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Slips, Thoughts and Actions

C. V. Felix



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DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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<p>Abstract.</p> <p>This dissertation explores the issue of knowledge and action in light of the phenomenon of slips. Slips are errors in performance where the agent violates her own governing intention. Chapter One argues for a novel theory of action explanation: explanation-by-norms. I claim that slips illuminate the usefulness of this form of explanation. Chapter Two explores the issue of capturing slips as actions through a discussion of Kay Peabody's criticism of explanation-based action theories. Chapter Three moves on to deal with the issue of basic action, and argues that a theory of action is better served focusing on basic activity, rather than basic action, and that basic activity can be defined by recourse to slips. Chapters Four and Five take issue with the phenomenon of knowledge how and Jason Stanley's reductive intellectualism. The upshot of these chapters is that knowledge how is not reducible to knowledge that. Chapter Six discusses knowledge of one's own actions, and defends a version of Anscombe's claim that agents have non-observational knowledge about their own intentional behavior.</p>		
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Slips, Thoughts and Actions

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Introduction

It is possible to disagree on nearly everything when it comes to human agency. Nonetheless, certain things are written in stone. One thinks. One acts. One makes mistakes. My focus in this dissertation is on these three simple facts and the relation between them. I am fascinated by the different roles that knowledge plays with each: that is, the kind of knowledge one has of thoughts, actions, and mistakes. What can one know about the thoughts, actions, and mistakes of others, and how? How does one come to have knowledge about one's own?

I will let two of the most intelligent persons I know introduce the topic in more detail. Both are philosophy professors. One day one of them was observed knocking on his own office door. After a brief period, he burst out: "ah, I thought I was knocking on my neighbour's door!" In the other case, I was sitting at a lunch bar waiting for a certain professor to arrive. He was somewhat late, and I sat watching the door. Suddenly I saw him through the window. He marched past the window towards the door, then marched past the door, leaving me puzzled. A few moments later, he came back and entered the restaurant.

The first professor's mistake was one of *false belief*. At the moment of knocking, he did not realize whose door he was knocking on. The second professor had no such false belief. He was just so stressed for being late that he blindly ran past the door he meant to enter.

My thesis explores cases like these, from different angles. My main focus is not on mistakes in general though, but on the form of mistake exemplified by the second professor: the slip. Slips are errors in performance where the agent violates her own governing intentions (Amaya 2013, Anscombe 2000, Baars, 1992, Norman, 1981).¹ Crucially, the agent slips despite *knowing* that her performance is an error. The agent

¹ One can construct examples where the agent *intends* to slip. Consider the skilled professor who wants her students to feel more comfortable. She knows that she intimidates them and makes them feel uneasy; so she puts herself in situations where she is likely to slip. She wants to show them that she, too, is prone to failure. Likewise, consider parents who want to show their children that even though they seem to manage everything perfectly, they are only human. That said, cases like this have a different character from genuine slips: the agent half plans them, by making changes in her environment to help them come about.

who intends to add milk to her coffee but pours juice instead acts contrary to her governing intentions not because she cannot tell the difference between milk and juice: clearly, she can. Competence does not provide immunity from slips: the person who slips does not do so because she lacks the relevant ability. She is fully able to grab, lift, and pour from a container; she just happens to grab the wrong one. She slips not because her movements are beyond her control, like those made by someone suffering from a compulsive disorder or Anarchic Hand syndrome,² but because she makes the wrong movements. Slips are fully democratic, occurring for even the brightest among us. Linguist Michael Erard estimates that people make on average one to two verbal slips for every thousand words they speak, among the approximately 15.000 words they use each day.

Though many slips go undetected, some are devastating. Consider slips in aviation or in the control rooms of nuclear power plants, where pushing the wrong button can be lethal (Baars 1992; Dekker, 2011; Reason, 2007).

One sometimes wonders whether one or another slip happens for a reason. Clearly, they can have hidden Freudian motivations, but they need not. Freud himself said that “sometimes a cigar is just a cigar”.³

The person who slips seems to lack immediate awareness of her action. Baars writes (1992: 4): “we can define slips operationally as actions that people quickly recognize as unintended, once they become aware of them”.⁴

When one slips, one has the correct beliefs, and one is competent to act on them; yet something goes wrong in the performance. Given how ubiquitous slips are in everyday life, it is an advantage for a theory of action if it is able to account for them.

For all their ubiquity, slips remain a neglected topic in philosophy. Kay Peabody⁵ observes (2005: 173) that “philosophers writing on action have not concerned themselves much with slips. Small wonder perhaps since slips, and mistakes more generally, are not exactly what we take pride in and so not exactly what we really care about.”

² Addressing Anarchic Hand syndrome, Marcel (2003: 77) writes: “the affected hand performs unintended but complex, well-executed, goal-directed actions. Often when the patient is trying to do something with the unaffected hand, the other hand appears to do the opposite or compete with it.”

³ The cigar comment aside, Freud is commonly understood as believing that one can *always* find hidden reasons. I find it reasonable to interpret him this way. See (Freud, 1966).

⁴ This implies that the agent who slips and then realizes it will immediately stop and correct herself. However, I can imagine cases where the agent stubbornly carries on, continuing to slip, thinking “I must finish what I’ve started.” Too, sometimes when people do not want to look foolish, they will pretend to have done intentionally what they actually did by mistake.

⁵ Pseudonym for Katarzyna Paprzycka.

Open a random philosophical encyclopaedia, and look up the word “slip”: chances are, there will be no entry. Check the index in any book on philosophy of action and agency: chances are there will be no entry for “slip” here, either (or “mistake”, for that matter). If slips are treated at all, they are made subordinate to something else. By contrast, psychologists have studied slips for decades; so e.g. Sellen and Norman (1992: 336) write of them: “slips provide a unique window through which to view human behavior. The processes of normal behavior are usually best revealed through the study of abnormalities, which makes the study of slips an important and essential aspect of cognition.”

How can a topic so valuable to psychology be so neglected by philosophers? Perhaps Peabody goes some way toward an explanation; but philosophers have not ignored other features of human behaviour of which people are hardly proud. Philosophers have worked extensively in such areas as self-deception and irrationality (Mele, 1987), akrasia (Arpaly, 2000; McIntyre, 1990) and procrastination (Gjelsvik, 2010; Stroud, 2010) just to mention a few. A likelier explanation, also discussed by Peabody, involves how philosophers typically conceive human agency.

Donald Davidson famously writes, in defining action (2001: 229): “an event is an action if and only if it can be described in a way that makes it intentional”⁶. Chapter Two discusses theories that define action by recourse to intentions, with the consequence of leaving no room for slips: after all, slips are not intentional. If a slip is not an action, one may think it of no interest to a theory of action: nevertheless a quite ignorant view, I think, at least if the purpose of a theory of action is to fully account for human agency, given how ubiquitous slips are to everyday life.

Norms

I find it striking how many philosophers seem to imagine human action⁷ as a one-way linear process starting off from a state of mind and ending in a successfully achieved state of the world.⁸ Human agency is far more complex than this simple picture allows.

⁶ In an extended discussion of Davidson’s account, Searle writes (1983: 82): “there are no actions without intentions. Even where there is an unintentional action such as Oedipus’s marrying his mother, that is only because there is an identical event which is an action he performed intentionally, namely, marrying Jocasta. There are many states of affairs without corresponding beliefs and many states of affairs without corresponding desires, but there are in general no actions without corresponding intentions.”

⁷ Much of what I write can probably be applied to non-human animals as well, but my focus is on human beings.

⁸ In this regard, I appreciate Moran and Stone’s remark (2009: 145): “if there is a tendency to think of action in terms of a one-way sequence, beginning with intending and moving through acting to having

Actions are not the creations of an isolated mind; something is lost when they are tied solely to the agent, and the situation in which they are performed is ignored. Actions are defined by the situation-specific norms that govern them, the people involved, and the places where they happen. A good theory of action ought to reflect this. Norms are of particular importance. In Chapter One, I offer an explanation of human action in terms of norms as an alternative to explanation by intention and suggest that such an account is especially useful for explaining slips.

Empirical studies prove that slips are far from random occurrences. Hofstadter and Moser write of verbal slips (1998: 84): “most errors are not simply random intrusions of ‘noise’ into an otherwise clear and unambiguous flow of communication; they are almost always intimately connected with the speakers intended message, and reveal something of it.” Slips are normally close to what the agent would be expected to do in the given situation; as such, they can be seen as approximating to the norm. Better to attempt to understand them against the backdrop of situational normative expectations than solely in terms of an agent’s mental states.

People normally act in accordance with the norms of the situation they are in. Expressing oneself correctly in English means speaking in accordance with the linguistic norms governing English: something English speakers tend to do. Being a guest in a stranger’s house calls for a degree of discretion and etiquette that might well be out of place in the house of a friend.

Of course, actions not infrequently go against the norms. Ignorance, for example, can lead one to act inappropriately. In March 2013 the Greek football player Giorgos Katidis was banned for life from the Greek national team for giving a Nazi salute after he scored a goal. After the game, Katidis claimed he did not know what the gesture meant. Presuming he spoke the truth and really did lack this basic cultural knowledge, he was truly ignorant. The point is that, *ceteris paribus*, one expects people to know and generally act in accordance with the governing norms.

Criminal intentions can also lead to normatively deviant behaviour – but here, something interesting happens. The criminal underworld has its own, alternative norms to guide the behaviour of those that identify as criminals.

Behaviour can deviate from the norms for other reasons. Rowland Stout writes of a psychotic man he knew (2005: 28): “I would sometimes ask him why he was shouting at me, and if I gave him a cigarette and he was in a good mood he would reply, ‘you were looking at me in a funny way’ or, perhaps, ‘you were avoiding looking at me’”.

acted – that is, as something beginning in the mind and ending in a state of the world – an illusion is present which arises from the philosopher’s focus on unmotivated or point-like actions (like the lifting of a finger) strangely abstracted from the *vita activa*.”

Being psychotic, this man's behaviour was the result of eruptions of his psyche. It was not grounded in standard recognizable norms.⁹

So, what distinguishes an innocent slip from psychotic behaviour? Consider what Wittgenstein writes in *On Certainty*:

§73: What is the difference between mistake and mental disturbance? Or what is the difference between my treating it as a mistake and my treating it as a mental disturbance?

§74: Can we say: a *mistake* doesn't only have a cause, it also has a ground? I.e., roughly when someone makes a mistake, this can be fitted into what he knows aright.

Wittgenstein's remarks make sense in light of his notion of a *language game*, according to which mistakes occur in light of the publicly shared principles defining the "game" in question. The *explanation-by-norms* I introduce in Chapter One has much in common with Wittgenstein,¹⁰ though it is not focused on language in particular, but rather on how any behavioural response is shaped by its factual and normative context. Every society and every community and subculture has its norms that members are familiar with and use to mediate their interaction, even as people outside that society or community or subculture will have difficulty relating or even following along. Olson writes (1969: 330):

In a recent conversation with a friend I apparently made a certain gesture with, I think, my hands. Afterwards he asked me if I happened to be a Freemason, to which I replied that I was not. He explained that a few minutes ago I had done something which he thought he recognized as one of the secret signs of masonry. He refused to tell me what the sign was or even to show me what I had done.¹¹

Every culture provides a clear intersubjective context for why people do as they do. People within the culture conform to socially shared norms on penalty of interaction that becomes difficult if not impossible. One just expects everybody to know certain things and act on them – until confronted with someone like the psychotic, who fails to conform to the expected pattern.

What distinguishes the psychotic's action from the slip? As Wittgenstein suggests, mistake making can be accounted for in terms of language games and their norms: it "can be fitted into what [the agent] knows aright". A slip can best be understood as an

⁹ My point is that the behavior of the psychotic deviates from the usual norms. In the words of Stout (2008, 28) the psychotic person follows his own "systems of justification". It is, of course, possible to predict her behavior once you know the patterns (i.e. system of justification) that govern it.

¹⁰ See (Soles, 1982) for an account of Wittgenstein's treatment of mistakes. (He does not discuss slips.)

¹¹ Note that Olsen's point is different from mine. He wants to illustrate how an agent can lack knowledge about his own action.

approximation to what ought to have been said or done. None of this is to deny that there can be times when it is difficult to tell the psychosis from the slip!

Basic action

The slip can be an extremely useful tool in the philosopher of action's longstanding search for basic actions. Philosophers of action have struggled to pin it down, to the point of recent suggestions for abandoning the project altogether (Thompson, 2008; Lavin, 2013).

Santiago Amaya wants to go the opposite direction and bring slips right to the heart of action. In defining "basic action", he writes (2015: 1): "an action is basic for an agent if and only the agent cannot slip in performing it". The idea, roughly, is that most actions break down into smaller constituent actions. When one reaches a constituent action where one can no longer slip, that action can be broken down no further. It is possible for a native English speaker to slip and say e.g. "Freudian flip", but not to say e.g. "Sreudian slip": the initial /sr/ sound is not phonetically permissible. The phonemes of one's mother tongue are so well-rehearsed that one cannot fail to pronounce them correctly: they are slip proof, and therefore basic.

Of course, one could attempt to abandon the notion of "basic action" as well; but that, I think, will not work. The causally inclined theorist requires a notion of basic action to avoid what is a well-known regress problem (see Lavin, 2013): *if* one accepts a causal picture (a point I return to shortly), then for actions to be performed at all, something must start them off. Something must be *the* basic act from which all other actions stem.

That said, if one's ultimate goal is understanding agency – how people think and act, what they find meaningful – then basic actions are not ultimately very useful. One acquires them automatically; they are the underlying conditions of agency; but there is often no point trying to explain them in the wider context of the situation in which they are performed, and it makes little sense to criticize them. They say nothing about intentions, willings, hopes, fears, ambitions, and so on: all those things that make people into thinking, acting, error-prone human beings.

I suggest redirecting attention somewhat, to *basic activities* instead: those things an agent can do "just like that". Most of the time it is not necessary to pin down the precise, most minimal constituents of an agent's performance to reveal what it is like to be a thinking, acting, erring human agent. I believe that the best approach to agency is teleological and *not* causal (Anscombe, 2000; Hornsby, 2013).

Knowledge how and knowledge that

One of the principal threads running throughout this thesis is the question of how the phenomenon of slips should inform the philosophy of knowledge and action. Much of this comes to a head in Chapter Four, where I discuss Jason Stanley's recent work on *knowledge how* (2013). One feature of slips in particular is key: though the agent who slips does something she did not intend, without awareness of doing so at the time she is doing it; nevertheless, what she does, *she does with skill*. As I argue there, this has the consequence of driving a firm wedge between *knowledge how* and *knowledge that*. So common within *knowledge how*, slips find no parallel whatsoever in *knowledge that*. Such a conclusion is highly problematic for an intellectualist like Stanley, whose avowed aim is to reduce *knowledge how* to *knowledge that*.

Chapter Five further explores Stanley's definition of *knowledge how* and his general argument for intellectualism, pointing out certain inconsistencies in his theory. The overall conclusion of these two chapters is that *knowledge how* necessarily involves a non-reducible, non-propositional element.

Knowledge of one's own actions

The person one spends the most time with during one's lifetime is, inevitably, oneself. This does not necessarily make people experts on who or what they are: by no means can one assume that one is transparent to oneself. It is not uncommon that the person who carefully and continuously emphasises that "I'm no penny-pincher!" is just that: whenever one shares a restaurant meal with her, she always seems to have left her wallet at home. People are easily biased in relation to themselves; studies have shown that they are far quicker to spot biases in others (Pronin *et al*, 2002; 2004).

Given these obvious failures of self-insight – for all that I write about knowledge, I deliberately avoid speaking of *self*-knowledge and make no attempt to investigate how one comes to have knowledge of one's *self*. My focus in Chapter Six is rather on what one knows of one's *actions* at the time one is performing them – including those times one slips and performs spontaneous actions that are not what one meant to do. When one slips, one does so in light of the unavoidable observation that, most of the time when one sets out to do something intentionally, one succeeds.

Anscombe nicely describes the knowledge one has of one's own agency (2000: 87): "it is the agent's knowledge of what he is doing that gives the descriptions under which what is going on is the execution of an intention." I believe that one generally has knowledge of one's own actions under *broad* descriptions (see Newstead, 2009).

The notion of non-observational knowledge is key to Anscombe's account, and mine. Anscombe is commonly interpreted as claiming that the non-observational knowledge one has of one's own agency is not grounded in anything. That is where she and I must part company. Following Paul (2009) I argue that, at some point in the agent's history, she must have acquired the knowledge she later depends on, non-observationally.

Slips, thoughts, and actions are woven throughout this thesis; but my aim is not so much to explore these phenomena themselves. Rather, the heart of my interest lies with what philosophical consequences they have for philosophy of action at large.

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Chapter One: Explanation-by-Norms

“I have now been in fifty-seven states.”

Barack Obama at a campaign in Beaverton, Oregon.

“No head injury is too trivial to be ignored.”

‘A verbal illusion’, P. Wason & S. Reich.

”A genius is a guy like Norman Einstein.”

J. Theisman, Washington Redskins Quarterback,
after being asked whether coach J. Gibbs was a genius.

Abstract

Philosophers’ search for the best way to explain human actions has led many to accept a core psychological model, one that can be supplemented with other forms of action explanation when needed. Rather than settling for this centralized model – where everything ultimately hinges on the psychological explanation – I argue for a pluralistic view. I do not argue that the psychological view is wrong, only that it is not as universally applicable as it is often taken to be. I suggest that explanation-by-norms is a distinct form of explanation in its own right. It explains actions by revealing how they

conform to norms, facts, and patterns and become intelligible in light of them. I argue that explanation-by-norms is especially salient in the case of slips.¹²

Introduction

People sometimes say and do puzzling things. It can be hard to explain what was going through their minds at the time they did these things; nonetheless, it is often easy to make sense of their performance. In the above examples, Obama should have said forty-seven states. Doctors generally advise that head injuries should *not* be ignored, however trivial they seem. Theisman should have said “Albert”, not “Norman”. The pattern is the same: a person makes a mistake; why the person made precisely *this* mistake is not known; yet one manages to make sense of the behavior.

A common philosophical view holds that explanations for actions ultimately reduce to accounts of mental states, typically citing an agent’s beliefs and desires. However, not all action explanations can be reduced in this way: e.g., in the case of *slips*, one understands what agents do, not by reference to what was going through their minds at the time, but by reference to norms that apply in the context of the situation. In light of those norms, one grasps what the agent *should* have done and understands or explains her behavior as an approximation to that. That is, one explains such actions by invoking the norms, facts, and patterns that would make the agent’s performance intelligible, had she acted properly.

I begin by sketching a common way of explaining action and highlight Michael Smith’s account. I introduce slips in Section 2 by discussing examples, showing how they differ from other sorts of traditional mistakes. Having done this, I introduce explanation-by-norms in Section 3 and contrast it with Smith’s account. In Section 4 I discuss four objections that could be posed toward explanation-by-norms. I conclude by claiming that psychological explanation and explanation-by-norms can well co-exist, but the former cannot supersede the latter.

¹² I want to thank Santiago Amaya, Henrik Andersson, Dan Egonsson, Björn Petersson, Wlodek Rabinowicz, Andreas Engh Seland, Caj Strandberg and Frank Zenker for valuable feedback during the work on this chapter. I am also grateful to the audience at Rutgers University where I presented an early version, a special thank you to Robert Matthews who commented on my talk.

1. The primacy claim

In philosophy of action, it is common to argue that human behavior is explainable in terms of an agent's psychological states.¹³ For example, one might explain why Ella went to the refrigerator to get a glass of milk in terms of Ella's desire for a glass of milk and her belief that the refrigerator was a good place to get it. Donald Davidson famously called such explanations *rationalizations*. By citing the beliefs and desires of the agent, one explains the action: that is, one reveals whatever valuable or otherwise positive outcome the agent saw in performing it (see Davidson, 2001 [1963]: 3).¹⁴

According to many philosophers, this kind of explanation is not only common but *ubiquitous*. Even though actions are sometimes explained, say, in terms of the agent's feelings at the time, habits¹⁵, etc., such explanations only work as explanations insofar as they presuppose some Davidsonian rationalization. Michael Smith makes the claim explicit (Smith, 1998: 17-18):

[P]hilosophy of action begins with the claim that it is always possible to construct a Humean, belief/desire, explanation of action. The idea is that once we see the central place occupied by Humean belief/desire explanations, we see that all the other explanations we give simply supplement this basic Humean story.

Two claims are worth distinguishing here. First, there is a claim about *possibility*: for every action, one can always construct an appropriate belief/desire explanation.¹⁶ Second, there is a claim about *primacy*: all appropriate explanation for action either takes the form of a belief/desire explanation or supplements a belief/desire explanation. It is the second claim – the primacy claim – that I wish to question.

The idea behind the primacy claim can best be illustrated, perhaps, by Smith's discussion of an example originally presented by Rosalind Hursthouse (1991). Hursthouse discusses a husband who, in an expression of grief, rolls around in his dead

¹³ The origin of this view is normally attributed to Hume, so it is sometimes called "the Humean story" (Smith, 1998). Probably the most famous contemporary source of the view is Davidson's 1963 paper "Actions, Reasons and Causes", reprinted in his *Essays on Actions and Events* (2001).

¹⁴ Malpas (1992) offers an excellent introduction to Davidson's account.

¹⁵ For an attempt at explaining actions in terms of habits see Lekan (2007) and Pollard (2006).

¹⁶ Belief/desire theorists seem always to be able to find a way to explain actions according to their model. Some think that the model is crucial for the very project of doing philosophy of action (Smith, 1998). Others see it merely as a "useful fiction" (Dennett, 1987). However, even considered as a "useful fiction" – i.e., purely instrumentally – the model has its weaknesses. That is to say: the fiction is not always useful. As Bittner remarks (2001: 4): "...not only do we often not mention one of the two, desire or belief, we often mention neither...". If one thinks of the belief/desire model as one story among potentially many other stories that one can tell about actions – stories of character, plans, life phases, upbringing, etc. – one arrives at something similar to my own preferred view.

wife's clothes. According to Hursthouse, the widower's action lacks a Davidsonian rationalization. The grief explains his behavior, but he does not act with a *desire* to express his grief. Smith objects, arguing that – on the Davidsonian interpretation – the man need not have such a desire for his behavior to be rationalized. All he needs is an appropriate set of beliefs and desires that *make it true* that he was acting out of grief (Smith 1998: 22):

The man is doing what he is doing because he desires to roll around in his dead wife's clothes and believes that he can do so by doing just what he is doing: that is, by rolling around in those particular clothes that he is rolling around in.

For Smith, the mention of the grief is explanatory to the extent that it *supplements* this more basic explanation: i.e., the grief helps explain the husband's behavior by telling us where his desire to roll around in his dead wife's clothes comes from.

According to Smith, this pattern of explanation and dependence is ubiquitous. It applies not only to cases in which someone's actions are explained in terms of her emotions but also to those explained by her commitment to certain values or her capacity for self-control. In such cases, one need not assume that she acts as she does because she wants to express that commitment or make a display of self-control. One simply assumes that she acts from certain beliefs and desires: ones that make sense for her to have, given her commitments or her self-control.

An important motivation for the primacy claim is that it provides the core for a simple theory of action. If true, it offers a unified account of actions in terms of how they are to be explained: i.e., an action is a kind of behavior explainable at a minimum in terms of beliefs and desires. This minimal explanation can then be complemented by other forms of action-explanation like e.g. expression of emotion. In fact, Smith argues that the only way in which philosophy of action can be successful, is if one can find a unified account of actions. According to him, the psychological explanations provided by the belief/desire model provide us with precisely such a unifying account.

Recent years have seen psychological explanations along these lines subjected to much criticism. It has even been questioned whether desires are necessary for action explanation at all (Platts, 1979; Dancy, 2000). It has been argued that such explanations cannot really explicate what it is for an agent to act for a reason (Stoutland, 2007) and that they unduly leave the agent out of the picture (Hornsby, 2004). My more modest concern is that this way of explaining actions is not as universally appropriate as the primacy claim suggests. In my own treatment of action explanation, I turn to the phenomenon of slips. I first describe what they are, and then I show why they pose a challenge to the primacy claim.

2. Slips

Mistakes are a pervasive fact of life; they come in many forms, under many guises. Yet philosophers' focus has generally been quite narrow.¹⁷ Most of their attention has been on cases in which the mistake ultimately can be traced to the agent's *ignorance* of some state of affairs relevant to her action.

Consider Davidson's discussion of a man who mistakenly boards a plane heading to London, Ontario. The man is ignorant of the plane's destination; he intends to go to London, England, and falsely believes that the plane marked "London" is crossing the Atlantic (Davidson, 2001: 84-85). It is easy to see how the primacy claim applies. To explain why he boarded the plane marked "London", an appeal is made to his ignorance. The problem is that such explanations only work to the extent that an agent has certain false beliefs, combined with desires that prompt her to act.

Not all mistakes fit this mold. Consider Obama's verbal slip in Oregon: "I have now been in fifty-seven states". Unlike in the case of the man boarding the wrong plane, Obama's mistake cannot be explained in terms of ignorance.¹⁸ One can safely assume that, as a Presidential candidate, he knows how many states there are in the Union. Had he been asked, he would have offered the correct answer. Similar reasoning applies to the doctor's *verbal illusion* (Wason & Reich, 1979). Her seeming advice that some head injuries ought to be ignored is clearly not due to lack of medical or linguistic information. As a competent speaker of the language, she knows that the pattern <no NOUN is too small to VERB> can be translated to <All NOUNs, however small, should VERB>, as in "no occasion is too small to warrant a gift." At the least, she has sufficient background information to know that the phrase "no head injury is too trivial to be ignored" says exactly the opposite of what she intends to say.

Slips and so-called *verbal illusions* are examples of mistakes that occur in performing an action. The agent acts on an intention; she does something other than what she intends; her action does not reflect what she knows or thinks she knows (Amaya, 2013; Amaya and Doris, 2014). Slips are *spontaneous*: they cannot be traced to an error in prior deliberation. They tend to be puzzling: the agent normally does not know why she made them. They are typically *surprising*¹⁹: the agent expects herself to perform correctly.

Not all slips are verbal: one finds slips as well in the domain of non-linguistic action. Suppose that you take the usual left turn heading home, instead of turning right to the

¹⁷ Some exceptions are Amaya (2013), Anscombe (2000), Austin (1956-1957), Gjelsvik (2010), and Peabody (2005).

¹⁸ At least, it seems farfetched to do so. That said, see my discussion of Sorensen's notion of *shallow beliefs* in the last part of the chapter.

