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HOW TO UNDERSTAND MENTAL ACTIONS

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HOW TO UNDERSTAND MENTAL ACTIONS

A Master's Thesis

by
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To my lovely darling, empathetic friends and beloved family, their presence and unconditional support makes the completion of this thesis possible



HOW TO UNDERSTAND MENTAL ACTIONS

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By Kemal Tarık Oral

I certify that I have read this thesis and have found that it is fully adequate, in scope and in quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Philosophy.

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ABSTRACT

HOW TO UNDERSTAND MENTAL ACTIONS

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June 2023

There are lots of goings-on in our mental lives: thinking of something, calculating the sum of two numbers, daydreaming, deciding what to do, or trying to remember a particular moment. Some of these are actions we do intentionally while others are things that just happen to us. Thus, philosophers of action take different stands about the scope of mental agency. In this thesis, I argue that there is an implicit metaphysical assumption in discussions about the scope of mental agency, which is somewhat due to Strawson's (2003) influential account. Roughly put, the assumption is that for a mental act A, A-ing occurs only after certain processes, which might (not) be agential, that lead up to an event of A-ing. I argue that this conceptualization leads many philosophers to argue that most mental activities cannot be agential. However, I think that this is metaphysically inaccurate. The objective of this thesis is to show how and why this is the case by focusing on a particular mental action:

deciding. Inspired by the Vendler-Kenny typology of verbs, I argue that deciding can be considered as an accomplishment and that the occurrence of the decision is not a distinct effect, but a result of deliberative processes: deciding is nothing over and above deliberative processes, but just these processes' coming to an end. I believe that this approach will be effective in solving problems an account of mental agency can face.

Keywords: deciding, decision-making, deliberation, mental agency, mental action



ÖZET

ZİHİNSEL EYLEMLER NASIL ANLAŞILMALI

Oral, Kemal Tarık

Yüksek Lisans, Felsefe Bölümü

Danışman: Yrd. Prof. Dr. Jonathan D. Payton

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Zihinsel yaşamlarımızda pek çok olay (event) vardır: bir şey düşünmek, iki sayının toplamını hesaplamak, hayal kurmak, ne yapacağımıza karar vermek veya belirli bir anı hatırlamaya çalışmak. Bunlardan bazıları isteyerek yaptığımız eylemlerken, diğerleri ise sadece başımıza gelen şeylerdir. Bu nedenle, eylem felsefesi ile ilgilenen filozoflar zihinsel failliğin (mental agency) kapsamı hakkında farklı pozisyonlar alırlar. Bu tezde, zihinsel failliğin kapsamı hakkındaki tartışmalarda, Strawson'ın (2003) iddialarından kaynaklanan üstü kapalı bir metafizik varsayımın mevcut olduğunu savunuyorum. Kabaca ifade edersek, bu varsayım, herhangi bir zihinsel eylem A için, A'nın yalnızca, A eylemine neden olan belirli süreçlerden sonra meydana geldiğini belirtiyor. Bu kavramsallaştırma birçok filozofu çoğu zihinsel etkinliğin bir faili (agent) olamayacağını iddia etmeye yöneltiyor. Bununla birlikte,

bunun metafiziksel olarak yanlış olduğunu ve yeni bir bakışın, zihinsel failliğin daha doğru bir açıklamasını sunabileceğini düşünüyorum. Bu tezin amacı, belirli bir zihinsel eyleme, yani karar vermeye, odaklanarak kararlarımızın nasıl ve neden faili olduğumuzu göstermektir. Vendler-Kenny fiil tipolojisinden esinlenerek, karar vermenin bir tamamlanmış süreç eylemi (accomplishments) olarak kabul edilebileceğini ve kararın ortaya çıkmasının bir etki değil, kasıtlı süreçlerin bir sonucu olduğunu savunuyorum. Başka bir deyişle, karar vermek, müzakere süreçlerinin ötesinde ve üzerinde bir şey değil, bu süreçlerin sona ermesinden ibarettir. Bunun, zihinsel faillik hesabının karşılaşılabileceği sorunları çözmede de etkili olacağına inanıyorum.

Anahtar Sözcükler: karar, karar verme, müzakere, zihinsel faillik, zihinsel eylem

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INTRODUCTION

Mental actions and mental agency are relatively neglected by philosophers of action. Even if not neglected, philosophers have a tendency to be unyieldingly skeptical about (the scope of) mental agency. This oversight is “particularly strange coming from philosophers whose professional life is caught up in mental activity.” (Stocker, 1982, p. 398) I believe that an accurate account of mental agency is crucial for different branches of philosophy such as philosophy of action or philosophy of mind.

In this thesis, I plan to specifically discuss how we can exercise mental agency in deciding what to do. Intuitively, it seems that we are, as agents, responsible for (at least some of) our decisions. However, at first glance, it seems that the agency we exercise over our decisions is not exactly the same kind of agency we exercise in walking. For instance, one does not necessarily move his body for the former.

The question of whether and how we exercise mental agency in decision-making is a significant one for several reasons. Firstly, it seems that most of us morally judge people for some, if not all, of their decisions. In general, assessments of agency, such as moral blame, praise, or responsibility, are tied to both intentions and actions. (Flowerree, 2017) Intuitively, one should be morally blamed for having an intention to kill an innocent child even though he does nothing about it. In ordinary cases, moral blame takes intentional actions of agents as its target. This is because the concept of moral responsibility entails that the agent has a power, a kind of control,

over what he is going to do if that action is to be morally evaluated. Then, it seems that we pre-theoretically believe that we exercise this kind of a power, whatever it exactly is, for some of our decisions. Furthermore, many moral theories focus on the so-called right kind of intentions more than actions performed. One such example is Kantian ethics. This shows that intentions and agential processes related to them are as important as actions performed to understand agency.

Secondly, it seems phenomenologically accurate to claim that we exercise mental agency for some of our decisions. Among other mental activities, deciding seems to be the best representative of active phenomenology. Some philosophers argue that ordinary actions are agential while they reject the possibility that forming an intention or deciding what to do can be agential. However, the main reason why we care about the relationship between intentions and actions is that it creates a sense of agency. This sense of agency means that we are in control of our actions and that they are purposeful. It is this sense of agency by which we can make sense of the moral responsibility of our doings. (Flowerree, 2017)

The objective of this thesis is to show that deciding might be agential when we consider it as an accomplishment rather than focusing on an allegedly instantaneous event of deciding. In the first chapter, I will talk about a metaphysical assumption, which is implied by Strawson's (2003) influential account. The assumption is that for a mental act A, A-ing occurs only after certain processes that lead up to an event of A-ing. I think that this assumption is the primary reason for Strawson's pessimistic account of mental agency, which argues that agents exercise only a kind of indirect agency, with the help of catalytic actions, in performing most cognitive activities. I argue that this assumption dominates discussions of mental agency, and this will be clearer especially when we talk about how other accounts of mental agency implicitly endorse the assumption in question. In general, the aim of this chapter will be an exposition of Strawson's account and the metaphysical assumption in question.

In the next chapter, I will discuss how the assumption leads to some problems in understanding mental agency, especially for mental activity of decision-making. I

argue that the main problem with the Strawsonian assumption is that it offers an arbitrary distinction between the mental event of deciding and the deliberative processes that lead up to it. To show this, I will introduce a useful linguistic guide, which is called the Vendler-Kenny typology of verbs. Then I will argue that we need to consider deciding as an accomplishment rather than an instantaneous event happening after deliberation. This will constitute my criticism of Strawson's account and the metaphysical assumption in it.

In the last chapter, I will try to show how an account of mental agency employing this strategy can be able to avoid some possible problems such as the regress problem and the content problem. I will argue that a slight revision of Shepherd's (2015) account, which argues that deliberation is a mental skillful activity, will be useful for this end.

