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When Is Action Intentional? A Problem for Ginet's Acausal Theory of Action

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Carl Ginet has proposed to define action as being intentional if and only if its agent simultaneously has a de re intention to be doing that very action. Ginet does not exactly tell us what makes an attitude like intention de re (or, in his terms, directly referential); rather, he takes the notion of de re attitude for granted. The gist of my paper is to show that the standard picture of direct reference allows for cases in which the conditions in Ginet's definition are met, yet we would not say that the agent intended to act as she did. And the intuitive reason why the action would not count as intentional is that the agent's intentions were not directed at her action "in the right way." Ironically, it is the problem of deviant causal chains, initially targeted against the causal theory of action, which Ginet's "acausal" theory was precisely designed to avoid, that turns out to be a problem for Ginet's own account – only now, the deviant chain goes from the action to the intention.

1. The Acausal Account of Intentional Action

The aim of my paper is to explore the limits of Ginet's account of intentional action.¹ I will present a case in which an action that, intuitively, is not intentional, is predicted by his account to

¹ The main reference is Carl Ginet, "Reasons Explanation of Action: An Incompatibilist Account", *Philosophical Perspectives* 3 (1989): 17-46.

be intentional, thus revealing a more general problem for his approach. But let me start with an outline of the account itself. For the sake of exposition, instead of using variables for individuals and actions, like *S*, *X*, *A*, I will be talking of arbitrary agents, like John, myself, and the actions of raising hands and dancing.

Suppose that John intentionally raises his hand, in order to vote at a meeting. Ginet's proposal is driven by the desire to reconcile these two ideas:

a) John's raising of his hand does not have to be determined by the previous state of affairs.

Given a complete account of John's beliefs and desires and all the events that had occurred up to the time of his action, it was still up to John to raise his hand rather than not raise it.

b) John's raising of his hand was not a random happening, as an accidental muscle spasm would have been. It was a genuine action that John did for a reason, namely, to vote.

Ginet offers his indeterministic account of action in response to the dilemma of free will. When John raised his hand, it was still in his power to do otherwise. If his action had been determined by the previous state of affairs, it is unclear how he could be justifiably held responsible for his action. At the same time, John did what he did for a reason, in order to vote. If John had not intended to raise his hand, e.g. if he had been forced to do it, or if he did it because of some unexpected muscle contraction, it is similarly unclear how we could hold him responsible.

Instead of replicating Ginet's definitions word for word, let me adapt Ginet's suggestion and focus on the basic case. Intentional action may be defined as follows:

Def 1. I intend to raise my hand if and only if as I am raising it, I have some directly referential intention about the raising of my hand, such as the intention that by doing *it* I will express my vote.

The notion of intention, *qua* a kind of attitude, will be taken for granted. My concern will bear on the relation between the intention and the intended action. What makes an intention be *about* an action? Ginet does not tell us much on what it takes for an attitude to be “directly referential.” His position seems to be something like, “pick up your favorite view of direct reference, plug it into my definitions, and you will get the acausal account of intentional action.” So, what views of direct reference are there on the market? Surprisingly enough, there does not seem to be much competition. Marginal questions set aside, the “best-seller” is the Kripkean-Kaplanian view, well-established in natural language semantics. I will show that when we plug the standard view into **Def. 1**, the resulting account of action, although accurate most of the time, fails in certain cases.