¹⁹ Surprising if noticed, that is. Of course, many slips, like slips of the tongue, go undetected.

supermarket as planned. Likewise one finds the equivalent of verbal illusions in the non-linguistic domain. Consider the person who, having traveled from Norway to the US, acts under the illusion that it is 8 pm when it is 2 pm. She knows her plane took off at noon; she knows the flight was eight hours; she knows about the six-hour time difference. Yet, upon arrival, she runs to make her 8 pm connection.

Mistakes due to ignorance aside, slips differ from other kinds of errors commonly discussed in the action-theoretic literature: e.g., those involving akrasia and self-deception.²⁰ Akritic episodes need not surprise the agent. A dieter breaking her diet by eating a piece of chocolate cake is generally aware that she has acted against her better judgment. In the case of slips, the agent is unaware of the fact that she will commit an error prior to the moment of making it; if something makes her aware that she is about to slip, she corrects her behavior. This is why Amaya suggests that slips “have a quick and easy “cure”” (Amaya, 2013: 564). Meanwhile, episodes of self-deception are often not spontaneous. The mother who refuses to believe that her son is guilty of murder must spend time and effort to deceive herself. Slips are not planned; they happen on the spur of the moment.²¹

3. Explanation-by-norms

Rather than explaining action in terms of beliefs and desires, explanation-by-norms exploits the knowledge people have of what they are supposed to do, to explain what they actually do. Confronted with a slip, one does not primarily regard the internal factors that led to the action; one rather considers how to make the erred act intelligible in light of its normative background: i.e., expectations justified in terms of social roles, social class, speech, gesture, gender, age, occupation, phases in agents’ lives, plans, community beliefs, argumentative standards of those communicating, other conventions etc. I take this as both a good and charitable strategy, because knowledge of psychological states *per se* will not make slips intelligible: the whole point is that the agents in these cases do something different from what their psychological states would indicate.

Explanation-by-norms does not explain performances in terms of what an agent desired at the time or her instrumental beliefs about how to achieve it. It explains an agent’s behavior in light of the norms, facts, and patterns informing it. This is an advantage when it comes to explaining slips. To make the behavior intelligible, one need not to go into details of the psychological machinery that gave rise to it: a job that may be left

²⁰ See S. Amaya (2013) for a thorough treatment of the distinction between action slips and other forms of behavior.

²¹ So-called *Freudian slips* seem to belong here. However, they *can* be explained by *hidden* beliefs and desires.

to the psychologists, psychoanalysts, and linguists; otherwise, it is not needed to explain one's actions or coordinate one's actions with those of other people.

Why, on his visit to Oregon, did Obama say that he had visited fifty-seven states? Consider the full quotation:

It is just wonderful to be back in Oregon and over the last fifteen months we have travelled to every corner of the United States. I have now been in fifty-seven states. I think one left to go. One left to go – Alaska and Hawaii, I was not allowed to go to even though I really wanted to visit, but my staff would not justify it (Obama in Beaverton, Oregon, 9 May 2008).²²

Some (e.g., Sorensen 2011: 404) hypothesize that Obama must have reasoned as follows. He first thought about there being fifty states in the Union. Given that his staff did not allow him to visit Alaska and Hawaii, he subtracted them. Further, realizing that he was in Oregon he subtracted it as well and concluded that he had visited forty-seven states. After months of intense campaigning, he was exhausted. When he opened his mouth, his previous utterance of “fifteen months” primed him to say “fifty-seven states”.

The explanation seems logically impeccable. Yet, on reflection, it clearly has loose ends. First, why did Obama claim, after saying “fifty-seven states”, that he had only “one left to go”? Did he, in addition to his verbal slip, make an arithmetical mistake? How many states had he been to? Was he thinking of Oregon as the one state he had left? Second, whereas the utterance “fifteen months” might have primed him to say “fifty-seven”, so, too, might the thought of there being fifty states. Which of these was the real primer?

Such questions are hard if not impossible to answer. At the same time, that one does not *really* know what went through Obama's mind causes no difficulty in everyday life. To understand Obama's performance, one characterizes it as a mistake, and then one appeals to the facts and norms of the situation to make evident what he meant to do: i.e., one explains the action by showing that the actual behavior approximated what would have been most relevant to do given the norms, facts, and patterns informing the situation.

Consider how this works in more detail. In talking about fifty-seven states, Obama failed to represent facts correctly. Everyone knows he made a mistake, because he said “fifty-seven”, and there are not fifty-seven states. Given that he is an educated man – competent in basic arithmetic – and a successful campaigner, his failure appears as an isolated incident caused neither by ignorance nor stupidity. It is a classical slip. Yet, even though it *was* a mistake, his performance was close to being correct. Imagine, by comparison, Obama saying “two” or “one hundred and one”. *That* would have been

²² Obama's speech is available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EpGH02DtIws> (accessed 12.09.14).

exceptionally puzzling, given how widely such an answer diverges from what one would expect in light of the norms.

An explanation such as I propose does not take the form of a Davidsonian rationalization. In considering explanation-by-norms, one may just as well give up on making sense of the action in light of what the agent believed or desired at that point in time -- *without* giving up on making sense of the action altogether. One merely places the agent's behavior into the background of norms, facts, and patterns known by observers. By doing so, one makes the performance less puzzling than it might initially seem.

Now consider the doctor who says "no head injury is too trivial to be ignored". Why would a doctor give such seemingly bad advice? Linguists agree that grammatical awareness is diminished under conditions of syntactic complexity, as it clearly applies here.²³ The noun phrase "no head injury" – the object which functions as the theme of "ignore" – does not appear in the usual position for a direct object: *cf.* "we ignored the head injury". The sentence effectively contains as many as three negatives: the negative quantifier "no" along with the negative expressions "to be ignored" (i.e., take *no* notice) and "too trivial" (i.e., *not* serious enough). Pragmatically, the sentence is odd: *prima facie*, it presupposes that serious matters should be ignored and trivial matters attended to.

Such linguistic intricacies are hard to follow. Fortunately, in everyday life, one need not think about them to understand what doctors are meaning to say. One relies instead on the socially accepted view that doctors help people and that head injuries are generally *not* to be ignored. If the doctor acts according to the norms, she acts so as to make her performance relevant in light of them; therefore, she does not believe what she said. The problem is just that the utterance is superficially similar to sentences of the type "no missile is too small to be banned", giving the false impression that it operates in the same manner.

Normative action explanations are common in everyday life. Generalizing from the examples I have presented, I suggest that they are especially salient when psychological explanations are beyond our reach. Sometimes, as with Obama's slip, one lacks the information to provide a proper psychological explanation. Other times, as with the doctor's verbal illusion, the psychological story is too complicated to follow all the details (doctor's illusion). Normative explanations may help in these situations. There are also other situations in which normative explanations may help.

Why did Theisman say "Norman Einstein"? Given the common stereotype of football players, one might plausibly think that he believed "Norman" to be Einstein's first

²³ For more details on this particular case see Cook and Stevenson (2010), Dabrowska (2004), Libermann (2009), Wason and Reich (1979).

name, and his mistake was one of ignorance. However, when questioned by journalists, he claimed that he knew the correct name all along. If so, why did he slip? One can suppose that he wanted to mention an intelligent person. He actually went to school with a clever student named *Norman Einstein*.²⁴ Maybe Theisman talked about Norman Einstein – whose intelligence he admired – and referred specifically to him and not to Albert Einstein. It is also possible that Theisman made a mere slip of the tongue: given the stressful setting of TV cameras and critical interviewers, he made an honest mistake.

In Theisman's case, it is easy to provide psychological explanations; but, because there are viable alternatives, it is hard to tell which account is correct.²⁵ At the same time, and even though it is difficult to know what Theisman thought or knew when he said the wrong name, what he meant to convey is easily understood: the concept of genius does not apply to football. He invoked an epitome of and symbol for genius in our culture: Albert Einstein.²⁶ Theisman failed to refer correctly, but the context made clear what he meant. What he said was sufficiently close to the "correct" alternative for one to understand him. Just like Obama and the hapless doctor, Theisman probably made an honest mistake in the execution of an action.

Explanation-by-norms is particularly useful in the case of slips because one generally does not, in these cases, know the agent's beliefs and desires – but one *does* know the norms that govern the situation and so can appeal to them for explanation. The difference between belief/desire explanation and explanation-by-norms is especially clear here. This does not mean though that these are the *only* cases that are amenable to explanation-by-norms. Indeed, explanation-by-norms apply in *all* cases. They represent our normal, everyday kind of action explanation.

Consider a man running towards a bus stop. What is he doing? He is probably trying to catch the bus. How does one know this? ...Because people running toward bus stops, in our experience, often are attempting precisely that. Normative action explanation works by interpreting an agent's behavior in terms of what is normal and normative in society and culture.

There is a further sense in which explanation-by-norms is lurking in the background of every action explanation: before one can offer a belief/desire explanation, one must

²⁴ When *Sports Illustrated* asked about the slip, Theisman told them that he went to school with a clever student named Norman Einstein (Hallinan, 2009: 29-31).

²⁵ Assuming that there even *is* one single, correct account, which there may not be.

²⁶ This norm is very common in Western culture. See e.g. Roland Barthes (2009): "...the supermen of science-fiction always have something reified about them. So has Einstein: he is commonly signified by his brain" (p. 77) and "popular imagery faithfully expresses this: *photographs* of Einstein show him standing next to a blackboard covered with mathematical signs of obvious complexity; but *cartoons* of Einstein (the sign that he has become a legend) show him chalk still in hand, and having just written on an empty blackboard, as if without preparation, the magic formula of the world" (pp. 78-79).

already have an understanding of what the agent has done, what her movements mean, and so on. What makes the slip special is that explanation fails us initially: the agent's actions do not make immediate sense in light of the norms, facts, and patterns of the situation. It is this that necessitates the attribution of mistake. It enables one to see what the agent does as an approximation to the norms. Next, I discuss four objections to my notion of normative action explanation.

Objections

The psychologistic objection

One might argue that explanation-by-norms *presupposes* psychological categories. After all, I seem to suggest that one relies on psychological assumptions to make an action intelligible: e.g., Obama knew and knows how to do proper arithmetic, and he meant to act according to this knowledge. Explanation-by-norms traces back to the agent's mind and what is in it. Admittedly, explanation-by-norms does presuppose that the agent acts rationally, in light of norms. One assumes that the agent wants to act in accordance with the norms that govern the situation she is in, respond relevantly to facts, and so on. However, although it makes reference to, explanation-by-norms is not explanation *by virtue of* anything "inside" the agent. It does not deny that the "inside" is there, but it proceeds by revealing how an action conforms to norms, facts, and patterns – not how it expresses an agent's psychology, her beliefs and desires. Explanation-by-norms underscores how action always takes place within a normative setting. If this were not so, observers would have no expectations regarding what is going on – and no way of understanding it, either. Precisely *because* actions take place against a normative backdrop, observers have a stock of knowledge about them – at least, insofar as they partake in the culture defined by the norms. In other words, a psychologistic explanation presupposes an explanation by norms, rather than the other way around – for how else, other than by recourse to the norms and facts of the situation, can one know that Obama surely meant to say forty-seven? Note that even though I think the latter is the case, this is not the claim I defend here.

Slips are not actions

The belief/desire model is meant to explain intentional action, but to perform a slip is to do something one did *not* intend to do. Slips seem to fall outside of the scope of what the belief/desire model seeks to explain. Admittedly, slips *per se* are not intentional, any more than any other isolated mistakes. That does *not* mean though that the performance as a whole is not intentional. Slips are thoroughly intertwined with intentional action. Even though they themselves are clearly not intended, they occur within a sequence of intentional behavior. While one has *less* control over them, *some* sense of control remains. Consider linguistic mistakes: the agent stays in control

of her speech; she does not speak mere gibberish. More generally, including non-linguistic cases: the agent stays in control of large parts of her behavior, even though she does something she did not intend. In the case of verbal "illusions", the agent intends – in some sense – to say the words she says; it is only that her words then and there do not reflect her intended meaning, knowledge and competence.

The vacuity objection

One could argue that normative action explanation does not *explain* anything: it offers mere re-description. Even if that is true, normative action explanation finds good company with some of the most famous action theories around: e.g., Anscombe's and Davidson's. To be sure, re-description does not always explain – but often it does, and such interpretation is common. Re-description explains a given performance by offering various descriptions of it, to illuminate it better: e.g., the rising of an arm could, given the appropriate circumstances, be re-described as "trying to catch a ball", "signaling to a team player to pass the ball", "playing handball", etc.

However, though it has features of re-description – it re-describes what an agent does as a mistake – explanation-by-norms amounts to more than mere re-description. It characterizes the erroneous performance as an approximation to what the relevant norms, facts and patterns prescribe. This is not just re-description, but seeing the act as part of a fuller picture.

The scope objection

One could insist that belief/desire explanations really are universally applicable but that *some* such explanations must be given in terms of a modified or "shallow" belief. So e.g. Sorensen (2011) has suggested that Obama's slip could be explained by an appeal to a "shallow" belief: Obama has no "deep" belief that there are fifty-seven states, but tiredness along with other factors made him believe it in the moment.

This solution could work, but it seems to be a bit *ad hoc*: one does not normally appeal to "shallow" beliefs for understanding actions. The conjecture that the agent is acting on a "shallow" rather than "deep" belief – i.e., that she makes a mistake – is based on the normative constraints of the situation. Moreover, to reach the conclusion that an action was caused by a "shallow" belief, one must *already* have understood what the agent did as a mistake – making the appeal to "shallow" belief superfluous.

Conclusion

Explanation-by-norms and belief/desire explanation are not incompatible and can, indeed, fruitfully be combined in various ways. My preferred view on action explanation is pluralistic. That said, I believe that the belief/desire model is not quite

as important as it is often supposed to be. To my mind, belief/desire explanations are not universally applicable; sometimes, as in the case of slips, it seems difficult, if not impossible, to apply them.

Such pluralism is, of course, highly problematic for a theorist like Smith who thinks it crucial for the very possibility of having a philosophy of action that the account of action explanations be unified (Smith, 1998). Needless to say, I do not think that such a unified account can ever be provided although, *pace* Smith, I do not take this to be in any way devastating for philosophy of action. Certainly, what happens when one acts can sometimes be described by appeal to psychological states like beliefs and desires – but what happens can *equally well* be described by appeal to norms, habits, memories, plans, culture, character²⁷, etc.

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²⁷ Hume is commonly described as a "pure" belief/desire theorist, but Annette Baier (2009) has written an excellent article showing that he was not as narrow minded in his action explanation as is often thought of him. According to Baier he often explained action in terms of character. Of course, whether such a thing as "character" really exists is a tricky question and a discussion in its own right. On the other hand, the attribution of character to people seems to be ordinary praxis.

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Chapter Two: Capturing Slips as Actions

Abstract

In this chapter I explore how slips can be understood as actions via an analysis of Kay Peabody's criticism of explanation-based action theories. She claims they cannot capture slips as actions because, on their account, only performances describable as intentional count as actions. Slips are not intentional; therefore, they do not count. Peabody's preferred solution is to define actions by recourse to a non-intentional – indeed, non-mental – notion of trying. Drawing on her account, I suggest that something counts as an action so long as the agent is clearly informed by the norms governing the situation she is in and either she is trying to achieve something that fits the norms or she deliberately violates them. Even if the agent violates certain norms governing the situation, she necessarily follows other norms, if she is to be understood as performing an action or actions: e.g., she violates ethical norms but complies with linguistic ones. The bottom line is that, if something is to count as an action, the agent must be acting according to norms.²⁸

Introduction

It might be obvious that people perform actions. Nevertheless, it is hard to say what makes any particular performances an action. Many philosophers assume that one cannot say what an action is unless one invokes a certain psychological perspective. One typically interprets a performance as an action only if it is intentional: i.e., the agent desired, chose, wanted, etc. to do as she did²⁹: e.g., Jane flipped the switch because she

²⁸ I thank the following for valuable feedback on this chapter: Santiago Amaya, Dan Egonsson, Björn Petersson, Wlodek Rabinowicz, Andreas Engå Seland, and Caj Strandberg.

²⁹ In effect, this is the belief/desire model I discussed in the previous chapter. There are many variations on that model. Many theorists do not subscribe to all the details of Davidson's account.

wanted to turn on the light.³⁰ Going bald does not count as an action, because one experiences it without intending.³¹

Donald Davidson famously held (2001 [1974]: 229) that “an event is an action if and only if it can be described in a way that makes it intentional”. What makes it possible for an event to count as an action is that it fits that explanatory pattern. This idea has been highly influential in the philosophy of action.

In her paper “Trying Slips: Can Davidson and Hornsby Account for Slips?”, Peabody argues that explanation-based theories of action – like Davidson’s – fail to capture slips as actions, precisely because they define a performance as an action in virtue of being “intentional under a description”.³² This disqualifies slips because slips *per se* are not intentional under any description. If one wants to include slips in a theory of action, one needs to find a way to understand them as actions. Toward that end, Peabody attempts to formulate a slip-friendly, non-mental theory of action without recourse to intention.

Peabody’s account is useful for the normative picture of action explanation I suggested in Chapter One, provided one incorporates into it my view on slips and actions. I wish to both explore and develop her account.

1. Actions, slips, and intentions

What makes something a person does intentional? For Davidson, the answer is clear: its primary reason for being performed consists of a pro-attitude – i.e., a desire or something similar – and a belief, thus constituting the *belief/desire model*. Davidson characterizes primary reasons in this way (2001 [1963]: 5):

R is a primary reason why an agent performed the action *A* under the description *d* only if *R* consists of a pro attitude of the agent towards actions with a certain property, and a belief of the agent that *A*, under the description *d*, has that property.

³⁰ This is Davidson’s (2001 [1963]: 4-5) classic example.

³¹ One can, of course, decide to shave off one’s hair, which does count as an action, but it does not fall under the rubric of “going bald”.

³² To be clear: her target is not the belief/desire model as such, only those versions of it, or other models, according to which actions must be intentional under a description. One can accept some version of the belief/desire model yet deny that actions by definition are intentional under a description (Pettersson, 2000).

The agent's primary reason(s) functions to rationalise the act: i.e., making it rational in the eyes of the agent.³³ Davidson writes (2001 [1963]: 3):

A reason rationalizes an action only if it leads us to see something the agent saw, or thought he saw, in his action – some feature, consequence, or aspect of the action the agent wanted, desired, prized, held dear, thought dutiful, beneficial, obligatory, or agreeable.

A few pages later he writes (2001 [1963]: 9): “central to the relation between a reason and an action it explains is the idea that the agent performed the action *because* he had the reason”. For Davidson, it is in virtue of an action's relation to a reason³⁴ that an action counts as intentional: this reason is the intention with which the action is performed.³⁵

Some actions appear not intentional and would seem not to fit Davidson's explanatory pattern. However, appearances can be deceiving. Consider Oedipus. He did not intend to marry his mother, yet that is what he did when he married Jocasta. Clearly, the marriage was unintentional under the description “marry one's mother”. Must the follower of Davidson therefore hold that the action fails to fit the requisite explanatory pattern and so is disqualified as an action? No, because one act can be given multiple descriptions (Anscombe 1979, 2000; Davidson 2001; Searle 1983). Oedipus had a reason for what he did: “marry Jocasta”. His action *is* intentional under that description (Searle, 1983: 101-2), even though it had unintended³⁶ aspects. Similar actions can be captured *as* actions precisely because they are intentional under certain descriptions, ignoring those under which they count as unintended. There is something an agent like Oedipus has a reason to do, which she successfully achieves through her performance; and the performance can be rationalised in terms of this reason.

Slips do *not* fit Davidson's explanatory pattern.³⁷ Davidson believes one should rationalize actions by trying to see them through the eyes of the agent. Did Obama believe there to be fifty-seven US states when he spoke? No; that is not how he “saw” his own act. He simply made a slip of the tongue. Slips can be placed somewhere between mistakes in judgment (false beliefs, etc.) on one hand and accidents (e.g., stepping on a banana peel) or mere happenings (going bald) on the other. When an agent slips, what the agent does is not forced; it is voluntary. At the same time it is not

³³ See also Davidson's “Intending” (2001), in which he modifies his view on primary reasons.

³⁴ Unless I specify otherwise, “reason” means “primary reason”.

³⁵ For an illuminating introduction to intention, I recommend Kieran Setiya's SEP article.

³⁶ I wish to distinguish “unintended” (Oedipus-like cases) from “non-intended” (slips). Unintended acts are intentional under certain descriptions, whereas – following Peabody -- non-intended acts *per se* cannot be captured as intentional under any description.

³⁷ See my discussion of slips in Chapter One.

intentional. It is a *non*-intentional action. The agent intends to perform an action, sets out to do so, but ends up doing something else. She acts contrary to her governing intention (see Chapter One; also Amaya 2013, Baars 1992, Norman 1981). Slips *per se* cannot be re-described as intentional in the manner of the above cases of unintentional action, such as Oedipus'. The unintentional cases have intended aspects; slips are not intended *at all* (Peabody, 2005). The agent who slips has no reason in Davidson's sense to slip. Mentioning the agent's intentions (motivations, desires, reasons, intentions, wants, beliefs, etc.) will not explain the slip. On any account by which a performance can only count as an action if it is intentional under a description, a slip is not an action. This raises a difficulty for anyone who thinks that slips nevertheless *are* actions.³⁸ Can a theory that defines actions as intentional under a description make room for slips as actions? Peabody attempts to answer this. I will now consider her treatment of explanation-based accounts of action.

2. Peabody's critique

Peabody targets explanation-based theories in general but focuses on Davidson's in particular. To grasp her point, one must take a closer look at the details of Davidson's theory: in particular what, for him, makes a performance intentional under a description and so turns a performance into an action. If one seeks a strategy for viewing slips as actions, one must understand how slips can be made intentional under a description.

I first must consider what makes actions in general intentional under a description. Then I can investigate Peabody's attempt to apply this to slips. I explain why Peabody thinks that all the options available to the follower of Davidson fail and agree with her conclusion that Davidson's explanatory pattern cannot be applied to slips.³⁹

According to Peabody's reading of Davidson (2005: 183-184), action A is intentional under description *d* only if (1) it has been caused in the right way by the agent's primary reason, which, again, "consists of a pro-attitude of the agent towards actions with a certain property, and a belief of the agent that A, under description *d*, has that property"

³⁸ Obviously, philosophers have different intuitions. Some hold that slips do not deserve action status. For me, it seems odd to say that what a person does without intention, in the case of a slip, is not an action. No one will deny that the agent did something action-like. I hope that what I have said already in Chapter One serves as adequate justification to accept slips as actions; I will not argue the point further.

³⁹ My discussion closely follows Peabody's presentation, pp. 183-193.

(2001 [1963]: 5);⁴⁰ (2) it has been caused in the right way by the agent's prior intention to perform A under description *d* (2001 [1978]: 83-102)⁴¹; and (3) *d* is true of A.

What options are there for theorists of Davidson's persuasion, who define action in terms of action explanation, to adjust that definition to capture slips? Peabody says that they must somehow make the slip performance intentional under a description; but how? She explores three possible strategies and shows why they fail.

First, one could argue that every slip involves a false belief,⁴² held by an agent at the time of acting, which can be described as intentional in terms of this false belief. Consider an agent on her way to a meeting on the third floor. She runs to the elevator, jumps in, and pushes "7". There are many ways this could happen. She might believe the "7" button will take her to the third floor: she pushes "7" intentionally, falsely believing the "7" button to be the "3". If one interprets her action this way, however, one is no longer talking about a slip because the agent does just what she means to do given her false belief.

Alternately, it seems possible that the agent merely slipped and pushed the wrong button. Everyday experience suggests that such an explanation is reasonable, but the false-belief strategy disallows it: what the agent did must be explained in terms of the agent's false belief, and must be intentional under the description of the false belief. In the slip case, however, it is not. The agent who slips does not have the false belief that "7" is "3". She just slips. There is no way to rationalise the gap between the intention (push "3") and the action performed (push "7") in terms of a false belief. Davidson demands that the intentional description must be true; yet it is false that the agent means to push "7". The action is not intentional under the description by which it is a slip. Remember that, for Davidson, an agent performs the actions she does because of the reasons she has; but the agent who slips has no such reason to make the slip: the slip bears no relation to her beliefs and desires in the way Davidson requires.

Remember as well Davidson's advice to try to see what the agent sees. One can hardly capture how the agent sees her action by describing her pushing "7" as intentional, as if she believed that pushing "7" would take her to the third floor. Instead of explaining

⁴⁰ Davidson adds the criterion "in the right way" to avoid the problem of deviant causal chains. Given his causal model, he needs a mechanism that prevents actions coming about in random ways. That said, exactly what constitutes the "right way" seems unclear even to Davidson, who writes (2001 [1973]: 79): "I despair of spelling out... the way in which attitudes must cause actions if they are to rationalize action". Many researchers have drawn attention to this: e.g., Stout (1996: 4) writes of "what Davidson famously despaired of spelling out".

⁴¹ Condition 2 might seem superfluous in light of Davidson's reduction of intentions to mere executive belief-desire complexes in his 1963 article. I am following Peabody's presentation here and I assume that condition 2 is designed to capture Davidson's acknowledging the role of irreducible "pure intending" (1978).

⁴² See Houlgate (1966) for an argument that all mistakes in performance of actions are due to errors in judgment. See also my Chapter One.

the agent's actions as intentional under a description, the false-belief strategy explains them away.

Second, one could argue that slips are intentional under a more general description than the precise details of the slip would suggest. Consider the same agent on her way to the third floor, who pushes "7". One admits that she does not intend to push "7", on the basis of some false belief – she intends to push "3" – but, seeing as the performance cannot be captured as intentional under that description, one says instead that she intentionally pushes *some* button. Her act of pushing "7" is intentional under the more general description "push a button".

As Peabody remarks, the problem with this strategy is that if an intention to do something entails a simultaneous more generalized intention – absurdity ensues. The intention to "do something" is fulfilled by too many things, activities or processes that one clearly does not want to classify as actions, never mind as intentional under a description (Peabody 2005: 187):

Let us suppose, however, in accordance with the view I am trying to resist, that the intention to eat the steak implies the intention to do something. The event, which is your intention to eat the steak, would presumably be identical on this view to the event, which is your intention to do something. If so, however, then your intention to do something would cause your mouth to water. Since your mouth's watering could be described as your doing something and so as your fulfilling your intention to do something, it would be intentional under some description and hence an action. This is not a good result.