CHAPTER 1

A METAPHYSICAL ASSUMPTION IN ACCOUNTS OF MENTAL AGENCY

1.1 Introduction

There are lots of goings-on in our mental lives: thinking of something, calculating the sum of two numbers, daydreaming, deciding what to do, or trying to remember a particular moment. Yet, some of these are actions we do intentionally while others are things that just happen to us.

Philosophers of action take different stands about the scope of mental agency. However, the standard approach in the literature on mental activities suggests that the scope of mental agency is quite limited. I argue that there is an implicit metaphysical assumption in discussions about the scope of mental agency, which is implied by Strawson's account. Roughly put, the assumption is that for a mental behavior A, A-ing occurs only after certain processes, which might (not) be agential, that lead up to an event of A-ing. In this context, A-ing is generally taken to be a momentary change in the agent's overall mental state. In other words, the assumption is that certain interesting mental behaviors are events that occur only after agential processes come to an end. Surely, the way the assumption appears in discussions of mental agency is

much more perplexing than I simply put. In what follows, I will try to point out the nature and implications of the assumption in the views of different philosophers.

1.2 Strawson

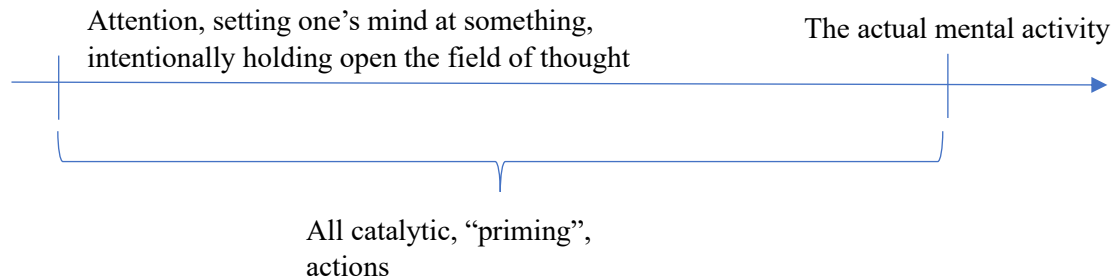
Strawson (2003) argues that no normal cases of cognition-involving mental activities such as thought, reasoning, judgment, and belief-formation are agential. He thinks that although there is such a thing as mental action, the role of action in these mental activities is, at best, indirect. To show this, Strawson appeals to a kind of phenomenological analysis of different mental activities. This involves a search for an answer to the question “What happens when one wants to think about a problem or a proposition *p*?” He argues that actions one can perform in any mental activity are limited to catalytic actions. By catalytic actions¹ he means those actions that foster or trigger appropriate cognitive conditions for a mental event to occur. The relevant mental events are presented to consciousness only after they are triggered with the help of catalytic actions, and the actual mental event in question occurs without any need for the agent’s active and direct control. These catalytic actions in the mental domain are also describable as “setting one’s mind” to a certain content or a problem to produce a mental event. This *setting one’s mind* might involve imagining keywords, and relevant sentences, rehearsing-inferential transitions, or refreshing images of related scenes.

All of these are "priming" actions. Although Strawson admits that they can be fully-fledged actions, he thinks that the actual thinking of a particular content or actual moment of judging that *p* can’t be agential. He argues that one can only perform certain catalytic actions for these events of thinking or judging to occur. Once you carve off all catalytic actions, what is left over, the actual thinking doesn’t seem to be an action.

In this sense, Strawson’s account demonstrates the metaphysical assumption in question quite well. He construes cognitive mental activities as momentary changes

¹ He also uses phrases such as “priming”, “mind-shepherding” or “triggering” to convey the same idea throughout the paper. (Strawson, 2003, pp. 231-233)

of states as he seeks for an *actual* moment of entertaining a proposition that p or judging that q. He argues that this event is just something that happens to agents. Although they might be caused by catalytic actions, which are genuine actions, the actual mental activity occurs only after these agential processes are finished. This view seems to offer a metaphysical picture like this:



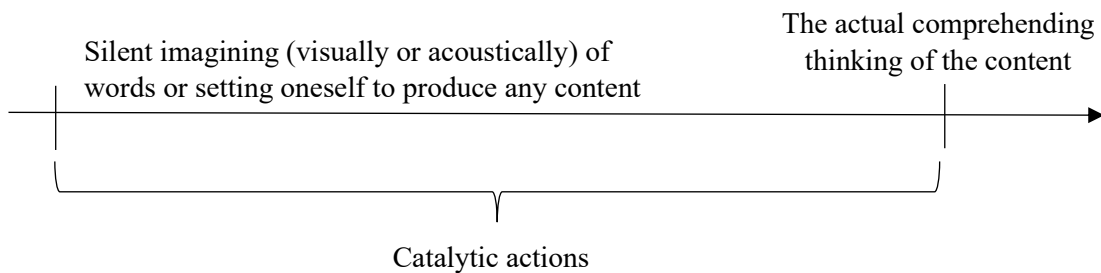
In his discussion of different mental activities, Strawson seems to rely on this kind of conceptualization of mental actions:

Mental action in thinking is restricted to the fostering of conditions hospitable to contents' coming to mind. The coming to mind itself—the actual occurrence of thoughts, conscious or non-conscious—is not a matter of action. (2003, p. 234)

For example, when one wants to entertain a specific proposition (say "grass is green"), what one does is limited to "silent mental imagining of words." Strawson continues: "The actual *comprehending thinking of the content* is something that just happens thereafter or at must concurrently." (p. 235) In entertaining a particular content, what happens is similar: one can only set oneself to produce any content.

[W]hat happens then is—a content just comes. Which particular content it is is not intentionally controlled; it is not a matter of action. It cannot be a matter of action unless the content is already there, available for consideration and adoption for intentional production. But if it is already there to be considered and adopted it must already have 'just come' at some previous time in order to be so available. (p. 235)

Thus, Strawson concludes that entertaining a proposition, by itself, is not a genuine action. These lines seem to suggest a similar approach:



The final occurrence of your thinking the content *is not itself an action* while catalytic actions might be agential for that product to occur.² Thus, he concludes that reasoning, thinking of a particular content or judgment can't be actions as which particular content they will have can't be controlled by the agent. The only way to perform agency, in this case, is indirect, with the help of catalytic actions.

Strawson presents similar phenomenological claims for imagination and decisions as well. For imagination, he notes:

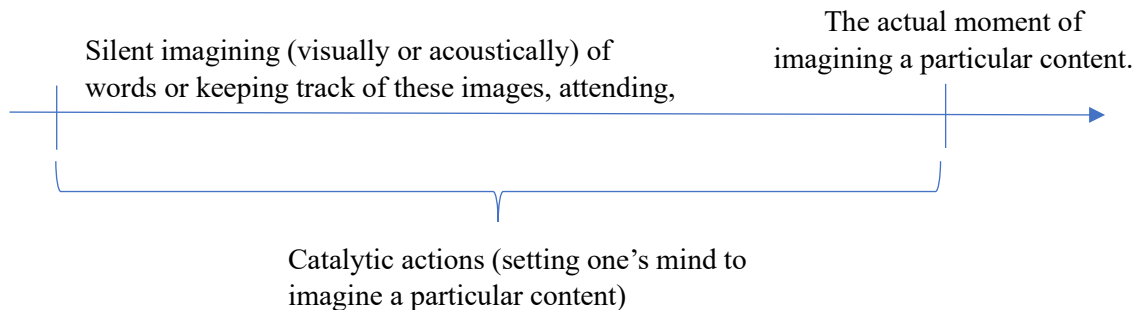
When one sets oneself to imagine anything there comes a moment when what one does is precisely to relinquish control. To think that the actual content-issuing and content-entertaining that are the heart of imagining are themselves a matter of action seems like thinking, when one has thrown a dart, that the dart's entering the dartboard is itself an action. (p. 242)

Suppose one asks you "not to conjure up a black-and-white striped giraffe" (p. 241): it seems one just can't do it without already conjuring up what is requested. This suggests, Strawson argues, that the mechanism of imagination is mostly automatic and not a matter of intentional control. (pp. 240-242) The content or any modification over the content of imagination is not directly controllable. What agents do in imagining a particular content is again limited to catalytic actions such as attention, focusing, and keeping track of visual or acoustic images of words or signs in mind.

