

Naive and sophisticated action theories

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1 The distinction between naive and sophisticated explanations of action

Thompson draws a contrast between naive and sophisticated explanations of action. Naive explanations of action explain one action in terms of another, as in

I'm breaking those eggs because I'm making an omelette.

Sophisticated explanations of action are the ones with which we are by now very familiar, which offer an explanation of an action in terms of an agent's wants, intentions, or other mental states. It is very natural, as Thompson notes, to think that naive action explanation is a kind of dispensable way of talking, and that every case of naive action explanation is underwritten by a sophisticated action explanation.

Thompson opposes the idea that naive action explanations are underwritten by more fundamental sophisticated explanations. The principle aim of the paper is to show that, in the end, we have to recognize naive action explanations as a more fundamental class of explanations of action than sophisticated action explanations. If this is right, then a plausible moral is that to understand the nature of intentional action, we should focus not on the relationship between mental states and actions expressed by sophisticated action explanations, but rather on the relationship between one action and another expressed by naive action explanations.

2 Different forms of action-explanation and their relations

The explanations with which we are concerned are of the form

X because Y

The thing filled in for ‘X’ — the thing which gets explained — is the explanandum. The thing filled in for ‘Y’ — the thing which does the explaining is the explanans.

Thompson considers four different sorts of sentences which might play the role of explanans and explanandum in an explanation of the sort that we are interested in:

I am doing X
I am trying to do X
I intend to do X
I want to do X

So far we have focused on explanations which let things with the form of the first of these be explained by things with the form of one of the bottom two. Thompson points out that we can construct ordinary sounding explanations with any combination of these four as explanans and explanandum. This gives us sixteen possible forms of ‘because’ sentence.

Thompson suggests that these four sorts of claims stand in a certain interesting relation: on the list above, each of these sentences entails the truth of each sentence below it, but is not entailed by any below it.

One might object along the following lines: if intention implies belief, then trying cannot entail intention, since one can clearly try to do something that one does not believe that one will do.

Thompson’s reply (103) seems to be that these sorts of objections rest on ambiguities in words like ‘intend’, and that there is one good use of the term on which it does not imply belief. (Maybe this is a use some might express by ‘decided to’ rather than ‘intended to.’)

He makes the same reply to the objection that one may intend to do something which one does not want to do; ‘want’ must be ambiguous, as is shown by the acceptability of sentences like ‘I don’t want to do what I want to do – I want to do what I ought to do.’

This system of entailments will become important later when we turn to discussion of Thompson’s treatment of sophisticated action explanations, and an objection to his own prioritizing of naive action explanations.

3 What intentional actions have in common

Thompson makes the following claim about the scope of naive action explanations:

“wherever a completed individual action is intentional ... it will be possible to find a true naive rationalization in which that description appears in the explanans.”

That is:

Thompson's conjecture

A is ϕ ing intentionally $\rightarrow \exists\psi$ (A is ψ ing because A is ϕ ing)

This raises an immediate problem. If it is true that A is ψ ing because A is ϕ ing, then it seems that A is ψ ing for a reason, which means that A 's ψ ing is an intentional action. But then, if Thompson's conjecture is true, it follows that it too must appear in the explanans of a naive action explanation, which means that there must be some other action which A is doing because she is doing this action. But this leads to the conclusion that one whenever one performs a single intentional action, one performs infinitely many intentional actions.

Thompson accepts this conclusion, and suggests that the impression that it is unacceptable depends on a requirement that for an act to be intentional it must be 'cognized' in advance of the action.

A separate worry: does Thompson's acceptance of this conclusion put some pressure on his views about the entailment from doing something intentionally to intending to do it, or wanting to do it?

So far this is only presented as a necessary condition on acting intentionally. But it is clear (112) that Thompson also thinks that it is a sufficient condition, so that we have:

A naive theory of intentional action

A is ϕ ing intentionally \equiv_{df} $\exists\psi$ (A is ψ ing because A is ϕ ing)

Thompson does not claim that this is an account of the nature of intentional action; but he says some things fairly close to this. In any case, a plausible reading of what he's up to takes its role as explanans in a naive action explanation to explain what makes some acts intentional.

