

Thompson on ‘naive action theory’

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1 Naive vs. sophisticated explanation 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. 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. (This tendency is the correlate of what Stout called the ‘internalist shift.’)

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.

2 The scope of naive action explanation

After distinguishing sixteen different kinds of practical explanation (or ‘rationalization’) in §2, Thompson moves in §3.1 to the question of the scope of naive explanation: the question of how many actions may be given a naive explanation. Thompson makes a strong (but qualified) claim about this: “wherever a completed individual action is intentional under a description of the sort Anscombe and Davidson have contemplated it will be possible to find a true naive rationalization in which that description appears *in the explanans*.” (17) I.e.: whenever an agent intentionally ϕ s, there will be some true explanation of the form, ‘ A x ’d because she was ϕ ing.’ If this is right, this will give naive action explanations a very large scope indeed.

This invites a natural objection: take any intentional act, like pushing a stone from A to B . It may be possible to find some part of that act such that it was done because the agent was pushing the stone from A to B . So far, so good. But now consider that part of the original stone-pushing. This must too be intentional, since it was an act done for reasons (the reason being given by the explanans, ‘because she was pushing the stone from A to B ’). But is there a part of this new, smaller act which can be given a similar explanation? Suppose that there is not; then we have a counterexample to Thompson’s thesis. Suppose that there is; then this too is an intentional action, and we are off looking for a part of this new action which can be given the right kind of naive explanation, and so on and so on. It looks as though, on pain of ascribing to agents an infinite number of intentional actions, this must come to an end; but it looks as though if it does come to an end, then Thompson’s thesis is false.

Thompson offers several responses to this argument (20-21). I find these difficult to follow.

3 The case for a sophisticated theory of action

Beginning in §3.3, Thompson discusses the prospects of a sophisticated theory of action. The version he focuses on holds that every naive action explanation is underwritten by an explanation of action in terms of an agent’s *wants*.

3.1 The ‘argument from illusion’

Here’s one argument for sophisticated theories of action, which is very close to the argument Stout discussed in Ch. 1: there are some cases in which we would naively say that an agent is ϕ ing because she is ψ ing; but it might turn out that the agent is not ψ ing at all. Still, in these cases it might yet be true that the agent wanted to ψ . Since the want is present whether or not the agent is *really* ψ ing, it provides the more fundamental explanation. Similarity to one form of the argument from illusion.

Thompson’s response to this is a kind of bad company argument: one’s only motivation for finding the above argument convincing is the thought that we must be unable to be mistaken about either the action to be explained or its ground. But then, Thompson notes, the objector must also hold that we can only ever explain events of wanting (since

we could be mistaken about whether we are really performing the act that we are trying to explain). But this is absurd.

But this seems to miss the point. The strongest form of the argument from illusion as applied to the present case is that in some cases there will just be no relevant action to do the explaining (just as there just is no material object to be the object of perception in cases of hallucination). We will see later that Thompson's remarks on aspect and the relation between verb forms like 'is falling' and 'has fallen' may provide the resources to answer this further objection.

3.2 *The argument from simplicity*

There is also a quicker argument for the sophisticated theory. As Thompson says, "all sides will agree that wherever naive explanation is legitimate, a sophisticated action explanation is also available, though the reverse is not the case." (26) But if this is so, then there seems to be no reason to think that the ultimate rationalizing explanations of action can come in two kinds, especially two kinds as radically different as actions, on the one hand, and mental states, on the other.

Thompson's response to this objection is to claim that there is no deep metaphysical distinction between actions, on the one hand, and tryings, intendings, and wantings on the other.

How does this admission that sophisticated action explanations are legitimate in cases in which naive action explanations are not fit with Thompson's 'conjecture' in §3.1?

4 The importance of aspect

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

It is common to refer to a large class of our mental states, including beliefs, desires, and intentions, as *propositional attitudes* – states which are relations to propositions. It is clear that beliefs are propositional attitudes. But it is not so clear that desires and intentions are propositional attitudes. 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.

