

Some objections to naive action theory

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1. As it stands, this theory seems open to Setiya's argument against the belief-desire theory: it can't explain the necessary connections between acting for a reason and certain mental states, like the claim that whenever one acts for a reason, one does something in the belief that one is doing it. How could a theory based on the primacy of naive action explanations explain the necessity of this? (Or the necessity of the principle that if one is acting for a reason, there's some reason such that one believes that one is acting for that reason (which may or may not be the real reason for action.)

Could these necessary connections be explained by a theory which explained belief and other mental states in terms of intentional action, rather than the other way around?

2. Doesn't Thompson owe us an explanation of the 'because' in naive action explanations? This is not just the 'because' of efficient causation, because of the sorts of cases we discussed ("He broke his nose because he tripped on the rug.") So his theory is not an explanation of Anscombe's special sense of the question 'Why?' — it takes for granted that this notion of 'because' is already understood. This is a point of contrast with all of the causal theories we have discussed, which try to *explain* acting for a reason in terms of efficient causation by some constellation of mental states.

(Another way to put this point: suppose we are given a catalogue of the actions and mental states of every person, and a list of the causal relations that obtain between them. This would be enough to figure out which actions were intentional on, e.g., Davidson's early theory (modulo the worries about deviant causal chains). But would this be enough to tell which actions were intentional on Thompson's theory? What further information would one need?)

So one might think that a satisfying theory of action should conjoin Thompson's theory of intentional action with an account of the special sense of 'because.' But it is hard to see how the latter might go. What makes it true that one is doing A because one is doing B — in addition to the fact that one is doing both actions? Might one hope to analyze this in terms of counterfactuals, like: if the agent had not been doing B, they would not have been doing A? This wouldn't help with the tripping example above. To me it seems disappointing that Thompson gives us no clue about how to proceed here.

3. Thompson's argument for the primacy of naive action explanation seems based on the coherence of a scenario in which rational agents explain each other's actions using only naive explanations. But why does this show the primacy of naive action explanations? Can't we also imagine a scenario in which rational agents use only sophisticated explanations? Is the fact that wants and intentions have verb-phrases as their complements supposed to do some work here?