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Understanding of Actions: Some Problems

Abstract: An action is understood by us iff we see the action as being the conclusion of an appropriate practical syllogism. With this starting point of von Wright's *Explanation and Understanding* (1971) several other proposals are compared and more or less identified with, namely understanding as (i) knowing of the intention with which the action was done, as (ii) knowing the reasons for which it is or was rational to perform the action, and as (iii) knowing the subjective meaning of the action. Relative to these different versions of "understanding of an action", I summarise some differences between von Wright and myself.

- 1 Which Practical Syllogism?
- 2 Which Intention?
- 3 Which Rationality?
- 4 Which Acting?
- 5 Is Understanding not Knowing?

In contrast to scientific *explanation*, *understanding* applied to actions and their agents (persons) and results (e.g. signs, expressions, languages) was initially regarded in analytic philosophy as an area best avoided in the academic world. The fact that this situation has radically altered is largely due to both Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (as far as rule-based acting is concerned) and Georg Henrik von Wright (in the field of intentional acting). It was in von Wright's book *Explanation and Understanding* (1971) that he first posed the crucial question clearly and unambiguously: If scientific explanations take the form of deductive-nomological and probabilistic inferences, but this form is inappropriate for understanding actions – *what form of inference does understanding have?* Von Wright's reply was that, as a special type of teleological explanation, the understanding of actions takes the logical form of Practical Syllogisms. In other words:

(U-PS) *An action is understood iff it is regarded as the conclusion of a (suitable) Practical Syllogism.*

My own occasional reflections on understanding are mostly also based on this approach, and the days and weeks during which I was able to discuss with Georg Henrik our common and yet different understanding of understanding are among my happiest times. However, it seems that even at the best of times a vestige of uncertainty is unavoidable in philosophical questions. There is only one way to further minimise this vestige – to try and make it explicit. And this is what I am doing here, by summing up the differences already developed in more detail elsewhere (see in particular von Wright / Meggle (1989)) along with their genesis.

1. Which Practical Syllogism?

1.1 There are many types of ‘Practical Syllogisms’. Let us leave aside the nuances of such syllogisms and restrict ourselves to the following:

(PS-I) (1) X wants A.
 (2) X believes A will occur iff he himself does f.
 Therefore (3) X does f.

Is this a valid syllogism? It ought to be, if Practical Syllogisms are to provide the same substantiation for (the performance of) actions as ‘DN’ (deductive-nomological) explanations for (the occurrence of certain) events. For only such DN explanations are genuine explanations, in which the deduction of the *explanans* regarding the *explanandum* is a valid syllogism. However, if (PS-I) is valid, then ditto (PS-II) – and vice versa.

(PS-II) (1) X wanted A.
 (2) X believed A would occur iff he himself did f.
 Therefore (3) X did f.

Let’s ask the question again: Are (PS-I) and (PS-II) valid syllogisms? Von Wright’s quick reply was No, as there are too many factors which still need to be considered before this question can even be put. To what times do the premises and conclusion specifically refer? Do X’s wanting and believing really occur at the same time? Can/could X do f in the first place? Did X believe himself that he could do f? etc. These and other loopholes were discovered and plugged by von Wright in *Explanation and Understanding* (III.5 and III.6). But even if all the possibilities which could get in the way were to be considered, the conclusion-validity question would still remain unsettled. How did von Wright solve this question?

1.2 This was where my initial difficulties arose. I found von Wright’s answer ambivalent. It seemed as if von Wright wanted to answer the validity question for (PS-I) vs. (PS-II) not just separately but even divergently: namely with Yes for (PS-II) – but only iff its conclusion (3) is already known to be correct – and a tendency towards No for (PS-I). Furthermore, he also (later) declared that the usability of a Practical Syllogism (of the above type) for the purpose of understanding an action ultimately does not depend on the validity of the relevant inference (cf. von Wright (1978), p. 279).

1.3 Naturally, this was and still is a mine of material for discussion, albeit probably no longer for us, for this part of the controversy at least ought now to be a thing of the past. Now (I believe) we share the opinion that in order to understand an action neither (PS-I) nor its past-tense form (PS-II) but rather a Practical Syllogism with a different conclusion type is relevant:

(PS-III) (1) X wants A.
 (2) X believes A will occur iff he himself does f.
 Therefore (3) It is/would be rational for X to do f.

The Practical Syllogisms corresponding to the understanding of the action substantiate the respective actions in so far as the premises of these syllogisms (i.e. the ‘voluntative-cognitive complex’ (1) & (2)) provide sufficient reasons for the rationality of these actions.

