

Thompson on aspect and the primacy of naive action explanations

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February 18, 2009

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1 Intentions, and wants, and propositional attitudes

1.1 Propositional attitudes

Recall this intuitive objection to naive action theory:

Cases in which I successfully ϕ can be, from the agent’s point of view, very much like cases in which one tries to ϕ but is unsuccessful. So how could the agent’s reasons for action be fundamentally different between the two cases — actions in one case, and states of mind like desires and intentions in the other?

Thompson’s reply to this objection is that there’s an important way in which intentions and wants are more like intentional actions than they are like states of mind like beliefs and judgements.

Beliefs and judgements are what are called ‘propositional attitudes’ — they are attitudes one might take toward a proposition, or claim about the world. Propositional attitudes are characteristically expressed by sentences like

Abe believes that arithmetic is incomplete.

Ben supposes for the sake of argument that Obama will solve the financial crisis.

Carla guesses that there are 148 beans in the jar.

In each of these sentences, we have a subject, and then a propositional attitude verb, and then a that-clause, which seems to name a proposition. As these examples should make clear, there are many, many propositional attitudes.

Many philosophers tend to assimilate all mental states to the case of propositional attitudes. Thompson thinks that this is a mistake. Wants and intentions, unlike beliefs, supposings, guesses, and conjectures, are not propositional attitudes.

1.2 *The objects of 'intends' and 'wants'*

As Thompson notes, it is very natural to say things like

I want to eat some ice cream.

I intend to go to the store.

whereas we would never say

I believe to eat some ice cream.

I suppose to go to the store.

but instead would say, e.g.,

I believe that I am going to eat some ice cream.

I suppose that I will go to the store.

'to go to the store' is not a name of a proposition — it is more like the name of an action — consequently this fact about ordinary usage is a prima facie argument that 'want' and 'intend', which take these sorts of 'to'-phrases, are not propositional attitudes.

However, it is not obvious that this argument is conclusive, for two reasons.

First, some desires are most naturally expressed in propositional attitude form: "My strongest desire is that Notre Dame win another national title before I die." (Or is it more natural to say: "My strongest desire is for Notre Dame to win another national title before I die.")

Second, we can often translate the sorts of ascriptions of wants and intentions given above into propositional attitude form, e.g.:

I want that I eat some ice cream.

I intend that I go to the store.

These sound stilted, but comprehensible. What shows that this possibility of paraphrase doesn't vindicate the idea that intentions and wants, like most mental states, are propositional attitudes?

1.3 *The grammatical distinction between event-descriptions and state-descriptions*

To answer this question, we need to understand Thompson's distinction between two different kinds of predicates, which he calls 'state-descriptions' and 'event-descriptions.' These are distinguishable by a grammatical criterion: event-descriptions, but not state-descriptions, admit of different *aspects*. It's easiest to see the point by looking at some examples.

Consider the following event-descriptions: 'to walk to school' and 'to make the omelette.' Given an event-description like this and a singular term, we can always form two different propositions without varying tense. For the singular term 'John', and the past tense, in this case the two are

John walked to school. John was walking to school.
John made the omelette. John was making the omelette.

The difference between the sentences in the left-hand column and those on the right is not one of tense; both are past tense. Rather, the difference is one of aspect. We say that the sentences on the left hand 'perfect' or 'perfective' aspect, whereas those on the right are 'imperfect' (sometimes called 'progressive'). Since, e.g., 'to walk to school' admits of a difference in aspect, it is, in Thompson's terminology, an event-description.

The interesting thing is that not all predicates admit of this distinction. Take the predicate 'is taller than six feet' (or the verb phrase 'to be taller than six feet.' For the singular term 'John', and the past tense, there is just one sentence you can form: 'John was taller than six feet.' There is no distinction of aspects here; so this predicate is a state-description.

When Thompson talks about a distinction in modes of predication, this is between predicates which are event-descriptions (and so admit of difference in aspect) and predicates which are state-descriptions.

1.4 *The relevance of aspect to the question of whether desire and intention are propositional attitudes*

There are two important points to keep in mind here:

1. Thompson claims that whenever we have a sentence of the form

I intend to ϕ .
I want to ϕ .

'to ϕ ' will be an event-description, which therefore admits of a difference in aspect. (There do seem to be exceptions to this claim – 'I intend to be taller than Michael Jordan' – but these do seem to be exceptions rather than the rule.)

2. There is no perfective aspect in the present tense. We can have both perfect and imperfect in the past (was walking, walked) and in the future (will have walked, will be walking), but in the present tense we can only have the imperfect (am walking). If we try to frame the perfect in the present tense, we get something like ‘I walk’ - which is a habitual sentence, meaning (roughly) I often/habitually am walking.

These two points are supposed to be trouble for the idea that desire and intention are propositional attitudes. For suppose that they are propositional attitudes. Then, for every use of, e.g., ‘intend’ on which it takes an event-description, we should be able to find some that-clause to take the place of the event-description. So consider

I intend to walk to school.

What could the translation be? One idea is that it could be something like

I intend that I walk to school.

But this seems wrong. As above, the natural reading of ‘I walk to school’ is habitual; but in uttering the original sentence I am not announcing the intention to habitually walk to school. A natural next guess for a translation is

I intend that I am walking to school.

which builds in the imperfective aspect. But this does not seem quite right; it sounds as though one is intending to be walking but, as Thompson says, indifferent to whether one makes it there.

