

Motives for Action

We may battle to specify what constitutes a human action, and also to map the stages of an action, but what matters most is the motives. We want to understand the theory, but we also want people to act well. This must mean getting the motivation right, as well as creating suitable circumstances. Achieving right motivations and good deeds is the concern of moral philosophy, rather than action theory, but the ideal account will show us what sorts of things motivate us, and thus point to where improvements can be made. It is hard to see how we can ascribe responsibility for actions (good or bad) if we don't know why they were performed.

The main debates about motivation focus on the relative importance of emotion and reason. At one extreme is the early suggestion that all motivation consists of movement towards **pleasure** or away from pain. At the other extreme is the 'intellectualist' view, that all decision-making is driven by reason (which evaluates the emotions and sensations). The first proposal seems wrong, because we don't grab every passing pleasure, and we sometimes choose uncomfortable actions. A more plausible theory which downplays reason is the claim that each decision arises from a **desire** accompanied by **beliefs**. Thus my opening of the fridge is motivated by a desire for raspberries, and a belief that they are in the fridge (and I am entitled to them). Reason may give rise to the beliefs, and it may modify the desires, but reason is marginal when it is time for motivated choices. Supposed counterexamples (of reasoned choices) are interpreted as disguised or subconscious desires. The theory has some support from modern research in psychology and neuroscience, which often indicates that we don't understand our own motivation.

Critics of this belief-desire psychology say there are many situations where a belief alone is sufficient motivation. I may be driven by some dubious desires to write this book, but such emotions don't seem relevant to my actual choice of ideas and words. If I yearn for fattening food when I am on a diet, my steely self-control seems to be restraining my desire (even if the control is not rational). The defence says this is just one desire (or 'drive') defeating another one, but we all know that a certain coolness is needed when we are in emotional turmoil; we don't just let our desires fight to the death. Most desires are rather short-term, in comparison with our more considered aims. When puritans decide that certain desires are wicked, they are very successful at suppressing them. It may even be that our desires are decided by our cooler aims, rather than the other way round.

The view that belief, rather than desire, is central to motivation is called '**cognitivism**'. Its 'strong' form claims that an intention to act simply *is* a belief. Typically this is a belief about how things will be once you have acted, so the motivation to open the fridge is merely the belief that it will result in an open fridge, and desiring the food is irrelevant. Its 'weak' form says beliefs are central to intentions, but emotions are also involved. An obvious ingredient missing here is hopes – I don't buy a raffle ticket because I believe I will win it. Support for cognitivism is found in indexical knowledge – that is, you must not only aim at an open fridge, but also know that the person standing there is *you*.

Early Greek discussions of motivation focused on **phronesis** [practical reason, common sense], which is the practical branch of the intellect. Decision-making is largely a rational matter, but it has its own mode of reasoning, which is distinct from theoretical knowledge or general wisdom. Practical reasoning is about the means of achieving your aims, so choices must be sensible, and also co-ordinated with your knowledge and wisdom. Motivation has two levels, of a sustained general aim (to achieve a good life), and of short-term success in particular instances. Dividing motivation obviously invites conflict, such as wicked means to achieve a good end. *Phronesis* was seen as the key to virtuous behaviour, but the choices made by *phronesis* alone might be sensible but misguided.

Hence the rival view of motivation was '**intellectualism**', which places knowledge, reason and wisdom at the heart of motivation. This does not guarantee that actions won't be misguided, but it takes a person's perception of what they take to be true as the source of their motivation. Hence good motivation is not healthy desires or knowing local facts or being sensible, but your whole understanding of life, and what you choose to do will flow from that. Evil is understood as ignorance, and goodness as deep understanding. The finest motivation is, of course, philosophy!

A problem with pure reason as the motivation for action is that it is not clear how reason *can* motivate. If our model of reason is simple arithmetic or a logical proof, these contain no stimulus at all towards action. The fear is that while reason is getting the credit, emotions are actually doing the work. After all, reasoning can be very slow, but decision-making tends to be quick. If the world of reason is seen as eternal and abstract, that places it outside the practical world of action. A modern solution to this problem defends reasons as motivators by ascribing **causal powers** to them. If dualism about mind is rejected, then reasons are an integral part of the physical world. Experience tells us that we justify our actions by giving the reasons why we performed them, and we think of those reasons as motivational. If your reasons (with some background beliefs) are what make you do something, then those reasons must have causal powers. Critics of this view either revert to the underlying emotions, or invoke some higher 'will' or 'self', which evaluates reasons, but does not have to be motivated by them. Or we may give up, and say that our motivating 'intentions' are **primitive**, because they cannot be analysed or explained.

The problem of motivation is mainly seen as important because we care about **responsibility**. We look to praise and reward (or blame and punish) others, and value our own successes and failures, but only if the action is fully attributed to the agent. The extreme requirement is that agents must have free will, which is the strongest degree of control over choices, but we might settle for a high degree of control, or simply that the agent is the major influence on the act. The issue becomes clearest when we ask what counts as a good '**excuse**' for a bad action.

It is sometimes said that responsibility for actions arises from the **character** or essential nature of the agent, rather than (say) a deed performed while sleep-walking. This seems to need rational control, and acting for reasons, because having a character which gives in to wild desires is usually seen as blameworthy. Fatalists say you are stuck with your character (so a bad character might be an excuse!), but existentialists say you can remake your character, which will need an even higher level of choice and responsibility.