Thompson next considers some objections to this sort of view.

4 Sophisticated action theory and the argument from illusion

Here's one sort of argument for sophisticated action theory (i.e., a theory which explains intentional action in terms of its relation to mental states like intentions or desires):

There are some cases in which an agent would give a naive explanation of her action, but in which that explanation would be false, because the agent is not doing what she thinks she is doing. ('I am getting a knife because I am making a peanut butter and jelly sandwich', said before the discovery that there is no jelly.) But even in these cases, the action is intentional, and done for a reason — so there must be some other, sophisticated explanation of the action. ('I

am getting a knife because I *want* to make a PB & J sandwich.’) But surely the kinds of explanation which really give one’s reasons for action cannot be different in kind depending on whether the attempted action is successful; so sophisticated explanations must give one’s real or fundamental reason even in the case in which the naive explanation could be true (when one really is making the sandwich).

As Thompson says, this shares a structure with the argument from illusion, which aims to show that in perception we are never directly aware of material things. One simple version of that argument might be laid out as follows:

1. In hallucinations, I am not directly aware of a material thing.
 2. In veridical experiences, one is only aware of the same sorts of things as in hallucinations.
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- C. In veridical experiences, I am not directly aware of material things.

In the case of action, cases in which I am trying to do something which I do not succeed in doing are the analogue of hallucinations. One might then construct the following argument to show that naive action explanations can never really give my reasons for action:

1. If I am not successfully ϕ ing, it is false to say that I am ψ ing because I am ϕ ing (because I’m not ϕ ing).
 2. But one’s reason for ψ ing must be the same whether or not it eventually turns out that one is successfully ϕ ing.
-
- C. Even in the case in which I successfully ϕ , the fact that I am ϕ ing can’t give the reason for my ψ ing – my reason must be the fact that I want to ϕ , or something else which is present in both the successful and the unsuccessful case.

Thompson gives two main replies to this argument for sophisticated action theory.

The first is a sort of ‘bad company’ argument, which might be put as follows:

Imagine a case in which I say ‘I am getting a knife because I am making a peanut butter and jelly sandwich’ but in which I fail to get the knife – perhaps all the knives are dirty. Then in this case the naive action explanation is again false – but in this case it is false because the statement in the explanandum position turns out to be false. Nonetheless, one might think that what I am up to still must have some explanation — even though my getting a knife doesn’t have an explanation since, as it turns out, I am not getting a knife. So what does have an explanation is something like the fact that I am *trying* to get a knife. But surely what I have reason to do can’t depend on whether my action turns out to be successful; so, even in cases in which I do succeed in getting the knife, I only really ever have a reason for trying to get the knife.

One might construct this argument by parallel with the above:

1. If I am not successfully ϕ ing, it is false to say that I am ψ ing because X (because I'm not ϕ ing).
 2. But what one has a reason for doing must be the same whether or not it eventually turns out that one is successfully ϕ ing.
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- C. Even in the case in which I successfully ϕ , what I have a reason to do cannot be ϕ ing – it must be something else, like wanting, or trying, to ϕ which is present in both the successful and the unsuccessful case.

Thompson thinks that this conclusion is absurd: if there are never really reasons for action, then there are no actions done for a reason, and there are no intentional actions. One sometimes has reason to do things, as well as reason to try to do them.

Is this really absurd?

But let's suppose that Thompson is right. That indicates that something must be wrong with the above argument for sophisticated action theory; but it doesn't show *what* is wrong with it. And it does nothing to show what is wrong with the following plausible-sounding thought:

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 argument is that wanting and intending are not states of mind of the same sort as beliefs and judgements, and that there are not, in the end, that fundamentally different from actions. This is the burden of the discussion of aspect in Chapter 8.