Some other possibilities:

I intend that I walked to school.

I intend that I will have walked to school.

Thompson’s conclusion is that there is no good translation of these kind of uses of ‘intends’ and ‘desires’ into propositional attitude form. Hence the ‘paraphrase’ response to the prima facie argument for the view that wants and intentions are not propositional attitudes fails.

2 Naive explanation is explanation by the imperfective

Thompson’s next main claim (129) is that in every case of naive action explanation, event-description in terms of which the action is explained is in the imperfective aspect. This seems broadly correct. It is natural to say ‘I walked to the corner because I was walking to school’, whereas ‘I walked to the corner because I walked to school’ is most naturally

regarded as something other than a reasons-explanation. (Same goes for ‘because I was trying ...’ and ‘because I tried ...’)

Suppose that Thompson is right in this conjecture. Then, as he says, this is a fact which seems to call out for explanation. Wants, tryings, intentions, and imperfective descriptions of past tense actions can appear as explanans or explanandum, but perfective descriptions of past actions, alone among these, can appear as explanandum but not as explanans. Why not?

One natural response is: rationalization is always a matter of explaining something in terms of an ongoing (relative to the explanandum) process — something imperfective, relative to the explanandum — rather than a state of affairs or completed event. The idea is that there are intrinsically imperfective states of affairs – happenings – and that these are always the grounds of naive action explanation. To give a naive action explanation is to locate the happening as a part of some imperfective, unfolding state of affairs.

This fits neatly with the conclusions about intentions and wants mentioned above. On that view, intentions are not attitudes toward propositions, but rather directed toward imperfective processes. This suggests that, as Thompson puts it

“the function of such practical-psychological verbs is precisely to express certain forms of imperfective judgement.”

Thompson’s idea is that he claims that

A wanted to walk across the street.

A intended to cross the street.

A was crossing the street.

Are all imperfective judgements directed toward the same action as the perfective judgement

A crossed the street.

A natural interpretation of this is that each of these three judgements represent a different stage in the happening of this event – A’s crossing the street.

This, ultimately, is why Thompson seems to think that wants and intentions are more like intentional actions than they are like beliefs. Ascriptions of wants and intentions are all imperfective descriptions of processes, whereas ascriptions of beliefs are state descriptions: they describe a state of affairs which does not admit of distinctions between perfective and imperfective aspects. (There’s no distinction, for example, between ‘I believed ...’ and ‘I was believing ...’, other than that the latter sounds borderline ungrammatical.)

3 The primacy of naive explanation

So far we have been largely occupied with responses to arguments against the legitimacy of naive action explanation. There is the sense that the observations about aspect lend credence to the idea that naive action explanation is more fundamental than sophisticated action explanation, but there is no straightforward argument for this conclusion. The most sustained defense of the thesis that naive action explanation is more fundamental than sophisticated action explanation comes in the last section.

Thompson's aim in this section is to imagine a society whose only form of action explanation is naive action explanation, and to compare that to our own ways of explaining actions. The only present tense explanation of action that such agents could give would be

I am doing x because I'm doing y .

Thompson mentions two uses of the imperfective aspect which allow these agents to explain more than at first sight might seem possible.

- Anticipatory uses, as in 'I want to turn the soil because I am turning the tomatoes tomorrow.' Why this is a strange kind of sentence.
- 'In hiatus' uses, as in 'He is organizing the peasants' (said of someone napping).

As Thompson plausibly says, these kinds of uses indicate that the idea that processes can exist even at times when there is nothing in which the progress of the process consists is built into our uses of the imperfective.

Thompson thinks that we can imagine the naive agents developing into agents capable of all of the kinds of explanation of which we are capable in two steps.

The 'first stage in the process of sophistication' comes with the introduction of the 'is going to ϕ ' locution. Thompson thinks of sentences of the form

I am going to ϕ .

as devices primarily for the expression of aspect rather than future tense, as would be expressed by

I will ϕ .

Two arguments for this claim: (1) We can give naive explanations in terms of the former, but not the latter: 'she's x ing because she's going to ϕ ,' but not 'she's x ing because she will ϕ .' (2) They embed differently in past tense constructions. So, while 'It was the case that I will bake the cake' entails the existence (past, present, or future) of some completed act of cake-baking, while 'It was the case that I was going to bake the cake' does not.

At this stage, rather than saying that he is doing something now because he *is* doing something tomorrow, one says that he is doing something now because he *is going to* do something tomorrow.

Once we have explanations in terms of the fact that agents are going to ϕ , we might imagine a distinction between cases in which one is giving such an explanation and thinks that the agent is eventually going to complete an act of ϕ ing, and cases in which one does not think this. Thompson thinks of this distinction as one which might be marked by the introduction of psychological verbs, and which would lead to sophisticated action explanations. (A philosopher of action might now come along, and decide that the sophisticated actions were the fundamental ones all along . . .)

Let's suppose that a language could develop this way. What, exactly, is this supposed to show? Does it show that naive action explanation is more fundamental in some sense than sophisticated action explanation? If so, how would you reconstruct the argument?

Does the analogy with barter, money, and credit economies help?