The concept of direct reference is primarily used to account for the semantic behavior of directly referential expressions, whose paradigms are demonstratives “this” and “that.” The study of such expressions goes back to Bertrand Russell, who talked of *logically proper names*, via Saul Kripke, who talked of *rigid designators*, to David Kaplan, who laid down both the term “direct reference” and a framework for the theory.² To illustrate the idea, suppose that, bringing a cherry to my mouth, I say “This is delicious.” I will be saying something about that very cherry,

² Russell B., *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism*, La Salle, Open Court, 1985; Kripke S., *Naming and Necessity*, Oxford UP, 1980; Kaplan D., “Demonstratives”, in Almog et al., *Themes from Kaplan*, Oxford UP 1989.

namely, that it is delicious. The demonstrative “this” is, on the standard view, directly referential. It brings the reference, and nothing but the reference, to what I said.³

The question becomes, what are directly referential *intentions*? First of all, how can something that is not an expression be directly referential? We may say that an intention (and generally, an attitude) is directly referential if and only if it can only be expressed using directly referential expressions. In other words, an attitude is directly referential iff its content can only be specified by means of devices like demonstratives.⁴

In order to conform to a usage that I think is more common, let me stop talking of directly referential attitudes, reserving the phrase for linguistic items, and talk of *de re* attitudes instead. There will be many *de re* attitudes. I say “This is delicious” because I believe *of* the thing to which I am referring, viz. the cherry, that *it* has the property of being delicious. I express my *de re* belief about that particular cherry. And when I eat it, it is not just that I wanted to eat any given cherry. I intended to eat that particular cherry. I had a *de re* intention about the cherry, to the effect that I would eat *it*.

Ginet is not really interested in this kind of *de re* intentions, namely, intentions about things in our environment upon which we act. He is interested in a special kind of *de re* intentions, those in which the action plays the role of the ‘res.’ In our redesigned terminology, we may redefine intentional action as follows:

³ Of course, not everyone accepts the standard view. For one, I myself have presented a number of criticisms (cf. e.g. Stojanovic I., *What Is Said: an Inquiry into Reference, Meaning and Content*, Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag 2008). But for the sake of the discussion in the present paper, problems with the standard view of direct reference may be safely set aside.

⁴ I believe that this is, roughly, what is meant by Ginet when he writes: “Given that *S* did *V*, it will suffice for the truth of ‘*S* *V*-ed in order (thereby) to *U*’ if the following condition obtains: (C1) Concurrently with her action of *V*-ing, *S* intended by that action to *U* (*S* intended *of* that action that by it she would *U*). [...] Note that the content of the intention specified in (C1) refers *directly* to the action it is an intention about. [...] It is owing to this direct reference that the intention is about, and thus explanatory of, *that particular* action,” Ginet 1989, pp. 119-120.

Def 2. My action is intentional if and only if I have an accompanying *de re* intention about it.

The definition still needs amendment. For one thing, some intentions, albeit *de re*, should clearly not make the action intentional. Consider a person who is having an eye-twitch. She is also desperately trying to stop it. As she is twitching, she has an accompanying *de re* intention about that particular twitching, that it would stop. However, her *de re* intention clearly does not turn her eye-twitching into an intentional action. So we need to refine **Def. 2** in a way that blocks this kind of cases, by requiring that the relevant *de re* intentions be of a suitable kind. However, I will not pursue this point any further here.

2. When Things Are not Caused “in the Right Way”: from a Solution to a Problem

Ginet is eager to point out that the intention not only does not have to cause the action, but cannot. For, if an attitude is to be *about* something, then, according to the standard understanding of direct reference, there must be a suitable causal link from the thing to the attitude, not the other way round. So, the action cannot at the same time cause and be caused by the intention, for otherwise, we would have a causal loop.

Causal accounts of action, like Davidson's,⁵ have difficulties with cases in which the causal chain is not straightforward. Suppose that I want to impress John, and I believe that I would do so by dancing rumba, and in particular, by moving my hips in a certain way. That is to say, I have the intention to impress John by making that rumba move. Now suppose that, as John comes into

⁵ See e.g. Davidson D., "Actions, Reasons and Causes ", *The Journal of Philosophy* 60 (1963): 685-700.

the ballroom, my wish to impress him becomes so intense that it triggers a muscle spasm in my hips, which makes me move them precisely in the given way. So I move my hips and, let us suppose, I do impress John. But was my action intentional? Was that particular move of my hips something that I had intended? People's intuition is that it was not, in spite of the fact that my desire to impress John caused me to move my hips the way I did. To block the claim that the move of my hips was intentional, causal accounts need to make room for the idea that the intention must cause the action "in the right way."

