

Normative Functionalism about Intentional Action
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1. Introduction

In any given day, I do many things. I perspire, digest and age. When I walk, I place one foot ahead of the other, my arms swinging gently at my sides; if someone bumps into me, I stumble. Perspiring, digesting, aging, placing my feet, swaying my arms and stumbling are all things I do, in some sense. Yet I also check my email, teach students and go to the grocery store. Those sorts of doings or behaviors seem distinctive; they are things I do intentionally.

What exactly is an intentional action? How does it differ from other things we do?

In this essay, I motivate and sketch an answer to those questions. On this view, an intentional action is a behavior that essentially alters what the actor is rationally accountable for, what she is rationally permitted or obliged to do, think, or feel. On this view, acting intentionally essentially involves a normative expectation that one has reasons for what one does. I call this view Normative Functionalism.

I begin in §2 by presenting a different, somewhat intuitive and popular view of intentional action, the so-called Causal Theory of Action. While that view does seem plausible, I allege that it doesn't seem to accommodate the apparent fact that actors are accountable for their intentional actions. That motivates Normative Functionalism, which I sketch in §3. I conclude in §4 by offering an interim assessment of the discussion.

2. The Causal Theory of Action

2.1. The Big Idea

In one of his many memorable remarks, Wittgenstein asks, "What is left over if I subtract the fact that my arm goes up from the fact that I raised my arm?"¹ In reply, it's very tempting to say something like this: 'my desire to lift it!' That expresses a fairly common way to think about intentional actions. When I intentionally raise my right arm, my body seems to go through the same motions that it would go through if someone else were to raise it for me; the only difference is how the motion is caused. So, it can seem that the main difference between the two cases is that intentional actions are behaviors that are caused in a certain way.

Many philosophers have developed that basic idea into a theory, commonly known as the Causal Theory of Action.² There are many versions of this sort of theory.³ Schematically, a behavior is an intentional action if and only if it is caused by X. Different versions of the Causal Theory replace 'X' with different things. For instance, one might replace 'X' with 'intention'; thus, a behavior is an intentional action if and only if it is caused by an intention. That is not merely a

¹ (Wittgenstein 1958, §621).

² For example, (Mele 1997) and (O'Connor and Sandis 2010).

³ For example, (Davidson 1963/1980), (Goldman 1970), (Bishop 1989), (Dretske 1989), and (Enc 2003).

claim about how intentional actions *happen to be caused*; it is a claim about what *constitutes* being an intentional action; if you like, it is a definition of intentional action; it says that being caused by an intention is *essential* for being an intentional action.

Beyond its apparent intuitive appeal, what else can be said in favor of a Causal Theory of Action?

2.2. Its Appeal

Let's consider three apparent features of intentional action that a Causal Theory seems able to explain well: control of the action; the possibility of failure; and knowledge of what one is doing.

Intentional actions seem to be different from other sorts of behavior because they are under the actor's control in a way that other behaviors are not. First, intentional actions seem to be chosen — or, anyway, things toward which the actor has some kind of affirmative mental stance or attitude.⁴ For instance, if I intentionally lift my arm, it is normally also true that I chose to lift my arm. By contrast, when my arm rises because of a shock induced by contact with an electrical outlet, it is normally not also true that I chose to lift my arm. The etiology of the movement seems to be a—if not the—distinguishing factor. Second, through their duration, intentional actions seem to be behaviors that the actor guides.⁵ For instance, if I am intentionally raising my arm, I can control how I am doing it, e.g., how fast or in which direction. By contrast, when my arm is caused to rise by shock, I do not have that sort of control. Again, it seems the difference lies in how the movements are causally sustained.

