

*Setiya on the marks of intentional action, the belief-desire theory,
and the guise of the good*

1. Two marks of intentional action

Setiya begins with two marks of intentional action, each of which were noticed by Elizabeth Anscombe.

The first is one with which we are very familiar: the claim that there is an important connection between acting intentionally and acting for a reason. It is controversial, as we have seen, that if one acts intentionally, one acts for a reason. But the following does not seem controversial:

Reason

If one Φ s for a reason, one Φ s intentionally.

The second mark of intentional action is one which we have mentioned, though spent less time discussing: this is the idea that there is a close connection between acting intentionally and doing something about which one has non-observational knowledge.

That might suggest the following principle:

If one Φ s intentionally, one knows that he is Φ ing.

Counterexample: Davidson on the carbon copies. A revision:

If one Φ s intentionally, then there is something which one is doing intentionally in the knowledge that one is doing it.

A worry: does this really count as knowledge? We can by pass this worry by sticking to the following weaker principle:

Belief

If one Φ s intentionally, then there is something which one is doing intentionally in the belief that one is doing it.

Together, **Reason** and **Belief** entail the following claim:

If one Φ s for a reason, then there is something which one is doing intentionally in the belief that one is doing it.

Further we can note that **Reason** and **Belief** seem to be necessary truths. If this seems right, then it seems that the following must be true:

Puzzle

Necessarily, if one Φ s for a reason, then there is something which one is doing intentionally in the belief that one is doing it.

Puzzle is what Setiya thinks a good theory of intentional action must explain. The idea that necessary truths must get some explanation.

His principal argument against the theories of intentional action that he considers in first few sections that we read is that these theories fail to explain **Puzzle**. One way to see the argument here is as an attempt to show that if these theories were true, then **Puzzle** would not be true. But it is; hence these theories must be false.

2. Setiya on the belief-desire theory

We are by now very familiar with the sort of belief-desire theory presented in Davidson's early work. Two aspects of Setiya's discussion of this theory are important for us: his solution to the problem of deviant causal chains and his criticism of that theory's failure to explain **Puzzle**.

The solution to the problem of deviant causal chains: (i) the distinction between basic and non-basic actions; (ii) non-deviance of basic actions explained by the desire guiding the action throughout its course rather than merely triggering it; (iii) non-deviance of non-basic actions explained by the notion of a plan: one's non-basic action of Φ ing is nondeviantly caused iff the basic actions by which I Φ are part of my plan for Φ ing.

Why the belief-desire theory fails to explain **Puzzle**.

Velleman's counterexample to the belief-desire theory: Freud and the inkstand.

Why this can be naturally seen as leading to what we have been calling "appearance of the good" theories of intentional action, in which part of what makes an action intentional is its being caused by the judgement that the action is good, or what we have most reason to do, etc.

3. Setiya on appearance of the good theories

Let's consider the following appearance of the good theories:

I intentionally Φ iff my Φ ing is caused by

- ... an unconditional judgement that Φ ing is the best thing to do
- ... a judgement that Φ ing is a good thing to do
- ... an unconditional judgement that Φ ing is what I have most reason to do
- ... a judgement that Φ ing is something I have some reason to do
- ... a that Φ ing is something I have good reason to do.

Do any of these theories of intentional action explain **Puzzle**?

A further argument against appearance of the good theories (apart from the examples of akrasia): the argument from the possibility of intentionally Φ ing for no reason. Suppose that I do something - X - because I am going to Φ , and Φ ing is something I am going to do for no reason. Then mustn't my doing X be something I do without seeing my reason for it as a good reason? (A limitation of this argument: it assumes that when I Φ for no reason I don't see anything good about Φ ing - but this would be rejected by some appearance of the good theories.)

4. Setiya's theories of acting for a reason & intentional action

Setiya's theory of acting for a reason is in one respect like the theories we have discussed: it takes action for a reason to be action caused in the right way by a certain psychological state. But the important motivating state is not a desire (as in the case of Davidson's early theory) nor a judgement about the good (as in appearance of the good theories) but what he calls a 'desire-like belief': a state which, like belief, presents its content as true, but, like desire, aims at making true that content.

The content of the relevant state is also a bit more complicated than in any of the other theories we have discussed: the content of the desire-like belief is that one is hereby Φ ing because of the belief that p. To have one's action be caused in the right way by a desire-like belief with this content is to act for a reason, which is sufficient (even if not necessary) for acting intentionally. So this is our theory of acting for a reason:

A Φ s for the reason that p =df A Φ s because A has the desire-like belief that he is hereby Φ ing because of the belief that p.

Why does this theory explain **Puzzle**?

How does this help with the sorts of examples that Velleman raises?

Setiya does not think that all intentional actions are done for a reason; but he does think that we can explain what intentional actions are, once we have explained the nature of acting for a reason. Intentional actions which are not done for a reason are actions caused by desire-like beliefs with a content different from that sketched above. So, for example, Hursthouse's examples of arational actions done out of anger are actions done because of the desire-like belief that one is Φ ing out of anger.

This leaves only actions (like the carbon copier example) which are done despite the agent not believing that he is doing them. These escape the above generalization of the definition of acting for a reason. These are cases (53-4) in which one is doing something else intentionally with the end of doing Φ , and in which one's Φ ing happens in accord with one's plan. (The example of the wild pigs explains the second condition.) So, for example, the carbon copier presses on the paper with the end of making 10 carbon copies.

Objections to Setiya's theory:

1. Setiya's theory correct implies that to act because of the consideration that p one must believe that p. But it also implies that one must believe that one believes that p. This threatens to put too-strong constraints on intentional action. See Setiya's response on p. 46-7.
2. Smith's argument against desire-like beliefs: a desire that p is disposed to go out of existence if one realizes that p is the case, whereas beliefs are just the opposite, so no state could have the characteristics of each.
3. The case of arational actions. Setiya thinks of these as intentional actions not done for reasons, which seems right. But his theory implies that whenever one acts intentionally out of anger one must believe that one is acting out of anger. Is this right? Is (to put it another way)

every action done out of anger but which is not such that the subject knows that it is done out of anger a non-intentional action?

4. If acting for the reason that p requires believing that you believe that p, so must believing for the reason that p require believing that you believe that p.

5. One can't, or at least shouldn't, have the relevant desire-like beliefs prior to the start of the relevant action. But then how can they cause the action? (See p. 57 and following.)