

Lecture 13: Central Themes

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1. The Question

What is the mark that distinguishes actions? (Davidson 1971).

‘The problem of action is to explicate the contrast between what an agent does and what merely happens to him’ (Frankfurt 1978, p. 157).

2. Action: Three Basic Principles

2.1. Actions have hierarchical structures

Many actions (e.g. changing a nappy) have proper parts which are themselves actions.

Component actions are related to the overall action by the means–ends relation.

The means–ends relation imposes a hierarchical structure (partial ordering with a unique maximum) on the component actions.

2.2. Actions are individuated by outcomes

To *individuate* some things is to say what makes one of these different from all others.

An *outcome* is a possible or actual state of affairs.

Actions are individuated by outcomes in this sense: any two actions can be distinguished by

which outcomes they are directed to.

Not all outcomes are end states (e.g. *his reaching for his gun* is an outcome but not an end state).

Not all outcomes are consequences of things which actions (e.g. *his reaching for his gun* is an outcome but not a consequence of any action).

Be careful to distinguish particular outcomes from types of outcome. For example, if Ayesha and Alfie are each running 10 kilometers, their actions are directed to the same *type of outcome*. But they are not directed to the same outcome. After all, Ayesha could succeed even if Alfie fell into a well. In that case, the outcome to which Ayesha’s action is directed would obtain, while the outcome to which Alfie’s action is directed would not.

What are bodily actions? Joint displacements and bodily configurations. (Note the difference between the claim about individuation and the claim about what actions are. Actions are individuated by outcomes, but actions are not outcomes.)

2.3. One action can have multiple descriptions (the accordion effect)

Suppose she causes civil war by killing the king by putting poison in his ear by pouring it from a vial.

We can describe her action by saying ‘She poured poison from from a vial’, by saying ‘She

put poison in the king’s ear’, or in many other ways. These are all descriptions of the same action.

3. Causes of Action: Belief and Desire

Ahmed’s next action will be either to pull the lever or to press the button (but he cannot do both).

If he pulls the lever, a forest rat will fall on his head.

If he pushes the button, he will get ten dollars.

Will Ahmed pull the lever? What is the minimum you need to know in order to know what Ahmed will do?

4. Intention

4.1. What is an intention?

‘intention simply is an all-out judgement. Forming an intention, deciding, choosing, and deliberating are various modes of arriving at the judgement, but it is possible to come to have such a judgement or attitude without any of these modes applying.’ (1980, p. 99)

4.2. Bratman on Davidson

‘the basic inputs for practical reasoning about what to do—either now or later—will just be the agent’s desires and beliefs. Such reasoning, when concerned with the future, can issue in future intentions. And these intentions are fundamentally different sorts of states from the desires and beliefs on which they are based’ (Bratman 1985, p. 222).

4.3. Norm of Agglomeration

It is not rational to have several intentions simultaneously unless it is rational to have a single intention agglomerating them all.

To illustrate, consider a combination of judgements:

desire: to earn more money

belief: I can earn more money by getting a new job.

judgement: My getting a new job would be desirable.

and, for each day of your life:

desire: to take it easy today

belief: I can take it easy today by not getting a new job today.

judgement: My not getting a new job today would be desirable.

Having this combination of desires is not irrational (although inconvenient).

Making this combination of judgements is not irrational (indeed, both might be correct).

But having the combination of corresponding intentions would be irrational. The Norm of Agglomeration is characteristic of intention (cf Bratman 2000).

5. Conclusion

Simple Picture

1. Beliefs and desires shape deliberation about what to do.
2. Deliberation characteristically results in intentions.
3. Intentions cause actions.

Intention is the mark that distinguishes actions.

This is a ‘causal theory’ in Frankfurt’s sense:

‘According to causal theories [...] the essential difference between events of the two types [actions vs things that merely happen to an agent] is to be found in their prior causal histories: a [pattern of joint displacements and bodily configurations] is an action if and only if it results from antecedents of a certain kind’ (Frankfurt 1978, p. 157).

References

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