Another way in which intentional actions seem to be different from other behaviors is that they can fail in a way that other behaviors cannot. For instance, suppose I begin to intentionally check my email, but something interrupts me; thus, I don't succeed. By contrast, when I walk as one normally does, my arms might not swing as they typically would; perhaps because my hands are in my pockets; or they might swing less than they normally do. Here it seems out of place to say I did not succeed in swinging my arms or that my arms were unsuccessful at swinging. Rather, my arms simply did not swing, or they did not swing as much as they normally do. It would be misleading to say that my arms failed to swing, or failed to swing as usual. Likewise, when I walk as one normally does and my arms do swing, it would be misleading to say that my arms were successful at swinging. They are no more successful at swinging than a leaf that falls to the ground is successful at falling to the ground. Unlike non-intentional behaviors, intentional actions seem to be goal-directed. They come with the possibility of failure and success. A Causal Theory of Action looks like it can explain that. A failed intentional action is a sequence with a certain kind of beginning and a certain kind of ending: the relevant cause occurs (such as an intention) but the relevant effect (that is, the intended effect) does not. A successful action is a sequence in which both the relevant cause and the relevant effect occur.

⁴ Donald Davidson called this a "pro attitude" (Davidson 1963/1980).

⁵ John Martin Fischer and Mark Ravizza refer to this sort of ability as "guidance control" (Fischer and Ravizza 1999).

A third way in which intentional actions seem distinctive is that actors have special knowledge of them. First, actors seem to know about their intentional actions before they occur. For instance, just before I intentionally raise my arm, I could tell you that I am about to do so. By contrast, when my arm rises because of a shock, I do not necessarily know in advance that it is about to rise. According to a Causal Theory of Action, in the first case, I know what is about to happen because I have knowledge of the cause (e.g., my intention to raise my arm); in the second case, I don't necessarily know what is about to happen, because I don't have knowledge of an event that will tend to lead to a rising of my arm. Indeed, in general, of the intentional actions I perform, I seem to be better placed than others to know that these actions are about to occur, and also what sort of action it will be (e.g., an arm raising). This sort of "privileged" knowledge extends to the duration of the action. When performing an intentional action, I seem to know better than anyone that I am acting intentionally, and what it is that I am doing intentionally. Others have to observe my behavior, and infer whether it is intentional, and if so, what sort of action it might be. I need not rely on observation and inference in that way.⁶ According to a Causal Theory of Action, such knowledge is possible because I am uniquely placed to be aware of the cause of the behavior.

2.3. A Problem

Many objections have been made to the Causal Theory of Action.⁷ Let me offer just one that motivates the alternative that I want to bring into view.

Agents seem to be essentially accountable for their intentional actions, but the Causal Theory of Action does not make adequate room for that.

What do I mean when I say that agents are accountable for their intentional actions? Consider an example. Suppose that I intentionally visit the grocery store. Others *may* now think or even feel things about me. That is not merely a claim about what they are physically or psychologically capable of; it is a claim about what is permissible or appropriate. Clearly, one *may* now think that I have gone to the grocery store, but one *may* also wonder why I did, or doubt that I should have done so; and a friend to whom I had made a promise *may* even resent me for not telling her. Likewise, I *should* have reasons for going to the grocery store; if someone were to ask me why I went, I *should* be able to give a reason for going; perhaps I just wanted to; or maybe someone else needed something; or maybe I needed a distraction from work.⁸

Now, it is possible that no one actually thinks or feels anything about me or my going to the grocery store; maybe no one ever addresses me about it. Similarly, it is possible that I have no reason (let alone a good one) for going; even if I were addressed by someone, I might give no reason at all. Nevertheless, if I have intentionally gone to the store, these things are now, in

⁶ G.E.M. Anscombe calls this sort of knowledge "practical knowledge" (Anscombe 1957/2000, §48).

⁷ For instance, (Wilson 1980), (Ginet 1990), and (Sehon 2005).

