

On intentions and the real causes of our actions

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In everyday life we explain behaviour (both our own and others') by positing intentions. Usually an action is understood when its intention is understood. In philosophy, however, since the Causal Theory of Action, the notion of intention has largely shifted from a personal-level explanatory construct to an internal state with causal efficacy. Intentions are supposed to be the state that triggers the subsequent action planning processes. I believe that this shift is problematic for empirical as well as conceptual (e.g. the problem of mental causation; the problem of intentionality) reasons. In this talk I will discuss both types of reasons. The suggestion that intentions are not the causes of our voluntary actions sparks two immediate questions: First, what causes our actions if not intentions? I will discuss recent neuroimaging and neurophysiological evidence that our actions are initiated and controlled by a complex and dynamic web of neural structures. Even though there is a division of labour in this network, it does not resemble the hierarchical structure that is commonly believed to be involved in translating discrete intentions to motor commands.

The second question is: What are intentions, if not brain states? I will argue that the notion of intention is a social construct, tied to the way we talk about actions. The same holds for the notion of free will: we use it to categorise actions. This categorisation is relevant on the social level, but it does not make sense to look for its neurophysiological counterpart.

Relevant paper