The generalization strategy seems farfetched, strangely cut off from real life. Consider the small boy who has just learned to press elevator buttons. He is so proud of his achievement that he does not care what button he pushes, so long as he manages to press some button. "Pressing a button" in this sense cannot be what the earlier agent intends.⁴³ To apply Davidson's framework again, this cannot be how the agent views her own action. As Peabody puts it (2005: 187): "I may intend to win a contest but not intend to either win or lose it", specific intentions just do not entail more general ones.⁴⁴

Third, one could apply what Peabody (2005: 189) calls the Accidental Consequences Method and attempt to explain slips by recourse to more basic actions. In a sense, this is the reverse of the generalization strategy: the claim is that the intention to do something entails intending to perform the basic actions needed to pull it off; slips can be described as intentional under a description that centers on these basic actions.

Unfortunately, this strategy runs into a mass of problems. First, it is unclear how stretching one's finger (a basic action in this context) can be said to describe pushing

⁴³ Thanks to Santiago Amaya for this example.

⁴⁴ See (Peabody 2005: 211 n17) for further details.

“7” when intending to push”3”. Suppose there are three people in the elevator. One intends to push “3”, but slips and pushes “7”. One of the other two asks: “what is she doing?” and the third explains: “she is stretching her finger”. Strictly speaking, this description is correct, but it falls well short of capturing what is going on. If Davidson’s test is applied – if one tries to see what the agent sees that makes the action worthwhile for her at the time she performs it – it seems highly unlikely that her understanding includes any consideration of stretching her finger. Even if this were plausible, not all slips are such that they can be captured this way. Consider an example that Peabody (2005: 190) quotes from James (1890 [1983]): “very absent-minded persons in going to their bedroom to dress for dinner have been known to take off one garment after another and finally to get into bed”.

Of course, one could still try to reduce the mistaken actions into a series of basic actions that were intended; but, once again, this is not the way to get at what the agent saw as worthwhile in her performance. She did not intend all of the basic movements she performed to reach her goal.

Peabody concludes that all three strategies fail and that, in consequence, theories of action like Davidson’s – which define action in terms of explanation, as intentional under a description – cannot properly capture slips as actions.⁴⁵ She offers an alternate strategy according to which one accounts for slips as actions by disambiguating Hornsby’s notion of trying, which I will briefly present before proceeding to Peabody’s account.

3. Hornsby’s notion of trying

According to Hornsby, *tryings* constitute a ubiquitous feature of human agency: in a sense, one *tries* to do everything one intentionally does, even though one does not normally think of oneself as intending to try them (Hornsby, 1980: 33, 2010: 18).⁴⁶ Hornsby has recently revised her view. It is important to realize that Peabody is working

⁴⁵ Davidson (2005) actually discusses a form of slip: the malapropism; which Peabody ignores. I am not sure why, though perhaps it is because Davidson’s focus is linguistic while hers is non-linguistic (though she does make some appeal to linguistic slips). That distinction is important because Davidson interprets actions narrowly, even as he presents a holistic linguistic theory. Leist writes (2007: 2): “whereas, in his linguistic theory, Davidson supports an unrestricted holism, with individual sentences acquiring their meaning from the meaning of *all* the other sentences of a language... action[s] are grasped and understood more narrowly”.

⁴⁶ Of course, there are cases of intending to try. Hornsby (2010: 23) offers the example of a person who judges a block too heavy to lift. She does not believe she will lift the block, but she intends to try.

from the earlier Hornsby,⁴⁷ since, to my mind, Hornsby's revised position fits Peabody's project even better, as I hope to show toward the end of the chapter.

I begin from Hornsby's original (1980) view. In the next section, I investigate how Peabody suggests adjusting it to capture slips as actions. I point out some ambiguities in Peabody's account before offering my own solution, drawing on both Peabody and recent Hornsby.

Davidson holds that all actions are bodily movements. Hornsby (1980) agrees that this is generally the case; but she also thinks that one can go a step further and capture action in a more basic way, through tryings. A trying is both an event and an action. It is a mental entity that reveals intentionality, understood as directedness towards a content. Actions result from tryings rooted deep inside the body: deeper than bodily movements. One might wonder why one would make such a claim. Consider a person suffering from sudden paralysis or some other motor failure who nevertheless tries to move. Nothing happens. Yet, what the agent does is, at the most basic level – at the level of trying – exactly the same as when she succeeds. Thus, body movements do not seem to constitute the basic essence of action. Based on this, Hornsby makes the following claims:

- (i) Basic action descriptions should be made in terms of tryings.
- (ii) All actions are tryings.
- (iii) Tryings – and therefore actions – are interior to body movements.

Hornsby's (1980) causal picture has much in common with Davidson's. She identifies the act of Φ -ing with the action that is the agent's way of Φ -ing. If S acts by trying to act, the act just is the trying: action and trying are identical. The act of moving one's arm and trying to move one's arm are the same. That said, if one tries to move one's arm, but nothing happens – say, because of momentary paralysis – then the trying and the action are unsuccessful. It is only the efficacious trying that is a successful action. So, all actions are tryings, but not all tryings are (successful) actions.

Hornsby makes a distinction between *transitive* and *intransitive* actions: a hand rising (intransitive) is not the same thing as S raising her hand (transitive); a finger moving is not the same as S moving her finger. S “transitively” moves her body; her body “intransitively” moves as a result. In a normal performance, one successfully makes the body movement one tries to make; the trying causes the movement: e.g., “raise arm”.

Claim (iii) above has led to much confusion. It is not clear how one should understand the idea that tryings, and therefore actions, are mental processes causally preceding or

⁴⁷ Both (Hornsby, 1980) and (Hornsby, 1996). I will make clear when Peabody is referring to the 1996 work.

“interior to” bodily movements, nor how this connects to Hornsby’s overall picture of tryings. I prefer to set this aside.

All actions may be tryings but, admittedly, one often lacks a sense of trying to do things; one “just” does them: e.g., one passes the salt when asked, “could someone please pass me the salt?” There is no prior planning and not much effort involved. Hornsby, however, argues that, even though one might say that one did not try to do anything, one “just” did it, this does not mean that no trying was involved – only that one need not and, indeed, generally does not mention the trying when, as here presumably, the act was successful. There is no need to note the information that one is trying to do something that one is, in fact, doing. One normally only appeals to tryings when the performance breaks down e.g., “he tried to catch the ball, but he was too slow” or “I tried to recall the poem, but I could not remember the opening lines”. Bottom line: both successful actions and performance errors are rooted in tryings.⁴⁸

4. Peabody’s account

Peabody thinks that slips should be seen as actions. She rejects Davidson’s idea of defining action in terms of an intentional description of the agent’s performance. She thinks that Hornsby’s account can capture slips as actions, given certain modifications. For Peabody, the relevant kind of trying does not take part deep inside the body. By contrast, she sees an essential ambiguity in Hornsby’s notion of trying: on the one hand the intention-like trying (tryingⁱ) that takes place deep inside the body; on the other, an action-like trying (trying^a). Peabody writes (2005: 199): “If intentions are mental (or intention-like) then tryingsⁱ are mental (or intention-like too). But tryings^a are not mental (or intention-like), they are action-like”. They can be seen as bodily expressions. As non-intentional and, indeed, non-mental entities, tryings^a can be used to capture slips as actions.

Peabody (2005: 201) fleshes out a non-mental interpretation of intentional action based on Hornsby (1996), following Hornsby (1980), with her interpretation of Hornsby added in brackets:

(α) An action is a person’s doing something intentionally. (Or: A performance is an action just in case there is a description under which it is intentional).

⁴⁸ Sometimes one refers to tryings when the performance is successful but difficult: “I really tried to catch the ball and I did succeed”.

(β) An action is a person's doing something in *attempting* to do something. (Or: A performance is an action just in case there is a description under which it is the agent's trying^a to do something and it causes her body to move_i).⁴⁹

(α) represents the traditional Davidsonian picture. In defense of a purely external, non-mental notion of action, Peabody adheres to (β) and rejects (α). She (2005: 200-201) describes her view as “a departure from the notion that to be an action is to be intentional under some description, and more generally, from the view that seeks to understand the status of an action in its mental aetiology”.

For Peabody, for a performance to be the action of an agent, it need not be intentional *in any respect*. The mental is removed from the picture. By contrast, Hornsby's tryings encompass not just those things that manifest themselves in actual behaviour and bodily motion, but also those that do not, and are still attempts at bodily motion; recall the paralysis case. The trying is not the intention, but rather the mediating element between the intention and the action. Recall (β)'s focus on attempting to do something. The trying is the spark that realizes the intention and sets it into motion as an action: it initiates the action.

Hornsby (1980) seems to conceive of tryings essentially as *mental* things – and is commonly interpreted that way. Hornsby's tryings are meant to be “deeper inside the body” than (superficial) movements, causally responsible for initiating those movements. It is this dimension of initiation that Peabody wishes to point toward, but only in a non-mental sense. While Hornsby wants to retain the intentional basis of trying, Peabody's suggestion is to remove it: actions can be analysed without recourse to intentions, and slips can be accounted for as actions. Specifically, a slip is characterized by an agent trying^a to do something but doing something that the agent did not intend. Nevertheless, she makes the slip *voluntarily*: she initiated it without being forced to and made goal-directed movements throughout the slip.⁵⁰

All that makes a performance an action is that “the agent was trying^a to do something” (Peabody: 2005: 200). Rather than being intentional under a description, performances can be seen as *voluntary* under a description, specifically (2005: 204): “the agent Φ s voluntarily (the agent's performance is voluntary under the description ‘ Φ ’) just in case the agent tries^a to Φ and his trying^a to Φ causes (in the right way) his body to Φ_i ”. Peabody (2005: 198-199) illuminates her position with a version of Davidson's (2001 [1973]: 79) classic climber story:

A mountaineer intends to let go of his partner whom he holds on a rope. This thought makes him so nervous (his hands begin to sweat) that the rope slides out of his hands.

⁴⁹ The annotated tryingⁱ, trying^a, move_i refer to Hornsby's distinction between transitive (t) and intransitive (i).

⁵⁰ Note that Peabody's focus is *not* on goal-directed movements.

Even though the mountaineer did not perform an action here – he was tryingⁱ to do something. All of this happened as he was tryingⁱ (in the sense of “had the intention”) to let go of his partner. But the mountaineer did not try^a to let go of the partner in the sense that matters to Hornsby. There is no action done here – and no trying^a either. Although the agent was tryingⁱ to do something, he did not manage to set out to doing it – he did not try^a to do anything. If someone interrupted the event and handed him the rope back saying “Here! You were trying (read: trying^a) to let go of your partner here,” he might blush and mutter (truthfully): “I was not actually *just now* trying (read: trying^a) to do anything. It just happened. The rope slid out”.

As another example, she offers Kerstin, who asks Martin for a glass of water. Martin though wants orange juice. He puts two glasses, a jug of water, and a jug of orange juice on the table. Then he grabs the jug of orange juice and pours from it in both glasses. He does so not because he has the false belief that the jug is the water jug, but because he acts automatically and so makes a slip (Peabody, 2005: 185). The researcher who wants to capture actions as intentional under a description has trouble accounting for Martin’s action, because the slip was not something Martin intended to do. It seems that the explanation-based theories in general cannot explain Martin’s performance as an action. For Peabody though (2005: 200), “Martin’s slip is an action not because of what he intended to do (not because he was tryingⁱ to pour water for Kerstin) but because he was trying^a to pour orange juice for her”.

It may not be obvious how this should be understood. One way to interpret it sounds relatively modest. For Hornsby, actions – successful or unsuccessful – involve a trying to do this something; so, in similar fashion for Peabody, every body movement in which the agent is behaving voluntarily in the appropriate way reveals an action. Martin performs a body movement with success. He does not pour orange juice onto the table or into Kerstin’s lap; he is not merely being clumsy.

Given the very readable way in which Peabody writes, one might easily miss just how radical her position is. Consider though (Peabody, 2005: 205):

...with the replacement of (α) by (β), the corresponding extreme position becomes conceivable, viz. the claim that it might be possible for our actions never to have intentional explanations as a matter of fact.

One might reasonably ask why Hornsby (1980) cannot account for slips as actions; one might reasonably wonder if Peabody is not, in effect, introducing a new form of trying and not just disambiguating Hornsby’s. After all, Hornsby (1980) *can* account for cases in which an agent’s trying amounts to nothing: the agent tries to Φ , but no Φ -ing occurs, as in the paralysis example. The problem of course is that Hornsby (1980) is largely open to the same criticism as Davidson, because Hornsby’s tryings are directly tied to the agent’s intentions: the agent tries to do something because of an intention

she has, and this intention-like trying is meant to explain the act.⁵¹ Such an account cannot explain slips as actions. To explain slips, one must understand trying differently. Consider again the person who intends to push “3” in the elevator but pushes “7” because she slips. In a way, *per* Hornsby (1980), she *tries* to push “3”; after all, this is what she intended to do. What Peabody reminds us is that there is also a sense in which she tries to push “7”, because this is what she actually does – just as with Martin when he pours orange juice instead of water. So on the one hand, there is the trying that concerns what the agent intends to do. On the other, there is the trying that concerns what she actually does. Only the former can properly be handled by Hornsby (1980), because Hornsby (1980) ties tryings to intentions. Peabody’s insight is that the latter can also be handled by that account, by setting actions free from intentions. In this way, slips become tryings and can be accounted for as actions.

Peabody’s suggestion is that slips are voluntary and *action-like*. The agent who slips “successfully” pushes “7”: she does not push the wrong button because she loses her balance, is pushed from behind, is forced by someone who puts a gun to her head, etc. She makes voluntary and meaningfully goal-directed movements throughout; she just slips. The slip is not an intended trying but remains an action-like trying: a trying^a.

On many points, I think Peabody is right. Tying tryings to intentions prevents explanation-based theories from accounting for slips. Hornsby can only explain how the agent was trying to push “3” and not how she was also trying to push “7”: the action she actually performed. Hornsby’s (1980) account must be amended to account for slips as actions. Unfortunately, saying that the agent was trying in an action-like sense - trying^a – is not without problems.

⁵¹ Peabody writes that Hornsby (1996) does not ‘*flatly* reject (α)’ (Peabody, 2005: 201). Hornsby (1980) clearly approves of (α); in her later papers, Hornsby clearly does *not* approve of (α); so Hornsby writes (1996: 55-56) of her version of (α) that:

The simplification I go in for results from eschewing the terminology of ‘intentional under a description’. I think that it has led to more confusion than it was intended to eradicate...In order to theorize about action, one has to speak at a level of generalization which exceeds what is ordinary: hence my recourse, in (α) and elsewhere, to the schematic...‘do something’; but this seems to me fully intelligible, where ‘do something under a description’ is not.

Hornsby (1980) regards her account as extending Davidson’s, while Hornsby (1996) accepts that there are complex problems with his notion “under a description”. Given subsequent papers, it seems plausible to read her the way Peabody does.

5. The reach of norms

Peabody offers no detailed explanation of how trying^a can define action. She provides no definition of slips. Her aims are modest (2005: 175):

My aim in this paper is neither to argue conclusively that slips are actions, nor give an account why. Rather, I want to offer the case of slips as a company to the case of actions done for no reason that would stand as a reminder to all those theories that may be tempted to identify a theory of action with a theory of action explanation too quickly.

I agree that actions should not be defined as intentional under a description. However, I believe Peabody makes a mistake in claiming that action can be defined without reference to mental aetiology. The claim is unnecessarily radical. My preference is to define action by appeal to norms.

I have already discussed the pitfalls of trying to make slips intentional under a description. It strikes me that all of the possible strategies fail for a common reason. No matter the strategy, the resulting model will fail to satisfy its own main requirement: namely, to capture something that the agent found worthwhile doing. As the passenger who boards the wrong plane shows, rationalizations are easy to offer in cases of false belief. In the case of slips, however, one struggles to find a suitable rationalization. The agent who slips would hardly offer a description under which her slip was intentional. By its nature, the slip is not connected to any of the things she might see as worth doing at the time that she slips. Peabody offers slips as “a company” to actions done for “no reason”: i.e., the agent has no reason to make the slip; she does something she does not intend to do.

I see as an advantage of Peabody’s account that her tryings^a fit well with behaviour commonly regarded as actions. It strikes me also that Hornsby, whose account Peabody builds on, in time has come to sound rather more like Peabody (Hornsby, 2010: 18):

I shall suggest that the claim about *trying*’s ubiquity can be made to be very plausible. But I shall argue that it lacks the significance which has sometimes been accorded to it. So far from leading us to find a strictly ‘mental’ component in bodily action, recognizing the ubiquity of *trying* can encourage us to appreciate that a person’s involvement in her actions – in her causing what she does – extends into the world beyond her body.

The more recent Hornsby wants to capture a notion of trying that is not solely interior to the agent: i.e., she wants to describe it in an intersubjectively accessible way. Peabody’s trying^a is of this character (Peabody, 2005: 198): “we can convince ourselves that the agent tries^a to do something in this sense not necessarily by inspecting his intentions or his mind more generally, but rather by reflecting on breakdown cases, where his activity is interrupted in some way”.

Suppose Kerstin interrupts Martin the moment before he pours orange juice for her, saying something like: “stop, I want water!”⁵² Martin performs an action because he tries^a to pour orange juice. What he does is clearly non-intentional and so cannot be explained as intentional under a description. Peabody goes further though: she claims that Martin’s action bears no relation – whatsoever – to his mental states. At this point, I find it hard to follow her account. For Hornsby’s part, though she has moved her focus somewhat away from the mental, I doubt that she wants to cut it from the picture. There are good reasons for keeping aspects of the mental in any definition of action. When one tries to make sense of what others do, part of that is being interested in the difference between the action intended by the agent, and the actual outcome, including any slips. Peabody’s trying^a is *solely* external: it can only capture body movements, physical expressions. It is unclear exactly how it can contribute to a proper distinction between actions done for no reasons, slips as body movements that can be seen as actions, and “mere” body movements that do not qualify as actions. What is missing from a more complete picture of action, I think, is norms.

Peabody’s account is close to what I have in mind: in particular, her idea that actions, need not be intentional but need only be *voluntary* under a description. This is what separates trying^a from mere happenings, such as body spasms. What is problematic is her attempt to make a full departure from mental aetiology: after all, “voluntary” is commonly regarded as a mental notion, indeed commonly coupled to the intentional, as *per* Roger Teichmann, who describes it (2011: 45) as “a close cousin of the intentional”.⁵³

Aside from a few examples and a brief discussion of Anscombe’s distinction between mistakes in judgment and mistakes in performance (i.e., slips), Peabody does not attempt to define “slip”. I take the following to be a standard definition: “to act contrary to one’s governing intention” (Amaya, 2013; Baars, 1992; Norman, 1981). In light of this definition, it seems unfortunate indeed to dismiss mental aetiology as Peabody does: after all, slips happen against a background of otherwise intentional behaviour.⁵⁴ They are distinct from sudden spasms and other glitches in the human machinery. The governing intention is crucial precisely because the slip deviates from it. The governing intention provides the standard against which one measures the slip. It just does not make sense to attempt an action-based account of slips if not to express the fact that a planned performance fails to achieve the intended outcome. It seems that one *must* explain slips, at least, as somehow related to an agent’s mental states. For the agent who

⁵² See (Peabody, 2005: 198) and n28 for further details.

⁵³ Peabody notes that there exists a non-mental sense of the voluntary and refers to Anscombe (see Peabody n32 and Anscombe’s “Action, intention and double effect”).

⁵⁴ Thanks to Santiago Amaya for this point.

realizes that she has made a slip, there will always be the awareness that she has acted against her governing intention.

I think that Peabody's account can be made much more defensible if one includes the different *stances* one can take towards a slip. In addition to a first-person stance, there is a third-person normative stance. Clearly, the observer does not experience "from within" that a slip has occurred: it is not *her* slip. Instead, she notices the slip and finds it intelligible in light of the norms governing the situation⁵⁵: norms with which she is familiar. To discern the difference between what the agent intended and what she actually did (e.g., make a slip), one assumes that the agent intends to perform actions that follow norms. At the same time, though norms help make actions intelligible, they are not all that determines whether or not something counts as an action: some link to the mental is commonly presupposed.

On the account I wish to set out, something counts as an action if the agent is clearly informed by the norms governing the situation: she is trying either to align herself with those norms or deliberately violate them. Even if she violates certain norms, however, she necessarily follows others, if she is to be understood as performing an action. She may violate ethical norms; but she will, say, still comply with linguistic norms. If her behaviour violates all norms, it will be incomprehensible to the observer, who will be unable to judge whether her behaviour involves any agency whatsoever.

It is not because one knows an agent's intentions that one knows that her performance was an action, even as she slips. The narrator of a novel typically has full access to the interior of the characters in the novel. Human society, however, does not work this way. What one knows of others' minds comes via the external signs they reveal. Suppose that a person feels envy, but does nothing that reveals this envy; then no one but she can detect it. Slips, on the other hand, are public performances: the observer detects and explains them from an "outside" perspective by taking a normative stance toward them. Slips have a certain systematicity. Like other norm violations, slips follow certain norms even as they violate others: e.g., verbal slips show lexical biases and rarely violate the usual syntactic constraints of the language in which they are expressed (Fromkin, 1971). Slips fall into patterns. The link to the mental is retained: the slip-as-action involves an agent's voluntarily trying to conform to or deviate from norms governing the situation.

Recall Peabody's example of Martin and Kerstin. Martin slips and pours orange juice for Kerstin, who rather wants water. For Peabody, Martin's performance is an action, because he is trying^a to pour orange juice. I do not find that particularly illuminating, however. One must say more to clarify why his slip is an action. Martin presumably becomes aware of his slip: he experiences the slip "from within". Upon realizing the mismatch between his intention and action, he might well mutter to himself something like: "hey, what an idiot I am!" In so doing, he takes a first-person stance on his slip.

⁵⁵ This is what I argue in Chapter One.

Kerstin, on the other hand – along with any other observer – takes a third-person perspective. She does not know what Martin’s intention is. She can only observe that he pours orange juice instead of the asked-for water.

What is required for Kerstin, or another observer, to regard Martin’s performance as an action is only to regard him as trying to conform to standard norms of politeness. This preserves Peabody’s version of Hornsby’s notion of trying. At least under normal circumstances, people act according to norms. Given that Martin is otherwise a polite person, one understands that he has slipped, and not acted maliciously. If one has any uncertainty – if, perhaps, one suspects that he is sick and tired of Kerstin whining about water – one could ask, “do you know what you are doing?”, and point out that he has poured orange juice instead of water. To pose the question is not to suggest that Martin does not know the difference between orange juice and water: that knowledge is taken for granted. It is rather to determine why he has violated the norms he has violated.

Objections

The causality objection

In the Davidsonian tradition, the common assumption is that causal concepts play a crucial role in explaining human action. Hornsby (1980) likewise defends a causal theory; for both Davidson and Hornsby (1980), an action is intentional under a description if it has been caused in the right way by an agent’s prior intention to perform the action under that description (see Davidson, 2001 [1978]: 83-102). When an agent Φ -s intentionally, her wanting to Φ – the sum of her beliefs, desires, reasons, etc., about Φ -ing – causes her body to move in a way that constitute Φ -ing. Nevertheless, one might complain that it is unclear how trying^a causes an agent to act.

Peabody criticizes the very idea of interpreting what it is to act intentionally in terms of the causal/explanatory history of a performance; but claiming this is not to claim that action involves no causality. One can deny – as Peabody does – that actions are explicable in the way that explanation-based theories of action suggest without thereby committing to the idea that actions are uncaused. At the same time, it *has* become increasingly popular to question Davidson’s causal picture. Much attention has recently been given to Anscombe’s non-causal account of how the agent *qua* agent accomplishes change in the world (Alvarez, 2007; Anscombe, 2000; Hornsby, 2005; Steward, 2014).

The intention objection

Intentions are central to human agency and explaining human agency. To understand human agency, one simply takes “an intentional stance”; one presumes that the agent is rational, attributes to her mental properties and tries to figure out what intentions

she ought to have given the circumstances (see Dennett, 1989). It seems unnecessarily complicated to add norms into the picture.

I do not want to argue against the possibility of an intentional stance. But I think that in addition to it, there is a normative stance which facilitates action explanation. I have suggested two stances one can take towards slips, and toward actions in general: third person (normative) and first person. They *can* coexist. What the normative stance shows is that mental explanations demand more data and further observations. Mental explanations are made on the basis of an initial interpretation of an agent's observable behaviour and surroundings. To paraphrase the old Freudian saying that "dreams are the royal road to the unconscious", observable actions are the royal road to an agent's mental states.

Conclusion

What I have shown in this chapter is that, by linking my idea of action definition by norms to Peabody's notion of non-intentional trying, one gets a suitable way to capture slips – a type of non-intentional performance – as actions. From the third-person perspective, the slip is something the agent tries³ to do, which makes sense in light of the norms governing the situation; not, though as a successful case of following the norms, but as an *approximation* to the norms. Rather than harmonizing with the rest of the agent's behaviour, the slip can be recognized as a failed attempt to see that behaviour through.

Peabody rightly attempts to distance herself from intentional definitions of actions. Actions should rather be seen as what one conventionally *identifies* as actions: i.e., observable public performances. Peabody is right to conclude that a slip is not intentional under a description. It is not something the agent means to do or otherwise has reason to do. Attempts to explain slips as intentional under a description seem artificial and, indeed, far-fetched. No Davidsonian rationalisation applies. Nevertheless, it seems appropriate to treat slips *as* actions.

Likewise, I think Peabody offers a convincing argument against explanation-based action theories like Davidson's. Where she goes wrong is in excluding the mental domain from definition of action.

Consider the normal reaction of the agent who slips. If asked about it, she would hardly try to describe her slip under an intentional description. No one does that. Should someone do so, the response would strike people either as strangely awkward or as *ad hoc* rationalisation. One does not try to make one's slips intentional. One tries to explain what went wrong: "My thoughts were elsewhere", "I failed to pay attention". That one typically offers excuses for one's slips points to the fact that one accepts them as one's actions. The only person who needs a description of a slip that can make it

intentional is the researcher who has a theory to save. Everyone else can manage just fine without.

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Chapter Three: Basic Activities

“If there are any actions at all, there are basic actions.” –

Arthur C. Danto, 1968

Abstract

The concept of basic action is typically understood in terms of simple movements like raising one’s arm or nodding one’s head; basic actions are the smallest constituents from which all other actions are made. This atomistic approach has played an important role in philosophy of action even as it has been notoriously difficult to pin down. I explore different approaches to basic actions and illuminate their problems. I investigate a novel and, I think, successful attempt at defining basic action as slip proof (Amaya, 2015). At the same time, I question the utility of any definition of basic action. People generally lack knowledge about the smallest constituents of their actions: they do not pay them much thought. I do not reject the concept of basic action but, drawing inspiration from a recent proposal of Hornsby’s (2013), I suggest focusing on basic activities instead. In carving out my own position, I explore the relationship between slips and activities. Slips are basic because one does not intend them, even as one performs them with knowledge-how-type skill.⁵⁶

Introduction

Imagine entering a dark room and turning on the lights: an ordinary thing to do; but how exactly does one do it? First of all, it is important that the agent herself turns on the lights. If they turn on because of, say, an electrical failure in a circuit, then no action took place, only a *mere happening*.