The metaphysical assumption that the momentary change of the agent's current state at the end of agential processes is the mental event we should focus on plays a

² "A-ing is not itself an action" is an important phrase in understanding how Strawson's account implies the assumption. He uses it several times for different kinds of mental actions throughout the article to argue that the end product of catalytic actions, the event of allegedly mental action by itself, is not intentional. (2003, p. 230, 234, 235, 237, 238)

similar role for imagination as well. Due to this implicit assumption, he focuses on this momentary change, the event of having been imagined something, and argues that it can't be an action since we have no direct control over it. What Strawson has in mind can be represented in the following form:



If imagining would be the whole process rather than the momentary change of a mental state at the end of agential processes, what he calls “priming” actions, Strawson would not be insistent on the idea that imagination, by itself, is never an action. However, Strawson seems to suppose that what is interesting in imagination in terms of action, again, is the end product: the moment where the imagination of an object, a proposition, or a scene exactly occurs. What exactly is this particular event? It seems to me that it is the exact moment where the full content of the imagination occurs in one's mind. When considered in this way, Strawson is right to conclude that agency lies not in this momentary event but in agential processes that lead, when successfully completed, this event to occur.

When it comes to decisions, Strawson's position seems to be somewhat less radical. It seems that he allows for some instances of decisions to be agential but sticks with the same phenomenological point of view he presents for other mental activities. He notes:

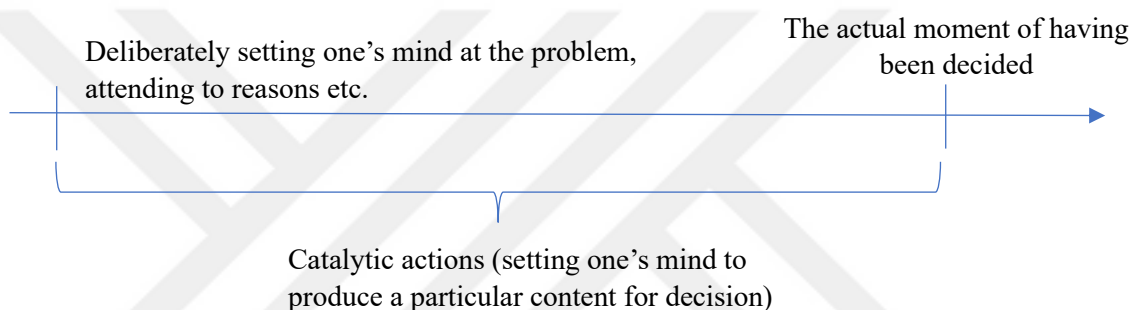
Some [decisions] are [mental actions], but the case is far from clear. And we need to consider the mental goings on that precede choices and decisions. Are these a matter of action, at least in part? (p. 243)

He argues that decisions are generally driven by a practical need: we must simply make decisions. Thus, diving into considerations about what to do just happens due to this need. It is automatic. In other cases where agents focus and try to decide what

to do, one can, at most, deliberately set his mind to the problem and wait for the content to come. Throughout the process, one can lose focus and try to re-focus again and again. All these catalytic actions can be controlled while what to decide is not intentionally controllable. He notes:

But here [in the case of decisions] again action is the underlabourer, preparatory, catalytic. There is no direct action in the actual issuing of new content, any more than there is in the growth of trees one has planted. (p. 243)

Similarly to other mental activities, Strawson seems to think that there is a momentary event of having been decided, a moment where all catalytic actions, such as deliberately setting one's mind or attention, come to a conclusion. Thus, we can similarly understand his account of agency in decisions in the following way:



He argues that there might be no agential explanation for deciding in normal cases. It is not in itself an action at all.

So far, I have discussed details of the assumption through Strawson's account of mental agency since I think it provides the most explicit demonstration of the assumption. However, other philosophers of action, too, are affected by this assumption one way or the other: they either implicitly agree with him about the truth of the assumption or try to get around the restrictive effects of the assumption on the scope of agency with different strategies. Some of these attempts bring more accurate accounts of mental agency without violating partially plausible insights about the scope of mental agency Strawson puts forward.

1.3 Other Philosophers on The Scope of Mental Agency

Not all philosophers are happy with the Strawsonian account of the scope of mental agency. This is mostly because the limitation over the scope of mental agency

Strawson's account suggests is not too intuitively appealing. Thus, many philosophers of action search for alternative accounts to expand the scope of our mental agency. Mostly buying the metaphysical picture of the Strawsonian account, they appeal to different methodological ways to do that.

1.3.1 Hunter

Similar to Strawson's account, Hunter (2003) argues for a restrictive approach about the scope of mental agency. His account, I think, is very similar to Strawson's account except for the extra attention to the perception-like character of cognitive mental activities. He thinks that cognitive mental activities such as entertaining a proposition can't be genuine actions. He claims that thought should be in the same metaphysical group as perception and is not a matter of action. Perceptual events lack intentional explanations that ordinary instances of action generally have. One sees an object O not because he desired to do so and believed that he can. (p. 139) His seeing is simply caused, if everything in his cognitive and perceptual system goes well, by his gaze at the object. Similarly, entertaining a content just lacks intentional explanations involving the agent's beliefs or desires. It is, in this sense, analogical with perception: one can only use his abilities to produce a passive state.

In perception, one looks in a certain direction to see an object. Seeing the object is just the result of looking, which is an intentional action. However, seeing itself is not a matter of action while looking at a particular direction is. Seeing an object is just the direct result of looking at the object. In the same way, when one wants to entertain a proposition p, he just performs certain triggering actions, and entertaining of p occurs if everything goes well in the cognitive system. (p. 143) This is just another example of the extent of the assumption we talked about.

The main idea in his account quite resembles Strawson's insights: the momentary event of entertaining a proposition can occur only after certain possibly agential processes end. This assumption leads Strawson and Hunter to specifically focus on antecedent events to explain why the event of entertaining occurs and to conclude

that if there is agency in the occurrence of this event, it must reside in these antecedent events, some of which might be agential.

1.3.2 Mele

Many philosophers of action agree that there needs to be a kind of direct control of behavior in cases of intentional action. While one's moving his paralyzed arm with his other arm doesn't seem to show this kind of control, one's ordinary moving of his arm does. When one intends to raise his arm, one's moving his arm seems to be an exercise of his agency. At the very least, it seems to be intimately related to agency. However, when one's arm is paralyzed, the movement of the paralyzed arm is itself not a genuine exercise of agency while the movement of the non-paralyzed hand can be a genuine action. In this case, the movement of the paralyzed arm is just the consequence of one's movement of his healthy hand, with the help of which he moves his paralyzed hand. Strawson's picture of mental agency resembles the latter case. He argues that the end product of agential processes is itself not intentionally controllable as the movement of the paralyzed hand is not an action by itself. Once one finishes all catalytic or preparatory actions, one will either have a mental event or not. This is like the movement of the paralyzed limb in the example. The assumption that the mental activity in question is the moment where agential processes that cause the relevant mental event to occur seems to suggest this picture.

Mele is mostly happy with this kind of reasoning although he disagrees with Strawson about the scope of mental agency. He aims to show that more than what Strawson thinks can be agential in our mental lives. One way to do that is by appealing to the distinction between basic and non-basic actions. The idea behind the distinction, at least for our concerns in this discussion, is simple. Agents can perform a basic action of A-ing just by A-ing, while they need to perform other actions to perform a non-basic action. Recall the previous example of one's moving his paralyzed arm. Moving my paralyzed arm is a non-basic action as I can't directly control a paralyzed limb. I need to raise my healthy arm for this. However, raising my healthy arm does not require the performance of any other actions. Appealing to this distinction, Mele (2009) argues that the role of non-basic action, bringing it

about that a particular mental event occurs, is crucial to explain why a specific mental event occurs.

