

Mental Action

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Here are some things that would count as mental actions, if you did them intentionally:

- Adding 67 and 78
- Recalling your last birthday party
- Imagining your room in another layout
- Attending to your breath
- Deciding to go to the park

By contrast, here are some mental events that tend to happen without your *doing* anything:

- Feeling a tickle in your throat
- Seeing a car turn right
- ‘Hearing’ the same song over and over in imagination
- Forgetting to do the dishes
- Falling asleep

Just as bodily actions are things you do with your body, **mental actions** are things you do with your mind. Both are different from things that merely happen to you.¹

Where does the idea of mental action come from? What are mental actions? And why do they matter in philosophy? These are the three main questions answered in this paper.

Section 1 introduces mental action through a brief history of the topic in philosophy. Section 2 explains what it is to be a mental action in terms of intentional action. Section 3 argues that the fact that we can perform mental actions has some striking consequences concerning mental content. Section 4 shows how mental action helps to explain some important facts about self-knowledge and the normativity of thought. The conclusion mentions two further fruitful avenues for philosophical research on mental action.

1. A brief history of mental action

There is nothing new about identifying something ‘active’ in the mind. In *De Anima* Aristotle distinguished between the active or ‘productive’ mind (*nous poiêtikos*) and the passive or ‘affected’ mind.² In the early modern period, Descartes, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Leibniz, Spinoza, and Kant all wrote about mental ‘activity.’³ But it’s crucial to distinguish between mental *activity* and mental *action* to get clear on what is special about mental action.

What’s the difference? Mental activity can take place in some subsystem or part of the mind, but mental action is, by definition, something *you* do as a whole agent or person.⁴ Consider, for example, the process by which your visual system ‘binds’ together distinct features into a

¹ Cf. Frankfurt (1978), though note that Frankfurt simply defined *mental* action out of existence.

² Aristotle (2016), *De Anima* iii 5. Cf. Korsgaard (2009).

³ Descartes (1641/1993); Locke (1689/1996); Berkeley (1713/1979); Hume (1739/1978, 1748/1975); Leibniz (1765/1981); Kant (1781/1998), Spinoza (1677/2018), p.48; Hobbes (1651/1928).

⁴ See Taylor (1963) p.312, Melsler (2004).

representation of one object.⁵ This may be mental *activity*, but it is not mental *action*. This process is not something *you* control; *you* are not responsible for it; indeed, you may have no awareness of the process at all. Each of these points suggests it is not *your* action.

Many early modern and modern philosophers identified mere activity of ‘faculties’ of the mind—such as sensation, imagination, or understanding—without describing anything recognizable as mental action. But some did write about genuine mental action as such. Hobbes explicitly contrasted the “Trayne of Thoughts Unguided” and the “Trayne of Thoughts Regulated ... by some desire, and designe” of your own.⁶ Descartes considered supposition and reflection to involve the use of your will, and the exercise of freedom.⁷ Most clearly of all, Thomas Reid identified attention, decision, and practical deliberation as “operations of the mind which may be called voluntary”—voluntary on *your* part, that is, in a way that accrues responsibility to *you*.⁸

Kant’s conception of judgment is often interpreted as a conception of mental action, although what he actually said on this point can seem equivocal. He claimed that judgment involves the faculties of sensation, imagination, and understanding, which makes judgment sound like mere activity of multiple mental faculties.⁹ But he also claimed that judgments are necessarily accompanied by non-observational self-awareness, which he calls “apperception” of a “pure” or “original” kind.¹⁰ Similar awareness is now closely linked to intentional action (Section 4.1.).

Although William James had significant influence in this area of philosophy, his work was also surprisingly ambiguous about mental action. He said that our power to attend selectively implies we are not creatures of “pure receptivity ... *my experience is what I agree to attend to.*”¹¹ But later he said that “the word ‘activity’ has no content save these experiences of process, obstruction, striving, strain, or release, ultimate *qualia.*”¹² This makes activity sound like a kind of feeling. But no genuine action is just a matter of feeling. To act is to exercise control, and to exercise control is (inter alia) to shape what actually happens by your causal powers.

A little later, in his *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein suggested that neither meaning nor understanding could be just a mental process.¹³ Some took this to imply that there could be no mental *actions*, although other interpreters vehemently disagreed.¹⁴ Either way, this work inspired later philosophers to admit only a derivative category of ‘action’ in the mind. In 1959 book *Thought and Action* Stuart Hampshire called “mental action” a “shadowy and parasitic” version of outward action; he said a silent assent to a claim is just like an inhibited version of an out-loud assertion.¹⁵ In the 1970s, Gilbert Ryle identified some thinking as *doing*, but denied that this doing could be “autonomous” from outward action. A full or “thick” description of this kind

⁵ See e.g. Treisman (1998).