X’s voluntative-cognitive complex results in (as long as, as tacitly assumed, we regard his believing and wanting to be strong believing and wanting) a *decision under certainty*. (From X’s viewpoint, doing f definitely

leads to A, i.e. to a result which is best for him, whereas not doing f will definitely not do so.) And for such a situation, the syllogism (PS-III) holds simply by definition. (Those who choose an action which will definitely provide an optimum result are acting rationally.) According to this new approach, whether X actually does or did what would be or would have been rational for him thus depends only on one thing: whether in the given situation X is or was actually rational. If this situation-relative rationality assumption is brought into play, all the other difficulties listed above dissolve into nothing; and (previous) disregard for this assumption also explains how these difficulties arose in the first place.

2 Which Intention?

2.1 If I do f, I want A, and I believe that I can achieve A only and precisely by doing f (in other words, in addition to (3), conditions (1) & (2) of the above syllogisms also apply to me), it could also be said that I perform the action f *with the intention* of bringing about A. Von Wright's concept of understanding (U-PS) and the following concept of understanding thus amount to one and the same thing:

(U-I) *Understanding an action := Knowing the intention behind it.*

2.2 At any rate, that's what I thought. But von Wright put me right. How? Like this: Whereas from my point of view in both situations (S1) and (S2) I do something with a certain intention –

(S1) I want to get home quickly. Shall I take a taxi? Shall I wait for the bus? "The bus will only come along in 20 minutes; I'll easily be home by that time if I take a taxi," is the thought which goes through my mind, and I hail the next taxi I see.

(S2) I'm driving close behind a lorry on the motorway. Suddenly the lorry's brake-lights come on. Automatically I put the brakes on too – after all, I don't want to cause an accident.

and due to (U-I) I treat both cases as being the same, von Wright shrinks from such egalitarianism. His "intentions" are accompanied by something like *conscious reflections*; mine are not. Von Wright would not even talk of intentional acting in connection with (S2), as this would clash with the automaticity of my braking reaction.

2.3 Is this just a disagreement about the choice of words? If not, we're immediately in trouble. Is deliberate intention part of acting? And in which of the various senses of "deliberate intention"? (Cf. for example "intention with" vs. "intention in", and "intended" vs. "not unintentional".) What distinguishes acting from mere behaviour – or behaviour from mere reflexes?

Luckily, we can keep out of trouble at this point. The central question which needs to be asked here is merely this: Should and do we really only want to discuss whether actions resulting from conscious reflections are understandable? And what argues in favour of and against Yes or No in each case? Naturally, more general systematic viewpoints come into play here. (We will examine one of these below.) Von Wright still seems to tend towards Yes, while I loudly declaim No.

3 Which Rationality?

3.1 The interim result of 1.3 above can also be expressed more generally as follows: An action is understood by those who know and know why it is or was rational for the agent to perform it. In short:

(U-R) *Understanding an action := Knowing the reasons for its rationality.*

Although the premises of a Practical Syllogism provide (as we can see in (PS-III)) such reasons, they only do so unrestrictedly for the special case of a decision under certainty, and perhaps also (albeit with some limitations) for a few other special cases of a decision under risk – in both cases, however, only because the decision situation can be formulated merely by means of the qualitative concepts *X wants A* and *X believes that A*. But what about the more general case in which we can only take more or less strong (i.e. comparatively or even metrically formulated) preferences or probability assumptions as our starting-point? In this case, Practical Syllogisms of the above type cannot be used for the actions characterised as rational (according to the Bayesian criterion of rationality, i.e. by providing a maximum expectation of benefit). Should these actions be regarded as incomprehensible merely for this reason?

This would be absurd. The understanding approach referring back to Practical Syllogisms is thus only usable for one special area (namely that of means-end rationality). A more general approach ought to begin by determining the concept of understanding in Bayesian rationality in general instead of with Practical Syllogisation. And as (U-PS) and (U-I) mean the same or (if this is too strong) are at least closely linked, the same also holds for the understanding approach referring back to intentions. The more general approach is (U-R); like (U-PS), (U-I) is also at best a specification thereof.

3.2 What's the state of play now with our above (see 2) *disagreement* concerning situations (S1) and (S2)?

If we let rationality take precedence, the old question of whether (U-I) is applicable to both situations or just (S1) appears less important. The more explosive question is now whether our rationality approach (U-R) is suitable for both.