⁸ Anscombe emphasizes this idea. She writes, "What distinguishes actions which are intentional from those which are not? The answer I shall suggest is that they are the actions to which a certain sense of the question 'Why?' is given application; the sense is of course that in which the answer, if positive, gives a reason for acting" (Anscombe 1957/2000, §5).

principle, *appropriate*.⁹ If they were not, it would be questionable whether I really did intentionally go to the grocery store. In this way, an intentional action essentially changes what the agent is accountable for, what she may (not) or should (not) do, think, or feel and what others may (not) or should (not) do, think, or feel *vis-à-vis* the agent.¹⁰

Why does a Causal Theory of Action seem unable to account for that? The basic reason is this: causal facts do not by themselves entail normative facts.¹¹ More exactly, the causal history of something does not entail that anything may (not) or should (not) happen. The fact that a behavior is caused in a certain way (e.g., by an intention of an actor) does not entail that it is permissible for others to think or feel things about the actor or address the actor. Nor does it entail that the actor should have a reason for the behavior.¹² For instance, the fact that my presence at the grocery store was caused by an intention to go to the grocery store does not by itself entail that I may (not) or should (not) do, think, or feel one thing or another.

4. Normative Functionalism about Action

Normative Functionalism about intentional action can be seen as a response to this shortcoming in the Causal Theory of Action; it centers on the idea that actors are essentially accountable for their intentional actions. In this section, I want to give a sketch of Normative Functionalism.

4.1. The Big Idea

Let us first contrast causal theories and functionalist theories generally. A causal theory of X — of what it is to be X — defines X in terms of X's causal history. Such a theory seems plausible for things like bird tracks, wind erosion, tides, sunburn, or real Champagne. All of those things seem like they are at least partly defined by what causes them.

A functionalist theory of X — of what it is to be X — defines X in terms of X's function or role. More exactly, X is defined in terms of its input and its output. Such a theory seems plausible for things like carburetors or pencil sharpeners, which convert a certain input into a certain output. They are not defined simply by what causes them. For instance, a carburetor could be caused by different people, factories, or designs; what matters is what it does.

Both causal and functionalist theories differ from a third sort of theory, which we might call the composition theory. This sort of theory holds that to be X is to be composed or "made of" a certain sort of stuff or material. Such a theory seems plausible for things like water and table sugar, which have specific chemical compositions (H₂O and C₆H₁₂O₆, respectively). On the face

⁹ Whether some particular person may or may not do, think or feel something often depends on her standing in other ways, see (Macnamara 2009) and (Maher 2010).

¹⁰ 'May' and 'should' are coarse stand-ins for what is probably a much more finely textured array of normative statuses and relationships. In unpublished work, Maggie Little refers to this idea as "deontic pluralism".

¹¹ This idea has its roots in the work of David Hume (1739/1985, 3.1.1) and G.E. Moore (1903/2008, §12).

¹² A proponent of a Causal Theory has available two broad lines of reply. First, she might contend that actors are not in principle accountable for their intentional actions. She would then have to explain why they appear to be. Second, she might contend instead that causal facts can indeed entail normative facts. Here the challenge is to deal with Hume's contention that one cannot derive an 'ought' from an 'is' alone, which seems plausible on its face.

of it, this sort of theory is not plausible for things like bird tracks or carburetors, since bird tracks and carburetors need not be made of some specific stuff — although, of course, there are limits on what such things are normally made of.

Functionalist theories are often expressed in merely descriptive terms, but they don't have to be expressed that way. For instance, one might propose that a pencil sharpener is anything that does in fact sharpen pencils or is able to sharpen pencils. But there is good reason to think that adequate functionalist theories need to use not just descriptive terms, but normative terms, such as 'may', 'should' and 'appropriate'. A pencil sharpener is not just something that does or can sharpen pencils, but something that *should* or *ought to* sharpen them, even if they don't actually do so on some occasion, or ever. After all, there can be dysfunctional and unused pencil sharpeners. Let us call any functionalism that relies essentially on normative terms, a *normative functionalism*.¹³

A normative functionalist theory of intentional action could take many different forms, but any such theory will define an intentional action in terms of a role or function, relying on normative terms.