⁶ Hobbes (1651/1928), pp.20-21. I owe the citation to Irving (2016), who also highlights a similar distinction to be found in Thomas Branch’s (1738) *Thoughts on Dreaming* (pp.65-66).

⁷ Descartes (1641/1993) puts the point in terms of “the mind” doing something, but identifies that mind with that which we call “I,” so I count this as mental action. See also Soteriou (2013), pp.213-17.

⁸ Reid (1788/2010), “Of The Will” Chapter III.

⁹ Kant (1781/1998). For more on Kant’s conception of judgment, see Hanna (2017), Longuenesse (2001), and O’Shaughnessy (2000).

¹⁰ See the B-Deduction in Kant (1781/1998), p.245ff.

¹¹ James (1890), p.402. Emphasis original to the text.

¹² James (1905), p.6.

¹³ Wittgenstein (1953/2009). For his classic comments on action more generally, see Sections 611-628.

¹⁴ See e.g. Geach (1969).

¹⁵ Hampshire (1959), p.163-4.

of doing would capture it as practice or preparation for some potential outward action later on.¹⁶ Others simply rejected the existence of mental action altogether: Irving Thalberg argued in 1978 that there were no good criteria by which to classify mental events as actions or not actions.¹⁷

Contemporaneous research embraced the occurrence of mental action that was not just a tacit version of, nor merely practice for, outward bodily action. The reality of such mental action was often used to advance further theses. In 1963 Richard Taylor explicitly laid out a theory of the mental “act” as “anything that an agent *does*, as distinguished from things that are done to him.”¹⁸ He listed various advantages this theory bore over William James’s theory of the “stream of thoughts.”¹⁹ In 1969, P.T. Geach used an idea of thinking as a **basic** action—that is, something you do, but *not* by performing any other actions as a means—to argue against materialism about the mind.²⁰ Then in 1974, Hugh McCann argued that **volition** is the single basic mental action of the will needed to explain how any further action at all is possible.²¹

These historical studies of mental action made fertile soil for a recent efflorescence of philosophical work on the topic, including at least four monographs and two volumes of essays in recent years.²² Remarkably, the reality of mental action is no longer controversial in philosophy. Its most famous detractors do not claim mental action is impossible, but rather that the scope of our mental agency is much more restricted than others take it to be. Galen Strawson, for example, argued in a 2003 discussion of “mental ballistics” that the most you *do* in thought is set your mind to a topic and wait for content to come.²³ In reflection on empirical research, Thomas Metzinger has argued that two-thirds of our conscious mental lives are not active.²⁴

Instead of summarizing this contemporary work, I’ll introduce it along the way as I treat some more substantive questions about mental action. Let’s start with the simplest one.

2. What is mental action?

I have already mentioned some general features of mental action in passing: it involves *your* doing something, and that involves your exercising control over what happens, in a way that accrues responsibility to *you*. But this is just a sketch. It’s much more complicated to produce a philosophically precise definition of mental action. It is at least as complicated as defining “mental,” and at least as complicated as defining “action.”

¹⁶ Ryle (1958/2009, 1966/2009, 1968/2009).

¹⁷ Thalberg (1978).

¹⁸ Taylor (1963), p.311.

¹⁹ See also discussion of the James-Geach debate in Soteriou (2013).

²⁰ Geach (1969). He actually uses the term “activity,” but given his direct reference to Anscombe’s theory (p.32), and his clear commitment to these activities being things that *you* as a whole do (p.38), I have decided not to use the term “activity” in summarizing his view, since it is associated with other processes I have already described.

²¹ McCann (1974).

²² See Soteriou’s *The Mind’s Construction* (2013); Lucy O’Brien’s *Self-Knowing Agents* (2007); Proust’s *The Philosophy of Metacognition* (2005); and Derek Melser’s *The Act of Thinking* (2004). The edited volumes are O’Brien and Soteriou’s *Mental Actions* (2009) and Michael Brent’s *Mental Action and the Conscious Mind* (forthcoming).

²³ Strawson (2003).

²⁴ Metzinger (2013).

What does “mental” mean in this context? *Mental* actions are sometimes individuated among actions by distinction from bodily action,²⁵ or by their ‘covert’ nature.²⁶ Joëlle Proust takes mental action to be something you do to produce *representational* events, states, or dispositions in yourself.²⁷ Michael Brent takes the use of *cognitive* capacities to be essential to mental action in particular.²⁸

Each of these ways of describing *mental* actions does capture some mental actions, but each also runs the risk of excluding some actions that are mental. To avoid this risk, I won’t give a definition of “mental” here. Let me offer a number of examples of mental action instead.

