

Comments on Christopher Peacocke: “Mental Actions”

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Two central claims:

(P1) Awareness of mental actions is a species of action-awareness.

(P2) Mental actions involve tryings in the very way that bodily actions involve tryings.

(P1) and (P2) are in principle independent. However, given Peacocke’s understanding of awareness of action they are connected through the tryings that figure in both P1 and P2.

We can distinguish between

- (1) trying
- (2) awareness of trying
- (3) action
- (4) awareness of action

Trying necessary for a mental event to count as a mental action.

Trying causes awareness of action.

(1) Doxastic voluntarism

Mental Action Thesis: For a mental event to be a mental action it must involve a trying.

Worry: Mental action thesis entails a version of doxastic voluntarism.

But while we chose which bodily actions we make and try to make those bodily actions, we do not (typically) chose our beliefs and judgements and do not try to make those beliefs and judgements. We find ourselves judging or believing that p.

Disanalogy between bodily action and mental events insofar as a trying is involved in every case of an action, but is only involved in a special class of judgements.

While it seems plausible that

- calculations
- theoretically complex judgements
- decisions

involve tryings, it is not obvious that

- simple mathematical judgements, such as “ $2+2=4$ ”
- moral judgements, such as “killing is wrong”
- perceptual judgements

involve tryings.

Arguably the judgments in the second group are not judgements the making of which involves a choice or a trying.

Questions:

(1) How restricted is the group of mental events that involve tryings?

(2) What is the notion of tryings in play?

(2) Action Awareness

Action Awareness Thesis: A subject's awareness of his mental actions involves awareness of being the agent of the action.

In a first approximation the action awareness thesis seems to be a version of the Kantian thesis that "It must be possible for the 'I think' to accompany all my representations" (B131).

Two readings of the Kantian thesis:

(a) Whenever I have a representation with propositional content p , I must *know* that I have such a representation, and be able to express this knowledge in a judgment of the form "I R that p ."

(b) My having a representation with the propositional content that p must involve my *consciously representing* that p in such a way that I can express this consciousness in a judgment of the form "I R that p ."

Two readings of "I"

"I" as subject. (Kant)

"I" as agent. (Peacocke)

By contrast to Kant, Peacocke understands the "I" that accompanies the content of the thought as the "I" of the agent.

The question remains: What is the awareness in play in mental actions awareness of?

Is action awareness anything more than

(1) awareness of the content of the judgement

and

(2) awareness that I am having the thought?

Peacocke wants a third thing namely

(3) awareness of the making of the judgement.

What can (3) be?

Why do we need (3) if "I" is already understood as the "I" of the agent?

Wouldn't (3) fall prey to an argument analogous to the argument for the transparency of perception?

Can we imagine a mental life which does not contain (3)?

If so, what would it be lacking?

If not, why is (1) and (2) not sufficient for a mental life to be a rational life?