I will sketch one version of Normative Functionalism about action, rooted in the idea that actors are essentially accountable for their intentional actions. The core of the view is this: an intentional action changes the normative status of the actor, what she may (not) or should (not) do, think or feel, and what others may (not) or should (not) do, think or feel with respect to her.

To get the basic idea, consider an analogy. Actors are like players in a game or sport, or participants in a practice or institution more generally.¹⁴ Thus, actors are like chess players, soccer players, parents, students or citizens. Like players of a game, there are certain things that actors may (not) or should (not) do, depending on the circumstances.

In turn, acting intentionally is like making a move in a game or participating in some way in a practice. Crucially, making a move in a game essentially affects the state of play, who may (not) or should (not) do what to whom and when. A player on the field in a soccer game is not just able to kick the ball at the opposing team's goal; that is also something she is allowed to do. If the ball happens to go in, then her team is credited with a goal. Although a player is able to touch the ball with her hands, she is not allowed to do so. If she does so, then the other team gets a free kick. Likewise, an intentional action essentially affects who may (not) or should (not) do what to whom and when. If I intentionally go to the grocery store, that is not just something that my body happens to physically engage in; it is also something for which I should have reasons, and it is something which can legitimate certain responses to me in turn, such as calls for reasons.

If this analogy is at all apt, then we must ask: what practice or institution are actors participants in? Philosophers in the Pittsburgh School suggest an answer, captured well in a phrase from

¹³ For discussion of the idea, see (Rosenberg 1974, 38-40), (O'Shea 2007, 77), (Lance 2008, §1), (Kukla and Lance 2009, 14), (Brandom 2009, 12), and (Maher 2012, 30-31, 108).

¹⁴ One seminal articulation of this idea is (Strawson 1962/2009). For an important development of the view, see (Wallace 1994). For critical commentary on Strawson, see (McKenna and Russell 2008).

Robert Brandom; actors are participants in “the game of giving and asking for reasons.”¹⁵ To be an actor is to participate in this multi-faceted practice. To act intentionally is to make a move within it. Roughly speaking, an intentional action transforms what one is rationally permitted or obliged to do, say, think or feel and in turn what others are rationally permitted or obliged to do, say, think or feel.

This proposal raises many questions. Is there one, unified game of giving asking for reasons? Or are there many? Is participation in this game necessary and sufficient for acting intentionally? Who or what settles the norms of this game? Does this proposal over-intellectualize intentional action? By defining intentional action in terms of rational accountability, does this proposal simply define away important substantive questions about whether we are accountable for any of our actions?¹⁶

Those are just some of the important questions that Normative Functionalism must answer if it is to be ultimately acceptable. Given that my goal is to introduce the view, however, I think it is more important to indicate more of its basic appeal.

4.2. Its Appeal

Let us consider, then, how Normative Functionalism handles the facts about intentional action that seem to be handled well by a Causal Theory of Action.

First consider control. Earlier I observed that intentional actions seem to be under the actor’s control in a distinctive way. This control seems to have at least two aspects. First, intentional actions are chosen; second, actors guide their intentional actions. Normative Functionalism explains these aspects of intentional action by appealing to normative expectations. Roughly, actors should have control of their intentional actions. That expectation is normative, not merely descriptive or predictive, for it licenses various forms of rational accountability. If the actor does not in fact exhibit sufficient control of a behavior, then she is accountable for that lack of control. For instance, if I intentionally lift my arm, but it waves erratically and doesn’t rise very far, then I am the person who should account for that. Why did I do it that way? Perhaps I don’t have a good reason. Or maybe it just happened that way, despite struggling against it. In that case, we might say that what started as an intentional action devolved into mere behavior. I might then need to defer explanation of the behavior to a neurologist. Likewise, if an actor does exhibit the relevant sort of control, then she is accountable; she is to be “credited” with satisfying the expectation. Crucially, if the actor is not, in principle, accountable for successful or unsuccessful control of a behavior, then the behavior is not an intentional action. To treat someone as having done something intentionally is to treat her as in principle accountable for the control (the choice and guidance) of that behavior.