Above, I mentioned adding, recalling, imagining, paying attention, and deciding as types of thoughts that could be mental actions. But there are many more types of thoughts that can be mental actions. You could do any of the following intentionally, i.e. as a mental action:

- count to one hundred
- make a contingency plan
- figure out whether functionalism is right
- entertain your opponent’s claim
- replay part of a movie in memory
- soothe yourself with memories of the beach
- call to mind examples of intersectionality
- think of good crossword clues
- determine who the murderer is
- make up a story
- list all those who have ever wronged you
- attend to the floaters in your eyes

This is no exhaustive list. But note that it’s not obvious that all these exclude the use of your body, or that all are ‘covert,’ or that all produce representational states, or that all use cognitive capacities. What unites all these things you can do is that you do them *primarily*—and in some cases exclusively—with your mind.²⁹

So much for the “mental;” let’s get to the “action.” To perform a mental action, as I am using that term, is to perform an **intentional action**. When you perform an intentional action, you act on an idea to do a certain kind of thing—an **intention** to do that thing—by controlling what happens.³⁰ For instance, you can act on an intention to scratch your left elbow by controlling the

²⁵ C. Peacocke (2009), Soteriou (2013), Stocker (1982), O’Brien (2007).

²⁶ McClelland (2019, 2020).

²⁷ Proust (2001), pp.106-7.

²⁸ See his overview to the *Mental Actions* section of PhilPapers at philpapers.org/browse/mental-actions.

²⁹ Of course, the boundaries of your mind will matter to the boundaries of mental action. See Clark & Chalmers (1998). Note that while it may not be a good sufficient condition to exclude the use of your body in mental action, it is also certainly not a good sufficient condition to require the use of your mind in mental action; your mind is certainly put to use in all sorts of actions we’d call non-mental, including throwing a dart at a bullseye, comforting a crying friend, or painting a mural. Compare Ryle (1958/2009, 1966/2009, 1968/2009).

³⁰ Note that this claim is indeed consistent with accepting Bratman’s (1984) claim that not every action performed intentionally under a certain description is performed in acting on an *intention* to do that. Bratman still agrees that each intentional action must be an instance of acting on at least some intention.

movements of your right hand to make that scratching motion. In this case, the event of the scratch is itself intentional in just these terms: it is intentional as a *scratching of your left elbow*.

Because your behavior is controlled by an idea to do a particular kind of thing in intentional action, your actions aren't just intentional *simpliciter*; they are intentional in terms that match the terms of the idea in question. Here's an example from Donald Davidson: your turning on the lights might also alert a prowler to your presence in the house.³¹ But if you have no idea there's a prowler around, this action is intentional as a *turning on of the lights* but not intentional as an *alerting of the prowler to your presence in the house*. The fact that actions are only intentional under some of their aspects is a point of broad consensus in the philosophy of action.³²

An action *can* be intentional under several aspects at once in different circumstances. This happens, for instance, when you do one thing *in order to* do another. Here's an example: I know that pulling a funny face makes my niece laugh, so I can act on a **complex intention** to *pull a funny face in order to make my niece laugh*. My doing that is then both an intentional action of *pulling a funny face*, and an intentional action of *making my niece laugh*, in those terms.

When you act on an intention to ϕ , you have ϕ -ing in mind, quite literally; and your having this in mind guides what happens towards ϕ -ing. For instance, if you were acting on an intention to trace a picture, and your pen skewed from the line beneath it, you would adjust your pen accordingly to adhere back to your intention to *trace the picture*, which is what you have in mind. A representation of ϕ -ing is thus part of what *causes* your ϕ -ing by guiding what happens.³³ This guidance manifests your control over what happens, and control is a necessary aspect of any intentional action.³⁴ An uncontrolled success is not a properly *intentional* action.³⁵

I will call the relevant representation of ϕ -ing the “**controlling representation**” in intentional action. Sometimes it is understood as an intention that plays an ongoing role—an **intention-in-action**—and sometimes it is understood as a belief about what *is* happening that plays a causal role in making itself true.³⁶ But it doesn't matter for our purposes which it is.

If we stopped here, we would have a **causal theory of action**, one which takes intentional action to be definable just in terms of causal relations between certain states and events.³⁷ Al Mele and Joëlle Proust notably endorse causal theories of mental action in particular.³⁸

I don't think a causal theory of action is right, for two related reasons.