⁵⁶ I want to thank Santiago Amaya, Björn Petersson, Wlodek Rabinowicz, and Andreas Engh Seland for comments and feedback on this chapter.

As the saying goes, the devil is in the details. To turn on the lights, one must perform a connected string of sub-operations: locate the switch, raise one's arm, step forward, position one's hand, flip the switch, etc. These sub-operations appear to be the underlying means to reach the goal of turning on the lights. It makes intuitive sense to think of them as *basic actions*. Does any one of them constitute *the* basic action? Many philosophers would answer "yes". First though, what precisely *is* a basic action, and why has it has been found appealing by so many?

1. Basic action

An intuition shared by many philosophers is that what a person does is accomplished by doing something else: e.g., one illuminates a room by turning on a light, turns on the light by flipping a switch, flips the switch by moving one's finger, etc. At some point though this unpacking of actions must come to an end, if one is not to be caught up in an endless regress where agents never actually get to act. To allow the very possibility of agency, there has to be a *basic action* that one can perform without doing something else. As Arthur C. Danto writes (1968: 44) in introducing the notion:⁵⁷

...If there are any actions at all, there must be two distinct *kinds* of actions: those performed by an individual *M*, which he may be said to have *caused* to happen; and those, also performed by *M*, which he cannot be said to have caused to happen. The latter I shall designate as *basic actions*.

A few pages later he writes (1968: 54):

A basic action is perfectly simple in the same sense in which the old "simple ideas" were said to be: they were not compounded out of anything more elementary than themselves, but were instead the ultimately simple elements out of which other ideas were compounded.⁵⁸

An agent does not cause a basic action: nothing she does first makes the action come into being. Basic actions are *causally* basic: that is how they can avoid the regress. They are the very source of agency, the material of which all other actions are made. They

⁵⁷ Danto coined the phrase "basic action", but its theoretical roots can be traced at least to Aristotle (*Physics*, 256 a, 6-8) and *The Bhagavad Gita* (Ch. IV, lines 16ff). See Sandis' introductory article "Basic actions and individuation" (2010: 10).

⁵⁸ For Danto, basic actions are analogous to basic beliefs in foundationalist epistemology; he writes (1968: 52n1): "the analogy between theory of knowledge and theory of action runs very deep indeed, almost as though they were isomorphic models for some calculus. Obviously, there are things we can say about actions that do not hold for cognitions, etc., but this means very little.... I shall use theory-of-knowledge features as a guide for structuring the theory of action".

are a necessary condition for all other matters connected to agency such as causality, freedom of the will, moral responsibility, full-fledged actions as distinguished from mere happenings, etc.

No wonder so many have considered the task of identifying basic actions to be crucial. Not only do basic actions avert a regress, they can – ideally – reveal the stuff of which agency is ultimately composed. If one wants to know how a clock works, one takes it apart, studies the parts and their interaction, and – through these observations – gains an understanding. So, too, with human action: by dissecting actions into their smallest components, one hopes to gain knowledge of how agency works.

Of course, actions are not such that one can disassemble them in the same manner as clocks. How is one meant to identify a basic action? One strategy is simply to ask: “how did S Φ ?”; to which the answer is, “ S Φ -ed, by Ψ -ing”. One keeps on repeating the question until one can go no further, at which point one has presumably reached *the* basic action. In the case of the lights, the basic action might be “moving one’s finger”. As with similar body movements, this is not something one does by *willing* the finger to move. Davidson writes (2001 [1971]: 49):

If we interpret the idea of a bodily movement generously, a case can be made for saying that all primitive [basic] actions are bodily movements. The generosity must be openhanded enough to encompass such “movements” as standing fast, and mental acts like deciding and computing. . . . It is important, however, to show that in such ordinary actions as pointing one’s finger or tying one’s shoe laces the primitive [basic] action is a bodily movement.

Many see this as the standard view⁵⁹, according to which every (normal) person has the same repertoire of basic actions:⁶⁰ bodily movements an agent can make or refrain from making. At the same time, the debate over basic actions has a long and lively history, and researchers have widely diverging views on how one should flesh them out. Basic actions face a potentially much bigger problem, however.

⁵⁹ Needless to say, the standard view comes in different versions. I have tried to capture its core nature here, though some might disagree with one or another of my details.

⁶⁰ Danto says this explicitly (1968: 51): “...every *normal person* has just the same *repertoire R* of basic actions. . . .” Of course, he allows that a person’s repertoire might differ due to e.g. physical hindrance or disability (Danto, 1968: 53).

2. The infinite simultaneity claim

The very notion of basic action would seem to be superfluous if the imagined regress is *not* vicious. Consider the point that an action can be described in unboundedly many ways, and so one can, in a sense, perform an infinite number of actions simultaneously. By writing “1” one writes a number smaller than 2, one writes a number smaller than 3, etc. If an action can be infinitely expanded in this way, what problem is there with an infinite expansion in the other direction?⁶¹ An action – any action – comfortably accommodates a sense of the infinite within itself. One might call this the *infinite simultaneity claim*.

The claim draws attention to a distinction between the standard view on basic actions, and a competing view whereby basic actions are *teleologically* basic.⁶² As such, they are not the smallest body-movement-based constituents of agency, like raising one’s arm or nodding one’s head. Rather, they are those actions an agent can perform with knowledge-how-type skill: “just like that”; she does not have to figure out by which means to perform them (Hornsby; 1980, 2013). Examples are speaking, reading, skateboarding, and stirring food.

Views on teleologically basic actions differ, but there is general agreement that the agent need not intend them: they are not causally but rather *intentionally* basic. A professional skateboarder is so good at what she does that she can perform multiple tasks without needing to plan them in advance. Of course, she can think, “I want to do an olly kickflip”, but she does not need to plan how to do this: it is part of her teleologically basic action repertoire (even though it is clearly *not* a basic action on the “standard” account). Through years of practice she has learned the skill: i.e., the knowledge how. She knows her actions under broad descriptions.⁶³ A novice skateboarder must always reflect on what to do. She must focus on how to place her feet on the board, how to maneuver it, how to move her body to prevent injury in case of falling, etc.

The infinite simultaneity claim is unproblematic for the teleological account of basic action. It is true that one could offer endless descriptions of an agent’s performance; but then, multiple things can and will be teleologically basic for any given agent. On the other hand, the infinite simultaneity claim is a serious threat to the “standard” account, attacking the very logic of the argument and the causal view on which it is

⁶¹ Thanks to Wlodek Rabinowicz for pointing this out.

⁶² Teleologically basic should be understood as roughly the same as *intentionally* and *semantically* basic. That said, there are different ways of being teleologically basic: one can e.g. distinguish between something being teleologically basic given an agent’s intentions and something being teleologically basic given certain facts and norms.

⁶³ I consider this in more detail in Chapter Six.

based. Remember, the “standard” account requires an action that was not itself caused: one that can serve to initiate a chain of actions.

The “standard” view theorist has a possible defense: that an action can be infinitely expanded “forward” into a series of equivalent descriptions does *not* mean that it can be infinitely expanded “backward” to a prior cause for any given action. The former may suggest the latter, but it in no way logically requires it.

The “standard” view theorist has another possible defense: the infinite simultaneity claim does not reflect basic actions’ causal and temporal nature. Actions are events: spatiotemporal particulars with the characteristic feature that they are countable and occur only once. The movement of one’s finger presupposes the movement of one’s arm, which presupposes movements by one’s feet and legs, and so on. While one can give infinitely many descriptions of a given action, one cannot perform infinitely many actions: at some point the causal chain must stop. If one puts on the lights by flipping the light switch, then the flipping of the switch is what causes the lights to turn on, with (in the normal course of events) a temporal gap between the two events. The sense of infinity that is operative in the infinite simultaneity claim is simply excluded.

To sum up, when someone performs a basic action on the “standard” account, she does so by making a bodily movement that constitutes the fundamental atom of what she is attempting to accomplish, grounding every other action. On the other hand, when one performs a basic action in the teleological sense, one does so without any need to determine the means by which the action should be performed.

With that background in mind, I can now move on to a standard distinction in the literature between fine- and coarse-grained views on action, depending on how one prefers to do action individuation.

3. Action individuation

However one chooses to identify basic actions, one must have a method for individuating actions. G.E.M. Anscombe defends a *coarse-grained* approach. She offers the example of a person whose arm moves up and down because he is operating a pump. It turns out that, at the same time he is supplying a building with drinking water, he is poisoning the water supply, because he wants to kill the politicians inside the building and so overthrow the government (Anscombe, 2000: §26):

Are we to say that the man who (intentionally) moves his arm, operates the pump, replenishes the water supply, poisons the inhabitants, is performing *four* actions? Or only *one*? ...Moving his arm up and down with his fingers round the pump and handle *is*, in these circumstances, operating the pump; and, in these circumstances, it *is* replenishing the house-water supply; and, in these circumstances, it is poisoning the household. So

there is one action with four descriptions, each dependent on wider circumstances, and each related to the next as description of means to end.

Any of the descriptions Anscombe offers – and more than one could think of – correctly describes the action. Some – describing the pumping – have a narrower scope. Others – describing the intention to overthrow the government – have a broader one. What the man does is intentional under some descriptions and unintentional under others: e.g., he might unintentionally be making a clicking noise when moving the pump handle. Though there are clearly different ways to describe what the man does, it does not follow that he performs more than one act. Being basic here, then, is not a matter of kind but of description, where some descriptions are narrow, others broad. Anscombe thinks it pointless to search for *the* basic action. She writes (1979: 220):

I have on occasion stared dumbly when asked: “if one action can have many descriptions, what is *the* action, which has all these descriptions?” The question seemed to be supposed to mean something, but I could not get hold of it. It ought to have struck me at once that here we were in “bare particular” country: *what* is the subject that has all of these predicates? The proper answer to “What is the action, which has all these descriptions?” is to give one of the descriptions. Any one, it does not matter which; or perhaps it would be best to offer a choice, saying: “Take whichever you prefer”.

For Anscombe or anyone inclined toward a coarse-grained view on individuating actions, actions are not countable particulars. By contrast, the fine-grained view holds that every description of a given action picks out a *different* action, only *one* of which is basic: the operating of the pump is a distinct action from the poisoning of the water supply. Alvin Goldman defends such an account: a particular act, or act token, “is the exemplifying of a property by an agent at a particular time”, where “two act tokens are identical if and only if they involve the same agent, the same property, and the same time” (Goldman, 1970: 10). Examples of act tokens are John’s mowing his lawn at time t , John’s flipping a light switch at time t , etc. The advantage of a fine-grained account, according to Goldman (1970: Ch. 1), is that it can handle cases in which the identity claims made by a coarse-grained account appear to be wrong. Leibniz’ law says that, if $x = y$, then any property of x must also be a property of y . Applied to action individuation, it follows that, if an act of operating a pump is identical to an act of poisoning a water supply – as the course-grained theorist would seem to claim – then every property of the former is a property of the latter. Perhaps the coarse-grained theorist rejects Leibniz’ law.

Consider the act of (1) John killing Smith by (2) John pulling the trigger. The coarse-grained theorist would presumably hold that these are two descriptions of one and the same act: i.e., the events are identical. Yet one of the acts has properties lacking in the other: John’s pulling the trigger has the property of causing the gun to fire; John’s killing Smith does not. “Since one of these acts has a property which the other lacks,

they cannot be one and the same act” (Goldman, 1970: 2). Goldman offers several other arguments showing weaknesses in the coarse-grained view.

Given these considerations, it seems clear that the two views on action individuation are indeed radically different. The fine-grained view depends on the notion of a basic action in a way that the coarse-grained view does not. Seeking common ground, Goldman claims that the coarse-grained theorist would not deny that any of the actions pointed out by the fine-grained theorist *are* actions. I think this is debatable: some of the body movements that the fine-grained theorist counts as actions, the coarse-grained theorist very well might not. Anscombe, at least, does not seem committed to making Goldman’s move. Consider the movement of a toe in an action sequence of cutting one’s nails: the nail cutting is intentional; the toe movement need not be. For Anscombe, actions are expressions of an agent’s complex intentional make up and cannot be viewed in isolation from their position in an overall sequence of actions. It would be pointless within her teleological framework to seek “the” basic act, and many minor movements will not be actions.

Goldman’s Leibniz objection misses the mark: Anscombe’s idea of re-description has no direct connection to Leibniz’ Law; it is *not* a claim about identity. Her claim is only that an action may be described in multiple ways, where it is intentional under some descriptions and not under others. Anscombe herself writes (1970: 220) in reply to Goldman: “...this is no more a rejection of Leibniz’ Law than it is to say that Socrates is taller than Theaetetus and not taller than Plato”.

It can feel hard to decide between coarse- and fine-grained views: each has its advantages and disadvantages. The coarse-grained theorist objects that the fine-grained theorist requires the existence of too many actions and that the coarse-grained view accords with common sense. The fine-grained theorist responds that, even though one may in everyday language speak of something an agent does as a single action rather than breaking it down into multiple sub-actions, this does not mean that these sub-actions should not themselves count as actions. It could be no more than a matter of conversational implicature that one avoids mentioning, say, four acts instead of one: to communicate efficiently, agents focus on the most relevant features of the situation. An agent who goes into too much detail will be seen as providing irrelevant information (Grice, 1975; Sperber and Wilson, 1993).

It is hard to draw any firm conclusions. For myself, I think that all the small, carefully individuated actions of the fine-grained view are somewhat pointless to count as actions in their own right. These action “atoms” have, in and by themselves, little if any meaning without reference to the overarching goal of their performance. In isolation, they are meaningless.

Unfortunately, matters get even more complicated. One can ask whether it really is the case – as has often been suggested – that body movements constitute the fundamental level for action, though Davidson thought so (2001 [1971]: 59):

We must conclude, perhaps with a shock of surprise, that our primitive [basic] actions, the ones we do not do by doing something else, mere movements of the body – these are all the actions there are. We never do more than move our bodies: the rest is up to nature.⁶⁴

This is not the only option. Perhaps one needs to enter the mental domain to capture basic actions properly, in search of something even more basic to action than movements of the body: namely, *willing* (Prichard, 1968) or *trying* (Hornsby, 1980).⁶⁵ Hornsby (1980: 79) writes:

More evident counterexamples are provided by cases where an agent gains such control over the internal workings of his body that bringing about changes inside himself becomes something that he can do at will. Some philosophers refuse to allow that there are actions at all in such examples, but I suspect that they do so precisely because their accounts fail to admit that anything except a bodily movement could be basic.

An important motivation for accepting things other than body movements as basic is that, sometimes when an agent initiates an action, nothing happens. Hornsby (1980)⁶⁶ shares Davidson's view that actions are *generally* movements of the body. Where their accounts differ is that Hornsby insists on actions always having the more basic component of *trying*: specifically, trying to move one's body. Recall the discussion from the last chapter. The most basic way to describe an agent who illuminates a room by flipping a light switch is not to say that the agent illuminates the room by moving her finger in a certain way, but that she does so by *trying* to move her finger. The trying stops the regress – not the finger movement.

Remember that, for Hornsby, both successful actions and erring ones are tryings, even though it is normally only in the breakdown cases that one appeals to tryings. When pushing a red button, one does not say: "I'm trying to push the red button"; when drinking coffee, one does not say "I'm trying to drink..." Such utterances strike one as awkward because, under normal circumstances, the intention behind successful actions is clear cut. Again, even though one does not normally say of an agent *S* that *S* tries to Φ when *S*'s Φ -ing is successful, this does not mean that one thinks *S* is not trying, only that one need not mention it.

Prichard's and Hornsby's accounts have one key difference. Unlike Prichard, Hornsby is not committed to the idea that every action is preceded by an act of will; rather, they

⁶⁴ Note that Davidson in the above quote (2001[1971]: 49) might have an unusually wide notion of bodily movement

⁶⁵ For an introduction to this topic see Moya, Chapter Two, 1990.

⁶⁶ The text should make clear which period in Hornsby's writings I refer to.

are simultaneous. In this way she escapes the endless regress that threatens Prichard's account.⁶⁷

4. Teleologically basic action

Consider the example from Hornsby (1980) of someone saying "grass is green". The utterance is performed through movements of the tongue, mouth, teeth, etc. The agent does not make these movements because she believes they are means of saying "grass is green"; she probably has no particular beliefs about them and is hardly aware of them. She does not do them intentionally in the way she intentionally utters the sentence as a whole. Neither does she intentionally say each of the phonemes of which the sentence consists. Not just this agent but *most* agents will be unable to describe what they do under the narrowest possible descriptions. Hornsby concludes that the movements the agent makes when uttering the sentence "grass is green" cannot be what is basic to her. Consider that people often intend and successfully perform actions even though they have false beliefs about how they perform the smallest constituents of those actions. Johansson and Lynøe (2008: 156) write:

Most people think falsely that they do not move their arms and hands when they are biking without turning, and that biking should primarily be explained by our sense of balance. In fact, when biking we rely only to a small extent on this sensory system. Biking is in the main made possible by centrifugal forces. When we turn to the left, a centrifugal force arises that will tilt us to the right; we then move our hands and make a turn to the right, whereby a force arises that will tilt us to the left. We then make a new little turn to the left, and so on. Tiny movements of the hands enable us to keep the bike upright by creating centrifugal forces of opposite directions. The bike is actually tottering from left to right, even though we may think that the bike is continuously in a stable upright position. Even when we are biking straight ahead, we are unconsciously making small turns; and we have to do these turns.⁶⁸

From the agent's perspective, basic actions have a teleological structure, and one can perform them without any need to understand their details correctly. The regress threat ends with those actions the agent "just does". On a teleological view, basic actions are relative to the agent: acts that are basic for one agent may not be for another. Too,

⁶⁷ Prichard's exact position remains unclear to me. His reply to the regress complaint appears to be that "it is impossible to will to will"; the question "from what willing would the willing of β result?" is mistaken. The proper question is, "from what *something* would the willing β result?" to which the proper answer is, "from a certain increase in desire to will β " (Prichard: 1968: 68-69).

⁶⁸ Johansson and Lynøe credit Polanyi for the example. Note that, whereas my main purpose is fleshing out teleologically basic action, their focus is on the distinction between *knowing how* and *knowing that*.

something that is basic for an agent in one setting may not be in another. Consider the agent for whom using her own hot-water kettle is a basic action while using a hot-water kettle of unfamiliar design is not.

The teleological view is really, I think, a step towards abandoning basic actions in favour of the more abstract notion of *basic activities*. Indeed, Hornsby (2013) has recently moved in this direction. In setting out my own account, I draw inspiration both from her original account (1980) and her more recent one, together with a novel suggestion for action individuation through slips (Amaya, 2015). First though I must say more about what Hornsby means by “basic activity”.

5. Basic Activity

Taking inspiration from Michael Thompson (2008), Hornsby (2013) suggests that philosophers writing in the field of philosophy of action need to take serious account of basic activity. Thompson criticizes the “standard” view on basic actions for failing to capture the sense in which agents are active participants in their own doings, which themselves are always parts of ongoing processes. The problem lies in the “standard” view of action as “bringing about an event”; actions are seen as spatiotemporal particulars that can happen only once, serving as causes of other events. Such an account seems only able to capture what an agent has done or will have done but not what an agent actually is doing. In attempting to capture basic actions, the “standard” view is ignorant of agents being *active* agents. Hornsby writes (2013: 1): “in the standard story, agents are subjects of event-predications, whereas in Thompson, agents are treated as the subjects of ‘event- or process-forms.’ This makes an enormous difference.”

Hornsby parts with Thompson, however. Inspired by Anscombe, Thompson concludes that one cannot pinpoint *anything* that is genuinely basic in action, on the grounds that there can be no natural start or end point within a process of acting. Each act can be indefinitely divided and all parts count as actions in their own right, as means to more complex actions.⁶⁹ Hornsby, on the other hand,⁷⁰ writes (2013: 2): “...it seems to me that there must be something right in saying that no one would do anything if everything she might do was something she could only do by doing something else”.

This relates to a regress problem to which Hornsby (1980) draws attention: if one intends to Φ , and doing Φ requires one to Ψ , then one must intend to Ψ ; but if one’s intention to Ψ requires one to X , then one must further intend X , and so on. One seems to be staring at an infinite intentional regress. A notion of intentional basicness

⁶⁹ For a criticism of basic actions along Thompson’s lines, see Lavin, 2013.

⁷⁰ I do not mean to imply that Thompson is inspired by Anscombe and Hornsby is not; clearly, she is. Rather, their readings of Anscombe diverge.

is needed to stop the regress. Hornsby does not propose some universal set of intentionally basic actions in the way that e.g. Danto attempts to define a universal set of causally basic ones. Rather, every agent must have a set of actions that are intentionally basic *to them*. If an agent must plan how to perform every detail of what she will do, she will never get anything done. What an agent intends is not all of an action's sub-routines but what they collectively amount to – their *telos*. The sum of these sub-routines is automatized and can be performed without premeditation: “just like that”.

Further progress requires having an understanding of activity. Hornsby writes (2013: 1) that “an agent is engaged in an activity so long as an action of hers is occurring”. Contrast this with the common view of actions as events, where events are countable spatiotemporal particulars. Think of the event “the blue bomb is exploding”, and another: “the red bomb is exploding”. Two events occur: a blue bomb explodes and a red bomb explodes. As spatiotemporal particulars, they cannot recur. The “standard” view reports action in a similar way: e.g., “Katja turned on the light”, “Lucas drank the bottle of milk”. Actions are reported as completed performances, and they are countable. Of course, many things people do can be reported like this; but many things cannot. Consider: “Katja waited for her father to come home from work and was killing time by walking around the apartment; just for fun she turned the light on and off while singing to herself”, or “Lucas drank the bottle of milk while stretching his leg muscles before his next run”. Now Katja and Lucas are not just performing an action but engaged in an activity; it would not make sense to report only bits of it. Hornsby (2013: 3) writes:

An idea of ongoing activity seems to be presupposed to the idea of an action. For if someone did (will have done) something, so that there has been an action of her doing it, then at some time she was (will be) doing it, which is to say that she was (will be) engaged in the activity of doing it. Perhaps this isn't obvious for an action that took (will take) only a very little time, where interruption is difficult to imagine. But one can always picture things in slow motion; then one sees that a person may have been doing something, even if there would not have been enough time to say that she was doing it.

Activities are things that may be intentionally engaged in (2013: 3):

by one or another person at one or another time. They are not then actually present in the world of space and time. In this respect they are like what are sometimes called acts or act types, which are abstract, and instantiated by actions (so called “token actions”).

Where does basicness enter the picture according to Hornsby? She writes that (2013: 16) “Ongoing (intentional) activity will always be of some basic type”. That “basic type” consists not of e.g. finger movements or head nods, but things that the agents have know how to perform (2013: 14): “you have an end which you could achieve

directly ‘just like that’: you could achieve it by virtue of the fact that you knew the means”.

Hornsby’s reply to Thompson follows naturally. The multiple performances, the twists and turns in an agent’s activities that convince Thompson to dispense with basic actions, cannot all be intended. Many of them must be intentionally basic – something that Thompson seems to have overlooked.

Hornsby’s focus of attention is intentional activity; but I believe that what she says has broader consequences, notably in the case of slips. Slips are not intended; at the same time, they directly exemplify what Hornsby means by “knowing the means”. They are actions that an agent performs unknowingly and non-intentionally – but with know how. The agent clearly knows how to do the thing she performs as a slip. Every non-intended slip reveals a practical capacity for doing something “just like that”, without conscious premeditation or guidance. In another setting, the exact same behaviour that was a slip becomes something the agent intends.

6. Slip-proof actions

Amaya explicates basic actions through the notion of a slip. He writes (2015: 1) that an action “is basic for an agent if and only if the agent cannot slip in performing it”: i.e., some actions, such that the agent does not have to plan them in advance, do not allow for slips. They are slip proof “because the agent doesn’t need to do another *action* as a means to perform them” (Amaya, 2015: 4). Amaya writes (2015: 4) that, “in the slip, the intended action is broken down into its constituents. So, if you cannot slip in doing some action, a reasonable hypothesis is that it has no constituents. It is, therefore, basic for you”.

Amaya takes inspiration from psycholinguistic research, notably Fromkin’s. Findings seem to show that there are some slips fluent speakers of a language do not make: e.g., when planning to say “slips of the tongue” in English, one could err and say “stips of the lung” but not “tlip of the sung”.⁷¹ The /tl/ sound is not phonetically permissible in English. More generally, the data shows “that speech acts are produced recursively from a set of atomic constituents” (Amaya, 2015: 5). Amaya concludes that phonemic segments are basic and, as such, slip proof.

This does not mean that one cannot be mistaken when speaking; obviously, one can. Again, drawing on Fromkin, Amaya divides slips into *substitutions*, *transpositions*, and *omissions*. A substitution would be saying “read” instead of “write”, a transposition

⁷¹ I take the example from (Fromkin, 1973: 184).

saying “foon and spork” instead of “spoon and fork”; an omission would be trying to drink from a bottle before taking the cap off.

Amaya offers speaking, walking, and the typing of a skilled typist as examples of slip proof and, therefore, basic actions.

Speaking: “...slips do not result in phonemically impermissible sounds. Articulating the phonemic segments of one’s language is among the most rehearsed actions there is” (Amaya, 2015: 9). “Due to years of intense rehearsal [competent speakers] do not face the problem of figuring out how to cobble together articulatory movements into those phonemes and, hence, they do not make the corresponding planning mistakes” (Amaya, 2015: 12).

Walking: “some action patterns are so well rehearsed that they seem apt candidates for being slip-proof. The adult stride is likely one of them. After years of practice, raising one’s foot as soon as the other hits the ground becomes an action unit” (Amaya, 2015: 9).

Typing: “due to years of practice each key becomes associated with one particular finger” (Amaya, 2015: 15).