Intuitively, most people think that deliberation, solving a chess problem in mind, thinking of seven animal names starting with the letter “g”, deciding, and mental tryings are actions we can perform. Mele (1997) argued that there are true descriptions for these actions to count as intentional actions. Then, he partially changed his mind about whether these are genuine actions. He argues that although “thinking of seven kinds of animal having a name starting with ‘g’” may describe an action, it does not describe it as an action.” (2009, p. 18) In a similar way, he argues that remembering a particular content cannot be intentional. The idea behind this is similar to what Strawson points out: one cannot intentionally remember a particular content that p. What one can do is limited to actions that can catalyze remembering of the content that p in question. However, Mele argues that one can intentionally (try to) bring it about that he remembers that p. This action of “bringing it about” is a successful attempt. More precisely, one’s trying to bring it about that he A-ed, which involves several actions, should be causally related in the right way³ to her intention to bring it about that he A-ed. This non-basic intention causes and sustains the agent’s trying, which involves several actions the agent performs in order to bring it about that he A-ed.

As we saw earlier, Strawson argues that “No coming to entertain a content, and no comprehending entertaining of a content is itself an action.” (2003, p. 244) Mele notes:

If ‘to entertain a content’ c, as Strawson intends that expression to be understood, is just to have a conscious thought the content of which is c—for example, a conscious thought of the word ‘goat’ or of a proposition expressed

³ For such an intention to be causally related “in the right way” to his actions, it must not only trigger a response but also causally sustain it. (Mele, 2009, pp. 24-25) Only then, this non-basic intention can explain one’s continued trying:

Did Gail intentionally bring it about that she thought of seven animal names starting with ‘g’? (That is, did she intentionally B7?) What it is to do something intentionally is a matter of considerable debate. However, if Gail’s B7-ing is an action and B7-ing is something that she tried at the time to do, then given ‘the absence of deviant causal chains and other monkey business’ (Mele 1997: 234), her B7-ing is an intentional action, provided that her control over the success of her attempt does not fall short of the control required for intentional action. (p. 25)

by 'goats are hairy'—then it is natural to understand 'coming to entertain a content' in such a way that it itself is never an action. (2009, p. 30)

Even though this is true, Mele argues that mental actions play an important role in explaining why certain mental events occur. "Coming to entertain a content" might express something that just happens to one. However, non-basic mental actions are an important part of the answer to the question of why a particular event happens to one. They are useful to explain why one happens to have a certain thought.

Although he mostly agrees with Strawson, Mele is not happy with the restrictiveness of Strawson's account. He admits that reasoning, entertaining, or judging can't be, in themselves, actions. However, he points out an agential element that is useful to explain why a mental event occurs: Mele emphasizes the role of non-basic mental actions. Metaphysically speaking, Mele's account is very similar to Strawson's picture. Other than its restrictiveness, Mele doesn't think that there is a problem with the way Strawson formulates mental activities and actions. Like Strawson, Mele implicitly endorses the idea that for any mental action of A-ing, A-ing occurs only after some agential processes that cause A-ing to occur. For instance, reasoning is not itself an action but bringing it about that one reasoned in a particular way is a non-basic action. The actual event of reasoning occurs only after agential processes. Unlike Strawson, he just points out the role of non-basic, instrumental mental actions in explaining mental agency. Since the non-basic intention causally guides and sustains these activities, the mental event in question can be considered as an intentional action.

Mele seems to think that this revision will make Strawson's account a more plausible one. This might be because Strawson's picture of mental agency is sometimes criticized for its insensitivity to the role of sustaining causation needed for actions. (Buckareff, 2005, pp. 84-86) While Strawson only talks about triggering causes, catalytic actions in his terms, Mele's conception of non-basic mental actions provides a more plausible kind of causation to talk about control or guidance in action. As Buckareff puts it:

[T]he causation of the action by the intention must play a guiding role, with the agent controlling his behavior via the intention, remaining responsive to feedback in the execution of the action. (p. 85)

Mele argues that what Strawson calls “catalytic actions” are properly causally related to one’s intention to bring it about that she A-ed. One’s persisting intention to bring it about that she A-ed explains the sustaining causation needed for us to talk about control in action. In this way, Mele offers a way not to conclude as Strawson did about the scope of mental agency without rejecting this metaphysical assumption.⁴ In addition, this allows him to avoid Buckareff’s criticism of neglecting the sustaining causal role of intentions without radically diverging from Strawson’s metaphysical picture.

1.3.3 Hieronymi and Others

Although the metaphysical assumption that a mental action, A-ing, is just a momentary change happening after relevant agential processes is not discussed explicitly, similar strategies to avoid the conclusion Strawson draws are presented in different accounts as well. Hieronymi (2009) argues that we need to introduce another kind of agency. It is a form of agency, evaluative control as she calls it, by which agents control their attitudes by answering for themselves the questions these attitudes embody. If one has settled for oneself positively the question of whether to p, one intends to p, and one intends to p just in case one is committed to a positive answer to the question of whether to p. Similarly, one believes that p if he settles the question whether that p: a belief embodies a positive answer to the question of whether p. (Hieronymi, 2009, pp. 139-140) In a similar fashion, some philosophers argue that the pessimist conclusion can be avoided by introducing a unique kind of causation, agent causation, which is not reducible to ordinary event-causation. (Hunter, 2023; Taylor, 1963)

⁴ This is possible partly because Mele rejects the Simple View while Strawson’s account seems to imply a kind of Simple View. The Simple View refers to the idea that “for me intentionally to A I must intend to A” (Bratman, 1984, p. 377) It seems to me that Strawson has the Simple View as an implicit assumption in his account. To deliberately entertain the proposition that p, one must form the intention to entertain the proposition that p. However, this means that the proposition is already there to be picked up. This is why these mental activities can’t be intentional actions. Think of judgment: one needs to have the intention to judge that p so that his judgment that p can count as an intentional action for Strawson. This is exactly what Strawson thinks is impossible. (2003, pp. 235-36) Mele rejects the Simple View and I think that this is what makes it possible, in part, for Mele to reject Strawson’s pessimistic conclusion about the scope of mental agency.

These kinds of accounts suggest that we need a specific explanatory tool for an account of mental agency. Accordingly, we either need a different kind of agency or a unique kind of causation to explain mental agency. For the former way; McHugh (2017) argues for attitudinal control and Pink (2009) argues for an account considering action as a distinctive mode of exercising rationality. For the latter way, Brent (2017) tries to show how agent causation might be useful to explain mental agency. All these accounts point out a specific feature of mental agency and involve partial truths about the way we exercise mental agency. However, I think, without finding a way to replace the problematic metaphysical assumption we talked about, they will not be able to provide a full-fledged account of mental agency.

1.4 Other Criticisms of Strawson's Account

Many philosophers criticize Strawson's account for reasons unrelated to his metaphysical picture as well. Buckareff (2005) criticizes the restrictiveness of Strawson's account of mental agency in general by showing that Strawson focuses only on the initiating role of agency and intention while neglecting their sustaining role. Similarly, Proust (2001) thinks that intentions play not only a catalytic role in mental activities. Inspired by that, Mele argues that non-basic intentions (intentions to bring about a particular mental event) can be an important part of agential explanations in the mental domain. (2009) When it comes to decision-making, Mele argues that practical deciding is a genuine action. Against a non-actional account of practical deciding, he thinks that it is more plausible to think of practical deciding as momentary mental actions of intention formation, which temporally excludes practical reflection and deliberation. (Mele, 1997, 2000, 2023) He notes "...deciding to A does not precede the onset of the intention to A formed in the act of deciding. Instead, what it is to decide to A is to form – actively – an intention to A. The intention arises in that momentary intention-forming action, not after it. (The same goes for deciding not to A.)" (2023, p. 256) In different forms, the idea that practical decisions are momentary mental actions is defended by several other philosophers as well. (Clarke, 2003) Furthermore, Proust (2010) notes that when we talk about mental acts in an agential sense, we think of processes that intentionally activate

some mental dispositions in order to acquire a desired mental property. Some philosophers argue that Strawson's representation of the ordinary experience of thought is misleading and there might be mental activities that cannot be reduced to triggering content delivery. Upton and Brent (2019) try to give such an account by appealing to meditative mental activities. These are just a few examples and there are many different criticisms, however partial they might be, to Strawson's account of mental agency for its too reductive and restrictive approach.