¹⁵ For instance, (Brandom 1994, xxi,17,141). For versions of the idea in the work of Sellars and McDowell, see (Sellars 1963) and (McDowell 1994, Lectures V-VI).

¹⁶ For instance, many hold that it is a substantive question whether actors are accountable for their intentional actions. It is a vexed question just what accountability is. See, e.g., (Watson 2004), (Smith 2005), (Shoemaker 2011), and (Smith 2012).

Now, second, consider the possibility of failure. Intentional actions seem like they can fail. Normative Functionalism will again explain this by appeal to a normative expectation. Roughly, actors should complete the intentional actions they undertake.¹⁷ That expectation implies that the actor is in principle accountable for the failure of her action. For instance, if I begin intentionally to check my email, but I don't actually do it, I am accountable for the lack of success. It could be that I changed my mind; it could be that the computer froze; it could be that my son interrupted me. These are all reasons I might give for why I did not complete something I set out to do. I might not have a reason, but I should have one. Once again, the key point is that if the actor is not, in principle, accountable for the ultimate success of the behavior, then it is not an intentional action. To treat someone as having done something intentionally is to treat her as in principle accountable for the success or lack of success of that behavior.

Turn now to the distinctive knowledge that actors have of their intentional actions. Normative Functionalism will again account for this appearance by appeal to normative expectations. An intentional action is not just a behavior that an actor has knowledge of in advance of its performance. It is a behavior of which she should have such knowledge. She is accountable for that knowledge or its lack. If I am about to intentionally check my email, I should know that I am about to do so. Similarly, while in the course of intentionally checking my email, I should know that I am doing something, and, in particular, that I am checking my email. If I do not know that I am about to check my email before I intentionally do so, I am in principle accountable for that. Why didn't I know? Did I choose to do so on the spot? Or did my plans change suddenly? Likewise, when I am intentionally checking my email, if I do not know (a) that I am doing something or (b) that I am checking my email, I am in principle accountable for that. I should know. Why don't I? To treat someone as having done something intentionally is to treat her as in principle accountable for knowledge of that behavior.

In general, where a Causal Theory of Action treats control, the possibility of failure, and knowledge of action as features of the causal structure of intentional actions, Normative Functionalism treats those features as normative expectations governing intentional actions.

5. Interim Assessment

Where do things now stand?

While a Causal Theory of Action is intuitively appealing, and seems able to explain a few important features of intentional action, it also appears to have a crucial flaw. Intentional actions seem to be things for which actors are essentially accountable. That flaw initially motivates views like Normative Functionalism, which emphasize that feature of intentional actions. Normative Functionalism is also appealing because it too can make sense of the same features of intentional action that a Causal Theory seems able to make sense of.

¹⁷ That does not imply that any particular person wants or would prefer the actor to complete the action. We all might be relieved or overjoyed that an actor failed to complete some intentional action that she began, such as a nuclear attack. The claim is that the actor bears responsibility for the completion or non-completion of the action.

On balance, then, Normative Functionalism seems to handle well one more thing than the Causal Theory. And so it can seem as though Normative Functionalism is the better view. But accepting that conclusion would be too quick. First, in passing, I mentioned several questions that Normative Functionalism must address. Second, there are other objections one might make to the Causal Theory. Third, I have not presented an exhaustive list of the desiderata or explananda for a theory of intentional action. Fourth, there are other theories out there. So, we do not have a decisive end to the discussion, but only the beginning.

I think an important question to ask about Normative Functionalism is this: Why should we think that the distinctive features of intentional actions are best understood as normative expectations governing those actions?

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