In the speaking case, one could object that, if one substitutes one phonemic segment for another or transposes or omits it, then one certainly slips. This is true, but it misses Amaya’s point. He acknowledges that it is possible, in all these cases, to slip by substituting, transposing, or omitting. Nevertheless, there are certain slips one just does not make, like saying “tlip” for “slip”, even though pronouncing “slip” can go wrong in many ways. Likewise, one can slip while walking if one e.g. suffers from sleep deprivation or has had too much to drink; what one cannot violate is the stride pattern: “the stride pattern is a non-breakable unit.... [One] always maintain the one-to-one stepping pattern (alternating steps with support periods and no airborne periods)” (Amaya, 2015: 10 n13). Finally, the skilled typist slips now and then, but does not slip with regards to which key belongs to which finger.⁷²

Amaya takes all his slip-proof cases as “action units” (2015: 9), requiring “intense rehearsal” (2015: 12) and “years of practice” (2015: 9), giving his account of basicness a teleological bend. That last part is, however, problematic; and there are other difficulties in Amaya’s account.

⁷² Amaya refers to empirical findings in all these cases: psycholinguistic research, experiments on treadmills, and observational studies of professional typing respectively; see (Amaya, 2015) for details.

7. Problems for the slip-account

I believe that individuating basic actions through slips can work, but not exactly in the way Amaya suggests. On the one hand, he claims that his position “is neutral regarding the metaphysical positions that dominate the discussion”; on the other, he explicitly says that “the focus here will be on *teleological basicness*” (Amaya, 2015: 3). It seems he is picking sides in the metaphysical debate over what an action really is, after all: actions are inherently tied to the *telos*, or intention, of the agent. At the same time, it strikes me that Amaya’s position is not really teleological and better fits the “standard” view.

Amaya’s focus is precisely on the smallest components of an action. In a comment he does not develop further, he writes (2015: 2) that “skilled typists, say, don’t deliberate about how to type words or sentences. But typing a word or a sentence seems too ‘large’ to count as basic for them”. In general, basic actions are atomic: they have no constituents; “the action, *qua* action, does not have an internal structure” (Amaya, 2015: 5). This only makes sense, I think, on the “standard” view of basic action.

For Amaya, basic actions are such things as “discrete linguistic units” (2015: 5), “adult stride[s]” (2015: 9), and “key strokes” (2015: 15). By contrast, a teleologically inclined theorist is perfectly happy to accept as basic skateboarding, swimming, playing a musical instrument, operating a pump, walking to the store, answering the phone, etc., even though these actions are certainly not slip proof. People can be so good at things that those things become intentionally/teleologically basic; yet they do certainly not become infallible.

Amaya’s account has further difficulties. Additions are the opposite of omissions, but Amaya seems to have left them out of the picture, even while Fromkin, who inspired his taxonomy, does not (1973):

What is apparent, in the analyzes and conclusions of all linguists and psychologists dealing with error in speech, is that, despite the semi-continuous nature of the speech signal, there are discrete units at some level of PERFORMANCE which can be substituted, omitted, transposed or added.

An example of an addition would be saying “we and I” instead of “we”. Like omissions, additions certainly represent a difficult category; but they are common enough. I am not sure why Amaya chose to ignore them; perhaps he thinks that the other three categories are sufficient to cover them⁷³ though, if so, I am not sure they can. In contrast to the other cases, an addition is not a mistake in the intended performance *itself*; rather, something is added to the performance that corrupts it and makes it something the

⁷³ That is how I have understood him from personal conversation.

agent did not intend. It is hard to tell how one can break down additions into smaller, slip-proof constituents; clearly, more work is needed.

Consider the agent who intends to walk to the garage but goes to the garden instead. The agent performs a complete action sequence – a complex activity – even while slipping. With goal-directed movements, she successfully performs an action she did not intend. This shows that one can slip and substitute *one complete action sequence* for another. How do cases like this fit the picture of basic actions as slip proof, which seems so crucial to Amaya’s account?⁷⁴

I think that there is a sense in which Amaya’s claim – that basic actions are slip proof – is correct; but not for the reason he thinks. He thinks that basic actions are slip proof because they are well rehearsed, at the same time that he claims – seemingly contradictorily – that his concept of basic actions is teleological. Maybe one cannot slip in performing the smallest possible constituents of actions – like pronouncing “tlip” – but pretty much everything else can, and often does, fail.

Amaya cannot have it both ways: he cannot both claim that basic actions are things one does without possibility of slipping and that basic actions have a teleological nature. On the teleological view, basic actions are always tied together into activities by the agent’s intentions, together with her practical competence to pull them off. By contrast, on the “standard” view where they are the smallest possible constituents of movement, they are learned from birth, based on the agent’s natural ability to move her body.

It seems to me that Amaya has successfully isolated basic actions in the sense the “standard” theorist is after: they are slip proof because they are absolutely primary in the sense Danto addresses.⁷⁵ They can be explained without appeal to intentions, plans, goals, deliberations, rationality, etc. They do not constitute a teleological unit. Normative claims do not apply. Danto’s basic actions must be slip proof because they have no fault lines along which they can break.

The “standard” theorist should embrace Amaya’s proposal. I also wish to make use of his account of slips, but in a different way.

⁷⁴ Amaya ignores cases like this in treating slip-proof actions but mentions them elsewhere in (2013).

⁷⁵ Amaya argues against the claim that basic actions are bodily movements, saying that it corresponds to nothing more than his claim that e.g. extremely well-rehearsed tool can be basic for a given agent (Amaya, 2015: 15). I think his point is correct, but it is difficult to see how one can apply it to his otherwise atomistic picture of basic action.

8. Slipping behaviour as basic

A slip is always part of a process, a pattern, an activity: a genuinely isolated slip does not exist. As I showed in Chapter One, it is against this normative background that one is able to recognize the slip as a slip: the slip does not fit with the rest of what an agent does. This is not to say that if one picks the slip apart then one will not reveal basic action in a fine-grained sense: one will. Yet the slip itself is always a unit, an addition to otherwise correct behavior.

I doubt whether basic actions on the “standard” view should be seen as actions at all; they are simply the natural condition for agency. If one’s aim is to understand how agents think about and relate to their own and other people’s actions, then the concept of basic action does not seem very useful. When one shifts to the teleological view, one is no longer talking about the smallest constituents of behaviour but about activity – understood as whatever a person does when she is engaged in doing something, as Hornsby put it. Activity is such that it can be made intelligible against a normative background, in contrast to mere movements, which – in and of themselves – say little about what agents find meaningful. As Todd Lekan writes in a different context (2007: 167), even turning off a light switch can be understood in multiple ways, most of which make little sense in terms of the smallest constituents of agency:

Turning off a light switch may be further described in any number of ways, depending on the context. It may be “the first step in preparation for love-making”, “closing the act of a play”, “getting ready for bed”, “saving electricity”, and so forth. The description may not go much beyond “this is the sort of thing a person does when entering an existing room in her house”. (Even this description will be part of a network of assumptions about what she does in her house).

Consider the agent who plans to stir her coffee, but slips and uses her pen instead of a spoon. This is correctly characterized as a slip. The performance of stirring one’s coffee with a spoon deserves labelling as an action unit: an activity. The agent has done this so many times that she can do it without extra thought. Yet even with such automatized performances, one can fail to do them correctly: the agent absently uses a pen instead of a spoon. What is remarkable is that the agent can pull off another act – stir coffee with pen – from her action repertoire with full success. It seems to me that herein lies the true foundation to agency: even in slipping, the agent successfully performs an action, just not the intended one. Rational agents are able to substitute one complete action for another and pull off the misdirected action successfully: that truly is a remarkable feature of human agency.

Performances one can successfully do while intending something else reveal what one can do “just like that”, precisely because one has all the necessary bodily skills to

perform them. Because of that capacity, one can reasonably be expected to be able to perform them intentionally as well.

Activities depend on the norms of the culture and society in which they are performed. They exist on a higher level than mere body movements.

I think Hornsby is right that some concept of basicness is needed to avoid an intentional regress; I just think that her notions of basicness and of basic activity are not *quite* right. A basic activity, I claim, is one the agent can perform even while making a slip. By no means do I mean that the agent *must* slip, if she is to perform a basic action; rather, those things that one is able to do even while making a slip are the ones that truly are basic: slipping behaviour exemplifies basicness. A slip is the kind of performance that would, in another context, be meaningfully intended. After all, *slips are not random*. Verbal slips show lexical biases, tend to result in grammatically correct utterances, and rarely violate the syntactic constraints of the language; so Fromkin (1973: 183) writes: “according to all linguists who have analyzed spontaneous speech errors, the errors are nonrandom and predictable”.

This is important, because it illuminates how an agent’s *knowledge how* is operative when she slips. When an agent slips by grasping the salt instead of the sugar, then this is not because she is incompetent in distinguishing salt from sugar. What the slip shows is *misdirected* competence. Slips are small episodes of misdirected behaviour in otherwise correctly performed action sequences, often closely resembling the correct act. Salt is not so far from sugar in terms of appearance or use. Contrast the act of grasping the salt instead of the sugar with that of accidentally taking a handful of soil from a pot of tulips: such action surely would be baffling, because it differs so much from what is expected. The point becomes particularly clear with so-called slips of the tongue: the agent who slips speaks comprehensible words, not mere gobbledygook.

Slips are actions that form part of an agent’s basic action repertoire. Amaya thinks that basic actions are those that are slip proof. I turn that around to suggest that what one is able to do even while making a slip is that which is truly basic. I believe this preserves Amaya’s general insight even as it properly redirects the focus.

It is important to the philosophy of action that one maintains a notion of basicness. First, one needs something like basic activity to account for automatized, non-intentional behaviour like slips. Second, one needs to account for how it is that agents intend something when they do so: which is to say, what kind of actions agents and observers find meaningful when they understand and explain action. Such meaningful performances are surely not at the level of e.g. finger or foot or other muscle movements.

I have put forth a particular account of how one accounts for basic activity through slips. Nevertheless, there are objections that one could raise to my proposal.

Objections

Slips are not performed "just like that"

To do something "just like that" suggests that it is automatic: there is nothing else one must do to do this something; that is why such doings are thought able to stop any intentional regress. But – one might object – slips cannot be done "just like that", because they are always performed as an unconscious and unintended substitute for an intended action. My reply is that slips *can* be done "just like that" in the sense that matters: one does not intend them; one performs them automatically. The agent has the necessary know how to perform the slip successfully; it is her competence that is misdirected.

Slips are not activities

Another objector might complain that I criticize Amaya's position because it takes basic actions to be the smallest constituents of agency and so amounts to little more than Danto's fine-grained view; yet I keep the same notion of slips – how can this be? It is true that my notion of slips has much in common with Amaya's; however there are key differences. For Amaya, the natural stopping point – the basic act – is the smallest constituent of action, what remains after one has dissembled an action till all that remains is slip proof: e.g., a phonemic segment that cannot be wrongly pronounced. By contrast, I start from the relationship between the slip and the intended act from which it deviates: I see an underlying unity grounded in similar activity, one that reveals the teleological basis of action. Intending one thing, one winds up doing something else – albeit something one also has the *knowledge how* to do.

Conclusion

I think Amaya is right to portray slips as providing the demarcation criterion for basic actions; however, in professing to offer a teleological account, he gets things the wrong way around when he suggests that an action is basic for an agent if and only if the agent cannot slip in performing it. What he ends up with fits better with the "standard", fine-grained view, not a teleological one.

A teleological view makes infallibility impossible; surely, one's definition of basic action should centre on the possible rather than the impossible. I have argued that, even though some slips seem impossible to make, they could conceivably *be* made. I propose that, if an agent can do something while making a slip, that something is, for her, a basic activity. That places my account firmly in the teleological tradition that Hornsby initiated. Teleologically basic activity can be done without premeditation: indeed, even without awareness of doing them. My account replaces basic actions as the smallest

possible (i.e., atomic) constituents of actions with basic activities as complete action sequences: a very different picture. I believe that seeing things this way is more in tune with a folk conception of agency. People rarely ruminate over finger movements or phonetic-segment utterances. Though these features of agency are important in many regards, particularly for the physiologist and the psycholinguist, they are not the kind of things one needs to reflect on to perform everyday actions. If what one wants to understand is agency, then it seems best to focus on the activities people commonly engage in, analyse how they conceive of them, and consider how they intend to do them.

Danto may have been correct to speak of an analogous structure between theory of knowledge and theory of action. Still, agents do not seem to relate actively to their most basic beliefs any more than they do to their most basic movements or the phonemes they utter. Rather, what they see as the starting point for their actions are teleologically grounded: what I, following Hornsby (2013), call *basic activities*. Though the professional philosopher of action might work from the premise that “the devil is in the details” – which is, I acknowledge, often a fruitful approach in philosophy – this is not how, in practice, agents spin their webs of actions. If it is all the precise details of human behaviour that one seeks to pin down, then maybe one is right to search for the smallest, most basic constituents of which behaviour is composed. If, on the other hand, one wants to understand how people relate to their activities in practice: how they think about them, what kind of things they intend with them, etc., then searching out the details may mean losing sight of the bigger picture. Consider: most people are happy with clocks so long as the clocks can inform them what time it is; they feel no urge to explore just what makes the clocks tick in the first place.

List of literature

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Chapter Four: Slips and Reductive Intellectualism

Abstract

Reductive intellectualists (e.g., Stanley and Williamson 2001; Stanley 2011, 2013; Brogaard 2011) argue that *knowledge how* is a form of *knowledge that*. Consequently, *knowledge how* must have the same epistemic properties as *knowledge that*. I argue that slips show how *knowledge how* has epistemic properties not present in *knowledge that*. When an agent slips, she does something different from what she intended; nonetheless, the performance is guided by her *knowledge how*. This reveals a divide between the knowledge that actively guides behaviour: the *knowledge how* that the agent applies subconsciously; and the *knowledge how* she intends to guide her behaviour in the first place, which she thinks she is acting on even as she slips. I argue that this divide has no parallel when it comes to *knowledge that*. Therefore, *knowledge how* cannot be reduced to *knowledge that*.⁷⁶

Introduction

Knowing how to do things is a key part of everyday life. Posting a letter, tying one's shoelaces, and making coffee are all actions people know how to perform and *do* perform, on a daily basis. How one should conceive of this knowledge, however, is notoriously hard to pin down. The field is roughly split between so-called anti-intellectualists who think that *knowledge how* and *knowledge that* are distinct kinds, and

⁷⁶ Thanks to Dan Egonsson, Emmanuel Genot, Olav Gjelsvik, Ingvar Johansson, Björn Petersson, Wlodek Rabinowicz, Oscar Ralsmark, and Andreas Engh Seland for comments on this chapter. Thanks also for comments from participants, Jason Stanley in particular, at the 2012 Lund-Rutgers graduate conference.

so-called intellectualists who think that knowing how to do something just is knowing a truth.⁷⁷

Gilbert Ryle introduced the distinction to contemporary philosophy when he described “the intellectualist legend” (Ryle, 2002 [1949]: 29): “champions of this legend are apt to try to assimilate knowing how to knowing that by arguing that intelligent performance involves the observation of rules, or the application of criteria”. Ryle claims that intellectualists are mistaken in regarding *knowledge that* as the quintessential foundation for all intelligent performances. He sets out to show that *knowledge how* also bears the mark of intelligence, and that people routinely distinguish between *knowledge how* and *knowledge that* in everyday life, when thinking about behaviour. That is, one typically distinguishes between the truths people know and the things they know *how to do*, on the other (Ryle, 2002 [1949]: 28):

Theorists have been so preoccupied with the tasks of investigating the nature, the source and the credentials of the theories that we adopt that they have for the most part ignored the question of what it is for someone to know how to perform tasks. In ordinary life, on the contrary, as well as in the special business of teaching, we are much more concerned with people’s competences than with their cognitive repertoires, with the operations than with the truths that they learn.

The relation between *knowledge how* and *knowledge that* has been much debated ever since. Jason Stanley’s⁷⁸ recent work on the topic has stirred up debate once again. In what follows, I mainly focus on Stanley’s position.

1. Reductive intellectualism toward *knowledge how*

Contra Ryle, Stanley claim (2013: 190) that “it is only when our behavior is guided by intellectual recognition of truths that it deserves to be called ‘intelligent’”. He defends a reductive intellectualism⁷⁹ toward *knowledge how*, according to which *knowledge how* has the same epistemic properties as *knowledge that*. The two share a core set of properties, and the former can be seen as a variation on the latter. This is not to say that the two are exactly the same: Stanley allows that certain of their properties may differ; but such properties are not of a kind to challenge his reductive account.

⁷⁷ Some radical anti-intellectualists defend the view that *knowledge that* is a species of *knowledge how* (Hetherington, 2007). I will not discuss that view here.

⁷⁸ Stanley’s early work on intellectualism was co-written with Timothy Williamson, who also has contributed significantly to the debate. However, my focus is on Stanley’s most recent work.

⁷⁹ I will often just refer to reductive intellectualism as “intellectualism” even though there are other forms of intellectualism: e.g., objectualist intellectualism (Bengson and Moffett, 2011).

Stanley's favoured example is swimming, claiming that, when someone learns to swim, what she learns is the propositional truth or truths about swimming. More generally, "knowing how to do something amounts to knowing a truth" (Stanley, 2013: 190) – which, for Stanley, means grasping a proposition. Knowing how to do something means grasping a proposition in a practical way. *Prima facie*, Stanley seems to offer a promising account of *knowledge how*: his distinction between a practical way of grasping a proposition and a theoretical way of doing so seems to do justice both to the differences between these ways of knowing and to their similarities: in particular, how they respond to the same facts. If *knowledge how* has the same epistemic properties as *knowledge that*, it requires no separate account, and knowledge receives a unified treatment: a clearly attractive consequence.

2. Practical competence

That said, Stanley's account faces a basic problem that any version of reductive intellectualism needs to resolve: namely, that knowledge about how something is done does not transfer directly into practical competence. Someone can know how something is done without knowing how *she* can do it.

Consider Jenny, who has observed her neighbour install a telephone – including all the necessary wall wiring – and so gained some knowledge about how this can be done. Nevertheless, she might not be able to do the same herself, if asked. She might read all the available manuals and still not manage it.

Clearly, one can have propositional knowledge of how a thing is done without being able to put that knowledge into practical action. This poses a problem for Stanley, as his view seems to erase the distinction between theoretical knowledge and practical competence: both are propositionally structured and have essentially the same epistemic properties; one might therefore expect the one to transfer more readily into the other. The challenge Stanley faces is to allow them to have the same core epistemic properties; and, at the same time, explain why *knowledge how* cannot be transferred propositionally, in the same way as *knowledge that*.

Stanley's solution is to say that, for an agent to act skilfully, she must entertain "a practical way of thinking" (Stanley, 2013: 124-130) concerning the true proposition(s) she knows. She must grasp in what way an action can be performed *and* manage to apply this: Jenny must apply the information she has observed and read directly to her own practical capacities. This requires more than acquisition of facts.

Consider Stanley and Williamson's original account of *knowledge how*, according to which *S* knowing how to Φ consists in *S* knowing some means *w* such that *w* is a way to Φ , while entertaining the proposition that *w* is a way for *S* to Φ under a so-called *practical mode of presentation*. Stanley and Williamson (2001: 429 n3) write:

if someone entertained a way of riding a bicycle by possessing a complete physiological description of it, that might also give them *de re* knowledge of that way, though not under a practical mode of presentation.

By making this distinction between *de re* and *de se* knowledge, Stanley and Williamson can capture the difference between knowing how some person can perform an action: *de re*; and how one can perform that action oneself: *de se* (see also Stanley, 2013: ch. 3).⁸⁰

To recap: Stanley's reductive intellectualism understands *knowledge how* as a form of *knowledge that*. The two have a shared core of epistemic properties, the most important of which is that both consist in grasping true propositions. Stanley meets the transferability problem faced by any reductive intellectualist by distinguishing between two ways of grasping a proposition: practically and theoretically.

3. Epistemic properties

I would like both to elaborate Stanley's main points and investigate the principal criticisms against them. I begin with the matter of epistemic properties: Stanley argues that *knowledge how* and *knowledge that* have the same core epistemic properties, but what exactly does this mean?

A property is an attribute that inheres in an object: e.g., most printed books have the property of being rectangular. *Knowledge how* and *knowledge that* share the key property of grasping a propositional truth.

A common criticism of reductive intellectualism is to argue that *knowledge how* and *knowledge that* have different properties, most commonly by arguing that there are no Gettier cases for *knowledge how* (Poston, 2009). Stanley thinks this is mistaken, and in defense of his claim offers the aspiring pilot Bob (2011: 216)⁸¹:

Bob wants to learn how to fly in a flight simulator. He is instructed by Henry. Unknown to Bob, Henry is a malicious imposter who has inserted a randomizing device in the simulator's controls and intends to give all kinds of incorrect advice. Fortunately, by sheer chance the randomising device causes exactly the same results in the simulator as would have occurred without it, and by incompetence Henry gives exactly the same advice as a proper instructor would have done. Bob passes the course with flying colours.

⁸⁰ The matter is actually more complex, but this brief description should suffice for my argument.

⁸¹ The Pilot-case figures in Stanley and Williamson (2001, 435) as well.

He has still not flown a real plane. Bob has a justified true belief about how to fly. But there is a good sense in which he does not *know* how to fly.⁸²

Bob's situation is designed to be straightforwardly analogous to a standard Gettier case for *knowledge that*. Just as in the standard case, success follows from mere epistemic luck rather than epistemic agency. Bob makes all the correct moves by sheer accident, thus may be said not to know, genuinely, how to fly.

Poston has objected that the role played by sheer accident does not seem as devastating in cases of *knowledge how* as of *knowledge that*: there is a sense in which Bob does learn how to fly (Poston, 2009). That he has done so through a series of freak happenings is immaterial, and this case, at least, is not a convincing Gettier case for *knowledge how*. Stanley replies that Poston's rebuttal implicitly presupposes that there can be no Gettier cases for *knowledge how*. He extracts the following premises:

(P1) Gettier-cases for know-how, if they exist, require that the subject intelligently and successfully Φ -s, where Φ ranges over actions.

(P2) If one can intelligently and successfully Φ , then one knows how to Φ .

Stanley accepts P1, but rejects P2. He (2011: 217) quotes a case from Bengson, Moffett, and Wright (2009):

Irina, who is a novice figure skater, decides to try a complex jump called the Salchow. When one performs a Salchow, one takes off from the *back inside* edge of one skate and lands on the *back outside* edge of the opposite skate after one or more rotations in the air. Irina, however, is seriously mistaken about how to perform a Salchow. She believes incorrectly that the way to perform a Salchow is to take off from the *front outside* edge of one skate, jump into the air, spin, and land on the *front inside* edge of the other skate. However, Irina has a severe neurological abnormality that make her act in ways that differ dramatically from how she thinks she is acting. So, despite the fact that she is seriously mistaken about how to perform a Salchow, whenever she actually attempts to do a Salchow (in accordance with her misconceptions) the abnormality causes Irina to unknowingly perform the correct sequence of moves, and so ends up successfully performing a Salchow.

Irina can perform the Salchow. She does it intelligently, reliably, and successfully on the basis of her intentions. In a study reported by Bengson, Moffett, and Wright (2009), 86% of test subjects asked about the case thought that Irina was "able" to do

⁸² It is controversial whether Gettier cases even exist. Stanley's point is not to address that controversy, only to respond to his critics by showing that *knowledge how* and *knowledge that* face similar difficulties.

the Salchow while only 12% thought that she “knew how” to do it: thus supporting Stanley’s claim that Poston’s second premise is false.

Stanley’s Irina anecdote is not without problems: one could e.g. question the formulations in the questionnaire.⁸³ However, none of the discussion concerning Gettier cases is important to the argument I wish to make, so I set it aside – whilst noting that my argument shares the same strategic structure.⁸⁴

4. The argument from slips

A slip is a non-intentional action that an agent performs without being aware of it. Slips exist along a spectrum of levels of inattention stretching from complete ignorance, to a vague sense of something being amiss, to a full realisation immediately following the act. However, in every case, full awareness is lacking at the time of the execution; otherwise, the slip would have been avoided. Consider “the cases where we almost slip up when we push the button, but notice that we are about to make an error and correct ourselves at the last possible instance” (Gjelsvik, 2010: 19-20).

I have already discussed slips and will not repeat what I have said; suffice to say that, in the case of slips, an agent acts contrary to her governing intentions. Although the agent acts without awareness of what she is doing, she still acts with skill: i.e., *knowledge how*. The agent who grabs a pen instead of a spoon to stir her coffee succeeds in stirring the coffee with her pen; she in no way struggles with it. The agent who inadvertently says “spank you!” is not producing gibberish but rather a like-sounding English word to the intended one. The agent who pushes the wrong elevator button successfully pushes a nearby button; she does not try to push the wall instead, nor does she, with the intention of pushing a button, play at leapfrog instead. The mistake in action is not wide of the mark concerning the intention in question. Recall Hofstadter and Moser (1998):

most errors are not simply random intrusions of ‘noise’ into an otherwise clear and unambiguous flow of communication; they are almost always intimately connected with the speakers intended message, and reveal something of it.

Admittedly, cases exist where, in some substantive sense, what the agent does *is* far removed from her original plan: consider the agent who slips and drinks poison thinking it is water; surely, she did not mean to do *that*. At the same time, what she does has much in common with what she planned to do: drinking a glass of water-like

⁸³ Stanley is aware of this and addresses it in a brief footnote before setting it aside (Stanley, 2011: 235, n6).

⁸⁴ For a recent attempt at a Gettier-style attack on intellectualism, see (Carter and Pritchard, 2013).

liquid. It is not as though she throws the glass out the window or pours its contents over her head. In spite of her mistake, she does not struggle to pull off any of her body movements; indeed, she displays her water-drinking skills in a way that closely resembles the success case. That aspect of resemblance is key to my argument against intellectualism.

Consider Stanley's claim (2013: 190) that

knowing how to do something amounts to knowing a truth. This explains both the human capacity for skilled action, as well as the fact that when we act with skill, we know what we are doing without observation.

Stanley connects knowledge of one's own actions with the observation that skills are always informed by facts.

I believe that the existence of slips poses problems for multiple elements of Stanley's account. First, slips run counter to his claim for a close connection between the propositional nature of skilled action and the way an agent comes to know what she is doing without observation. In the case of the pen and the coffee cup, the agent does not know what she is doing as she does it. If asked, "why did you put your pen in the coffee cup?" she would be surprised and answer something like, "Oh! I didn't know." She lacks non-observational knowledge of what she is doing yet acts with skill. *Per* Stanley's theory, she ought to have known better.

Imagine asking the agent to repeat her performance deliberately: she performs the same movements; they reveal the same skills as before – with a tiny but crucial difference. Both times she performs a skill that is part of her action repertoire, but this time her act is intentional. This time, her coffee-stirring skill is applied deliberately; she knows what she is doing without any need to observe herself: she does exactly what she thinks she does. Skill cannot be tied to non-observational knowledge in the way Stanley wants it to be because only on the repeated performance can one speak of the agent having non-observational knowledge of her actions.

