

Intentionality without intentions

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Abstract

A problem of action is to account for its intentionality. Abstract from its intentional features and you are left with mere bodily movement which, to most philosophers, is "not unlike the movement of wind-swept sand on the shores of Lake Michigan" (Mele & Moser 1994, p. 39). But what do you abstract away when you abstract from intentional features of action? The answer will seem obvious to many. To abstract from intentional features of action is to abstract from propositional attitudes such as beliefs, desires, and intentions; these attitudes are the primitive bearers of intentionality in action.

Despite its popularity, this view is far from obvious. Consider grasping a mug and abstract from any beliefs (such as a belief that it contains Assam tea), desires (such as a desire to drink Assam tea) and intentions (to pick up the mug) which you may have been acting on. What is left does is not obviously a brute bodily movement. For your fingers are shaping themselves to the position and features of the mug in such a way as to secure it for transporting it to your mouth. On the face of it, this grasping activity is goal-directed: the goal is to secure the mug for transport. Certainly it has features characteristic of goal directed activity. For instance, it is plastic (the goal can be reached from different starting points and along different paths if, for instance, obstacles are present) and persistent (some degree of interference can be compensated for) (on goal-directed activity see \citealp[p. 272]{nagel_goal-directed_1977}; on grasping see \citealp{Jeannerod:1995bb}).

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Comment [1]: [Nagel, 1977] Nagel, E. (1977). Goal-Directed processes in biology. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 74(5):261–279. ArticleType: research-article / Full publication date: May, 1977 / Copyright © 1977 Journal of Philosophy, Inc.

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Comment [2]: [Jeannerod et al., 1995] Jeannerod, M., Arbib, M. A., Rizzolatti, G., and Sakata, H. (1995). Grasping objects: the cortical mechanisms of visuomotor transformation. *Trends in Neurosciences*, 18(7):314–320.

What does this observation about grasping show? On some views of intentionality \citep[e.g.][]{Millikan:1984ib}, this observation is already sufficient to indicate that the grasping activities have functions and thereby manifest intentionality in whatever sense full-blooded intentional action does. But on other views of intentionality there is room for a sharper distinction between functions and intentionality proper. The observation about grasping is neutral on whether grasping is an activity with a function or whether it involves a richer form of intentionality. We will argue that attention to the ways in which grasping and other motor acts are guided by representations of their goals reveals that such actions, considered in abstraction from intentions and other propositional attitudes, manifest intentionality in ways that involves more than their merely having teleological functions.

Our aim, then, is not to contend the claim that propositional attitudes are a source of intentionality in action. Rather, our contention is that to abstract from intentions and other propositional attitudes does not amount to abstracting from intentionality altogether. This because, we shall argue, such attitudes are neither the only nor the primitive source of intentionality in action. For motor representations provides a further source of intentionality. Furthermore, motor representations provide a source of intentionality in action that is more primitive than that of propositional attitudes such as desire and intention.

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What *more primitive that* means:

- (1) There is a relation (or a family of relations) that a desire, intention or other propositional attitude bears to an action which can be expressed by saying that the agent was acting on this intention, desire or other attitude. Call this relation (or relations of this family) 'rational guidance'.
- (2) There is a relation that a motor representation bears to an action when the representation guides execution of the action. Call this relation 'motor guidance'.

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Comment [3]: [Millikan, 1984] Millikan, R. G. (1984). *Language, Thought and Other Biological Categories*. MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass.

(3) There are relations of rational guidance the obtaining of which constitutively depends on the fact that relations of motor guidance obtain; but not conversely. (We explicate the dependence below when we argue for the truth of this claim.)

In particular, we shall argue, first, that the status of an action, and its identity as the action it is, does not uniquely depend on its combination with propositional attitudes, being there another source of intentionality, motor cognition; second, that this further source of intentionality is primitive in the sense that the intentionality in action of intentions as well as of other propositional attitudes depends on its existence but not conversely.

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Comment [4]: I find this hard to understand --- suggest we drop it or spell it at length how we understand this claim.

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Comment [5]: On reflection I think we should make this more precise. Perhaps we will only be able to make this more precise when we have the central arguments of the paper in view.