It is plausible that phrases of the form ‘that grass is green’ are names of propositions; consequently it is plausible that ‘believes’, which in the standard case attaches a name of an individual to such a that-clause, expresses a propositional attitude. But ‘to go to the store’ is not a name of a proposition; consequently it is less plausible that ‘desires’, which takes these sorts of ‘to’-phrases, expresses a propositional attitude.

Of course, sometimes ‘desires’ and ‘intends’ do take ‘that’-clauses, so the issue is not so clear. Thompson’s argument is that the use of these verbs in which they take ‘to’-phrases is the more fundamental one.

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

These ‘to’-phrases are verb phrases. The first point Thompson makes (§3.2) is a contrast 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 what Thompson and linguists call ‘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 threefold distinction between propositions, he is talking about the distinction between propositions (sentences?) which are (i) in the perfective aspect, (ii) imperfective, and (iii) have no distinction with respect to aspect. When he talks about this threefold distinction being underwritten by a twofold distinction in modes of predication, this twofold distinction is between predicates which are event-descriptions (and so admit of difference in aspect) and predicates which are state-descriptions.

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

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.)

There is second relevant point here: as Thompson says, there seems to be 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. Thompson discusses this in fn. 54. Is his argument against this propositional-attitude translation a good one? Does his appeal to the past tense show anything?

Thompson’s conclusion is that there is no good translation of these kind of uses of ‘intends’ and ‘desires’ into propositional attitude form.

4.4 Naive explanation is explanation by the imperfective

Thompson's next main claim (p. 37) 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 arguably 'I walked to the corner because I walked to school' is most naturally regarded as something other than a reasons-explanation.

Suppose that Thompson is right in this conjecture. Then, as he says (p. 39), this is a fact which seems to call out for explanation. The natural way to explain it is to invoke a metaphysical distinction corresponding to the grammatical distinctions of aspect (which is anyway plausible). Then the idea is that there are intrinsically imperfective states of affairs – happenings – and that these are 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.

Indeed, given that the objects of intention and desire are also these sorts of imperfective states of affairs, we can say that "the type of explanation of *action* at stake in action theory, whether naive or sophisticated, is uniformly a matter of locating the action explained in what might be called a developing process ..." (39).

This is evidently meant to be an answer to the worries above discussed under the heading of the 'argument from simplicity.' How this is an answer is made slightly clearer by the argument of the last section of the paper.

5 The myth of exclusively 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, §3.6.

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 .

He gives two arguments for this claim. The first is that we can give naive explanations in terms of the former, but not the latter: ‘she’s \bar{x} ing because she’s going to ϕ ,’ but not ‘she’s \bar{x} ing because she will ϕ . The second is that 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.

If this really is a device for expressing imperfective aspect, then it is natural to read it as saying the same thing as those uses of the simple imperfective which above we called ‘anticipatory.’

The second stage of sophistication is the admission of the ‘psychical verbs’ which figure in ordinary sophisticated action explanation. Here (p. 49) we do not get as much in the way of detail as one might like.

This conclusion rests on a certain view of the relation between the imagined naive agents and ourselves. Thompson says of this relation, “whereas they apprehend the imperfective mode of presence of an event- or process-form directly and abstractly, we apprehend it in a number of forms or guises.” (45) The idea appears to be that, as above, all explanation of actions is explanations in terms of, so use a phrase Thompson avoids, ‘imperfective facts’, where these are a kind of unfolding process. When we explain actions in terms of tryings, desires, or intentions, Thompson thinks that this is fundamentally the same kind of explanation.

Exactly what kind of explanation in terms of the imperfective is explanation in terms of intention, desire, etc? Perhaps the thought is that ‘I intend to ϕ ’ is very much like ‘I am going to ϕ .’ But then what about desire, and trying?

Worries about teleology in the assumption of such processes.

A general worry about the theory of action: if, as Thompson recognizes, we can use explanation in terms of the imperfective in all kinds of non-human (and non-animal) cases, how might we ever use this kind of explanation to single out intentional actions?