Could Stanley reply that acting with skill is necessary *but not sufficient* for non-observational knowledge of what one is doing? Could he claim that one must also *intend* what one does? I do not think that such a reply can work. People do multiple things with the aid of their practical competencies without intending them first, *especially* the things Stanley writes about, like swimming and boxing. The expert swimmer and boxer can swim and box without any need to intend their actions: these are basic activities that they are able to do "just like that".

That is not my main concern, however.⁸⁵ The bigger problem is the way Stanley is forced to conceptualize slips given that they clearly involve skill. It is a trivial

⁸⁵ I discussed activities in Chapter Three.

observation that, for multiple reasons, people often end up doing something different from what they have planned. Slips, though, are different from other unplanned doings – precisely because they involve no change of mind, self-deception, false belief, Freudian hidden belief, etc. The agent who slips has both the practical competence and the knowledge she needs to perform her intention – yet she does something bluntly contrary to it. Nevertheless, slips are without exception skill based: they necessarily involve a practical way of “knowing a truth”; it is only that they do not involve the truth that the agent believes she is acting upon.

On the intellectualist view, when an agent slips, there must exist some substantive sense in which she is split between two levels of propositional knowledge: the subconscious propositional knowledge that guides her immediate behaviour, and the conscious (and false) propositional beliefs that follow from the knowledge intended to guide her behaviour. Again, the movements she performs non-intentionally require skill. For the intellectualist, these movements must originate from a mistake in regard to a practical truth: i.e., a truth she has grasped in a practical way. Prior to the movements that comprise her slip, she must have responded to a different truth than the one to which she intended to respond, without her being aware. In other words, the intellectualist must hold that, when an agent slips, she is wrong about the proposition(s) guiding her behaviour. There is a mismatch between what she takes herself to be doing, given her intention and what she is actually doing, and so a divide between the *knowledge how* she thinks is guiding her behaviour and the *knowledge how* that is actually guiding it.

This mismatch – between the (presumed to be propositional) knowledge the agent intends to manifest and the knowledge she actually manifests – is unique to *knowledge how*, finding no equivalent within *knowledge that*. Consider: it cannot be the case that one thinks oneself to be thinking about one or another proposition without *actually* thinking about it; in a *cogito*-inspired vein, if one thinks one thinks it, one must think it.

Practical knowledge does not work like that. One can think about doing something in a practical way without that thought being what you actually do: that is, without making any faulty judgment or having any change of mind, one can end up doing something different from what one intends. It is not an option for Stanley to reply that the “Cartesian” view – with no allowable space between what one thinks one thinks and what one thinks – only applies to thinking in a theoretical way, because this would be to admit a substantial epistemic difference between *knowledge how* and *knowledge that*: precisely what he wants to avoid.

In the case of theoretical thinking, the agent can – of course – take herself to believe something without actually believing it, or only believing it in a very weak way. One example would be self-deception, another implicit bias; a third would be manifestations of the Freudian unconscious. What all these cases have in common is that the agent is wrong about a few or more of her own mental characteristics: she holds false beliefs

about herself and her psychological makeup. By contrast, slips express nothing about underlying belief or desire.

Again: the analogous case to a slip, in the theoretical domain, would be an agent who, thinking herself to be thinking about one proposition, is really thinking about quite another proposition, without being aware of it – not in the sense of active self-deception, but rather that of making a blunt mistake regarding what thought she is thinking. It would be like deciding to think about the White Rabbit, and thinking one is thinking about the White Rabbit, whilst really thinking about the Mad Hatter: an absurd scenario.

Everyday slips are ubiquitous, for all one's practical competence to perform correctly. It makes sense that one sometimes wonders: "am I really doing what I take myself to be doing?" By contrast, it is not possible to make sense of the thought: "am I really thinking what I take myself to be thinking?" This capacity to get things wrong, in a skilful way, is a *sui generis* feature of *knowledge how* – setting it clearly apart from *knowledge that*. Inasmuch as one tries to keep to Stanley's framework and accept *knowledge how* as a kind of relation to a proposition, that relation is not reducible to the relation informing *knowledge that*. Both are relations to propositions, but they are not alike. The existence of slips shows that *knowledge how* and *knowledge that* do not have identical epistemic properties, and so neither one can reduce to the other.

To recap, Stanley explains *knowledge how* through skilful actions in a way that makes it reducible to *knowledge that*; knowing how to do something amounts to knowing a propositional truth about the world, in a practical way. In technical terms:

[1] Knowing how to Φ is knowing some means w , such that w is the way to Φ .

When Stanley's agent acts skilfully, she does so by entertaining a proposition in a practical way. I have emphasized that slips involve skilful behaviour. In Stanley's terms:

[2] A slip involves thinking in a practical way of some means w^* as a way of Φ -ing while knowing that w^* is not a way of Φ -ing.

On Stanley's account, when one slips, one is guided by the practical grasp of a proposition that is not in line with one's knowledge or intentions. One sets out to perform one skilled action but ends up performing another: in blunt terms, one manifests one's practical grasp of one proposition while believing oneself to be manifesting one's practical grasp of another. One is guided by the proposition:

[3] w^* is a way of Φ -ing.

even as one thinks the guiding proposition to be:

[4] w is a way of Φ -ing.

How can this be? How can one unknowingly manifest a different proposition of theoretical knowledge from the one that one thinks oneself to be manifesting?

I come to a different conclusion: slips reveal *knowledge how* to be of a different nature than *knowledge that*. An agent simply cannot slip when it comes to *knowledge that* – only *knowledge how*.

This in no way requires me to deny that what an agent thinks can add a dimension of meaning, of truth, to what she herself is aware of: it can. Nor am I suggesting that an agent's judgments about her inner states – unlike her judgments about the world – are error proof; I make no claim to full-blown mental transparency. Neither am I denying the possibility of false beliefs.

Consider: I think my flight leaves tomorrow; but I am wrong. I am unaware that my flight has moved to the day after tomorrow, or perhaps I have confused the days. Obviously, one can be wrong about a proposition one entertains or what it refers to. Such a possibility is unproblematic if one allows Frege's distinction between sense and reference.

At risk of repeating myself, the "Cartesian" insight I want to drive home is that the one thing one *cannot* be wrong about is the proposition one believes oneself to be entertaining. Someone could object that the insight is trivial, and maybe it is. At the same time, if something that is trivially true of *knowledge that* does not transfer to *knowledge how*, it is not so trivial anymore – at least, if one wants to reduce all *knowledge how* to *knowledge that*.

Stanley might still try to object that one *can* be wrong about what proposition one entertains and claim that this is exactly what happens in the case of slips: the agent's act is guided by proposition *P* while she thinks about proposition *Q*, but fails to entertain *Q* in a "practical mode". The proposed "solution" comes with a hefty price though: the notion of "practical mode" must do a great deal of explanatory work, even as it is unclear what exactly it amounts to.⁸⁶ The very real risk is that a "practical mode"/"theoretical mode" distinction merely takes the place of the *knowledge how* / *knowledge that* one. Worse, the "solution" implies that what one might call *local transparency* – the inability to be wrong about what one takes oneself to be doing, when what one is doing is entertaining a certain proposition – does not hold for propositions entertained in the "practical mode"; but that would undermine a key rationale for Stanley's reductive account, which is meant to explain non-observational knowledge of skilful actions. If Stanley's reply is that the principle holds in general – i.e., for full-blown intentional actions – but not for slips, then the "solution" seems *ad hoc*. Given the argument from slips, at least something in Stanley's account has to go.

⁸⁶ I will discuss this in more detail in Chapter Five.

Objections

There is no such thing as a genuine slip

What further reply could Stanley make to my critique? One option would be to deny the existence of slips altogether. This, however, would go against a long tradition in linguistics, in psychology, and in cognitive science, dating back at least to Meringer's 1908 report on his collection of verbal slips, possibly to Freud (1966 [1901]). In more recent times, one should not forget Lashley's groundbreaking 1951 paper "The problem of serial order in behaviour". The list of researchers working in this area – all of whom accept the existence of slips as real – has grown so long that doing it justice would take far more space than I have available.

Slips do not imply skill

Alternately, Stanley could deny that slips imply skill. Such a move would erase the problematic propositional-knowledge split by making the motions comprising the slip unguided by propositional knowledge. The unfortunate consequence is that motions that seemingly *do* involve skill – like a verbal slip, where one word is substituted for a like-sounding word – must be seen as not representing skill; but this runs contrary to the indisputable fact that verbal slips are essentially never gibberish.

Slips imply skill, but the skill is misdirected

Finally, Stanley could be tempted to deny that the agent who slips acts with skill in the following sense: she intends to Φ but Ψ -s instead, while thinking she is Φ -ing: the appropriate skill is present but misdirected. The agent who slips and stirs her coffee with her pen uses her customary coffee-stirring skill but applies it to a pen rather than the more conventional spoon. The intellectualist can thus argue that there is no propositional-knowledge split in the cases of slips; the agent simply applies the *correct* propositional knowledge to the wrong object. What exactly is it though to misapply propositional knowledge?

The "solution" has the fatal problem that it cannot be generalized. Perhaps it makes sense in the case mentioned, because of the physical similarities of pen and spoon in terms of shape, weight, etc.; but there are many situations where it would not work to say that the agent misapplies her skill: that is, applies the correct skill to the wrong object. Sometimes the relevant skill is not directed at any object, as when an agent slips and says "spank you" instead of "thank you".

Conclusion

As expressions of *knowledge how*, slips lacks any equivalent within *knowledge that*. *Knowledge how* is hence essentially different from *knowledge that*, and the one is not reducible to the other. I take it as an advantage of my argument that it relies upon ordinary real-life cases, compared to the highly contrived Gettier cases so often used in this debate. Gettier cases are the consequences of sheer epistemic luck: the hapless agent in a Gettier case lacks “genuine” knowledge. By contrast, the agent who slips does so not on freak chance but on skill – just not the skill she meant to apply.

One could object that I have not shown *knowledge how* to be non-propositional. Perhaps this is so. What I have at least shown though is that *knowledge how* is not reducible to *knowledge that*, even if both are propositional. This strikes at the core of Stanley’s reductive intellectualism by undermining one of its key motivations: namely, the attempt to deliver a unified theory of knowledge. The appearance of slips with *knowledge how* but not with *knowledge that* clearly shows that certain core epistemic properties of the one are not core epistemic properties of the other. Slips drive a seemingly unremovable wedge between *knowledge how* and *knowledge that*.

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Chapter Five: Grasping Truth in a Practical Way

Abstract

In Chapter Four, I argued that slips, common within applications of *knowledge how*, find no parallel in *knowledge that* and that this counts decisively against Jason Stanley's reduction of *knowledge how* to *knowledge that*. I suggested that one possible response Stanley might make would require elaborating what it means to entertain a proposition in the sort of "practical mode" he relies on, even as I expressed doubts about the prospects for solving the problem that way. In this chapter, I explore further Stanley's idea of the "practical" grasp of a proposition and present additional arguments against his reductive approach, particularly as it relates to his comparison of how- questions to who-, where-, and when-questions.⁸⁷

Introduction

My aim in this chapter is to explore Stanley's notion of the "practical" grasp of a propositional truth in light of his intellectualist approach in general.⁸⁸ My strategy will be to show that there is more to his notion of a "practical" grasp than merely a special

⁸⁷ Thanks to Ingvar Johansson, Björn Petersson, Wlodek Rabinowicz and Andreas Engh Seland for valuable feedback on this chapter.

⁸⁸ Stanley's notion of "practical grasp" has gone through many modifications over the years, but I will not treat them all. I suppose one reason Stanley has made them is because the notion is difficult to account for. In Stanley and Williamson (2001) they write that the agent must entertain a way of Φ -ing under a practical mode of presentation and that (2001, 429): "thinking of a way under a practical mode of presentation undoubtedly entails the possession of certain complex dispositions". Stanley (2011, 2013) builds on this idea when he develops his view on "ways of thinking" (2013, ch. Four). It seems to me that Stanley's problem is similar to the problem Davidson famously despaired to spell out (see my note 40).

kind of relation to a propositional truth, and that this added dimension raises further questions about how reducible *knowledge how* is to *knowledge that*.

In Section 1, I recap the main points from Chapter Four: in particular, Stanley's reasoning regarding how *knowledge how* differs from *knowledge that*. Sections 2–4 evaluate Stanley's basic argument in favour of intellectualism. In section 5, I show how Stanley's concept of *knowledge how* counts against elements of his intellectualist argument. Finally, I explore a possible objection to the alternative approach that I sketch. I conclude that, even within Stanley's framework, there must be more to *knowledge how* than a grasp of a proposition.

1. The argument from knowledge transfer

In Chapter Four, I raised a general difficulty for any theory that attempts to reduce *knowledge how* to *knowledge that*: that of knowledge transfer. If *knowledge how* is essentially propositional, then it would seem that it ought to be easy to transfer propositionally; yet it is not. Comprehending all the propositional truths about how to swim will not enable one to swim. One cannot learn it from a book. Success takes practice and time. One does not learn it, intellectually; one must learn how to do it, practically, in a way that seems to point towards some non-propositional proficiency.

To accommodate this practical aspect of *knowledge how* whilst preserving his intellectualist account, Stanley defines *knowledge how* as the “practical” grasp of a propositional truth; to have mastered a skill is to have grasped a propositional truth in a “practical” way. In this way, *knowledge how* can be seen as propositional, despite possible appearances otherwise. This further serves to make it apparent why *knowledge how* cannot be transferred propositionally: the mere transfer of propositional content cannot secure a “practical” grasp of that content.

Given what it is meant to do, the “practical” grasp of a propositional truth must include the ability to apply that propositional truth practically. If learning to swim means gaining a “practical” grasp of the propositional truths about swimming, then that “practical” grasp includes being able to execute the necessary motions described by those propositions: i.e., acting on those propositions in the right kind of way. It should be noted that Stanley's (2013: viii) suggested solution involves a “more sophisticated notion of [a] proposition”, namely “one that exploits ways of thinking”.

2. Stanley's intellectualism

The backbone of Stanley's argument for intellectualism is his analysis of embedded questions: i.e., questions that appear in declarative statements or as part of another question. The details of his analysis are complex. Simplifying somewhat, his argument is that the semantic nature of how-questions is similar to that of wh-questions – i.e., who/where/why/when-questions – because all conform to the same basic pattern (2013: 134) “Knowing-wh stands and falls together – either they are all species of propositional knowledge, or none of them are”. A unified semantic theory requires *all* the answers to be propositional. Stanley writes that (2013: 141):

the kinds of philosophical and scientific considerations that would lead us to conclude that knowing how to Φ is not a species of propositional knowledge would also lead us to conclude that knowing where to Φ is not a species of propositional knowledge.

If how-questions could be answered in a non-propositional way, as anti-intellectualists claim, that would necessarily *also* be true for wh-questions, which Stanley finds unacceptable: the answers to these questions often clearly *are* propositional.

Contra Stanley, Michael Devitt (2011) argues that one should go ahead and accept that, in many cases, knowing-wh is *not* propositional (Devitt, 2011, quoted after Stanley, 2013: 134):

The foraging desert ant wanders all over the place until it finds food and then always heads straight back to its nest.... On the strength of this competence, we feel no qualms about saying that it “knows where its nest is.” But to attribute any propositional attitudes to the ant simply on the strength of that competence seems like soft-minded anthropomorphism.

Stanley replies (2013: 134):

It should be widely acknowledged that the philosophical and scientific motivations that motivate the view that knowing how is not a kind of propositional knowledge also would lead one to conclude that many ascriptions of knowing-wh, *even ascriptions of knowing whether one of several options obtains*, do not ascribe propositional knowledge.

“Knowing whether one of several options obtains” is a clear-cut case of propositional knowledge built on propositional descriptions of the world: either Bogota is the capital of Colombia or it is not. Stanley takes it as an unwelcome result if a semantic theory of questions says that knowledge-wh can be non-propositional in character, because (2013: 134) “languages are remarkably uniform in their ascriptions of knowing where, knowing when, and knowing whether”. He goes on to argue that *knowledge how* is likewise expressed in this uniform way cross-linguistically.

At this point, let me set aside further discussion of the details and refer the reader to Stanley. The bottom line is that he argues that embedded questions demand a unified semantic theory, and that this points in the direction of a *propositional* theory, as many of the questions must be answered in the form of a proposition.

A possible objection, given Stanley's linguistic focus, is that communication of *knowledge how* does not work the way he seems to presuppose. In everyday life how-questions are not treated in the same manner as wh-questions. Imagine what such communication would be like. If one asks, "how do I swim?" the reply would need to be something like, "place yourself laterally in the water with the arms extended in front of you; push your arms apart so that they create a diagonal with your body; pull your elbows in toward the sides of your body; bring your hands together in front of your chest; then simply push your hands forward so that they return to where they started".⁸⁹ If one asks, "how do I ride a bike?", the reply would need to be something like, "the key skill is balancing and steering, which you should practice until you feel confident; use a flat surface to get the feel of how the bike leans and steers".⁹⁰ These questions might be common enough⁹¹, what is rare is the propositionally structured answer. One does not normally answer these questions linguistically.

Such replies seem odd and unhelpful. An exchange of this sort rarely happens; even when it does, it is of little use in transferring *knowledge how*. Contrast this with wh-questions and their replies. If one asks, "where is the nearest gas station?" the reply might well be something like, "just carry on down this road; there'll be a Texaco on your right-hand side after half a mile." "When did Susan leave the party?" "She left around ten." "Who is Barack Obama?" "He is the president of the United States." Questions and answers of this form are ubiquitous; answers of the "how" form are rare. In the age of Google and Wikipedia, one can always search the Internet for answers to such how-questions; but they certainly do not occur as often in everyday life as wh-questions do. When – as may rarely happen – they are answered propositionally, the reply does not *really* answer the question; it cannot, because it does not give the enquirer the practical competence she is seeking. Very few ever ask for the best description of the act of swimming; if one asks, "how do I swim?" that's not what one wants, anyway. The how-question is posed with an actual performance in mind. Experts typically impart *knowledge how* by demonstrating it, while the novice imitates what she is shown.⁹² Stanley's analysis strikes me as contrived and not really addressing everyday

⁸⁹ <http://www.wikihow.com/Swim-the-Breaststroke>, accessed 9 December 2014.

⁹⁰ <http://www.wikihow.com/Ride-a-Bicycle>, accessed 9 December 2014.

⁹¹ Thanks to Joel Parthemore for pointing this out to me.

⁹² I am simplifying, of course. In practice, there are multiple ways to learn and improve *knowledge how* without recourse to *knowledge that*. In addition to imitation, Johansson and Lynøe suggest (2008: 159-161) practicing on one's own, practicing with a tutor, and learning via "creative proficiency": a practical variation on creative thinking.

life. To know, genuinely, how to do something – to gain that *knowledge how* – one must go ahead and *try* it.

So whereas questions and answers are generally sufficient to gather knowledge in the *wh*-domain, they are of little help when it comes to knowledge how to perform a particular task, unless the task is truly simple, like “how do I start the coffee machine?” to which the reply might be “push the red button”. Such simple questions are quite different from questions concerning how to ride a bike or swim. Indeed, I suppose that one could call them camouflaged *knowledge that* questions even though they seem to ask for *knowledge how*.⁹³ In any case, Stanley’s interest is not in these simple cases but in complex activities like swimming and riding a bike.

Though Stanley puts a great deal of weight on answering questions about such activities, he does not claim that people ask and answer how-questions in the way I have discussed. Instead, he has a special sense of answering questions in mind.

3. Answering questions

Again, building on his earlier work with Williamson, Stanley holds that *knowledge how* always amounts to knowing the answer to a question; but this does not mean that all such knowledge consists in the ability to verbalize one’s answers, because (2011: 214) “knowing how to ride a bicycle involves knowledge of a distinct proposition than does knowing how to explain how to ride a bicycle”.⁹⁴ One’s ability to answer a question can be latent, in which case one simply acts, based on certain implicit facts; as Stanley puts it (2011: 214): “only grasping a way to ride a bicycle is required to know how to ride a bicycle”. The cycle-riding agent has, in a practical way, grasped the requisite propositions for riding a bike: i.e., she knows of some means, *w*, such that *w* is a way to ride a bicycle. Her *knowledge how* consists in an ability to answer certain questions in principle, not necessarily in practice.

It is important for Stanley that, even though knowledge how to ϕ is the same as knowing a fact about ϕ , the intellectualist does not demand from the agent that she can

⁹³ Many everyday *knowledge how* questions and basically all those one expects to be answered verbally are concealed *knowledge that* questions: e.g., “how do I get to the bus stop?” and “how do you play chess?” are both asked in a “how” manner but are really requests for *knowledge that*. Thanks to Björn Petersson for this point.

⁹⁴ Stanley quotes Fodor. “There is a real and important distinction between knowing how to do a thing and knowing how to explain to do that thing. But *that* distinction is one that the intellectualist is perfectly able to honor.... The ability to give explanation is itself a skill – a special kind of knowing how which presupposes general verbal facility at the very least. But what has this to do with the relation between knowing how and knowing *that*? And what is there here to distress an intellectualist?” (Fodor, 1968: 634, Stanley, 2011: 213).

explain how to ϕ . The only requirement is that she grasps a way in which ϕ can be performed, though Stanley allows why one might think otherwise (2011: 214): “perhaps the very fact that the intellectualist defines knowing how in terms of propositional knowledge suggests that someone who knows how to do something must be able at least to *express* her propositional knowledge.” The point is that the agent need only be able to express that knowledge *somehow*, perhaps with demonstratives, not necessarily explain it verbally: a weaker claim than one might otherwise think Stanley is making.

Stanley explicates his point by offering the young Mozart who, having been asked, “how do you do it?” points to one of his masterpieces while writing it, saying (2011, 214): “this is how I can do it”. Of course, one could object that this does not answer the question of how to compose a masterpiece. An answer should be informative; but Mozart’s “answer” is not illuminating at all – not so much because he cannot verbalize himself as because he is seemingly unable to give *any* satisfactory answer. It seems counterintuitive to say that he possesses an ability to answer the how-question presented to him. Nevertheless, Stanley claims that Mozart’s pointing at his masterpiece, while composing it, is an expression of *knowledge how*. He justifies this by asking one to consider what words should count as expressing *knowledge how*. If *all* words should count – and Stanley believes they should – then, Stanley says, demonstrative expressions like “this” count, and Mozart has successfully expressed his *knowledge how*.

Stanley does not seem much concerned with how the recipient interprets Mozart’s gesture. What matters is that Mozart has a way to express his knowledge that Stanley’s intellectualism can capture. Stanley goes further: the intellectualist need not hold that an agent be able to express the proposition that represents her *knowledge how* in words at all, not even using demonstratives. Her *knowledge how* need be nothing more than a state implicated directly in action. Stanley writes (2011: 215):

The southpaw is winning on points. But then the expert boxer adjusts and starts boxing in a particular way that is the best way to fight against a southpaw. The announcer, pointing at the way in which the expert boxer is fighting, utters “He knows that that’s the best way to beat a southpaw”. *The announcer’s knowledge-ascription is quite explicitly a true ascription of knowledge-that*. Furthermore, it is true *whether or not* the boxer is able to verbalize his knowledge of the way in question of boxing against a southpaw in non-demonstrative, non-indexical terms, non-demonstrative terms.

Stanley’s expert boxer has grasped certain boxing truths, expressed through his change of tactics. I have a problem with this. If, as Stanley claims, knowledge always involves grasping a proposition, and this is meant to capture how actions are informed by intelligence, it seems to me a proper demand that the agent be able to give more informative expression to the proposition she is meant to grasp. If she cannot do so, it is hard to see in what sense exactly she grasps a proposition. Stanley’s “mute” grasp of

a proposition strikes me as mysterious, yet Stanley offers nothing to dispel the mystery. Instead, he focuses on shared characteristics of how- and wh-questions.

4. Wh-questions

Remember that, for Stanley, two things are key: *knowledge how* consists in knowing the answer to a question, and *knowledge how* should fit within a more general account of knowing answers to questions. Toward that end, he seeks to set out for his readers the similarities between knowledge how and knowledge-wh and so between how- and wh-questions. In particular, knowledge ascription is always, he believes, done in a similar way, comprising the ability to answer a how- or a wh-question. Just as one says things like “Hannah knows *where* her bike is”, “Hannah knows *why* her bike has a flat tire”, and “Hannah knows *when* she parked her bike in the garage”, one also says things like “Hannah knows *how* to ride a bike”. Of course one *could* give each of these ascriptions their own account: one for *knowledge where*, one for *knowledge why*, one for *knowledge when*, and so on. What is striking though is that all these ascriptions have a similar semantic structure (Stanley 2013: 36): “it is a stable cross-linguistic fact that most of the sentences... are translated with the same verb used in translations of sentences of the form ‘X knows that p’”, and “the same word ‘know’ occurs in all of these constructions”. For Stanley, that means they represent a single, unified phenomenon. He writes that (2013: 37) “The fact that we do not employ different words for these notions suggests they are at the very least intimately related concepts”.

Rumfitt (2003) criticizes this line of reasoning. He notes that French everyday language contains a number of distinct terms for knowledge how: e.g., *savoir faire*. Such terms do not seem to fit the pattern Stanley prescribes.

Stanley replies that the apparent problem is nothing more than a matter of Gricean conversational implicature: while many languages spell out embedded questions in full in accordance with his model, others do not. Their omission of the question word is guided by Grice’s maxims (2013: 141, *emphasis added*):

It is clear that in a language in which it is possible to drop the overt question word in expressions of knowing how, Grice’s maxim of manner predicts that one ought to drop the question word. But there is no language known to me where the propositional verb together with the bare infinitive means *knowing where*. *So the fact that in many languages ascriptions of knowing how do not superficially appear to take the form of an embedded question should not lead us to analyze them as relations to activities. So doing would lead to an unwarranted asymmetry between states of knowing how to do something and states of knowing when to do something and where to find something, asymmetries that all parties to the debate about the nature of practical knowledge should reject.*

Not only does Stanley seem to think he can explain linguistic developments in the French language by appeal to Grice, he also claims that interpreting *knowledge how* “as relations to activities” would lead to an “unwarranted asymmetry” between states of knowing how and other states of knowing-wh. When Stanley says that *knowledge how* is propositional knowledge, he really does mean that it is propositional on a par with knowing where the nearest gas station is; but this raises a difficulty.

5. Ability to execute a skilled action

For a unified theory of embedded questions to be possible in the way Stanley wants, the answer to a how-question, as an expression of *knowledge how*, must consist of a proposition. As I argued in Section 1, *knowledge how* is the ability to execute a skilled action – noting that, for Stanley, it is not a requirement on *knowledge how* that the agent actually is able to execute the skill; an abstract ability suffices. (I will say more on that below, under “the ability objection”.)