Nonetheless, most of these accounts don't take Strawson's metaphysical assumption as their direct target of criticism while it poses a serious problem for any account of mental agency. In none of these attempts is the metaphysical assumption (i.e., any mental action A-ing is just a momentary change occurring due to prior causes some of which might be agential) explicitly questioned. The agent causalist just emphasizes the importance of the irreducible effort of the agent in bringing about that he A-ed. Hieronymi emphasizes the possibility of a different kind of agency, which lacks essential features of ordinary agency such as voluntariness. I don't argue that these accounts explicitly take the assumption to be true, but, at the very least, they do not consider whether the assumption might be the problem leading to the Strawsonian conclusion.

1.5 Conclusion

In general, this metaphysical assumption leads us to a seemingly convincing point: for any mental event of A-ing, it is generally thought that certain actions of the agent cause the event of A-ing to occur. Thus, not A-ing, but only actions that are causally related (in a proper way) to the event of A-ing seem to be significant in explaining mental agency. If this is true, then there seems to be no important agential aspect of A-ing when considered in itself. This means that agency in much of the mental domain is doomed to be indirect. Some philosophers try to get around this conclusion without rejecting the assumption as we discussed above. Generally, such an attempt requires one to revise Strawson's account to give enough emphasis on intentions and relevant mental events as sustaining causes. We discussed other strategies as well.

However, I think that this assumption might be questioned for certain cases of mental activities.

I do not deny that the assumption can explain a good number of cases where agents exercise mental agency. It is true that one just performs certain catalytic actions which trigger some mental content to occur, and the occurrence of this mental event might be called a momentary event of A-ing. Depending on one's theoretical commitment, one can argue that the actual judgment that p just occurs when triggered by a set of mental states or possibly agential processes, and mental agency is limited to this. If one has theoretical commitments of the kind Mele has, he might argue that one exercises his mental agency through the performance of a non-basic action with the help of which he controls the product (the event of A-ing). These might be accurate explanations for many cases. However, this does not mean that if a token of a type of mental action A-ing is not explicable in these terms, there is no way for it to be an intentional action. Once we recognize ways to reject the assumption for some tokens of mental actions, it will bring a more accurate model for us, at least for some cases of mental actions, to decide whether a mental activity is something the agent intentionally controls.

CHAPTER 2

A WAY OUT FROM THE ASSUMPTION IN ACCOUNTS OF MENTAL AGENCY

2.1 Introduction

Deciding what to do is not a momentary event that happens after agential processes as some accounts of mental agency imply. In other words, deciding is nothing over and above processes of decision-making. Thus, mental agency in decisions is to be found in the processes of decision-making. These processes of decision-making involve deliberation and other related processes. In the account I will defend, deciding is nothing over and above agential processes leading up to the event of deciding. In this sense, deciding is not a distinct event that is caused by decision-making (or call it deliberative processes) but it is just the end of the decision-making process.⁵

When the agent successfully completes these processes, she ends up with a decision or an intention. This process, which may or may not end up with an appropriate intention, constitutes what the agent does. Contra the assumption discussed in the

⁵ In this context, deciding is just a decision-making process, however short it might be, and nothing more. In what remains, I will use any other terms instead of deciding such as decision-making or making a decision to refer to the event of deciding only when they are stylistically more appropriate in a particular situation.

previous chapter, there is not just a causal relation between the act of deciding (the event at the end of the process) and agential processes that are related to the production of the decision. I will argue that deciding must be considered as an accomplishment and that the occurrence of the decision is not a distinct effect, but a result of decision-making processes. To that end, I will first introduce the Vendler-Kenny typology of verbs and show how deciding has similar features to accomplishments. Then, we will discuss how the deciding-as-an-accomplishment approach offers a metaphysically better picture than Strawson's account. Once we appreciate that the occurrence of the decision is not a distinct event, but just the end of decision-making processes the agent controls, we can better analyze which instances of deciding can be agential and which ones cannot.

2.2 The Vendler-Kenny Typology of Verbs

Verbs are crucial in language as they express some metaphysical qualities such as action, existence, and state of being. The Vendler-Kenny typology of verbs is a classification system that categorizes verbs by their meaning and usage. (Kenny, 1963; Vendler, 1957) According to the Vendler-Kenny typology of verbs, we can categorize verbs based on the types of events they describe: activities, achievements, accomplishments, and states.⁶

Activities refer to events that are homogenous in the sense that every time stretch within the time the event takes place can be truly described by the activity verb in question. In other words, for any time t , where t is in the time period in which the event occurs, sentences “ S is Φ -ing” and “ S has Φ -ed” are true at t . In this regard, sentences such as “Mary is walking” or “Mary has walked” will be true for any moment throughout her morning walk.

Achievement verbs, on the other hand, only refer to the climax of an activity. Unlike activity verbs, they do not refer to temporally extended events. It would not make sense to say that “I am recognizing you.” Verbs such as “to realize” or “to win” refer

⁶ Kenny uses a single category called “performances” for both accomplishments and achievements. (1963, p. 121)

to achievements. Achievements can be said to *take time* in a loose sense. It might take three years of training or a minute of extreme effort and concentration for one to win a race. However, it would be hard to say that, at any time *t* within this training period or the duration of the race, he is winning the race or that he has won the race. He only counts as winning the race at the moment the race is completed. In this sense, achievements are instantaneous.

Accomplishments demonstrate different features. Firstly, accomplishments have a naturally built-in endpoint. For accomplishment verbs such as “reaching the store” and “drawing a circle”, these goals are arriving at the store and having drawn a circle. Further, accomplishments do not demonstrate a kind of homogeneity activities have. Suppose that *S* walks to a store for a time period *P*. Assuming that *t* is within *P*, for any time *t*, we can truly say that “*S* was walking to the store” at *t*. However, one must arrive at the store before the sentence “*S* has walked to the store” can be true. To describe someone as having walked to the store, rather than simply as having been walking to the store, one needs to have reached the store at a point. Similarly, one must finish drawing a circle for the sentence “he has drawn a circle” to be true. Verbs used in describing these cases do not describe homogenous events. Unlike activities, it would be absurd to ask how long one draws a circle. In other words, it sounds odd to say that I have drawn a circle for twenty minutes while saying that it took me twenty minutes to draw a circle does not. Accomplishment verbs have a continuous form since accomplishments take time to perform.

State verbs, like achievement verbs, do not have a continuous form. However, unlike achievements, states have temporal extension. One loves (which is a state verb) something for a period of time, but one reaches the top of a hill (an achievement verb) only at a particular moment. The difference between achievements and states can be found by asking certain questions. One can ask, “At what time did *S* reach the top of the hill?” while it would be absurd to ask for how long *S* reached the top and vice versa for states. Furthermore, states cannot be a matter of action. (Vendler, 1957, p. 149)

In discussions of the scope of mental agency, I think that the Vendler-Kenny typology can provide a good starting point. This doesn't necessarily mean that language is a perfect guide to metaphysics. Whether such linguistic categorizations can be fully representative of how things are in the world is another discussion. Keeping in mind that the Vendler-Kenny typology of verbs might not be a completely accurate guide to the metaphysics of events, I only take it to be a useful guide.

If we are to put some verbs of mental acts into this picture, we can use these general categories in the following way:

Activities: Certain verbs describing continuous mental activities such as "to think" and "to ponder" can be considered under this category. This kind of verbs refer to mental processes that continue for a while.

