

Intentional action and ‘in order to’

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I. Thanks largely to Joshua Knobe, philosophers now frequently empirically investigate the folk psychological concept of intentional action. Knobe (2003, 2004a, 2004b) argues that application of this concept is often surprisingly sensitive to one’s moral views. In particular, it seems that people are much more willing to regard a bit of behavior as intentional, if they think that the action in question is bad or wrong.

There is much controversy about both the design and the interpretation of the experiments Knobe has conducted. One concern is that common use of the word ‘intentionally’ seems to be sensitive to matters other than the concept of intentional action. Perhaps the use of the word ‘intentionally’ is also governed by pragmatic thoughts about blameworthiness—if you think N.N. is to be blamed for ϕ -ing, then you are more likely to say that N.N. is ϕ -ing intentionally, apart from whether you really judge that the ϕ -ing was intentional (Adams and Steadman 2004a).

One way to neutralize these concerns is to gauge whether people regard an action as intentional, not by asking them whether they would apply the word ‘intentional’ or its cognates to the action in question, but by seeing whether they treat the action as susceptible to reason explanations. After all, if some act of ϕ -ing is susceptible to a reason explanation, then the act of ϕ -ing is intentional. Knobe infers that we can see whether a psychological subject regards some act as intentional by seeing whether the subject is willing to say that the bit of behavior can function appropriately in a reasons explanation.

Knobe illustrates how this works with a particular example:

So, for example, suppose that I want to get a beer and therefore start walking toward the refrigerator, when suddenly I trip and fall. Here it seems wrong to say, ‘He tripped in order to get a beer.’ Indeed, it seems wrong to use any sentence of the form ‘He tripped in order to...’ Presumably, the problem is that, since I did not trip intentionally, it seems wrong to explain my tripping using a reason.

(Knobe 2004a, 183)

Knobe (2004a) applies this insight to the examples he asks his psychological subjects to consider. Thus instead of asking psychological subjects only whether e.g. the chairman helped/harmed the environment intentionally, Knobe argues it would also be useful to ask them whether the chairman helped/harmed the environment in order to increase profits. Perhaps people’s use of the word ‘intentionally’ fails to be governed solely by their concept of intentional action, but we can see whether subjects regard the action as intentional by seeing whether they are willing to use the ‘in order to’ construction to explain the act.

Knobe thus discovered that psychological subjects in one group were somewhat willing to say that the chairman harmed the environment in order to increase profits, and yet those in the other group were somewhat unwilling to say that the chairman helped the environment in order to increase profits. The difference in the two groups was statistically significant. Yet it seems unlikely that pragmatic considerations about praise and blame explain the difference between their responses to the two vignettes. Thus

Knobe concludes that the difference between them shows us something fundamental about the concept of intentional action itself.

II. I wish to raise a problem for Knobe's argument here. He is correct to think that one can capture what's important about the concept of intentional action by seeing how this concept is used. If a psychological subject thinks that an agent is ϕ -ing in order to ψ , then this is some evidence that the psychological subject regards the agent's ϕ -ing as an intentional action.

Anscombe (1957) displays this feature of intentional action quite nicely. She argues that intentional action is action to which a certain sense of the 'Why?' question applies. One of the marks of this question is that the answer mentions something in the future. Thus, if someone is asked why he is going to the office, and he answers "(In order) to teach my seminar this evening", then his going to the office is an intentional action. Anscombe argues in effect that intentional actions are those appearing on the left hand side of the 'in order to' construction, and Knobe properly follows suit.

Michael Thompson (forthcoming), however, has suggested that intentional actions are not necessarily those for which Anscombe's famous 'Why?' question has application, but instead might be those that can answer her 'Why?' question. For example, one may answer the question "Why are you traveling to New York?" with the response "I'm visiting my sister." This would indicate that one is visiting one's sister intentionally, for it answers the 'Why?' question. This would lead us to think that intentional actions are those that can appear on the right hand side of the 'in order to' relation.

This is consistent with the spirit of Intention. In section 23, Anscombe describes a man who is doing many things, some of which he knows, some he does not. Yet there is an order that some of these doings display. He is moving his arm up and down in order to pump the water supply, and he is pumping the water supply in order to poison the inhabitants of the house. Intentional actions like ‘pump the water supply’ appear on both the left hand side and the right hand side of various ‘in order to’ explanations. This suggests that we should expect to find intentional actions appearing on both sides of ‘in order to’ explanations. We can imagine a long string of actions wherein the agent α s in order to β , β s in order to γ , γ s in order to δ , δ s in order to ϵ , ..., and so on—each of these actions is intentional. Thus we can see whether a psychological subject regards something as an intentional action by seeing whether they are willing to mention it on both sides of a reasons explanation.

I should acknowledge straightaway that there are two situations where this strategy seems not to yield the right answer. In the case of deviant causal chains, an agent ϕ s, and an agent ψ s, and the agent even ϕ s in order to ψ , and yet we may not want to say that the agent’s ψ -ing is in fact an intentional action. The ψ -ing does indeed appear on the right hand side of an ‘in order to’ explanation, but this may not guarantee that the ψ -ing is intentional. So, appearing on the right hand side of an ‘in order to’ explanation is a necessary but not sufficient condition for being an intentional action. (Fortunately for present purposes, Knobe’s vignettes do not involve deviant causal chains.)

