

# Lecture 15: Central Themes

s.butterfill@warwick.ac.uk

## 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. One or Two Answers

### 2.1. Justifying vs Explanatory Reasons

‘we have to carefully distinguish explanatory reasons, the reasons why S does A or believes P, from justifying reasons, S’s reasons for doing A or believing P, the reasons S (if able) might give to justify doing A or believing P.’ (Dretske 2006, p. 168). (You may remember this distinction from Theme 1, Perception without Awareness.)

Explanatory reason example: Steve arrived looking like that for the reason that the path was so muddy.

Justifying reason example: Steve walked to the party because he believed it would be more romantic.

### 2.2. Are these answers distinct?

What is the mark that distinguishes actions?

1. Actions are events appropriately related to intentions.
2. Actions are events for which there are justifying reasons.

### 2.3. What links justifying reasons to agents?

Among all the considerations which are, or might be, explanatory reasons for an action, what determines which are (the agent’s) justifying reasons?

In part it’s a matter of what they believe. But not just this. After all, they might have the same beliefs and yet not count the same things as reasons which justify their running.

It’s those of her beliefs which lead to her forming the intention which guides her action.

If this is right, actions for which there are justifying reasons are actions guided by intentions. So of the two answers in Section 2.2, the second implies the first. (Exercise: does the first answer imply the second?)

## 3. Don’t Spiders Have Intentions?

### 3.1. Not according to philosophers ...

Intention is among the ‘concepts which are inapplicable to spiders and their ilk’ (Frankfurt 1978, p. 162).

‘Many animals that do not have conceptual intentions flexibly exercise agential control. [...] Spiders very likely do not have them’ (Buehler 2019).

### 3.2. ... but maybe according to scientists

Some spiders take detours:

‘Scytodes’ dangerous end is at the front, as the gummy spit is fired from slits on Scytodes’ fangs, and one part of *P. labiata*’s prey-capture tactic is to take detours by which it can approach this dangerous spider from its rear, keeping out of Scytodes’ line of fire’ (Jackson & Cross 2011, pp. 130–1).

But apparently only when necessary:

‘*P. labiata* foregoes the detour and instead takes the shorter, faster head-on approach when the spider it sees in a web is a *Scytodes* female that is carrying eggs [...]. This

makes sense because *Scytodes* females carry their eggs around in their mouths. Egg-carrying females can still spit, but only by first releasing their eggs (Li et al., 1999). Being reluctant to release their eggs, egg-carrying females are, for *P. labiata*, less dangerous as prey' (Jackson & Cross 2011, p. 131).

Lab experiments indicate that spiders of the same species can identify a route to prey at one time and then, at a later time, when the prey is no longer visible, follow that route (Jackson & Cross 2011, p. 118–121).

This finding, together with the ecological observations, indicates that some spiders have intentions, at least if intentions are representations which somehow guide actions.

### 3.3. Lessons

Never trust a philosopher.

Don't offer opinions. The question is not about you.

## 4. Bach's Objection

According to Davidson, intention is the mark which distinguishes actions. Bach objects:

'some actions are performed too automatically, routinely, and/or unthinkingly to be in any way intentional. There need be nothing intentional about scratching an itch [...] There need be nothing intentional about [...] ducking under a flying object. Impulsive actions are not intentional' (Bach 1978, p. 363).

Exercise: outline the argument against Davidson's answer to The Question implicit in Bach's view. Is the argument sound?

### 4.1. Bratman's Reply

'it is unclear whether we can appeal to a general intention to protect myself from flying objects to explain [...] why my catching the ball [or ducking Bach's flying object] is intentional' (Bratman 1984, p. 395 footnote 26).

## References

- Bach, K. (1978). A representational theory of action. *Philosophical Studies*, 34(4), 361–379.
- Bratman, M. E. (1984). Two faces of intention. *The Philosophical Review*, 93(3), 375–405.
- Buehler, D. (2019). Flexible occurrent control. *Philosophical Studies*, 176(8), 2119–2137.
- Davidson, D. (1971). Agency. In R. Binkley, R. Bronaugh, & A. Marras (Eds.), *Agent, Action, and Reason*, (pp. 3–25). Toronto: University of Toronto Press. Reprinted in Davidson, D. (1980) *Essays on Actions and Events*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dretske, F. (2006). Perception without awareness. In T. S. Gendler & J. O. Hawthorne (Eds.), *Perceptual Experience* (pp. 147–180). Oxford: OUP.
- Frankfurt, H. (1978). The problem of action. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 15(2), 157–162.
- Jackson, R. R. & Cross, F. R. (2011). Spider Cognition. In J. Casas (Ed.), *Advances in Insect Physiology*, volume 41 of *Spider Physiology and Behaviour* (pp. 115–174). Academic Press.