Achievements: Verbs describing an instantaneous mental event can be considered under this category. Some examples of achievement verbs in the mental domain might include "to understand" and "to recognize".

Accomplishments: Verbs under this category describe mental processes that have a natural goal. Verbs such as "to decide" seem to be members of this cluster.

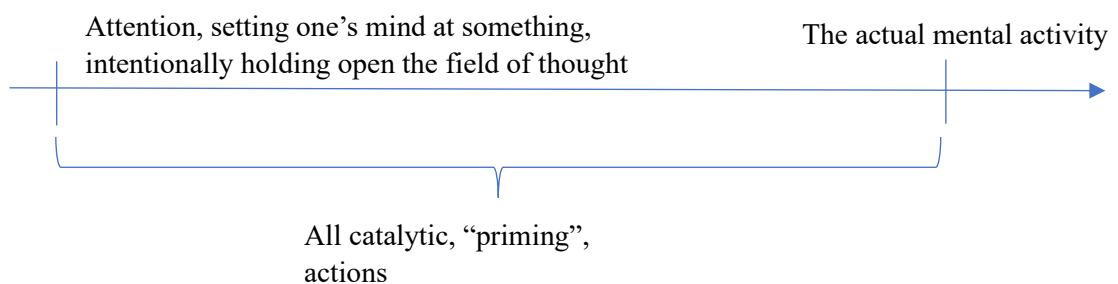
States: Verbs describing mental states, such as "believe" or "desire," belong to this category.

At first glance, "to decide" seems to be an accomplishment verb for several reasons. When one says that "I have already decided what to do while you were discussing the issue.", he refers to a process of decision-making at a definite time period and to the fact that it ended up with a particular state. When one utters the sentence "I was making a decision about what to do when I heard the burglar, but I couldn't decide", he seems to refer to a similar process by highlighting activity-like features of deliberative processes. Even in cases where the agent is interrupted before his deliberative processes naturally finished and he ends up with the continuation of uncertainty about what to do (his initial state), he might be counted as having been deciding.

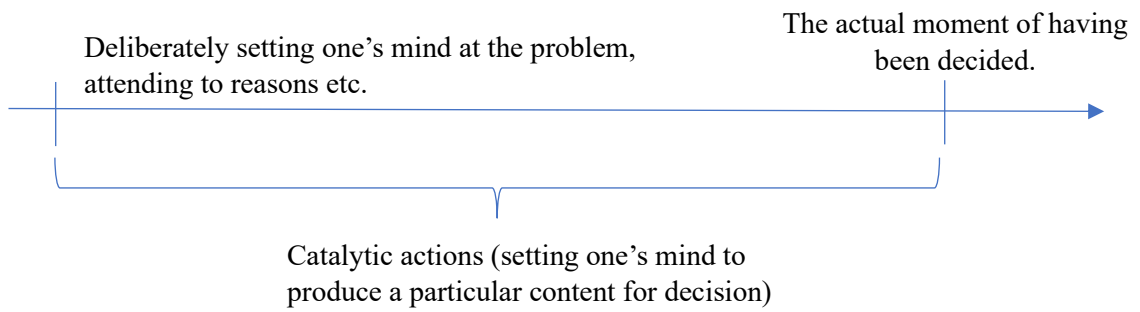
This kind of categorization, by itself, might not seem to be directly related to the question of whether deciding is agential or not. However, I argue that the assumption we discussed earlier has its own position in this picture. After all, the Vendler-Kenny typology seems to be neutral on whether deciding is a genuine action. Accordingly, deciding can be considered as a state or an action, or both, and investigating this relationship will help articulate a coherent position in discussions of mental agency in general. Thus, it is important to understand what this schema offers and how it can lead our way to understanding the scope of mental agency in decision-making.

2.3 Strawsonian Picture

Strawson's 2003 paper is an influential one for discussions of mental agency and many philosophers follow its core elements in their analyses although their conclusions about the scope of mental agency generally differ. One of these elements, a metaphysical assumption we mentioned earlier, is discussed in the previous chapter. According to this view, deciding is an event that occurs as an effect of certain agential processes such as deliberation. When one tries to decide on what to do, she can only perform certain actions such as deliberation, which then causes a decision to occur. In this sense, the decision itself is something that happens to her rather than something she is in control of. As a natural result of this conceptualization, the event of deciding cannot be an action. This is just an application of Strawson's conceptualization of cognition-involving mental activities in general to decision-making:



1.1: Strawson's conceptualization of mental activities



1.1: Strawson's conceptualization of decision-making

What one does in deciding what to do is limited to catalytic actions such as deliberation or calling useful information to the mind. The rest, the occurrence of the decision with a particular content, is up to the causal work of nature. (Strawson, 2003, pp. 244-5) Thus, he argues that mental agency ends just before the decision has been formed.

Strawson notes that most of the time, decision-making happens automatically. Deliberative processes generally work automatically due to the practical need to make a decision and deciding is not a matter of action at all. In other cases, in allegedly intentional instances of deciding, Strawson appeals to the same strategy we talked about before:

[In allegedly intentional cases of deciding] there is a deliberate setting of the mind at the problem of what to do, a process of focusing on the problem, a concertion of thought, and this can be a matter of action. But what follows is, again, just a waiting for content to occur. As in the case of theoretical thought there may well be a process of refocusing and re-refocusing— that curious ballistic launching and relaunching of the mind after it has stalled or stumbled or been distracted, a recasting of it (in the fishing sense) after it has started to settle in one direction, so that it will be receptive to hitherto unengaged relevant considerations. But here again action is the underlabourer, preparatory, catalytic. There is no direct action in the actual issuing of new content, any more than there is in the growth of trees one has planted. (2003, p. 243)

According to Strawson, the occurrence of a decision with a particular content about what to do is an event that is caused by the agent's deliberative processes. We have a straightforward causal relationship between two events: one's (agential or non-agential) deliberative processes and the occurrence of the decision itself. Since agents can only have control over the former, it seems that deciding can't be a matter of action.

2.4 An Alternative View: Deciding as An Accomplishment

The main problem with this conceptualization is that it considers the event of deciding, which is the result of agential processes, as a distinct element of the analysis. In this view, the event of deciding is an instantaneous one that comes right after agential processes such as deliberation. What might be an alternative? A short answer should appeal to the fact that deciding can be considered as an accomplishment and that it is not a distinct effect, but a natural result of deliberative processes: deciding is nothing over and above deliberative processes, but just these processes' coming to an end.

Before going further, it should be noted that Strawson's account might be accurate for some mental behaviors. A full-fledged account of mental agency might decide whether this is the case. However, I only argue that his account doesn't seem to be an accurate representation of mental agency in decision-making. Thus, in criticizing Strawson, I will simply focus on decisions.

Intentional instances of deciding what to do are nothing over and above deliberative processes such as attending to reasons and inferences related to the deliberation, weighing different options, considering the pros and cons of certain ways of behaviors, imagining possible results and so and so forth. The occurrence of a particular decision is just the end of these processes, and agents, in intentional cases, are aware that their control over these processes is just their control over their decisions as there is no other way to talk about the control over one's decisions other than sci-fi scenarios. Defined in this way, the decision, which is a mental state, is the product of the mental act of deciding as a circle is of one's drawing a circle. A simplified version of my argument goes as follows:

P1: Deciding is an accomplishment.

P2: Strawson's metaphysical assumption is problematic for understanding deciding as an accomplishment.

Therefore,

We need to reject the metaphysical assumption for an accurate account of mental agency in decision-making.

To see why P1 is true, let us examine some accomplishments and how deciding demonstrates similar features. Suppose that S is drawing a circle between t_1 and t_2 . She must start from a point and continue smoothly and consistently. Throughout the process, she must adjust the compass appropriately, check whether there is any problem with the angle she holds it, try to keep her hand as stable as possible, and try to adjust the pressure applied. When one asks, "What are you doing?" at any time throughout the process, she can truly say, "I am drawing a circle". Once these and other possible actions she needs to perform are completed, the sentence "S has drawn a circle" will turn out to be true. In this case, we can say that it took her a certain time ($t_2 - t_1$) to draw the circle. It would also be appropriate to say "S was drawing a circle" for any time stretch between t_1 and t_2 .

