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ACTIONS AND ATTITUDES

abstract

Any phenomenologically sensitive account of action must be able to deal with at least two features which characterise many examples of acting. First, actions can be rational; that is, an agent can act for or in light of reasons. However, the phenomenology of action stresses that action is primarily a practical mode of engagement with the world, and so need not be guided by reasoning or abstract principles.

I shall offer a phenomenologically-informed account of how action might be able to meet both of these descriptions. To do this, I shall develop Husserl's notion of an attitude. On my interpretation, an attitude is the intentional structure of the agent's ability to perform a particular kind of action. Since an attitude is an intentional framework, it is not something which must be attended to before the action can be performed. Agents can justify their actions by appealing to what they were aiming to do and to the demands and opportunities of their situation. An attitude is precisely the agent's awareness of their situation as allowing for courses of action structured by goals and possible means. The agent can justify their action by appealing, not the attitude itself, but to the way their situation appeared in that attitude.

keywords

Action; phenomenology; reasons; engaged coping; McDowell; Husserl

1. Any phenomenologically sensitive account of action must be able to deal with at least two features which characterise many examples of acting. First, actions can be rational; that is, an agent can act for or in light of reasons. This requires not just that there are reasons for the action, but that agents respond to reasons as such when they act (McDowell 2007b, p. 366). In this paper, I shall not take a particular stance on what kind of thing can count as a reason for action. Therefore, it will not matter whether one takes a reason for action to necessarily be a mental state of the agent, or a non-mental item such as a state of affairs.

The second feature is stressed by the phenomenology of action; acting is primarily a practical mode of engagement or coping with the world. In acting, agents usually deal with the objects around them and the situation they are in without having to follow a preconceived plan or consider the reasons for what they are doing. Phenomenology thus regards much acting as what I will term engaged coping, where this means any behaviour which is not guided by cognition in a narrow sense, “theoretical detached observation” (Zahavi and Gallagher 2008, p. 154).

These two features of actions were both discussed in the recent exchange between Hubert Dreyfus and John McDowell (Dreyfus 2006, 2007; McDowell 2007a, 2007b). Dreyfus, starting from the phenomenology of action, argued that the two features were incompatible; McDowell denied this. I agree with McDowell that these features are compatible. Indeed, I think there are many actions which are both rational and examples of engaged coping. However, I wish to address a different issue in what follows. Given *that* it is possible for an action to be both rational and an example of engaged coping, I wish to ask *how* this is possible. To this end, I shall develop an idea McDowell highlighted in the exchange, the suggestion that rationality does not need to guide an action in the manner of a maxim, but rather can be present in the action itself (2007a, p. 351 n. 13). That is, an action can be rational even if the agent has not made a conscious judgement as to what it is intended to achieve; nor need the agent execute the action by consciously following a rule or rules. Rather, the agent can act rationally simply by responding to the situation in the appropriate fashion, as including reasons for acting in that way. Put another way; an action can be for a reason even if the agent does not engage in a process of reasoning prior to or concurrent with the action (McDowell 2007a, p. 341).

I assume in what follows that McDowell’s suggestion is correct. What I wish to do is to offer an account of how this suggestion is possible; an account which

would be compatible with what the phenomenology of action tells us about engaged coping. To do this, I shall first introduce the notion of an attitude, and outline what this notion can and cannot explain (section II). In section III, I shall argue that the notion of an attitude can help explain how it is possible for much human activity to be rational engaged coping.

2. Following the phenomenology of action, I shall take as my examples of action such modes of practical engagement as the use of tools and instruments. Using a tool requires understanding it as a particular object in one's environment which one can use to perform different tasks, for example by directing towards oneself or to another object in one's environment (as when one shaves, or sews a button). In using tools the agent will usually not follow an explicit plan which has been worked out prior to the action; nor need the agent have made a judgement about the aim of the action, or the reasons for performing it.

Each action, I suggest, occurs in a particular attitude¹. An attitude is the intentional structure of an agent's ability to perform actions of a particular kind; for example, actions using a particular type of tool or instrument, or which, at least from the point of view of the agent, have the same goal. The attitude is not a state or process which is separate from this ability, but is rather the meaningful aspect of this ability. When an agent is in a particular attitude, a particular field of objects is available to him or her to be perceived or acted upon. Every object in this field is presented as having certain features, some of which are directly available to the agent, others of which are indirectly given. The classic example is when I see a physical object such as a cup; only a certain side is directly given to me, but I perceive it as a three-dimensional object, with other sides and indeed with other features (such as weight and texture). Furthermore, each object is given as in a field of other objects, to which the agent can turn. Thus, in revealing these objects, each attitude also opens up what Husserl terms a horizon of possible experiences (1960, p. 47); an array of possible perceptions of these objects, possible activities which one can undertake towards them, and so on.

