In Search of Intentional Causation

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Introduction

Many approaches to understanding cognition begin with an explanation of how we use intentional states (Cummins, 1989). Intentional states, such as beliefs and desires, supposedly denote just those mental states that an agent takes to meaningfully refer to facts about the world. Agents use these mental states to explain, plan and perform actions. However, reductionist approaches to cognition suggest that behavior can be causally explained in purely neurological/syntactic terms. If a syntactic account of cognition succeeds in explaining behavior, then it would appear that intentional states like 'believing' or 'desiring' are not causally relevant in an explanation of an agent's behavior, since we would have reduced these high-level notions to more basic causal factors. Intentional explanations, on such an account, become 'epiphenomenal' or causally inert.

Allen (1995) argues that intentional states may yet be causally efficacious under such reductionist theories. Allen begins by granting that mental states may be token-identical to brain states. That is, each mental state is constituted by its neurological properties. Allen then claims that standard arguments for such neurological reductions contain an ambiguity. He contends that we must distinguish between the effect a property has on a single token and the effect that possessing that property may have on a group of tokens.

This distinction is illustrated with an analogy to how the property 'genuine' applies to money. Suppose the physical token '20$NOTE' instantiates a twenty-dollar bill. An exact counterfeit of such a token, if it is truly token-identical, will have all the same physical, causal properties of a genuine 20$NOTE. At this point, the property 'genuine' seems causally inefficacious to the value of any particular 20$NOTE. However, Allen claims, if we flood the market with counterfeit 20$NOTEs, we can alter the value of each token 20$NOTE without changing any of their physical characteristics. In this way, potentially having the property 'genuine' or 'counterfeit', though not physically identifiable in the 20$NOTE itself, has a causal effect on the value of such tokens.

Allen's account depends on using the context in which a token is used to supply intentional content. Appropriating Millikan's (1984, 1993) account of action which emphasizes the importance of a token's history in determining its use, Allen argues that the situational elements surrounding the development of a token provide a context which isn't physically expressed in the token itself. That context, however, seems causally efficacious in any explanation of the token's behavior and is necessary for the token's behavior to be successful (for it to actually refer). In the same fashion, intentionality applies only to those tokens with an appropriate history and contextual development. Thus, Allen argues that it isn't that each token must intentionally refer, but that enough tokens must intentionally refer for behaviors to reliably develop. Analagously, most 20$NOTEs must be genuine to have value, though any individual 20$NOTE may be bogus.

I argue against the view that intentionality, so described, is causally efficacious. Counter-examples are presented demonstrating Allen's argument to be inadequate in at least two important ways. First, a serious disanalogy exists between intentionality and genuiness. Allen uses 'genuiness' as a success term, requiring that most tokens possess it for it to be causally efficacious. However, I argue that neurological tokens which 'accidentally' refer to behavioral states do not damage the general use of such tokens. Furthermore, it is possible that *no* physical tokens posses intentionality, whereas Allen begins with a comparison to a property, genuiness, that does exist. By assuming the existence of a meaningful difference between intentional and non-intentional, Allen begs the question at hand. Second, I argue that Allen misconceives where the onus of proof lies in this debate. He relies on a skeptical argument which merely states that intentionality hasn't been disproven. However, as purely physical accounts of behavior become more successful and evidence mounts against the causal role of intentional states, it is incumbent on the defender of intentional causation to show that such states must be included in a causal account.

References

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