First, there is the problem of **deviant causal chains**: your relevant states, e.g. your intentions, can cause events that match their content but do not thereby count as intentional actions. In one case from Donald Davidson, a climber intends to drop his climbing partner, and this intention makes him so nervous that his hands slip and lose their hold on the rope holding his partner.³⁹ Cases like this show that *just* being caused by certain states and events cannot suffice for an event to be an intentional action. The challenge for a causal theorist is to restrict the type of causation to avoid ‘counting’ such cases as intentional actions. It's not clear how to do this.

³¹ Davidson (1963/2001), p.4.

³² See also Anscombe (1957).

³³ On guidance in bodily action, see Frankfurt (1978); on guidance in mental action, see Proust (2001).

³⁴ For more on control, see Shepherd (2014).

³⁵ Compare the literature on deviant causal chains, e.g. Davidson (1973/2001).

³⁶ **Strong cognitivists** about intention, like Velleman (1989) and Schwenkler and Marusic (2018), say that the two come down to the same thing. For commentary, see Paul (2009), p.3ff.

³⁷ Davidson (1963/2001) is usually interpreted as a causal theorist. Smith (2012) is also a causal theorist.

³⁸ Mele (2009), Mele (forthcoming), Proust (2001), Proust (2013).

³⁹ Davidson (1973), p.79.

Relatedly, there is an evaluative aspect of intentional action that is not captured by any causal theory of action. An intention to ϕ doesn't just play a causal role in your ϕ -ing; it also sets a **standard of success** on whatever you do to ϕ .⁴⁰ This standard is genuinely evaluative, it is self-imposed, and it applies primarily to an event: the event of your ϕ -ing is a positive success, by your own lights, when it is an *intentional* ϕ -ing.⁴¹ I don't think that this evaluative component can be adequately explained by any causal theory of action, although I cannot fully defend this claim in the limited space we have here. For now, I'll simply note that the remainder of this paper assumes that a causal theory of action is not right.

Let's put all this together into a description of intentional action. Any intentional action is, more particularly, an intentional ϕ -ing. Acting on an intention to ϕ involves using a controlling representation of ϕ -ing to guide what happens. This can constitute an exercise of control, which is necessary to intentional action. The intention on which you act in intentional action also imposes a standard of success on what happens. This self-imposed evaluative standard is necessarily involved in intentional action, and I think it is not explicable in purely causal terms.

Now let's apply this picture of intentional action to some examples of *mental* action.

You can act on an intention to *recite the pledge of allegiance in imagination*, and guide your thoughts towards the words of the pledge of allegiance, imagining saying each one in order and correcting if you deviate from the real words. If you do this with control, and get all the way to the end, you count as having *recited the pledge of allegiance in imagination* intentionally.

Here's an example of a **complex** mental action, one which is intentional under several aspects. You can *think of an adjective in order to choose a word for this spot in Mad Libs*. In trying to do that, you might accidentally bring some nouns to mind; if so, you might call more words to mind in order to get some adjectives. When you do think of an adjective—say, “squishy”—by controlling your thoughts in this way, that *thinking of an adjective* can be intentional. Given your overarching purpose, it can also be intentional as a *choice of a word for this spot in Mad Libs*. One and the same token action can be both of these at once.

Given this picture of mental action, we might start to see how one particular form of mental action is particularly fundamental: the mental action of *paying attention*. Sebastian Watzl, Wayne Wu, and Yair Levy all argue that attending is the basic or “most general” mental action, one involved in all others.⁴² Paying attention to what is actually happening with an eye to doing something in particular is central to exercising control over your thoughts.

This has not been an entirely neutral story of mental action.⁴³ There are both general action theorists and philosophers of mental action who disagree with parts of the view just presented. I have already mentioned that the story I presented rejected the causal theory of action. In addition, some philosophers of action deny the claim that intentional action involves acting on an idea to do something. Brian O'Shaughnessy and Lucy O'Brien, both of whom give special emphasis to the importance of mental action, have argued that action is already a psychological type, and so it needs no separable mental state or event to guide it.⁴⁴ Others reject the idea that the causation involved in intentional action is of a kind with other causation. Those who endorse **agent causation** think that your causing events in the world is a special piece of our metaphysics

⁴⁰ Compare those who define action in terms of tryings, including Hornsby (1980) and Peacocke (2008).

⁴¹ Compare Korsgaard (2009), Soteriou (2013), and Wilson (1989).

⁴² See Watzl (2017, forthcoming); Wu (forthcoming); quotation from Levy (forthcoming).

⁴³ A further controversy that has not been mentioned in the main text: some, including Alvarez and Hyman (1998) and Hyman (2015), take actions not to be events but rather causings.

