHIL 43503
Jeff Speaks

January 22, 2009

We should distinguish the question of what the correct theory, or analysis, of intentional action is from the question of what theories of intentional action are, or should be, theories *of*. Here are some answers to the question: what does a theory of intentional action aim to explain?

A theory of intentional action should explain the nature of . . .

1. actions to which the question ‘Why?’, in the relevant sense, has application. (Anscombe)
2. actions which are such that the agent can know what he/she is doing without observation. (Anscombe)
3. actions done for a reason. (Davidson)
4. actions which the agent does self-consciously and deliberately. (Frankfurt)
5. actions guided by, or governed by, the agent. (Frankfurt on ‘intentional movement’)

Depending on which of these we choose, we will get a different view about whether, for example, spiders perform intentional actions. (If 5, yes; if 4, no; what about the others? maybe if 1 or 3, yes; if 2, no?)

We might also get a different view about actions done out of habit.

Do any of the above categories coincide? If so, which?