Similarly, suppose that S is assembling a chair. Firstly, he needs to get the necessary tools such as a screwdriver and a hammer. He must join different parts using certain connectors such as screws, tighten these screws, check the alignment of certain parts, and re-assemble them if necessary. When one asks, "What are you doing?" at any time throughout these processes, he can truly say, "I am assembling a chair." This is because assembling a chair is nothing over and above these and other possibly related activities' coming to an end. Even though "S has assembled the chair" is true only after t_2 , "S is assembling a chair" would be true for any time between t_1 and t_2 .

In these cases (assembling a chair, drawing a circle), it seems absurd to think that one can only control catalytic actions (one's trying to keep one's hand as stable as possible or tightening screws respectively for the abovementioned examples) since doing these actions are just what performing the accomplishment in question is. Although it is true that one cannot be counted as having A-ed until these processes end, she can be counted as having been A-ing throughout the process. The link between these activities and the accomplishment itself is not merely causal. Accomplishments are generally constituted by a set of activities and a natural end or

a built-in goal. For “to assemble a chair”, the natural goal is obviously assembling a chair. Once this goal is reached, one can be considered as having assembled a chair. Similarly, the built-in goal of deciding is to get rid of uncertainty about a particular topic, to decide what to do.⁷ Deciding is constituted by deliberative processes, and the natural goal to decide what to do as drawing a circle is constituted by activities such as manipulating the compass, checking the stability of one’s hand throughout the process, and the natural goal of ending up with a circle. The occurrence of a circle on the paper just means that these activities were successfully performed and ended.

Similarly, the occurrence of a decision is just the end of deliberative processes. In other words, the decision is the result of deliberative processes. As drawing a circle is nothing over and beyond certain activities, deciding is nothing over and above deliberative processes.

This is also evident from the idea that one can’t end up with a decision by someone’s else command. You have to perform deliberative processes and successfully terminate them so that the result will be the occurrence of a decision. It is not obvious what deciding would be over and above deliberative processes. When one is commanded to walk somewhere, he immediately moves his legs one-by-one in a particular adjustment, tries to keep his balance and so and so forth. This is because walking is just performing these activities. Now, suppose that you are commanded to decide what to do. What would you do to be counted as deciding? There seems to be no answer other than some deliberative processes. This is because deciding is nothing over and above these processes and the control over the content of the decision is just the control over deliberative processes.

When we think of “to decide”, it seems that “to decide” takes deliberation, weighing options, attending throughout the process, checking one’s values regarding the

⁷ Mele argues that practical decisions are “prompted partly by uncertainty about what to do.” (2023, p. 256) Similarly, Shepherd thinks that this uncertainty arises due to cognitive or perceptual failure to present an immediate solution for a need or a goal. (2015, p. 342) I think all these imply that the primary goal of decision-making is getting rid of uncertainty.

decision (promises, prejudices, or goals in general), etc. This list is not an exhaustive one. In the rest of the paper, rather than trying to come up with a complete list, I will use “deliberative processes” to refer to processes that constitute deciding. The main point is that it is hard to imagine any instances of intentionally deciding what to do without performing some of these deliberative processes. Thus, it is hard to think of the occurrence of a decision as a separate event: there is no deciding without any decision-making processes. Deciding is fully constituted by deliberative processes.⁸ However, Strawson suggests a metaphysical framework where *the actual event* of deciding is a distinct event that is caused by deliberative processes. Thus, once we accept P1, P2 turns out to be true.

In other words, the occurrence of a decision is nothing over and above the fact that certain deliberative processes came to an end. The case is similar to other examples given above. There is no *distinct event* of running as something produced by activities constituting “to run” or there is no walking as the distinct effect of walking activities. Notice that if we acknowledge this, not only P1 and P2 turn out to be true, but also some accounts⁹, which consider the event of deciding as an instantaneous event, will be implausible as well. Such accounts reiterate the problematic approach of Strawson’s account in a different way. Strawson overreacts to how deliberative processes have a role in the occurrence of a decision and considers the decision as a passive gathering while deciding-as-an-instantaneous-event accounts overreact to the occurrence of a decision by considering it as a kind of active intention-formation by itself. It problematically overemphasizes the active role of the agent’s forming his decision, while undermining the active role of the agent throughout the deliberative processes.

⁸ Here, I borrow the idea of “full constitution” from A. Peacocke. She uses the term for complex actions by the performance of which one can execute several intentions at once. For instance, one can intentionally knit a scarf in order to make a gift for his girlfriend. Thus, in knitting a scarf, one can execute two intentions at once: the intention to knit a scarf and the intention to make a gift for his girlfriend. (2023, pp. 35-37) I am neutral on whether her arguments about content plurality and complex actions are accurate enough. However, I think her use of the notion is suggestive: for some intentions A and B, there might be cases where a singular performance can be counted as the execution of both. In arguing that deciding is fully constituted by deliberative processes, I mean that what it takes to decide on something is just performing deliberative processes.

⁹ Mele’s (2023) account of practical decisions is a good example. Other such accounts include McCann, 1998 and Clarke, 2003.

2.5 Some Problems for Any Account of Mental Agency and Criticisms

As mentioned at the end of the previous chapter, many philosophers criticize Strawson's account of mental agency for its overly reductive and restrictive approach. Nonetheless, most of these accounts don't take Strawson's metaphysical assumption as their direct target of criticism while it poses a serious problem for any account of mental agency. I hope our previous discussion shows why the metaphysical assumption is problematic and deserves attention.

The reader might think that my presentation of Strawson's account is not a charitable reading of Strawson's work. However, I think that the conceptual problem is worth reiterating. The problem with this analysis is its taking the decision unnecessarily as a separate event in action explanations. Suppose that I am trying to draw a circle. In a sense, my drawing a circle, if everything goes well, causes a circle to occur on the paper. In any agential analysis, the occurrence of the circle, by itself as a part of the causal chain, is rarely an important part of an action explanation. The occurrence of the circle on the paper cannot be thought of as a discrete event from my drawing it at all. It doesn't occur after my drawing process ends. Rather, the process of drawing a circle ends up with the completion of a circle. This feature is a characteristic of accomplishments.

This kind of reasoning is even more convincing for decision-making and reveals why Strawson's account of decision-making is problematic. How can we analyze the occurrence of a decision without decision-making processes? It sounds odd to talk about the occurrence of the decision as a discrete event from the processes that led to it. Deciding is a process unfolding in time and all activities constituting the accomplishment of deciding affect the result of the accomplishment as activities constituting drawing a circle affects what kind of a circle occurs as a result.

Strawson's analysis of decision as a mental happening might seem compelling at first glance. After all, it offers a systematic way to understand events involved in a

decision-making process. Strawson's account can be said to rely on an intuitive assumption that decision-making is a two-part process, with the first stage including agential processes and the second stage involving the occurrence of the decision itself. Deliberative processes, in this picture, might be a matter of mental agency since it involves agential processes such as attending, imagining, and weighing different possible options. However, the decision itself is just the distinct effect of these processes' causal work. This offers a stylistically simple method of explaining mental events. After all, one simple way to effectively explain various phenomena in the world is by appealing to cause-effect explanations.¹⁰

Although this characterization might look appealing as it offers a simplistic analysis, I think that it leads to an arbitrary separation between the deciding and decision-making processes. A cause-effect analysis might indeed be useful in explaining mental agency in general. However, this does not necessarily imply that the occurrence of the decision should be considered as a distinct element in action explanations. Recall the example of drawing a circle. When S has drawn a circle, one might truly say that a circle just occurred. This event, the occurrence of the circle, can be explained by prior actions of S. However, this doesn't necessarily mean that the occurrence of the circle is a distinct event taking place after these processes end. The occurrence of the circle unfolds in time by his drawing it.