Attitudes are characteristically first-personal; they reveal a situation as offering possibilities for what I or we can perceive or do. They are thus closely related to what Wallace terms the agent's "deliberative perspective",

¹By "attitude" I do not mean the propositional attitudes discussed in the philosophy of mind. In particular, my use of this term is not to be confused with the notion of a "pro-attitude" (Davidson 2001, p. 4). My discussion of attitudes systematises and adds detail to Husserl's treatment of them (in particular, his discussion of the natural and the arithmetical attitudes in his 1982, pp. 51-57), while trying to remain consistent with what he says.

the perspective from which one decides what one ought to do (2002, p. 432)². Both Wallace's notion of a deliberative perspective and the notion of an attitude I am using are first-personal, and both, as I shall outline, involve the agent's being sensitive to reasons as such. The main difference between them is that Wallace defines the perspective he discusses in terms of the agent's deliberation, weighing up considerations for and against various courses of action. Being in an attitude does not require one to deliberate before acting. As we shall see, this allows the notion of an attitude to help explain how rational engaged coping (rational acting which does not require reasoning prior to acting) to be possible.

As an example of an attitude, consider a musician's ability to play jazz. One can exercise this ability in different actions, involving the manipulation of particular instruments or parts of instruments (for example, the keys of a piano). But this ability does not simply consist in a disposition to react in a particular way to particular stimuli. Nor can it be captured by describing all the actions one has undertaken or one will undertake which would count as one's playing jazz. One's ability to play jazz is better described as involving a frame of mind which reveals one's situation as including various objects with particular properties (as being musical instruments, fellow musicians etc), and as offering various possibilities for acting (performing standards, improvising etc). This attitude structures bodily and social abilities, such as one's ability to manipulate certain instruments, or to engage in specific modes of social interaction. These abilities are bound together as forming one's ability to play jazz by the attitude in which they can together be exercised.

The notion of an attitude does two kinds of explanatory work. It explains the generality of one's abilities to act, and it provides us with a way of understanding the structure of the agent's openness to his or her environment. By "generality", I mean that an agent's ability to perform an action of a particular kind is never exhausted either by any particular action or by any particular situation within which the agent acts. For example, an agent is capable of using tool T1 on object O1 only if they are capable of using T1 on a different object (O2), or a different tool (T2) on O1³. I mentioned above that each attitude reveals its objects as suggesting different possibilities for perception and action, and as belonging to a wider field of objects. Therefore, the agent can perform different actions on the object or objects, or the agent can direct his or her activity towards other objects in the same field. In the example of jazz, one can play the same instrument in different ways, or different instruments of the same type; one can play in

² Indeed, Wallace even speaks of the agent's "deliberative horizon" (2002, p. 432).

³ This generality constraint is modelled on Gareth Evans' generality principle (1982, p. 104).

different combinations with different musicians; and so on. Attitudes are inherently general, and can thus explain how one's abilities to act can meet the generality constraint.

In speaking of generality, I am not saying that attitudes or the rationality of the action they allow for are general in the sense of being detached or situation-independent. An attitude does not need to involve the application to a specific situation of principles which are themselves situation-independent. However, in any attitude the agent must be aware of the situation as having conditions and potentials which it shares with other situations. An ability to play the piano need not involve the application of situation-independent principles, but it must be more than an ability to play just one specific piano, or to play only one piece of music on a piano⁴.

The second feature of action which attitudes can explain is the structure of the agent's openness to the situation. When agents are aware of or engage with objects, they are never simply open to these objects in an unstructured way. Rather, they are always open to them in a specific mode, which involves exercising particular capacities (for perception, for practical coping, for abstract theorising etc). The notion of an attitude thus provides an important complement to the phenomenology of action. The latter stresses the openness of agents to their environment, and rightly warns against a view of agents as detached from their surroundings (that is, as acting only when consciously following rules) (e.g., Dreyfus 2007, pp. 354-355). However, when agents act, they are never *simply* open to their surroundings. Rather, they are always presented with their surroundings in a particular manner, which helps to determine the modes of engagement which are possible (and appropriate). I have stressed how attitudes serve to open up fields of objects and horizons of possible experiences, but correlatively each attitude closes off certain possible experiences. That is, in order for the agent to undergo one of these experiences, he or she must adopt a different attitude. In this way, each attitude frames the agent's possible experiences and actions, and thus structures the agent's openness.

In the phenomenology of action, much weight is placed on the notion of skilful embodied coping (e.g., Dreyfus 2006, pp. 46-48). I do not think that attitudes and skills are competing explanations of action. Attitudes are the intentional structures of abilities to act. For an agent to have a skill is for him or her to have honed a particular ability to such a degree that it can be deployed without following rules. Therefore, to exercise a particular skill requires being in a particular attitude; however, one can be in the right

⁴ McDowell makes a similar point when discussing the generality of *phronēsis* (2007a, p. 341).

attitude and not have the kind of control characteristic of skilful coping. So attitudes and skills explain different facets of acting. Skills can explain a certain type of highly controlled acting which is characteristic of what I earlier termed “engaged coping”. Attitudes are structures of the agent’s abilities to perform any actions at all, no matter how skilfully or ineptly. I thus regard the two notions as complementing each other in an overall account of action.