⁴⁴ O'Shaughnessy (1980, 2003); O'Brien (2007).

that cannot be reduced to causation of states or events by the same. Richard Taylor and David Hunter both see mental action as involving agent causation.⁴⁵

To simplify the discussion that follows, I will mostly set aside these other views in favor of the first description of mental action provided above. This clarity of position will help us proceed smoothly, and I'll note when it runs into controversial implications (as in Section 3).

We can now consider some key implications of the fact that we perform mental actions.

3. Consequences for mental content

Several general features of intentional action also appear in the mental domain. Just as we can practice to improve our control and become skilled in certain non-mental actions, we can do the same with certain mental actions too.⁴⁶ Mental actions can be effortful and use up resources of working memory, just as non-mental actions can.⁴⁷ As Tom McClelland has persuasively argued, we are sensitive to opportunities to do things mentally—i.e. **affordances for mental action**—just as we are sensitive to opportunities to do things with our bodies.⁴⁸ You can experience a fly buzzing next to your head as *demanding your attention*, or as demanding to be brushed away.

In this section I'll lay out some further surprising implications of the fact that we perform mental actions. If certain kinds of complex mental actions are possible, then certain contents of these mental actions will only be specifiable in terms of intentional action. I'll explain why.

Let's say you intentionally *think of a first name* with some further intention, say, to *think of that name as a possible name for your dog*. If you do this successfully, you do in fact think of a specific first name—say, "Freddie." That is a thought with a particular linguistic content. But if we isolated this particular mental occurrence from its context in intentional action, we would miss out on an important aspect of its content. For thinking of "Freddie" here is not just to have that word in mind; it is also to think that "*Freddie*" is a possible name for your dog. This mental action has this further content precisely because it is performed with this complex intention.

How can one action be both a thought of "Freddie" and a thought that *Freddie is a possible name for your dog*? This can only be explained with reference to your use of *thinking of a first name* as a constitutive means to *thinking of that name as a possible name for your dog*. A **constitutive means** to some further end is one whose performance also *constitutes* the accomplishment of the further end.⁴⁹ You can use this constitutive means to this end if you already believe—before acting on the complex intention in question—that whatever first name you think of will be a possible name for your dog. You set up your mental project ahead of time in such a way that makes your thinking of "Freddie" also *constitute* a thought that "*Freddie*" is a possible name for your dog. One way of putting it is to say that you have in mind, while acting, that whatever first name you think of is a possible name for your dog; then all that is required to have a more specific thought that "*Freddie*" is a possible name for your dog is to fill in "Freddie," which you do just by thinking of "Freddie" here.

⁴⁵ Taylor (1963); Hunter (forthcoming).

⁴⁶ See Reid (1788/2010).

⁴⁷ Though note that a lack of feeling of effort does not imply that a mental event is not a mental action; see Melser (2004), p.8ff., and Boghossian (2019).

⁴⁸ McClelland (2019, 2020) focuses specially on attention as a mental action.

⁴⁹ Setiya (2017) persuasively argues, in the context of some Anscombe interpretation, that all means performed intentionally in the service of further intentions are constitutive means. Cf. Baier (1970). I have also discussed constitutive means to mental actions in A. Peacocke (2017, forthcoming).

Here is a further feature of this example. Even if the total content of *some* mental events is purely intrinsic to those mental events—i.e. specifiable only with reference to the non-relational properties of those events—not *all* contents can be. That’s not (just) because some mental events need to bear robust relations to the ‘external’ world to bear the contents they do, as **externalists about mental content** claim.⁵⁰ It’s also because some mental events need to be intentional actions in order to have the contents that they do, and an event’s being an intentional action is partly (but, on my view, not entirely) a matter of how it was caused.⁵¹

If this is right, then there’s a further interesting connection between the philosophy of mind and philosophy of action—one which links the causal theories of action discussed above to functionalism about mental content. **Functionalism** in the philosophy of mind individuates mental events and states just in terms of their causal roles. **Functionalism about mental content**, in particular, identifies some mental event or state’s having a certain content with its playing a particular kind of causal role with respect to other states and events.⁵² For example, all it takes for some mental event to be a judgment that *it’s raining* is just for that judgment to be *caused by* a visual experience of rain, to *be likely to cause* umbrella-grabbing behavior, and so on.⁵³ This picture of mental content is attractive insofar as it fits neatly into a naturalistic frame, just as causal theories of action are meant to be attractive in their naturalistic approach to agency.

