



Stephen Butterfill <stephen.butterfill@gmail.com>

Hey

Olle Blomberg <olle.blomberg@gmail.com>

25 October 2011 11:29

To: Stephen Butterfill <s.butterfill@warwick.ac.uk>

Dear Stephen,

We discussed your paper in our reading group yesterday (we were eight, the majority were psychology PhDs I think, only me and one other philosophy PhD student). I thought I'd try to briefly say something about the discussion, and give you some of my own thoughts.

I don't remember exactly what had changed from the version I read before our meeting in London, but this version did feel tighter and better. It's really a great paper, and I think I'm speaking for most people in the reading group when I'm saying that. I thought the "feline action"-metaphor that you framed the paper with was really neat (from "joint action is like feline action" to "individual action is like feline action")! (Was that also in the previous version?) At least two of the psychology participants thought this kind of definition would be a useful tool for them. Someone wasn't convinced by Davidsonian argument against the simple definition and thought the simple definition was fine (but I guess one could think of your paper as an explanation of what would have to be the case for the simple definition to be true...or one disregards the distinctions between "genuine" actions and actions in an "attenuated" sense...see my final comment below as well).

Some of the participants was a bit confused by the talk about goals/outcomes and goal-states/intentions, and someone thought you should have just talked about outcomes that actions are directed towards instead. I think this is just a terminological issue though... Slightly related to this, one worry was that your final definition was still too broad because of the fact that mental states that represented goals weren't required: Could insects act jointly? Could trees act jointly? I suppose these kind of questions will depend on what theory of action (in the genuine rather than the attenuated sense) one is committed to (this theory could introduce constraints that rule out movement of tree limbs as actions for example). So this doesn't seem to be a problem, but it might be interesting to know how some of the reading group participants reacted to the paper...

Regarding the final definition, I wasn't sure what condition (b) added to the penultimate definition that preceded it...are there cases that the penultimate definition would classify as joint actions which the final definition wouldn't?

One more broad question I have is about your distinction between a notion of genuine primitive action ('genuine' is my word here, not yours) and an attenuated notion of action. I can see that you need some kind of distinction here, since the notion of action is part of your account of what it is for someone to be agent of an event, but I wonder if you need to call the latter an attenuated notion. You mention that we in ordinary everyday talk and thought conceive of people as agents of events other than (primitive) actions, but also think of these events as actions. I can of course see that one can distinguish between 'Ayesha and Pandora's making the puppet sing' as a set of bodily movements and as an episode, but thinking of this distinction as cutting between a set of actions and a (non-action) episode will depend on accepting the idea that primitive actions are all the actions there are (premise 2 in the argument against the simple definition). It seems more satisfying to me if you could reject this idea, in which case you wouldn't have to talk about an attenuated sense of action, and you could really claim that individual action is like feline action (not: individual "action", in an attenuated sense, is like feline action). Maybe this is just a terminological issue though. I do see that some kind of distinction between basic and non-basic actions is needed.

To sum up though, I think this is really great paper. Incredibly well-written, stimulating and interesting!

Best wishes
Olle

On 10 Sep 2011, at 11:39, Stephen Butterfill wrote:

[Quoted text hidden]

<shared and collective intentions 6 A4 share.pdf>