Ginet's acausal account clearly has no problem with this case. A moving of my hips is intentional if and only if I have an accompanying intention that by that very motion of my hips I would, say, impress John. If I am, so to speak, taken by surprise, and I just find myself moving my hips so, it is still open to me either to intend this action to have such-and-such effect, or not have any intentions whatsoever about it. My having or lacking a suitable intention determines whether I intend or not to be doing what I am doing.

Ironically, it seems that at the end of the story, Ginet's account must also appeal to the murky idea of things being caused "in the right way." Only now, actions are not caused. The problem resides in intentions. I will present a case in which an agent raises his hand and has a accompanying de re intention, of a suitable kind, about his action. However, the causal link from the action to the intention that makes it a de re intention is, as it were, deviant. It cannot be too deviant, though, because it has to secure the de-re-ness of the intention. But it is deviant enough to pose a problem for Ginet's proposal.

Suppose that John is a neuroscientist, and is interested in action and causation. His team is carrying out the following experiment. Electrodes are implanted in the subjects' brains, possibly

unbeknownst to them, by means of which their neural events are directly manipulated, leading them to do simple things, like move their hips or raise their hands. The subjects' movements may or may not be voluntary.⁶ At any rate, as John manipulates the neural events of the subject, he has at his disposal the subject's complete brain scan. He is aware of all the activities going on in the various areas of the subject's brain, and is able to track them. His job is to cause the relevant neurons to fire, so as to trigger muscle contractions, and make the subjects raise their hand. When the subject raises his or her hand and does not form any accompanying intention about his or her movement, the action is clearly not intentional. The subject simply raises his or her hand, but does not intend to do so. He or she raises it because John's electronic manipulations brought about the neural event that is responsible for the movement at stake.

Note that John has quite a special relation to the events that are taking place in the subject's brain. John is related to subject's attitudes and actions in a remarkably direct way, as he is able to track them through the subject's brain-scan, and not only track them, but even control them by suitable electronic manipulations. The cognitive link between John and the subject's attitudes and actions has more than enough of the properties that are required for direct reference. John is certainly aware of the subjects' action of raising their hand. For, if he were not aware of it, how would he have been able to go on with his experiment, which precisely consists in causing and controlling the given action? Obviously, John can have *de re* attitudes about the subjects' actions. For example, he may believe *of* a given subject's hand-raising that it will draw the attention of his

⁶ In other words, as the subject is raising her hand, she may have the feeling that she is doing it voluntarily, but she may also be unaware of her movement. It is relevant to note this in order to distinguish the present case from the one that Ginet considers, in which the subject is caused to perform her action by a direct manipulation of her neural events, but she is caused to perform it voluntarily, since the "voluntary exertion," that is, the feeling that the action is being performed out of one's own will, is also electronically manipulated. Ginet wants to say that the action in this other case is intentional, even though it has been caused by electronic manipulations (p. 119).

colleagues. John is not a mere spectator. Through electronic manipulation, he is in the position of controlling the subjects' actions, and he can therefore even form *de re* intentions about those actions. He may intend *of* a given action that it would draw the attention of his colleagues.

So far, so good. But now suppose that John himself, perhaps unbeknownst to him, happens to be among the subjects of the experiment. Suppose that the subject on whom John is working is John himself (which he may ignore). By a direct electronic manipulation of his own neural events, John produces an appropriate firing of neurons, which triggers a muscle contraction that results in the event of John raising his hand. John also has a *de re* intention about the action that he has produced, namely, about his own hand-raising, e.g. that it would prove his experiment to work and make him famous. The conditions for intentional action are, then, all met: as he is raising his hand, John has a *de re* intention about that particular action that in virtue of it he would become famous. According to Ginet's proposal, John's action of raising his hand is intentional. He raised his hand, and he intended to raise it, for he intended that that particular action would make him famous. It thus follows, on Ginet's account, coupled with the standard view of direct reference, that John raised his hand in order to become famous. But this is clearly wrong; in the case that I have presented, we would not want to say that John raised his hand in order to become famous. Ginet's account therefore fails.