On the line of thought I’ve been developing in this subsection, that’s not all that functionalism and the causal theory of action share; their fates are more directly linked. If your thought of “Freddie” can also count as a thought that “*Freddie*” is a possible name for your dog just because it executes an intention to think of a possible name for your dog, then the success of functionalism about mental content relies on the success of the causal theory of action. Here’s why: if a thought’s having a content is *just* a matter of its standing in certain causal relations (functionalism), but sometimes its having the content it has ineliminably depends on its being an intentional action (as I just argued), then its being an intentional action must also just be a matter of its standing in certain causal relations (as in the causal theory of action). Contrapositively, if the causal theory of action is false—as I think it is—then functionalism about mental content must be false too, so long as some thoughts’ contents are dependent on their status as actions.⁵⁴

Aside from this surprising connection across previously separated subfields in philosophy, there are more important upshots of this discussion of the contents of complex mental actions.

Most simply: individual mental actions—which are individual mental events—can have several contents at once, under the several intentions they execute.⁵⁵ To accept this is to reject the ubiquitous assumption in philosophy that each mental event has at most one content.

⁵⁰ Classic sources include Kripke (1972) and Putnam (1975). See Lau & Deutsch (2014) for an overview.

⁵¹ Here is a controversy: if you *do* take a (mental) event’s being an intentional action to be an intrinsic feature, but you accept that mental actions can have distinct contents under the distinct descriptions under which they are intentional, you might deny that such mental content is partly extrinsically determined.

⁵² Putnam (1960/1975) gave an early characterization of functionalism. See Levin’s (2004) summary.

⁵³ This is a vastly simplified picture of functionalism, which ascribes contents to mental events and states in ineliminably holistic ways: to be a judgment that *p*, on this view, is for that judgment to stand in certain causal relations with respect to a great many other states and events. See Levin (2004), Section 5.1.

⁵⁴ A caveat: you could save functionalism by saying that events count as intentional actions just in virtue of what they *cause*, not what they’re *caused by*. By definition, this would not be a causal theory of action. But this view is implausible enough to set aside; nobody, to my knowledge, defends a view like it.

⁵⁵ Why not say they have *complex* contents instead? Because nothing can have a complex content concatenating a linguistic item like “Freddie” and a propositional content like “*Freddie*” is a possible name for my dog.

In addition, we cannot treat ‘inner speech’ as a complete model of the contents of thought. Even a perfect description of all the imaged words and half-sentences in your thoughts would still underdetermine their contents. Several philosophers, like P.T. Geach and Matt Soteriou, have recognized this fact independently of the content plurality of mental actions.⁵⁶ The same point goes for mental images called to mind with the purpose of imagining particular people or scenes. As Amy Kind has argued, the mental images themselves, understood outside the context of intentional action, underdetermine the total content of active imaginings.⁵⁷ What *does* fill in their content, I suggest, is their performance as intentional mental actions.

4. What mental action explains

The fact that we perform mental actions can explain a lot. Here, I’ll summarize how it can help explain special self-knowledge and the normativity involved in certain kinds of thoughts.

4.1. Self-knowledge

As discussed above, in acting on an intention to ϕ , you use a controlling representation to guide what actually happens. I’ll now add that this representation has the content *I am ϕ -ing*. It is a first-person, present-tense representation of what you are doing in the terms of your intention. As such, this controlling representation can constitute—or at least make available—a special kind of self-knowledge, which G.E.M. Anscombe famously introduced as “**practical knowledge**.”⁵⁸

Practical knowledge is special in a few ways. First: practical knowledge is not based in observation or in inference. In ϕ -ing intentionally, you can know that you are ϕ -ing without perceiving anything at all, and without inferring what you are doing from something else you know or perceive. Consider a case in which all of your senses are numbed, and you intentionally wave your arms around. You could still know that you are doing that, if you do that successfully.

How could that be? Recall that control is required for intentional action. To control your ϕ -ing is (among other things) to bear a robust counterfactual connection with what happens.⁵⁹ If you were to try to ϕ , and you have control over that matter, then you would ϕ . Thus the truth of the content of the controlling representation is not merely an accident. This makes it possible for

⁵⁶ Geach (1954), Soteriou (2013).

⁵⁷ Kind (2001).

⁵⁸ She derived the term from Aquinas. Also note that Anscombe (1957) seems to define “practical knowledge” in at least two ways: once as knowledge of what you are now doing, and another time as a general capacity to act. It is the first of these that I label “practical knowledge” in this paper. You need not endorse her strong claim that this knowledge partially *constitutes* an action’s being intentional in order to see how intentional action *can* involve this special form of knowledge. For more on practical knowledge, see Schwenkler (2012, 2015, 2019), Haddock (2011), Thompson (2011), Moran (2004), Setiya (2017), Velleman (1987, 2007), Frost (2019). For divergent views of the knowledge involved in intentional action, see Paul (2009), C. Peacocke (2009), and Donnellan (1963).