The problem is that, by virtue of the argument from knowledge transfer, it cannot be the mere grasp of a proposition that constitutes *knowledge how*, because *knowledge how* cannot be transferred propositionally. *Knowledge how* must comprise a certain kind of grasp: a “practical” grasp. So *knowledge how* does not consist of a propositional truth *per se* but rather a “practical” grasp of that propositional truth; and so the answer to a question about *knowledge how* does not consist of a proposition *per se* but of a “practical” grasp of that proposition, which is what constitutes the skill. If that is so, it is not the case, *pace* Stanley, that the answers to embedded questions have uniform structure.⁹⁵

If I am right, this weakens Stanley’s case for intellectualism. Despite what he claims, his theory seems unable to provide a unified semantic theory, at least when it comes to embedded questions. More tellingly, I believe I have identified an implicit component of genuinely non-propositional knowledge lurking within his theory: what he calls the “‘practical’ grasp of the proposition”. That grasp constitutes the ability to act upon the proposition by performing a skilled action; but does not this ability then constitute a

⁹⁵ I am aware that it may seem odd to say that knowledge how should consist in a propositional truth, but this is a consequence of Stanley’s theory. Remember that he holds that knowledge how must consist of an answer to a question. Moreover, given that he wants to have a unified semantic theory of questions, the answer to a question, including the how-question, must consist of propositions. Hence, knowledge how must consist of a proposition, seeing as a proposition is the answer to a how question.

competence in itself, independent from the proposition? If so, is it not this competence that really constitutes *knowledge how*?

Objections

The ability objection

There is a potential problem with my position. At one point, Stanley argues (2013: 126-128) that knowing how to do something need not mean actually being capable of doing it: contrary to what I have claimed, *knowledge how* need not consist of the ability to execute a skilled action. If it does not, then the difficulty I have outlined in Stanley's account threatens to dissolve.

Stanley's claim rests on three examples, two of which are taken from Carl Ginet. Ginet's eight-year-old son is not strong enough to lift a certain box; nonetheless, Ginet and Stanley say, he must be said to know how to lift it, because he knows how to lift boxes in general. Stanley writes (2013: 128): "Ginet's son knows how one *could* lift one hundred pounds off the floor...." The second example, also from Ginet, concerns an expert skier who is unable to ski down a hill because of stomach cramps. Certainly he knows *how* to ski down the hill, even though he cannot execute the ability at the moment. The third example, taken from Stanley and Williamson (2001, 416), concerns a concert pianist who loses both arms. Obviously she can no longer play the piano but, given her many years of practice, she still knows how to do so. Stanley believes that, together, these examples support the view that *knowledge how* need not entail the ability to execute a skill but rather takes the form of more abstract knowledge – thereby bolstering the case for his intellectualism.

I have two considerations in reply. First, how do the examples relate to what I have otherwise established? In the argument from knowledge transfer (Section 1), I conclude that *knowledge how* cannot consist in grasping a proposition in exactly the same sense as grasping a proposition theoretically since merely knowing how to do something theoretically does not enable one to do it. If *knowledge how* involves grasping a proposition at all, it must be a special kind of grasping.

It seems odd then that this special kind of grasping need not enable one to execute the relevant skill, and not just because of immediate circumstances such as being too young, having stomach cramps or losing one's arms: in other words, it seems odd that one can grasp a proposition "practically" without being able to act on it. This is odd because the reason Ryle separated *knowledge how* from *knowledge that* in the first place was to make room for the reality that is the practical execution of actions. What Stanley's intellectualism risks leaving one with is a notion of *knowledge how* that is practical only in name.

This leads to my second consideration. All three of Stanley's examples have the same basic structure: an agent faces a task that she cannot perform, but which she could perform *under other circumstances*. The eight-year-old can lift boxes, just not this box – until he is older. The skier can still ski, just not until the stomach cramps pass. The pianist knows how to play and *could* play if she just had her (robot?) arms back. All of the examples have a hypothetical scenario wherein the agent is able to execute the skill.

Stanley concludes that these agents possess the relevant *knowledge how* but are unable to execute it at that particular time. The eight year old certainly *knows* how to lift the heavy box; he just cannot do it because he is not strong enough. Stanley is thus stressing his brand of a more abstract form of knowledge how. He concludes further that *knowledge how* need not be tied to execution but takes a more abstract form. However, could not the reason one might have to ascribe to these agents *knowledge how* instead be the existence of the hypothetical scenarios? If Stanley had not stressed that Ginet's son knows how to lift boxes and simply described an eight-year-old who cannot lift a certain heavy box, would one still say that the child knows how to lift it? At the least, intuitions may differ.

If one leaves oneself open for the kind of *knowledge how* ascriptions that Stanley wants, then one must also allow that my husband knows how to play the piano, even though he has never tried. He knows how, because he knows that, to play a piano, one "just" needs to hit the keys in the correct combinations and sequence using the correct pressure and timing – just as the eight-year-old knows that, to lift a heavy box, one "just" needs to grab hold of the edges and stand straight. I take this to be an absurd consequence. If one is to be said to know how to play the piano, it seems reasonable to demand that one knows how to use it to produce actual, and not hypothetical, music.

Conclusion

I have attempted to argue that *knowledge how* must comprise more than the mere grasp of a proposition even if one otherwise accepts Stanley's intellectualism. I have done this by describing an implicit conflict between what I have called the argument from knowledge transfer and Stanley's argument from embedded questions: one that is revealing of certain characteristics of Stanley's "practical" grasp of a proposition that he downplays. At heart, my objection to Stanley is simple: even if *knowledge how* is propositional, it must involve an element of knowing how to act correctly upon the proposition; and this element of knowing how to act correctly cannot itself be propositional. Thus, *knowledge how* involves an irreducible non-propositional element and so cannot be reduced to *knowledge that*. As Ryle (2002 [1949]: 28) put it: "To be intelligent is not merely to satisfy criteria, but to apply them".

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Chapter Six: How Do You Know What You Are Doing Now?

Abstract

In this chapter, I discuss Anscombe's claim that agents have non-observational and non-inferential knowledge of what they are doing. I claim that much of the criticism of this claim is due to misinterpretation. I explore two recent approaches in particular: Sarah K. Paul's inferential account (2009) and an empirical study that claims to have shown that knowledge of one's own actions has a strong inferential component (Lind et al., 2014). I try to pinpoint what these accounts get wrong and build on what they get right. I suggest a reason-based account, built on the idea of teleological activity, according to which agents know non-observationally intentional actions that fall under certain types of broad descriptions.⁹⁶

Introduction

Imagine that you kick a ball. How exactly do you know you are doing it? You seem to know directly, without any need to observe or infer. By contrast, if another person kicks the ball, you must observe it to know what is going on. You *can* observe the external bodily motions of your own kick, but you do not have to observe them to know about them. You seem to have some privileged epistemic relation to your own actions that you do not have to the actions of others. This led G.E.M. Anscombe (2000) to claim that some of the knowledge one has about one's own actions is non-observational. Sarah K. Paul (2009: 1) calls this "a provocative claim" because human beings are "obviously" fallible creatures lacking any godlike knowledge of their own behavior.

Philosophers roughly split into two opposing camps regarding Anscombe's claim. On the one hand, there are such skeptics as Bratman, Davidson and Paul who find the claim obscure, unsound, and open to counterexamples. On the other hand, there are

⁹⁶ Thank you to Santiago Amaya, Andreas Lind, Björn Petersson, Wlodek Rabinowicz and Andreas Engh Seland for comments on this chapter.

those like Gjelsvik, Setiya, and Thompson who think it fundamentally correct and who believe that rejecting it puts one in conflict with facts about action and agency. Nonetheless, even those who support Anscombe's claim struggle to justify it. The main difficulty in describing some knowledge as non-observational is explaining what such knowledge consists of. How can agents be said to know what they are doing without observing whether their intentions have successfully been transformed into action? This has yet to be answered uncontroversially.

I wish to defend a version of Anscombe's claim, but – unlike Anscombe – I hold that non-observational knowledge is grounded in previously acquired practical competence. This competence, together with an agent's knowledge of the reasons she is, at present, acting on, provides the basis for non-observational knowledge of particular actions: precisely because the agent can offer certain broad descriptions of them.

I begin with a presentation of non-observational knowledge. Section 2 discusses Paul's inferential theory. Section 3 presents a recent empirical study (Lind *et al.*: 2014), which concludes that one must hear oneself to decide what one is saying. I contest this. Section 4 argues for my own, reason-based account according to which non-observational knowledge of one's own actions concerns only actions that are intended under certain broad descriptions. These actions are normal activities in everyday life. Interpreted this way, Anscombe's claim has a narrower application than it is normally assumed; much of the criticism of her account evaporates.

1. Non-observational knowledge

A theorist who wants to determine, precisely, the knowledge one has of one's own actions can choose between three options. She might take the view that such knowledge is gained by introspection: i.e., it is knowledge the agent has about her mental life, or what many would call the self. Alternately, she might conclude that such knowledge is of exactly the same kind as knowledge one has about the actions of others. Finally, she could carve out a middle course between these two extremes: this is what Anscombe tries to do. I take it to mean the following:

Anscombe's claim

If an agent acts intentionally, she knows – without observation – what she is doing, under the descriptions on which her action is intentional.

I take Anscombe's point to be that one *can* observe one's intentional actions; one *can* gain knowledge of what one is doing on the basis of observation. However, it is not necessary. So, Anscombe writes (2000: 24), "intentional actions are a sub-class of the events in a man's history which are known to him *not* just because he observes them".

As Gjelsvik (2010) notes, Anscombe's strategy for capturing intentional action differs from the standard Davidsonian alternative of interpreting actions as bodily movements, caused in the right way by the agent's (primary) reason. Anscombe "categorizes actions with other things towards which we typically have first person authority" (Gjelsvik, 2010). Intentional actions belong to the sub-class of things one knows without observation.

Indeed, as Gjelsvik further notes, part of Anscombe's point is precisely that there are many things, in addition to intentional actions, that one knows without observation: e.g., believing, remembering, fearing, hoping, and regretting.

Chapter Two investigated Davidson's significant reliance on Anscombe's idea of actions as *intentional under a description*: one ascribes an intention to an agent through a process of rationalization; one tries to (Davidson, 2001[1963]: 3)

see something the agent saw... some feature... of the action the agent wanted, desired, prized, held dear, thought dutiful, beneficial, obligatory, or agreeable.

What one does is to imagine the situation from the agent's perspective and describe the action as intentional under that description. Of course, Davidson does not claim that the agent must herself try to make her performance intentional under a description. When the action is a slip, for example, it is especially hard to imagine what the description could be. In all such cases, the agent does not want, desire, prize, etc. the slip. The difficulty for Davidson is that he both defines actions as intentional under a description and wants one to take the agent's perspective: something that does not straightforwardly work with slips. *Per* Peabody's analysis, Davidson must try to find a way to make the slip intentional under a description.

Anscombe has a different solution. According to her understanding of falling under a description, when someone is *Φ-ing intentionally*, a class of descriptions applies to what she is doing, with a subclass of these being descriptions she knows to be true of her action. She knows directly, without observation, that they are true. Any given action is intentional only under certain descriptions. To determine whether an action *is* intentional, it is appropriate to ask "why" questions: e.g., "why are you sawing that book?" If the agent replies, "I did not realize that I was", then her action is not intentional *under that description*. Her action might be intentional under another description: e.g., "sawing a plank"; maybe a book was underneath the plank, without her realizing it. If so she cannot be said to have sawed the book intentionally. The agent knows the description under which her action counts as intentional, and she knows it without any need to observe. Consider Anscombe's example (2000: 51):

Say I go over to the window and open it. Someone who hears me calls out: What are you doing making that noise? I reply 'Opening the window'. I have called such a statement knowledge all along; and precisely because in such a case what I say is true – I do open the window; and that means that the window is getting opened by the

movements of the body out of whose mouth those words come. But I don't say the words like this: 'Let me see, what is this body bringing about? Ah yes! The opening of the window'.

The example pinpoints how – most of the time when one acts – one knows what one is up to; one seems to be armed with this knowledge without needing to infer it. Under normal circumstances, a person need not observe herself to know that the movements of her body bring about the opening of a window. She does not need to ask: “what is this body of mine bringing about?” For the observer who merely hears the sounds of the movements, on the other hand, it makes perfect sense to ask: “what are you doing making that noise?” Of course, the agent can take a look to check whether she really is bringing about the action she intends; but it is not the observation *per se* that offers her knowledge of her performance.⁹⁷ In this way, human action could be seen as godlike: human beings can make changes in the world and have non-observational knowledge about these changes simply because they happen in the way the human beings intend.

It does not follow from Anscombe's claim that one has non-observational knowledge of one's own actions that one cannot be mistaken. Perhaps one cannot be mistaken when one says “I have a headache” or “I feel nauseous”, but one can be wrong if one says “I'll push Button Three” but actually pushes Button Seven⁹⁸ or if one says “I take your knight!” while removing the castle from the chess board. Indeed, slips and other mistakes in the performance of actions are common. Anscombe draws attention to this early on in *Intention* (2000: 4-5): “in some cases the facts are, so to speak, impugned for not being in accordance with the words, rather than *vice versa*”. When one says to oneself “now I press Button Three” pressing Button Seven, the mistake is not in what is said but in what is done (*cf.* Anscombe, 2000: 57).⁹⁹

The subclass of non-observational knowledge that comprises intentional actions is susceptible to a special sort of “why” question whose use as a tool for enquiry dates at least to Aristotle, though Anscombe makes no reference to Aristotle when she introduces her version of it (Anscombe, 2000: §8). That said, much of what she says is reminiscent of Aristotle, so a few words about his account will be illuminating. According to Aristotle, “proper” knowledge is knowledge of a cause, revealed through the answer to a “why” question; a “why” question is a request for explanation. One can be said to have knowledge of something when one has grasped its cause (Aristotle, *Physics*: 194 b 17-20).¹⁰⁰ Anscombe ties the “why” question specifically to the notion of intentional action: “intentional actions are ones to which a certain sense of the question ‘why?’ has application” (Anscombe, 2000: 11). This “certain sense” is the

⁹⁷ Moran's (2004) article on the topic is illuminating; see in particular pp. 57-58.

⁹⁸ My variation on Anscombe's example (2000: 57).

⁹⁹ Anscombe's emphasis on “expression of intention” is often overlooked. See Moran and Stone (2009) for a detailed discussion of the topic.

¹⁰⁰ See also Falcon's (2015) SEP article on Aristotle and causality.

agent's reason for Φ -ing. The sense she has in mind does not involve the notion of a cause – including mental cause. She offers a list of what she considers proper ways to answer the “why” question: a proper answer may mention past history, interpret an action, or mention something in the future (Anscombe, 2000: 24). The latter two offer reasons for action; the first is a proper reply only if ideas of good or harm are considered.

To have non-observational knowledge is to have an answer to the “why” question, where the final answer typically just is the intention; while the set of answers to a “why” question reveals the structure of an agent's practical reasoning. Consider a version of Anscombe's famous example (2000: 38):

Q: “Why are you moving your arm up and down?”

A: “I'm pumping”.

Q: “Why are you pumping?”

A: “I'm pumping the water supply for the house”.

Q: “Why are you pumping the water?”

A: “Because it is needed at the house and to poison the people inside”.

Q: “Why are you poisoning these people?”

A: “They are party members”.

Q: “Why do you want to kill the party members?”

A: “If the party members die, the government can be overthrown”.

The structure need not look exactly like this, nor would the agent necessarily think through the steps in exactly this manner: what this shows is one possible scenario. Through a series of repeated “why” questions and answers, which reveals the means the agent thinks she must achieve before she can reach her aim, one arrives at *the* aim, the intention: in this case, to overthrow the government.¹⁰¹ In this way, the enquirer comes to know just what the agent wants and gains knowledge about the action that the agent performs; while the agent knows her action already, as the product of her practical reasoning: she does what she meant to do. As an agent, she has practical knowledge of

¹⁰¹ The agent can, of course, have further reasons beyond the reasons she has for the exact action that she is at present performing. In this case, for example, unless she is being irrational, she has reasons for wanting to overthrow the government. One such reason could be that the party members are corrupt.

her actions, where “practical knowledge” is understood, in formal terms, as “the cause of what it understands”¹⁰²; by contrast, the observer’s knowledge is speculative, “derived from the objects known” (Anscombe, 2000: 87). The agent’s understanding of what she is doing is not merely one more description side by side with all other possible descriptions of her action; rather, it has some claim to determine what the action is. The movements of maneuvering the pump which is leading up to the poisoning of the party members and thereby the overthrowing of the government would not count as (intentionally) overthrowing the government if the agent’s practical understanding did not conceive of it in these terms.

Obviously, one must often see what one is doing in order to make sure that one is doing what one plans to do. However, the eyes are merely an aid. Knowledge of one’s own action is aided by observation; it is not based on observation (Anscombe, 2000: 53):

So without the eyes he knows what he writes; but the eyes help to assure him that what he writes actually gets legibly written.

If one must observe or be told that one is Φ -ing then, on Anscombe’s account, one is not Φ -ing intentionally; the knowledge one gains is speculative, rather than practical and non-observational. Like Gjelsvik, I see awareness as crucial for Anscombe. Gjelsvik writes (2010: 7): “missing awareness of what we do cancels ascriptions of intentional agency on Anscombe’s view, and this point is fundamental to her thinking on intentional agency”. If the agent’s reply to a “why” question is that she was unaware of doing the thing she is asked about, then it does not count as something she did intentionally. In short, “the facts about being aware of something (p) and doing something (p) intentionally are... tied into each other” (Gjelsvik, 2010: 7).

Kieran Setiya (2007: 25) describes Anscombe’s cases of *refused application* as “the basic insight of Anscombe’s argument”. A case of apparent intentionality is refused application by the answer: “I was not aware I was doing that” (Anscombe, 2000: 11); the agent lacks knowledge of her own agency. Anscombe offers several ways this can happen. The resulting action cannot be said to accord with the agent’s intention to act; the agent is not properly aware of her action. Anscombe writes (2000: 50-51):

By the knowledge that a man has of his intentional actions I mean the knowledge that one denies having if when asked e.g. ‘Why are you ringing that bell?’ one replies ‘Good heavens! I didn’t know I was ringing it!’

In cases of refused application, the agent is, in the midst of her acting, unaware – in some important way – of what she is doing. Should she be made aware she is doing something contrary to plan, she would stop what she is doing and do what she planned

¹⁰² Anscombe took inspiration from Aquinas.

to do instead. She is likely to be surprised by the discovery of what she is doing: something that normally does not happen when one does what one means to do.

It is not always easy to follow Anscombe's argument; also, her account has many details I have chosen to gloss over here. My point has only been to provide sufficient background material to discuss Paul's criticism of the argument.

2. Inferential theory

Paul writes that "a middle course must be found between... two extremes" in the debate over non-observational knowledge: the extremes of skepticism and strong cognitivism. She ascribes the first to Davidson and the second to Velleman and Setiya. Davidson rejects Anscombe's argument on the grounds that acting intentionally does not entail acting knowingly (2001 [1978]: 92):

In writing heavily on this page I may be intending to produce ten legible carbon copies. I do not know, or believe with any confidence, that I am succeeding. But if I am producing ten legible carbon copies, I am certainly doing it intentionally.

The point appears to be that intention plus success need not amount to knowledge of success. Davidson makes no mistake in his performance, yet he must look to know whether he has succeeded. This and similar examples lead Davidson into skepticism.

Meanwhile, strong cognitivism is the view of intention as a special kind of belief; an intention to Φ is a belief that one is Φ -ing or will do so. So long as an agent successfully performs according to her intentions, her beliefs about her actions are true. She forms her intentions because of preferences to perform certain actions, not on any evidence that they will be performed. In other words, the belief that accompanies action is not grounded in observation or inference: it originates in the agent's practical knowledge as "the cause of what she understands"; non-observational knowledge of one's actions is embodied in the intentions themselves. The action that the agent brings about is the representational content of the intention-belief. Setiya writes (2007: 26):

when someone is acting intentionally, there must be something he is doing intentionally, not merely trying to do, in the belief that he is doing it.

Setiya's reply to Davidson is that Davidson need not know that he is making ten simultaneous copies successfully; nevertheless, he has non-observational knowledge of what he is doing, because he knows he is pressing down hard with his pen. At the same time, it is not sufficient that he knows he intends to make ten copies; there are things that he must actually do, like pressing hard with his pen (Setiya, 2007: 25). According to the strong cognitivist, when one is successful in one's intention, one's belief about

what one is doing is true. Having an intention to Φ is considered to consist in a causally *self-fulfilling belief* that one will Φ . It can be hard to grasp exactly why this should amount to knowledge. William James can be helpful. He writes (1956: 25): “faith in a fact can help create the fact”. Velleman cites James before he states his own view in the following way (2007: 64):

An agent may therefore form an expectation about his forthcoming action without being prompted by evidence. Although the agent’s expectation of acting is a conclusion to which he jumps before the evidence is complete, he jumps with the assurance that the conclusion will achieve verity even as he lands.

Paul sees (2009: 3, 6) a “kernel of truth” in the non-observational knowledge claim that Davidson fails to acknowledge; but she thinks that the strong cognitivists exaggerate its role. She criticizes them for the view that beliefs can be formed without sufficient prior evidence, in contradiction to common theories of rationality. She takes aim as well at Velleman’s understanding of intention as “licensed wishful thinking”, according to which “the agent’s thoughts are licensed to be wishful because they are self-fulfilling” (Velleman, 2007: 69).

According to Paul’s middle path, intentions are not beliefs. She claims there are many counterexamples: e.g., one can seriously intend to get a PhD without fully believing one will get it. After all, many obstacles stand in the way of long-term plans, and intentions can fail. One assumes that the doctoral student will do all she needs to toward her intended goal without needing further to assume the belief that she will (necessarily) arrive there; nonetheless, it is reasonable to say that she intends to do so (Paul, 2009: 7).

There are other cases of intended actions that need not involve a belief that one will do as one intends. Consider the agent who intends to stop and get gas on the way home from work but counts on the possibility she will forget her plan and drive straight home instead (Paul, 2009: 7; see also Bratman, 1987). Paul allows that one could argue against her examples and claim that the person who doubts her success does not really intend to succeed, only to try; but this idea – that the only thing one knows non-observationally is one’s intention to try – she sees as problematic for Anscombe, given her view that what one knows is that which actually happens.

Anscombe’s thoughts on agents’ non-observational knowledge of what happens is a real worry for Paul, because “intending and doing are not the same thing” (Paul, 2009: 2). As Paul’s examples show, merely having an intention is often insufficient to pull off a plan. All manner of things might hinder one from doing what one intends: weakness of will, procrastination, self-deception, change of mind, and so on (Paul, 2009: 12):

We routinely misidentify the motives behind our decisions, agonize over trying to figure out what it is we want, spend years not knowing that we are really in love, and so on.

Why should we expect our knowledge of our intentions to be dependable and accurate enough to serve as the basis of non-observational knowledge of action?

The worry is understandable and one that most people can likely relate to, simply by recalling times when plans went wrong: the diet that ended up in weight gain, the intention to visit the gym regularly whose only sign is an expensive membership.

Though Paul does not accept Anscombe's argument as it is, she sees some sense to the notion of non-observational knowledge of what one is doing. Paul sees her approach as neo-Gricean, sharing with Grice the view that agents achieve knowledge of their agency (Paul, 2009: 12) "by tending to believe, in the absence to the contrary, that we are doing what we intend to be doing". Grice famously held that an agent intends to Φ just in case she wills to Φ and believes that she will Φ simply because of her willing to do so, based on her knowledge of her own will. Anscombe considered theories like Grice's to be "mad" precisely because of the role they give to the will (2000: 52): "the only sense I can give to 'willing' is that in which I might stare at something and will it to move". What one knows when one knows one's intentional actions should not be separated into non-observational knowledge of one's intentions and observational knowledge of one's performance. For Anscombe, such a view attributes an absurd role to the will. One does not stare at a matchbox and will it to move; one does not treat one's arm like a magician's wand and give it orders like "arm, wave!" or "arm, pick up that pencil!" A willing in and of itself cannot make something happen; and intention, for Anscombe, must relate to *something that happens*. However, Paul departs from Grice on this point. Instead of giving the role to willing something that he wishes to, she offers the following alternative (2009: 11):

If we think of intentions as distinctively practical, conative commitments that do not constitutively involve the belief that one will do what one intends, then we can replace the role of willing in the Gricean structure with intending.

Of her Inferential Theory, Paul writes (2009: 9):

The central idea behind the Inferential Theory is that our beliefs about our intentional actions are not spontaneous, but evidence-based – based largely, I will argue, on our knowledge of what we *intend* to be doing, where intentions are not themselves beliefs.

Highly relevant for Paul is an agent's background of belief in her ability to perform the actions she intends. *Contra* Velleman, she holds that it is unlicensed for an agent to believe she is doing something just because she intends it. The agent must have good reasons, derived from previous experience, to back this up. That means that the agent must have knowledge of her own history to know about her actions. Knowledge of one's history can reveal how likely it is that one will end up doing what one intends: e.g., a researcher might be reliable when it comes to paper deadlines but unreliable in

other settings (Paul, 2009: 15). Knowledge for Paul is given through experience; but she does not want to claim that all that one knows without observation is what one intends to do. What exactly does that leave for non-observational knowledge of one's own agency?

For Paul, it is crucial that the knowledge an agent has of her actions does not come about "just like that": at some point in her history, she acquired it; but the observational/experiential basis of that knowledge need not apply to every performance of it.

Paul's inferential theory lays out the conditions under which agents need not depend on observation of action in particular performances. (1) The agent must be confident that she has the abilities she needs to fulfill her intention. (2) The agent must have a proper grasp of the conventions that apply to the situation she is in, and she must understand the cause/effect structure on which her intention relies. (3) The agent must know how likely she is, given her previous history, to carry through with her plan. Echoing what Anscombe might say, Paul also mentions a fourth condition on the agent (2009: 18):

His understanding of the way some action descriptions apply partly in virtue of his intention in acting. The last consideration in particular makes it possible for him to know what is actually happening, under a certain description, in knowing what he intends to be doing.

Paul emphasizes throughout that the agent's beliefs *per se* do not cause the actions she performs (2009: 18):

According to the Inferential Theory, the agent's non-observational belief about what he is doing is based on the cause of its truth, but is not itself the efficient cause.