Let me forestall some tentative objections to my argument. One might challenge the claim that John's cognitive access to the action at stake is direct enough for him to have *de re* attitudes about it. However, it is beyond doubt that John is in a position to demonstratively refer to the action. He can say things like "Look at *this*! I'm sure *this* will be a beautiful hand-raising!" And to deny that such occurrences of "this" are directly referential, and refer to the event of John raising his

hand, would mean departing from our common sense about reference, and challenging certain well-established assumptions of natural language semantics. So, if Ginet's account builds upon the standard view of direct reference, I do not see how one could deny that John's attitude is a *de re* attitude.

Now, one might point out that we constantly use demonstratives to refer to actions of other people. Was it necessary to imagine such a complicated case, in which John's access to the action about which he has formed a *de re* intention goes through the identification of the neural events that cause the action? For comparison, consider the following case. I am in the ballroom, which happens to have large mirrors. In one of the mirrors, I see a person who is moving her hips. The person happens to be me, but I do not realize that. That particular action, of that person (i.e. me) moving her hips, is something in reference to which I can use demonstratives. I can even say things like: "Look at *this*! I hope that *this* will make everyone see how ridiculous she is." So, I can express a *de re* hope, about that particular movement of my hips, that it would make everyone see that the person doing it is ridiculous. Don't I have, then, a *de re* intention, to the effect that in virtue of that action everyone would see that the agent is ridiculous? And if I do, then we ought to say that the moving of my hips was intentional, since by it I intended to make everyone see how ridiculous I was. In other words, we would have to say that I moved my hips in order to make myself ridiculous, which is intuitively wrong.⁷

⁷As many will realize, this is an instance of the problem of the essential indexical; cf. Perry, John, "The Problem of the Essential Indexical", *Noûs* 13 (1979): 3-21; reprinted in Perry, J. *The Problem of the Essential Indexical and Other Essays*, Oxford UP, 1993.

The difference between the two cases should be clear. In latter case, where I see myself in the mirror, it is fair to deny the assumption that I can have a de re intention about the action of moving my hips, which I identify as “her” action, an action of the person I see in the mirror and fail to recognize as being myself. I can have de re attitudes about my action identified in this way, but it is specifically de re intentions that I cannot have. To be sure, the action is mine, and in that respect, I can in principle intend my action to have such-and-such outcomes. But in order to form such de re intentions, I need at least to believe that the action is largely up to me. However, the putative de re intention in the case imagined would have had to be formed without such beliefs. And clearly, I cannot intend anything of an action over which I believe that I have neither control nor influence. Now, the case that I presented as a problem for Ginet's account is different. There, John is the one who is manipulating the neural events that bring about the action. In that respect, the action is in his control, and he may legitimately intend various things of it, e.g. that it would have such-and-such outcomes. And when John forms his de re intention about the action, he is fully aware of the fact that he has control over the action. What he is not aware of is that the action is *his* action.

In sum, while I think that Ginet's acausal account of intentional action might very well be on the right track, it requires further work to overcome the difficulty pointed out in this paper.⁸

⁸ This is a revised draft of a paper written a couple of years ago for a seminar in Philosophy of Action, with Michael Bratman, whom I would like to thank for helpful comments. I have chosen it as a contribution to this special issue in analytic philosophy because I think that the problems addressed, the argumentative structure and the writing style are all very illustrative of the analytic approach. I would also like to thank Sorin Marica for the invitation to contribute to this issue.