⁵⁹ Compare Shepherd (2014).

this controlling representation to count as knowledge, or to make available a belief with the same content, which counts as practical knowledge.⁶⁰

Because practical knowledge is not observational or inferential, it is also **immune to error through misidentification**.⁶¹ Beliefs with this property aren't vulnerable to errors that involve accidentally taking one thing to be something else. You don't substantively identify *yourself*, observationally or inferentially, to know you are ϕ -ing when you are ϕ -ing intentionally. And because you don't substantively identify yourself, you can't make an error of misidentification. To illustrate, consider how your knowledge that you are in pain is similarly immune to such error. You don't have to pick yourself out from a crowd, or identify yourself in a picture, or find your name on a list, or otherwise *identify* yourself in any way to come to know that you are in pain. For this reason, it would be silly for someone to ask why you're sure that *you* are the one in pain. You simply can't make an error of *mis-identifying* who's in pain, because you didn't have to *identify* yourself in any substantive way at all to know that you're in pain.

A lot of self-knowledge seems to have features that are well explained with reference to these special features of practical knowledge in mental action. For example, your knowledge of what you believe is similarly non-observational and immune to error through misidentification. Several philosophers have argued that self-knowledge of belief is well explained via knowledge of the mental action of judgment, the occurrent analogue of belief that you can use as a guide to your beliefs.⁶²

Additionally, a lot of self-knowledge seems to be secured by a method unavailable in the third person. Alex Byrne has referred to this as the “peculiarity” of self-knowledge.⁶³ If this kind of self-knowledge is secured through mental action, then such “peculiarity” can be explained by the unavailability of practical knowledge of other people's mental actions.⁶⁴

Along contrapositive lines, a *lack* of mental action can be used to explain particular gaps in self-knowledge. In unguided mind-wandering, for example, you might find yourself drifting to a certain topic of thought with no recollection of how or why you got there.⁶⁵ Brian O'Shaughnessy has also suggested that the inarticulate confusion of dreams can be attributed to a “will freeze” in sleep.⁶⁶ At a further extreme in lack of self-knowledge, several philosophers and cognitive scientists have used a “motor model” of mental action to explain how some people with schizophrenia can feel as though certain thoughts have been ‘inserted’ into their minds.⁶⁷

4.2. Normativity

⁶⁰ Compare Velleman (2007). Lucy Campbell (2018) suggests that an intention in action could itself be the base state for practical knowledge. I do not mean to present this as a *full* explanation of the knowledge state; mere reliability of this kind is not sufficient for knowledge.

⁶¹ Shoemaker (1968), Pryor (1999).

⁶² See O'Brien (2005, 2007); C. Peacocke (2008); and A. Peacocke (2017).

⁶³ Byrne (2011). See also Moran (2001).

⁶⁴ In this and in several other ways, mental action offers a precisification of more general views connecting agency and self-knowledge. Moran (2001), Bilgrami (2006).

⁶⁵ Irving (2016), Irving & Glasser (2019), Irving & Thompson (2018).

⁶⁶ O'Shaughnessy (2000). See also Soteriou (2013).

⁶⁷ See Campbell (1999), Proust (2009), Voss et al. (2010), Stephens & Graham (2000), Fernández (2010), and Sousa & Swiney (2013).

Some special norms apply to special kinds of thought. Norms of instrumental rationality apply to decisions to do things. Norms of truth, warrant, and knowledge apply to judgments about factual matters. Corresponding norms apply to both practical and ‘theoretical’ reasoning to these ends.

The prospect of explaining the application of these norms in terms of mental action is an attractive one. The responsibility you bear for *intentional* mental actions, among mental events, might help us understand the applicability of norms to these thoughts as opposed to others.⁶⁸

John McDowell has taken this line in a neo-Kantian description of judgment. He writes that “judging, making up our minds what to think, is something for which we are, in principle, responsible—something we freely do, as opposed to something that merely happens in our lives.”⁶⁹ In his 2015 book *Judgment and Agency*, Ernest Sosa significantly developed a theory of judgment as a genuinely intentional action, produced with genuine responsibility for action.⁷⁰

Storrs McCall and Al Mele have provided detailed explanations of how a decision can be a mental action.⁷¹ Mele even claims that decisions, as “momentary actions of intention formation,” must be basic actions, not performed by doing anything else at all.⁷² But the connection between mental action and practical norms comes out more explicitly in discussion of **practical deliberation**. John Broome, Christine Korsgaard, and Thomas Pink all explicitly identify practical deliberation as a form of mental action.⁷³ Similarly, philosophers who work on **“theoretical” reasoning**—which terminates in judgment—tend to agree that it must be a form of mental action.⁷⁴ Some of these philosophers say this precisely to hold onto a prospect of explaining how norms can apply to this sort of reasoning.⁷⁵

But it is one thing just to note *some* connection between normativity and action, and another to provide a full explanation of that normativity in terms of specific features of intentional mental actions. Nobody has yet done that, although we can sketch how an attempt might go.