3. Let us now consider how the notion of an attitude applies to the two features of action I outlined in the first section; rationality, and engaged coping. My initial claim is that an action can be rational (that is, it can be done for a reason) without being the result of a process of reasoning or deliberation. That is, the rationality of the action is in the action itself, not standing behind it as a maxim which the agent must refer to in order to act for a reason. My suggestion is that the notion of an attitude can help explain what it is for the rationality of an action to be in the action in this way.

The attitude an agent is in is the agent’s awareness of his or her situation as allowing for a variety of courses of action towards particular goals, and as offering possible means of achieving this goal and possible challenges to be overcome. Conversely, to be aware of a particular feature of one’s situation as a challenge or as an opportunity, or to be aware of an item as suitable to be used in a certain way (as a needle or as a razor), requires that one be in the appropriate attitude. To be aware of an item, x , as affording one, an opportunity requires having some awareness of what it might let one do. Similarly, to be aware of y as a pen requires that one be aware of how to use it as a pen and be aware of what the purpose of such behaviour might be. So to be able to perform an action of a certain kind requires that one be aware, not just of a particular object or objects, but of various goals and means of achieving them. These are revealed to the agent as allowing for or requiring certain courses of action. For example, a pianist sitting at a piano with other musicians nearby will be aware of the situation as allowing for the creation of musical pieces, as requiring that he or she solo or play backing chords and so on.

The action the agent performs will be an exercise of the ability structured by this attitude. As such, the action will be a response to the situation presented by the attitude (as allowing for or demanding various actions etc). It is because the action is a response to these features of the situation that it can be rational, a response to reasons as such. This account does not explain what the agent ought to do in any particular situation. Nor does the attitude the agent is in ensure that the agent’s action, even if responding to a reason, will always be the correct thing to do. There may be a number of different courses of action available in a given situation, and the course the agent chooses may

not be the best one. But for the agent to act for a reason at all, he or she must be in a particular attitude and respond to the situation as revealed to him or her in that attitude. The attitude forms the agent's sensitivity to reasons as such; insofar as the action is a response to these, it counts as rational. This responsiveness to reasons as such allows us to explain an agent's behaviour based on the agent's reasons for acting. A typical explanation of this sort might run as follows: "I was trying to get a drink of water from the tap, but it was stuck, which is why I was trying to free it with a wrench". This type of explanation can be applied to the behaviour of other agents, or to oneself, when it is typically used to justify what one has done. In justifying one's own behaviour, one typically does not appeal directly to one's attitude, but rather to how things appeared to be from within that attitude⁵. Correlatively, one can understand the reasons for which another agent acted only if one can share his or her attitude to some degree.

Other kinds of explanation, such as a mechanical account of bodily behaviour, do not require this sensitivity to the agent's attitude. The contrast I am drawing here (between explaining behaviour by appealing to the agent's attitude and explaining it by giving a causal, non-rational account) is very similar to McDowell's distinction between the space of reasons and the realm of law. These two "spaces" are not separate realms containing different objects (e.g., reasons in one, law-governed natural phenomena in the other), but are rather different ways of making things or events intelligible. To place an event in the realm of law is to explain why it occurs by appealing to a law under which it falls; to place it in the space of reasons is to explain it by appealing to the reasons some agent had for performing it (McDowell 1996, pp. 70-71). Bringing our behaviour into the space of reasons is the characteristic way in which we understand ourselves and others as agents, as individuals who can act rationally. To explain an action by appealing to the agent's attitude is one way of placing that action in the space of reasons (it may be the only way of doing so, but this is a stronger claim than I need to make in this paper). Having described the relation between an action and the attitude it is performed in, we can now explain how rational engaged coping is possible. An instance of rational engaged coping is a rational action where the agent does not engage in any process of reasoning prior to acting, or follow any rules while acting. The rationale of such an action must be present in the action itself. This action involves the exercise of an ability the agent has, an ability which is structured by an attitude. Insofar as the action is a response to the demands and opportunities

⁵ This doesn't commit me to the view that reasons are how things seemed to be, as opposed to what states of affairs actually obtained. All I am saying here is that in attempting to justify their behaviour, agents can appeal either to actual states of affairs, or to how states of affairs appeared to them to be.

of the situation as revealed in that attitude, then it is a response to reasons as such. Since the attitude is the intentional structure of the ability which is being exercised, it does not stand between agents and their actions as something which must be attended to before the action can be performed. The agent can, in certain circumstances, formulate an explicit plan of action, but this is a different matter to one's simply being in a particular attitude.

The notion of an attitude can therefore help to develop McDowell's point that the rationality of much of our acting is present in the actions themselves. This allows us to formulate an account of rational acting which is compatible with the phenomenological insight that much of our acting consists of engaged coping with our surroundings.

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Donnchadh O'Conaill tutors and lectures at the Department of Philosophy in Durham University. He recently completed his doctorate, entitled "Phenomenology, Philosophy of Mind and the Subject". In this work, he applied Husserlian phenomenology to problems in the philosophy of mind, to develop an ontological model of the subject of experiences. His research interests include transcendental phenomenology, ontological dependence, the explanatory gap, acting for reasons, and the relations between cognition, perception and the emotions.

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