The other complication involves what are called ‘basic actions’. A basic action is ordinarily regarded as an intentional action, and yet the agent does not do anything else in

order to perform the basic action. Rather, the basic action is the first intentional action the agent performs. If α -ing were a basic action, then we probably would not be able to find a sentence where a psychological subject would say that the agent does anything in order to α , and yet we still think that the α -ing is intentional. Fortunately for present purposes, Knobe's vignettes do not involve basic actions. (Note that Knobe's strategy of relying solely on the left hand side of the 'in order to' construction runs into analogous problems in the case of 'final actions'. A final action is an intentional action that you do not perform for any further reason. Fortunately for Knobe's purposes, his vignettes do not involve final actions.)

Intentional actions—other than basic actions and final actions—appear on both sides of the 'in order to' construction. Returning to the main line of argument, I propose that we determine whether psychological subjects regard either the helping or the harming as intentional by seeing whether they assent to reasons explanation where the helping and the harming appear on the right hand side of the explanation, since Knobe has already investigated their responses when they appear on the left hand side. Does the one chairman do anything in order to help the environment? Does the other chairman do anything in order to harm the environment? My intuition here is that neither chairman does anything in order to help/harm the environment. And so, despite Knobe's findings, I think neither chairman helps/harms the environment intentionally.

In order to see whether people generally share my intuition, I ran a simple experiment nearly identical to the one reported in Knobe (2004a). Subjects were 86 people enrolled in a college mass communication course. Each subject randomly received either the original harm vignette or the original help vignette. After reading the

vignettes, subjects were given the new sentence “The chairman started the program in order to help [harm] the environment.” Subjects answered the question by rating the sentence on a scale from -3 (‘sounds wrong’) to +3 (‘sounds right), with the 0 point marked as “in between”, just as in Knobe (2004a).

The average rating for subjects receiving the help vignette was -1.4, and the average rating for subjects receiving the harm vignette was -2.3. It is statistically significant that both average ratings are less than zero; in the helping condition, $t(43) = 4.09$, $p = 0.0002$; in the harming condition, $t(43) = 16.24$, $p < 0.0001$. In both vignettes, then, subjects said that it sounded wrong to say that the chairman started the program in order to harm/help the environment, confirming my initial intuition. Thus if we think that intentional action ought to show up on both sides of the ‘in order to’ expression, and yet if subjects are unwilling to say that the chairman does anything in order to help/harm the environment, then we should conclude that subjects do not think that the chairman helped or harmed the environment intentionally. Subjects’ moral views seem not to affect significantly how they are deploying the concept of intentional action.

III. It still remains to be explained why subjects are somewhat willing to say that the chairman harmed the environment in order to increase profits, even if they are very unwilling to say that the chairman did anything in order to harm the environment. Why does ‘harming’ appear on the left but not the right hand side of the ‘in order to’ construction?

I cannot answer this question satisfactorily, but here are a few remarks. First, we should note that subjects are only very weakly willing to say that the chairman harmed

the environment in order to increase projects. Although in Knobe's experiments the average rating for subjects in the harming condition (+0.6) was statistically significantly higher than the average rating for subjects in the helping condition (-1), it was not statistically significantly above zero. So we should be reluctant to claim that subjects really were at all willing to say that the chairman harmed the environment in order to increase profits.

Second, one might suspect that subjects think that the chairman is to blame for harming the environment, despite not considering his harming the environment to be an intentional action. Perhaps subjects are more willing to say that the chairman harmed the environment in order to increase profits because they want to blame the chairman for acting badly, and these pragmatic considerations influence how they use the 'in order to' relation (Adams and Steadman 2004a, 2004b, Nadelhoffer 2004).

But notice that blame is at best influencing only whether they are willing to place 'harm' on the left hand side of the 'in order to' relation. This may be because the right hand side of the 'in order to' relation seems to wear its intentionality on its sleeve more, and so pragmatic consideration aren't powerful enough to override this feature of the relation. The average left hand side rating for both the harming and helping vignettes (+0.6, -1) are higher than the average right hand side rating for both vignettes (-2.3, -1.4). This seems to be some evidence for Thompson's view about intentional action.

And it is unclear that blame explains even this difference. Notice that the chairman, if asked why he was starting the program, clearly would not sincerely say "I'm harming the environment." Yet if asked why he was harming the environment, then, instead of just denying it, he might very well exclaim "Well, I'm doing it to increase

profits.” Yet the chairman clearly does not blame himself! So I don’t think blame explains as much as Adams, Steadman, and Nadelhoffer propose.

Despite these remaining mysteries, it is clear that subjects’ moral views are not significantly influencing whether they are willing to say that the chairman did anything in order to help/harm the environment. I conclude, then, that subjects think that neither chairman helped or harmed the environment intentionally. The folk concept of intentional action is not as significantly influenced by one’s particular moral views as previous evidence seems to suggest.¹

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