Consider a claim made by Korsgaard, that “if an agent tells himself to do something, there *really* is a sense in which he ought to do it, even if he should have told himself to do something else.”⁷⁶ Acting intentionally does not literally involve telling yourself to do something, but it does involve self-imposed standards of success, as discussed above. These self-imposed standards might ground genuine, robust normativity of specific varieties that apply to judgment, decision, and the forms of reasoning that produce them.⁷⁷

⁶⁸ Cf. Reid (1788/2010), p.71ff.

⁶⁹ McDowell (1998), p.434.

⁷⁰ See especially Sosa (2015), Chs. 3 and 7. Others who say judgment can be a mental action include McHugh (2011), Dorsch (2009), Steup (2017), and A. Peacocke (2017). The claim that judgment can be an action is very different from the implausible claim that *believing* is an action. Since belief is a state, it cannot be an action (see Vendler, 1957), *pace* Korsgaard (2009), p.37, and Boyle (2011).

⁷¹ McCall (1986), Mele (2009, forthcoming).

⁷² Mele (forthcoming).

⁷³ See Broome (2013), p.235; Korsgaard (2009), p.38;

⁷⁴ E.g. Boghossian (2014, 2019), Hunter (forthcoming), Korsgaard (2009), Mole (2016) Chapter 11, Shepherd (2019), Staffel (2019). Valaris (forthcoming) has a mixed position, in part because he claims that there is no one phenomenon unifying reasoning. Richard (2019) is a notable exception to the trend; he suggests reasoning is not mental action at all, and that is consistent with our bearing responsibility for it. Boghossian (2019) responds.

⁷⁵ See e.g. Broome (2013), p.235, Boghossian (2019), p.113, and Korsgaard (2009), p.29.

⁷⁶ Korsgaard (2009), pp.27-8.

⁷⁷ For a similar claim, made in terms of the constitutive aim of action being autonomy, see Velleman (2015), Chapter 2.

It is worth noting, however, that this connection between normativity and action does not obviously cut in favor of understanding judgment, decision, and reasoning as mental actions. Many philosophers take the normative constraints on these mental events to limit the control you have in performing these very actions.⁷⁸ If you subject your thought to a standard of truth, for example, you are no longer free to think whatever you like; similarly, if you subject your reasoning to certain norms, you are not free to infer whatever you like. This point is discussed extensively as it applies to judgment (and belief) in the literature on “doxastic voluntarism.”⁷⁹

In response to these concerns, some philosophers downgrade the status of judgment from a fully intentional action to something nearby.⁸⁰ But this concession cannot obviously retain the explanatory potential of judgment as a mental action as I have sketched it above. If we wish to explain the normativity of judgment in terms of a self-imposed standard of success placed on a particular mental event, we need to retain our picture of judgment as a fully intentional action.

This ongoing debate about judgment, decision, and reasoning as forms of mental action provides rich foundations for future philosophical work in metanormativity.

Conclusion

After scattered insights into the topic in the past few centuries, contemporary work on mental action has started to blossom in several directions. But not all fruitful avenues of research into mental action have been explored yet. I’ll mention two more that deserve more attention.

First, there is limited interdisciplinary research into mental action. What there is focuses selectively on one aspect—like the predictability of decision, the distortion of awareness in schizophrenia, or the aimlessness of mind-wandering.⁸¹ The time is ripe for philosophical study of the much more general and powerful cognitive-scientific concept of *executive control*, how it relates to mental action, and what explanatory work it can do.

Second, more research is needed to relate the contours of intentional mental action to substantive normative domains, including epistemology and ethics. Even aside from the metanormative project of explaining how *any* norms at all can get a grip on judgment, decision, and associated forms of reasoning, there is much work to be done on explaining the application of *particular* norms to judgment, decision, and the associated forms of reasoning with reference to what we do and do not control in these intentional mental actions.

⁷⁸ On decision as it connects with control, see the classic Kavka (1983) and Hieronymi (2006, 2009).

⁷⁹ Williams (1973), Setiya (2008), Yamada (2012), Hieronymi (2006, 2009), Bennett (1990), Shah and Velleman (2005), Boyle (2011), Owens (2000).
Toribio (2011), McHugh (2011), Dorsch (2009).

⁸⁰ Here I include Setiya (2008), McHugh (2011), and Toribio (2011).

⁸¹ See the controversy surrounding interpretation of Libet (1985), e.g. in Mele (forthcoming).

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