Paul sees this point as driving a wedge between her position and that of strong cognitivism. Agential knowledge is evidentially based on intention in two senses. First, it is because of the intention that the agent initiates and successfully completes the action. Second, the intention determines whether the agent's action falls under the intended description. What the agent arrives at is not mere speculation but counts as non-observational knowledge. It forms not simply a response to antecedent evidence about the external world; "the truth of the belief depends on the agent's choice to *make* it true, by carrying out the intention on which the belief is based, and not on its being an accurate reflection of the way things already stand" (Paul, 2009: 18-19).

This argument might work against strong cognitivism, but it is not an argument against Anscombe.¹⁰³ At the time that Anscombe's agent performs her action, she knows what

¹⁰³ For the record, Paul acknowledges that Anscombe did not hold the view that practical knowledge is the efficient cause of the action it represents (Paul, 2009: 2).

she does, because she causes what happens. This, however, is to talk about causation formally. In the case of intentional action, any speculation about Aristotelian efficient cause is ruled out, and the answer to the relevant “why” question is not of the kind that can be provided by a neurophysiologist: a point on which Anscombe is quite explicit.

Aristotle’s *formal cause* concerns the “form”: e.g., the shape of a statue; while efficient cause is the primary source of change and what directly produces someone’s bodily movements. As Moran (2004: 67) writes “speculative knowledge is not the cause, either formally or materially, of what it understands”. Anscombe points out that, when dealing with human behavior, what one wants to know are not the efficient causes behind the human machinery; rather, one wants information to make actions intelligible and meaningful. Knowing that someone’s C-neurons fired says nothing about the norms that govern the situation nor the agent’s grasp of it. Efficient causal factors are always to be found, but Paul and Anscombe are not looking for them.

It seems to me that Paul’s account is less distinct from Anscombe’s than first blush might suggest. Indeed, I think Anscombe would agree to many of Paul’s points. With Paul’s unconfident PhD student in mind, consider Anscombe’s view (2000: 87) that “the failure to achieve what one would finally like to achieve is common”. Anscombe discusses other cases where the agent intends something without believing that her intention will amount to action, even as “one can be as certain as possible that one will do something, and yet intend not to do it” (Anscombe, 2000: 94): e.g., a person can intend not to break down under torture and yet thoroughly expect to do so. However, such cases are rare. More typically, the agent says “I am going to do such and such” and does what she says.

Anscombe in no way suggests that an agent cannot be wrong or uncertain whether she will do what she intends. The agent could change her mind or be prevented from acting. An issue I find highly relevant for Anscombe is almost always overlooked: namely her focus on “the small activities of everyday life” (Anscombe, 2000: 92). When it comes to these matters, one does – most of the time – what one intends to do. Of course, one can also talk of knowledge of long-term plans, but there so much more can go wrong. In these cases, I would suppose Anscombe to say that the agent who fulfills her long-term plan knows, without observation, at the precise moment when she finally e.g. signs her marriage contract. One cannot know what one is doing unless one is doing it, and the things one intends must actually happen before one can be said to have knowledge about them.

Nevertheless, Anscombe’s critics put forth such extraordinary examples as the following (Velleman, 2007: 202):

Anscombe believes that if one is trying to shoot a bull’s eye, intends to shoot one, and will consequently end up having shot one intentionally, then one already knows without observation that one is shooting a bull’s eye, not just that one is intending or trying to do so, or moving one’s limb with that aim.

How can the content of one's intention to hit the bull's eye constitute knowledge of doing so? Such examples make Anscombe's position seem almost ridiculous! Not even the most professional dart player can know beforehand that she will hit the bull's eye, though she intends to do so. Again, however, Anscombe's focus is not on the extraordinary but the ordinary: the "small activities of everyday life", the things one plans on a daily basis. "I intend to paint the wall". "I intend to go to the cinema". "I intend to open the window". There is a remarkable difference between intending to hit a bull's eye and intending to go to the cinema. How often does one set out for the cinema with the ticket in one's pocket, filled with excitement wondering, "will I really manage to see a movie?" Of course, such obstacles as weakness of will and self-deception can intervene; but as Anscombe (2001: 87) writes:

What is necessarily the rare exception is for a man's performance in its more immediate descriptions not to be what he supposes. Further, it is the agent's knowledge of what he is doing that gives the descriptions under which what is going on is the execution of an intention.

Seen this way, Anscombe's position seems far less improbable than it is often read.

Contra the strong cognitivists, Anscombe does not take intention as a form of belief. If an agent fails to act as she intends and the mistake is not due to a false belief about the means or possibilities for action, then "the mistake is not one of judgment but of performance" (Anscombe, 2000: 57). The intention sets the standard for success. If a claim to non-observational knowledge turns out to be wrong, it is because of a mistake in the performance: the agent fails to perform in accordance with her knowledge (judgment). If the agent makes a mistake in performance, she lacks (non-observational) knowledge of her action.

A typical misreading of Anscombe takes her claim to concern knowledge of one's self. I think Paul commits this mistake. True, knowledge is, for Anscombe, related to intentions. However, the intended relation is not such that one has transparent knowledge of the kind of person one is. Rather, the descriptions under which an agent would appropriately say that her action counts as intentional are such that she knows them without having to observe them. One might spend one's whole life contemplating such questions as "who am I?" But if one needs to speculate about what one is doing, it will not count as knowledge for Anscombe. One might find oneself in situations where one starts asking oneself, "what am I doing?" If one needs to know what one is doing and this, in and of itself, is insufficient to provide the answer, one cannot be said to have non-observational knowledge of what one is doing. One has entered the domain of speculation. For the agent with non-observational knowledge, the wanting to know is sufficient to provide the information: one knows directly.

Paul is certainly correct to question Anscombe's claim: it is hard to pin down. Though numerous philosophers have written on the topic recently, it remains one of considerable debate. I think Paul makes points that should be taken seriously,

particularly regarding previous experience as an important source for knowledge of agency: the agent must, at some point in her history, have acquired the skills on which she bases her intentional performances. Such grounding must exist, even though the agent need not speculate about it every time she applies it. One must learn what one is capable of doing intentionally before it makes sense to speak of non-observational knowledge. Agential experience seems to be missing from Anscombe's account. Experience belongs to the epistemological and phenomenological issues on which she is silent. Paul covers some of them. That said, much of Paul's criticism of Anscombe seems to me off target: Paul's focus is on self-knowledge, which is not Anscombe's interest.

It is important to grasp what exactly one is meant to have non-observational knowledge about. I have tried to show that, on Anscombe's account, such knowledge is supposed to be – not about one's self and personality – but rather about one's actions. I am convinced that many seeming counterarguments to Anscombe evaporate if one makes this distinction properly. I hope to have said enough on this admittedly complex topic to move on. I turn now to an argument against non-observational knowledge that centers on the act rather than the self.

3. Empirical research on knowledge of one's own actions

The empirical study “Speakers Acceptance of Real-Time Speech Exchange Indicates That We Use Auditory Feedback to Specify the Meaning of What We Say” by Lind and colleagues (2014) concludes that “the sense of agency for speech has a strong inferential component”; “auditory feedback of one's own voice acts as a pathway for semantic monitoring” (Lind *et al.* 2014: 1198). Roughly, the study is meant to show that when people have auditory feedback, they use it as a source of knowledge of what they are saying. At best, I think the study has revealed how easy it can be to manipulate people. It does not follow that people need auditory feedback to determine the meaning of what they say. I begin with a brief presentation of the study, then argue that the way the researchers conceive of meaning/intention in relation to action is problematic; in any case, their results provide no knock-down argument against Anscombe.

Subjects performed a Stroop color-naming task in which auditory feedback was sometimes manipulated, such that subjects said one thing but heard themselves say another: a false slip. The manipulations used previous recordings of the subjects' voices, played back with precise timing while the sound of what actually was said got

blocked.¹⁰⁴ Two thirds of the false slips went undetected¹⁰⁵; in subsequent debriefing, 85 % of the non-detected false slips were reported as self-produced.

Consider the setup in more detail. The words used were phonologically similar but semantically different: e.g., *grön* (“green”) substituted for *grå* (“grey”).¹⁰⁶ In most cases, the test subjects accepted the manipulated incorrect response as their own performance. This was determined by pausing the trial and asking subjects: “what did you say?” (Lind *et al.*, 2014: 1200). The researchers conclude that the manipulated feedback shapes the agent’s knowledge of her action.

I have two initial comments. First, the experimental setting is quite different from everyday life. One finds oneself hooked up to electronic equipment, under observation. It should be no surprise if this leads to uncertainty and nervousness – even as it is hard to imagine how one could do a similar study in a more ordinary setting. Two, I think one should be careful about suggesting that people use auditory feedback to infer what they say before such testing can be done using substitution of full sentences, not merely single words. This brings me to my main point.

It is confusing how meaning (intention) is treated in this study. When the trial is paused after a manipulation, people are not asked “what did you mean?” The test subjects were asked “what did you say?” the moment after hearing themselves say a different word from what they actually said.

The researchers have not studied the subjects’ meaning/intention. Clearly, they have shown that people can be manipulated; but they have not gotten to the core of what the subjects meant to say in a way that Anscombe should be concerned about. Remember her point that, under normal circumstances, what one does is what one *means* to do. It would be highly relevant to know whether subjects would, immediately after the false slip, report that they have made a slip.

It is a serious question whether the researchers are entitled to make conclusions about speaker’s meaning the way that they do. The study ignores the link Anscombe saw as crucial between knowledge of one’s own agency and intention, in the sense of planning and meaning to act. Sometimes when one is about to act, one realizes one is about to make a mistake and stops oneself at the last possible moment (Gjelsvik, 2010: 19-20). That one can do this indicates that one need not observe oneself act to know what one is doing: one already has a grasp of it *before* one begins. This seems to be tied to one’s knowledge that one can, under normal circumstances, perform reliably according to one’s intentions. Remember as well that, for Anscombe, non-observational knowledge arises when what happens is what the agent intended to happen: In the experiment the

¹⁰⁴ The study made use of advanced hi-tech headphones; for details, see Lind *et al.*, 2014.

¹⁰⁵ Note that this is under ideal timing conditions.

¹⁰⁶ 92 out of the 155 analyzed trials were within a 5-20 ms timing window i.e. simultaneous (see Lind *et al.*, 2014, fig. 2, p. 1201).

test subjects did not, as a matter of fact, during the manipulation, say the word they heard themselves say. It is crucial to Anscombe's claim that what comes about is true of the agent's intention, otherwise, what the agent is left with does not qualify as knowledge. Anscombe's argument finds no challenge here. Of course, the study does not specifically address that argument, nor Anscombe for that matter; but it does make claims about knowledge of action and concludes that such knowledge is largely inferential: precisely what Anscombe argues against.

If the conclusion is meant to be that agents rely on observation for knowledge of what they say, why did a third of the substitutions fail? Why should anyone report something other than they observed/heard? It seems to me that Lind and colleagues have not shown that when one has auditory feedback, it is used to determine one's meaning. Recall Gjelsvik (2010: 7): "the facts about being aware of something (p) and doing something (p) intentionally are... tied into each other". The researchers set out to test whether people know non-observationally their (intentional) actions and concluded that they do not. I agree that it is puzzling that the subjects responded as they did, but I see multiple possible explanations.

On Paul's view, for example, I know what I am doing if I know my intention to act. To know what I am doing I do not have to observe my outward behaviour. The reason is that I possess lots of experience of my past performances: I know that in the past I consistently managed to act in accordance with intentions of this kind. So, I have a justified belief that the same obtains in the case at hand, and if this justified belief is true, then I have non-observational knowledge of what I am doing. This knowledge is non-observational in the sense that it does not require observation of my present action, but it is of course grounded in previous observations of my past performances. This is what happens in the standard cases. But if I get observational input that contradicts my belief about what I am doing - I believe I am saying "green", but I hear myself saying "gray" - then this observational input undercuts my belief based on past experience. Instead, I come to believe (falsely, as it happens) that I am saying "gray", not "green". However, this only shows that my belief about what I am doing is *sensitive* to observational inputs¹⁰⁷ - that my (purported) knowledge of my actions can be undercut by such inputs. This does not show that my ordinary knowledge of what I am doing is observational, in other words, that it is based on such observational inputs.

¹⁰⁷ Lind *et al.* (2014: 1203) concludes that "the results from our real-time speech-exchange experiment indicate that speakers listen to their own voices to help specify the meaning of what they are saying". It is possible that they would agree to what I say here.

4. A reason-based account

I see two main keys to a proper understanding of non-observational knowledge of one's own actions. The first is Anscombe's notion of mistake in performance, the second her notion of practical reasoning. I wish also to draw on the work of Betty Powell (1967) and Anne Newstead (2009). Powell suggests that the question "how did you find out?" is generally inapplicable as a request for an agent's knowledge of what she is doing. This is a good point, but Powell says too little about why this is so. I suggest that the question is inapplicable because the agent knows her reasons for doing what she is intentionally doing, under broad descriptions: that is, in a teleological sense; she seems not to be aware of the narrowest descriptions that apply to what she does: the smallest bodily movements, etc. On the latter point, I take inspiration from Newstead: in particular, her claim that the agent has knowledge of her present intentions by knowing her reasons for action; but I also part from her in several important respects. For example, I accept Paul's claim that the agent – at some point in her history – must have gained the knowledge she has of her practical capacity to perform intentionally, knowledge from which she can now benefit non-observationally; and whereas Newstead ignores the "why" question that is such a crucial device to Anscombe, it plays an important role in my account.

Let me begin with Powell's suggestion that the question "how do you know what you are doing (now)?" is inappropriate, if what one really is asking is: "how did you find out?" An agent need not wonder who is performing Φ when *she* is the one doing so. Consider the difference between the questions "how do you know that *S* did Φ " and "how do you know that you are Φ -ing (now)?" In comparing the possible answers to these two questions, the inappropriateness of the latter comes to light.

Consider the first question. Imagine asking some person – say, Sarah – "how do you know that Serena Williams won the tennis match?" If Sarah watched the match on television, she might answer: "I saw it on TV". Given an everyday setting, this seems an acceptable answer, even though it is not the only way to answer the question. Maybe Sarah did not watch the match herself; she could have read about it and so reply: "I read about it in the newspaper". Maybe she got the news from a person she trusts; if so, she might say, "I know because Linda told me so". Maybe she was in the audience when the match was played; if so, she could offer a reply people often find trustworthy: "I was there when it happened". All are potentially proper ways to satisfy the enquiry, even though some might invite further probing: "are you sure *that* is what you read in the newspaper?" In short, everyday justifications for knowledge about the actions of others include "I saw it", "I was told", "I was present when it happened", etc.

Now consider the second question. Imagine asking Michael: "how do you know what you are doing just now?" A natural reaction from him would be to remark that the question seems odd. Suppose that, for the sake of argument, one really asks that question. What exactly is one asking? In what enlightening way can Michael respond?

Suppose he is baking bread. To make a proper analogy with Sarah's case, imagine asking him: "how did you find out that you are baking bread just now?" It is not very helpful if Michael responds that the reason he knows he is baking bread is that he is present for the occasion. A person cannot completely fail to be present, when performing some action. Admittedly, one sometimes says things like "I am not myself today" or "sorry, my thoughts are elsewhere": there is a sense in which one can fail to be fully mentally present when going about one's business. Nevertheless, one cannot be wholly absent from one's own action. It also sounds absurd if Michael says, "well, I observe myself doing so". This is where Anscombe's idea of mistake in performance comes in. Think of this mistake as a slip. It seems natural to suppose that a person normally has direct knowledge of what she does; it is only when something goes wrong that one questions her knowledge: the agent's claim to non-observational knowledge breaks down when she makes a slip. Slips do not occur because the agent lacks the appropriate practical competence; nor, for Anscombe, do they occur because of a false belief, but rather because they fail to accord with the agent's practical knowledge. She writes (2000: 57):

Can it be that there is something that modern philosophy has blankly misunderstood: namely what ancient and medieval philosophers meant by *practical knowledge*? Certainly in modern philosophy we have an incorrigibly contemplative conception of knowledge. Knowledge must be something that is judged as such by being in accordance with the facts. The facts, reality, are prior, and dictate what is to be said, if it is knowledge.

With few exceptions (e.g., Gjelsvik, 2010; Moran, 2004; Newstead, 2009; Vogler, 2001), researchers who discuss Anscombe ignore the direct move she takes from practical knowledge and mistake in performance to practical reasoning. In the paragraph after her treatment of mistake in performance and introduction of practical knowledge, Anscombe writes: "the notion of 'practical knowledge' can only be understood if we first understand 'practical reasoning'" (Anscombe, 2000: 57). For Anscombe, a claim to practical knowledge is based, not on observation or inference, but rather on actions that manifest the conclusion of a process of practical reasoning.

Anscombe's "why" question is meant to be posed to the agent performing the action, not to an observer. The resulting series of questions and answers reveal the structure of the reasoning leading to the agent's intention. The final answer to the final "why" question typically is the intention. It can be and often is a broader description than the observer can derive from watching the action.¹⁰⁸ This is the sense of broad description I am after: not a description of basic bodily movements like "I'm contracting my muscles in such and such a way", but a description under which the action counts as intentional for the agent, revealing the action's purpose or *telos* like "I'm pumping water with the aim of overthrowing the government". The agent may well not know the

¹⁰⁸ Anscombe also thinks that an observer can often say straight off what a person she observes intends simply by reporting what this person is doing (2000: §4).

narrowest descriptions that apply. Broad descriptions are not, however, to my mind, sufficient to count as non-observational knowledge.

Anne Newstead writes (2009: 166): “practical knowledge is simply *knowledge of reasons for acting*”. I see this as a step in the right direction, but matters are not quite so simple. As Paul has pointed out, the agent must – at some point – have gained the skill in which her non-observational knowledge is grounded. With this confirmed, one does not only know these broad descriptions Newstead refers to; one can also actively intend and perform them, precisely because of practical competence one has previously acquired. Such practical competence grounds the agent’s action repertoire and provides the basic explanation for why something like the claim from Anscombe (2000: 87) that “it is the agents’ knowledge of what he is doing that gives the descriptions under which what is going on is the execution of an intention”. Of course, it is important to remember that “an intended effect just occasionally comes about by accident” (Anscombe, 2000: 39).

Anscombe does not discuss the distinction between expert and novice. I think it important: most of the time, someone expert in a skill will accomplish what she intends; the novice, who has not yet acquired the grounding for the appropriate non-observational knowledge, will experience more setbacks. That knowledge should qualify as non-observational in this way distinguishes my position from that of Newstead and Anscombe. Along with Paul, I cannot see how non-observational knowledge can arise without such grounding. The skill, ability, competence, know how, reliability – whatever one chooses to call it – that the agent needs to perform the actions she intends must have been acquired at some point. That achievement in hand, she need not intend her use of the skill on every occasion for which it is necessary to the performance of an action. As Stanley (2011) argues, the agent must somehow have grasped that she has the competence and can apply it to perform what she intends. I have previously pointed out some problems in Stanley’s approach, but on this point he must be basically right – even though I am not sure what exactly the something is that the agent has grasped (Stanley calls it a truth). I might be inclined to say, as Lucy O’Brien does (2007: 165), that “one [is] acting against a grasp of possible things one could have done as basic actions”, even though she does not pinpoint just what the agent has grasped, either: only that one is aware of one’s options. Still, this may be all I need, and I can say that what the agent has grasped are simply the available ways to realize her intention practically. This practical knowledge is constitutive of what she is doing whenever her actions are intentionally performed, for reasons that fall under certain broad descriptions. Again, the narrow descriptions are often unknown to the agent, as Anscombe emphasizes (2000: 53):

The only description that I clearly know of what I am doing may be of something that is at a distance from me. It is not the case that I clearly know the movements I make, and the intention is just a result which I calculate and hope will follow on these movements.

Putting this another way, things that are teleologically basic to us, in the sense I have discussed already, are such that the agent need not intend them to perform them successfully. The agent is so skilled at performing them that she can do them even while making a slip – in which case, she lacks non-observational knowledge of what she is doing, precisely because she acts contrary to her intention. Some hold that this still counts as intentional behavior; but, clearly, in some sense it is not. The agent performs goal-directed movements, but the “why” question does not apply, and what the agent does is not the product of her practical reasoning. I believe people perform fewer intentional actions than is often assumed. Much of what one does is done automatically, with little or no reflection. One need not confer with one’s reasons; one simply falls into familiar routes and routines. I think this is how days go by for many people.

Objections

The knowledge objection

One possible objection against the position I have been defending is that knowledge of reasons does not amount to knowledge of actions, and that one’s reasons may point in one direction even as one’s actions go in another.

I agree with Anscombe: most of the time, when agents set out to act intentionally in the routine activities of everyday life, they do as they intend; and they know that they do as they intend because their actions are the product of their practical reasoning. Furthermore, the knowledge they have is grounded in reasons that are grounded in previous experiences – making my claim narrower than Anscombe’s, as traditionally interpreted (e.g., by Newstead), and, I think, more plausible. It is important to my account that agents can and sometimes will make mistakes. They slip up, even though they have the proper competence to succeed with the action they intend. What they do is different from what they intend.

Anscombe’s position seems even more plausible if one removes any assumption that one is meant to have knowledge of the kind of person one is. That is not what Anscombe is claiming: Anscombe’s agent can respond to “why” questions about her actions without any need to speculate on her personality. When it comes to matters of the self, one leaves the domain of non-observational knowledge for that of speculation.

The intellectualist objection

My reason-based account can likewise be criticized for over-intellectualizing matters. As the expression goes, one often acts without “putting much thought into it” – in which case, one may not be at all able to answer the relevant “why” question.

Experience suggests that some people are more reflective than others; the ability to express one's intentions likewise varies. However, neither observation argues against Anscombe's position, nor mine. All I require is that the agent be aware of what she is doing as she performs her intentional action and able *in principle* to answer the relevant "why" question. As Fodor writes (1968: 634; quoted in Stanley, 2011: 8):

There is a real and important distinction between knowing how to do a thing and knowing how to explain to do that thing.... The ability to give explanation is itself a skill – a special kind of knowing how which presupposes general verbal facility at the very least.

The fallible agent objection

A typical criticism of positions like Anscombe's or mine is that agents are often wrong about their reasons for acting. People claiming this often refer to Nisbett and Wilson's research into the divergence between the reasons people report and the reasons revealed by scientific investigation. In their study, subjects reported buying an item because of its quality, even though its strategic placement in the store was shown to be a much more reliable predictor.

I do not want to argue against the claim that people are often wrong or uninformed about their reasons. Actions may be carried out unconsciously: say, if one is acting on Freudian desires. Consider the student who develops a sudden enthusiasm for math. She is very active in class and even stays after class to pose questions to the teacher. She may think that her motivations are purely intellectual; the truth, however, is that she has fallen in love with the teacher but cannot, for some reason, come to terms with this affection. Such examples are common, but they pose no threat to Anscombe. As I write above, I take it as given that people have multiple limitations when it comes to self-reporting. That does not change Anscombe's observation that, in the routine activities of everyday life, people are generally correct about the intentions behind their actions.

Conclusion

Anscombe holds that an agent's knowledge of her actions must involve more than mere knowledge of internal goings on: intentions, desires, etc. This "something more" is what happens in the world when one acts, as Anscombe emphasizes through her formula "I do what happens" (2000: §29): "...when the description of what happens is the very thing which I should say I was doing, then there is no distinction between my doing and the thing's happening".

The view that what one knows non-observationally when one acts is only the intention – the internal trying, willing, etc. – is nothing more for Anscombe than a "mad account" (2000: 52). I think she is right. That said, I argue with Paul for a more

restrictive view, according to which the agent must have acquired her knowledge at some point previously. *Contra* Anscombe, it cannot be that knowledge comes – ever – without grounding. For any of an agent’s actions, previously acquired knowledge lurks in the background. The agent can be made to reveal her reasons in response to a series of “why” questions about her action, in which case she will describe what she is doing under broader descriptions than the observer would otherwise have access to. This knowledge is unique to the agent. It allows her to say that what she is doing is overthrowing the government, when all that the observer can see is that she is pumping water.

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Conclusion

The main theme uniting this thesis is the phenomenon of slips. With the exception of Chapter Five, every chapter explicitly deals with slips in relation to one of the fundamental issues in philosophy of action. Chapters One and Two deal with slips and action explanation; Chapter Three deals with slips in relation to basic activity; Chapter Four deals with slips and knowledge how; and Chapter Six deals with knowledge about one's own action. This is not to say that the issue of slips always plays the leading role in these different chapters, but that it is nonetheless always present, informing the discussion. So, this can be seen as the thesis main question: How should the existence of slips affect philosophy of action?

I have attempted to show that the phenomenon of slips can be a game-changer in philosophy of action, since it forces one to think beyond the traditional limits of the discussion. Slips *per se* cannot be understood as intentional phenomena. Hence a proper theory of action has to involve components that can accommodate non-intentional actions. Explanation-by-norms can do so. Slips are *sui generis* performative. Hence they furnish us with an argument to the effect that *knowledge how* cannot be reduced to *knowledge that*, in virtue of the fact that there is no parallel to the phenomenon of slips when it comes to knowledge that. Consideration of slips also gives us a novel way of defining basic activity in relation to an agent, hence a novel way of understanding the fundamental components of action itself. Moreover, slips are relevant to the question of how to conceive of an agent's knowledge of her own actions; they show that this knowledge is fallible in the sense that an agent can very well do something without at all being aware of it.

It should be clear that understanding slips is not an aim in itself in this thesis. The overall issue is how questions about knowledge, thoughts and slips interweave when it comes to knowledge of one's own, and of others' actions. Thus, in Chapter Six I have attempted to make sense of the Anscombian claim that the knowledge an agent has of her own actions is non-observational, while still opening for the existence of slips. In Chapter Five I go into the details of Stanley's intellectualism, arguing that his theory involves certain potentially damaging inconsistencies. I do this by stressing that Stanley's notion of 'a practical grasp of a proposition' necessarily involves (though Stanley himself claims otherwise) the non-propositional competence of being bodily able to execute the said proposition, and thus that 'a practical grasp' is something categorically different than a theoretical grasp.

What I argue in Chapter Five connects to Chapter Six in the sense that what is a teleologically basic activity for an agent directly involves her *knowledge how*. Consider an agent for whom it is teleologically basic to tie her shoelaces. If so this agent can intend to tie her shoelaces without explicitly intending every little motion this process involves. These motions, on the other hand, are displays of her skill; knowledge how.

It is on the level of an agent's *knowledge how* that slips happen. In as much as the slip is the failed attempt to execute a given intention, the failure happens precisely in the agent's bodily execution, in her *knowledge how*. What this shows, again, is that by examining slips one can illuminate interesting aspects of human agency that have until now received very little attention in philosophy of action. Yet, a lot remains to explore.

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