Our disagreement on this point is unfortunately stronger than our joint plea for rationality. Von Wright continues to deny the predicate of rationality for my behaviour in (S2), whereas I see no problem in explaining my fortunately quasi-automatic braking reaction as rational. And of course, I'm not alone: at this point too I'm merely acting as the spokesman of all those decision theorists who have no problem at all in for example explaining even unconscious consumer behaviour in terms of decision and thus rationality theory. Von Wright's minority judgement may nevertheless be the more convincing of the two. But why? Because rationality considerations are only relevant for actions – but (S2) doesn't describe an action? If so, while happily subscribing to this because-sentence, I would dispute the but-premise. I didn't have to put on the brakes; I could have refrained from doing so. And I would like to regard behaviour which I could have refrained from doing as an action.

3.3 Perhaps this disagreement harbours an even more general one: belief assumptions usually do not need (including – but not only – within the context of decision theory) to be explicit assumptions (staring the decider in the face as he makes his decision); they can also be *implicit* (and (S2) provides a perfect example). There's no doubt that the vast majority of assumptions which determine our behaviour are merely implicit. (For example, I've spent the whole day working on this paper. And although I definitely wouldn't have done so if I'd not assumed that everything was okay at home, until just now the thought "Everything's okay at home" hadn't explicitly gone through my mind at any time today.) By contrast, von Wright appears (at least in the context of

his minority judgement as far as rationality is concerned) to have exclusively aligned himself behind the first alternative. Is this the case? And if so, why?

4 Which Acting?

4.1 The rationality grounds which we need to know in order to understand an act by the person X are exclusively composed of probability assumptions and the preferences of X himself. If we know these reasons, we know the function and the sense which the action concerned has for the agent himself *from his viewpoint*. We thus know, as can also be said with Max Weber, the *subjective sense* of the action. It's our rationality approach again merely expressed in different words:

(U-MW) *Understanding an action := Knowing the subjective sense of the action.*

This formulation makes it especially clear that everything so far has revolved around the understanding of concrete actions. Behaviours and their sense and understanding are ignored.

4.2 Some forms of action have what we call an 'intersubjective meaning' relative to a group. And sometimes we have to know this kind of meaning in order to be able to recognise the subjective sense of the action being performed. To use von Wright's favourite example, you have to know that tipping your hat is regarded in some areas as a gesture of greeting if you are to correctly understand X's concrete hat movement as a gesture of greeting on his part.

4.3 Although von Wright drew attention early on to such a 'sense priority' of intersubjective sense, I believe that he somewhat exaggerated the gap between the corresponding cases of understanding. That I correctly understand someone's behaviour as a greeting may indeed imply that I know that behaviour of the type concerned (within the reference group) intersubjectively has the meaning of a greeting, but greeting still includes the desire to greet – and so understanding in the sense of (U-MW) continues to remain relevant for these actions too. Occasionally, von Wright's remarks appear to represent the thesis that for the (performance of) actions with an intersubjective meaning, the concept of understanding actually tailored to concrete actions becomes irrelevant. Am I mistaken?

4.4 By the way, the above sense priority of the intersubjective does not exclude the possibility that "intersubjective meaning" itself (at least for some actions) can be explicated by means of the concept of subjective sense. For example, elementary concepts of the conventional communicative meaning of actions and thus also of linguistic expressions (as the products of such acting) can be explained in this way. Does von Wright believe this special application of the programme of methodological individualism to be unsuccessful right from the start? Although I would of course be very reluctant to want to believe this, his own understanding approach has, I believe, precisely in this field proved to be extremely fruitful.

5 Is Understanding not Knowing?

The area which gives me the most problems is the coherentistic change which has emerged with increasing clarity over the past few years, or to be more accurate with the consequence of this change which undermines the foundations of the following distinctions.

We have to distinguish between *understanding* and *believing to understand* in the same manner as we generally do between *knowing* and merely *believing to know* (i.e. strong belief). Just as knowing implies the

correctness of what's believed, understanding also implies the correctness of what's believed to be understood. And this is exactly what distinguishes a case of *understanding* (as knowing) from the more general case of *understanding something as something* (i.e. believing, regarding, considering something as something). Something can be correctly or incorrectly understood as something; by contrast *understanding* is always correct – or it's not understanding. ('Correctly understanding' is thus just saying the same thing twice over.)

Von Wright evades these distinctions with his thesis that understanding need not be knowing. I simply cannot understand this, or his reasons. Or is it more to the point that I simply don't want to understand it? If that's the case, I need someone to give me the motives to change my attitude accordingly.

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This was just a brief rundown of our differences. Naturally, as already stressed at the start, our common ground is much larger and more significant. And of course behind this summary is something like another dream of new, happy days.

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