The same is true for decisions. In intentional instances of decision-making, it is not the case that you perform deliberative activities about whether to buy a car and wait for whether a positive or negative decision will come. Throughout these processes, you might realize that you have difficulties in continuing the deliberative processes (as you might get bored or anxious) or in terminating it with a clear decision. You might end up with a decision or might fail to do so. Even though you end up with a clear decision, you might not be committed to the decision for a meaningful period of time. However, these are different issues, which does not imply that decisions come

¹⁰ We generally explain historical or scientific events in this way. Certain chemical reactions of hydrogen and oxygen cause the formation of water or a series of economic and political processes causes the fall of the Roman Empire. In a similar way, Strawson's account seems to be an attempt to explain a mental state with a particular content, a decision, by finding out its prior causes.

only after deliberative processes. The occurrence of the decision unfolds in time by your performance of deliberative activities and depends on internal, psychological or cognitive, and external, time constraints or social conditions.

There is also a phenomenological problem. In ordinary cases of decision-making, I don't think anybody will have a sense of agency throughout his deliberation processes while the occurrence of the decision lacks it. What happens, instead, is that one starts deliberating about what to do about a topic. Then, if everything goes well, he narrows down the scope of possible ways of action to consider the issue at hand according to internal and external factors until he is satisfied with the scope and value of the decision he ends up with. The agent knows that he ends up with a particular decision as he builds it step-by-step. Thus, he has active phenomenology as is the case in deliberative processes.

Furthermore, Strawson's view leads to several problematic implications. One of these implications concerns moral responsibility for decisions. An agent is morally responsible for his decision-making processes as they are agential and under her control. Moreover, decision-making processes, and decisions, must be primary objects of ethical considerations as all other possible objects, one way or another, stem from them. Pereboom notes that:

I take moral responsibility to apply primarily to decisions... The view that responsibility for decisions is especially important is driven by the sense that responsibility is fundamentally a matter of control, a kind of control agents would have primarily over their decisions, in conjunction with the fact that decisions are causally prior to consequences of decisions. Intuitions about "moral luck" cases support this view. (2001, xxi)

However, Strawson's account seems to imply that we can only be responsible for deliberative processes as we can control them directly while the occurrence of the decision is out of the scope of our agency. This seems to suggest that we are only indirectly responsible for our decisions.

In other words, although the occurrence of the decision is a direct result of these processes, it might or might not be morally attributable to the agent. This depends on

whether the agent truly foresees that the particular decision he ends up with is a direct result of the agential processes that she initiated. If we accept Strawson's metaphysical picture, we also need to acknowledge that there might be cases where the agent is morally praised or blamed for decision-making processes while she cannot be morally praised or blamed for the occurrence of the decision. This is a direct result of Strawson's account as he argues that we can only control catalytic actions while the occurrence of the decision is not a matter of agency. I know that different moral theories might offer different accounts of direct and indirect responsibility for explaining such cases. However, the problem is that people intuitively judge peoples' deliberative processes and the decision itself equally. There would not be a difference between them in normal intentional cases of decision-making.

As mentioned earlier, the Strawsonian might insist that we can be indirectly responsible for the occurrence of the decision. However, this devalues the most important element in moral assessments, namely decisions or intentions. Such an approach might be useful for cases where the occurrence of the decision is heavily affected by some external factors such as upbringing. However, in an ordinary case of intentionally deciding, it doesn't make sense. Suppose that John works for a small company and his boss hasn't paid his salary for the last three months. As he is tired of this exploitation, he tries to decide what to do in order to solve the problem. Suppose that, in his circumstances, he has only two options: explicitly asking for his money or stealing the relevant amount from the boss' safe in the office. He eliminates the first option as one of his friends was fired last week just because of it. Since the risk of being arrested doesn't seem worse than his current situation, he decides to execute the second option. Intuitively, all ethical considerations applying to his decision should apply to his decision-making processes as they are one and the same thing. It is hard to argue that some tools of ethical analysis might apply to decision-making processes while it doesn't apply to the occurrence of the decision. The boss's attitude and his current situation are highly effective in his coming to this particular decision just because they are equally effective in his decision-making processes.

One might argue that the core idea of my alternative view is similar to a possible account of agency in decision-making, which takes deciding as an extended action. Mele presents this view in the following way:

The process [which culminates in intention acquisition] centrally involves practical reflection, mental activity. It may be suggested that "practical deciding" is a name for the whole process. In any case in which an agent (nondeviantly) acquires an intention is a process of practical deciding that begins when the reflection begins and ends with the acquisition of the intention. Since much of that process is actional, and since the process is a unified whole, the process itself is properly counted as an action - specifically, an action of deciding to do something. (2000, p. 83)

Then he argues that this view is problematic in its taking "decision" as an extended action, pointing out the ordinary use of the word. He notes:

[This view] is best construed as a reformative view, as opposed to an explication of some common-sense notion of deciding. A student who says "I was up all night deciding to major in English" would be regarded as lacking a firm grip on the language. We would be strongly inclined to say that he means that he was up all night deliberating about what major to declare, or about whether to major in English, and eventually decided (or acquired an intention) to declare English as a major on the basis of his deliberation. However, on [this view], claims of the sort this student made are often true: according to this view, an instance of deciding, an extended action, begins when relevant practical reflection begins and ends when the agent (nondeviantly) acquires an intention on the basis of that reflection. (2000, p. 85)

He argues that this kind of view offers a conceptual reform without a significant need and intuitive appeal. Although the terminology is a little bit different, I think the view Mele presents is, at least partially, similar to the alternative view I presented. It seems to me that my alternative view is a version of the view he talks about. Thus, it seems that a similar criticism is applicable to my account as well.

However, I don't think that "conceptual reform" offered by such an account is objectionable. It is true that one doesn't say that "I was deciding all night" in ordinary cases. The main problem is that any other alternative puts decisions in an awkward position. Accounts that consider deciding as an instantaneous event have difficulties in explaining its intrinsic relation to the deliberation. Strawson argues that this event is non-actional while some accounts argue that there is such an instantaneous event, but it is a genuine action. The linguistic usage, I think, doesn't change this.

Moreover, some idioms can convey the same meaning as deciding. For instance, “I have decided” and “I have made a decision” are equivalent in meaning. One can insist that the same problem arises for deciding: it doesn’t make sense to say that “I was making a decision all night”. Yet, there are cases where such idioms can be used to refer to a bunch of different parts of an event. When one says that “you are being annoying”, one refers to a bunch of behaviors that can be labeled as “annoying” in a certain period of time. She doesn’t use a state verb in a grammatically incorrect way. In the same way, making a decision refers to a bunch of activities tied together with a general intention, a goal built into it as it is an accomplishment.

Further to that, the language should be an initial guide for these discussions. One doesn’t need to seek a perfect match between language and metaphysics in deciding whether conceptual reform is necessary or not. Once an alternative conceptualization offers more explanatory power, the gap between language and metaphysics might be tolerated. To reject this, one needs to claim that there must be a perfect match between language and the way things are, which is implausible in general.

Mele’s criticism can be understood as a criticism about descriptions of intentional action. He seems to argue that one can be deciding whether to A while the sentence “I was deciding to A all night” doesn’t make sense. In this case, it is true that we have different act types. Conceptually, deciding to A and deciding whether to A are not the same type of actions as one can perform the latter without performing the former. However, a single process can be a token of each. In other words, there might be cases where one’s deciding whether to A is nothing over and above his deciding (not) to A. What I present as an alternative account accommodates this.

2.6 Conclusion

In Chapter 1, we discussed a metaphysical assumption hidden in Strawson’s account of mental actions and mental agency. The current chapter has presented what this assumption problematically implies about the nature of deciding by showing the

intuitive appeal of an alternative view, according to which we should consider deciding as an accomplishment. This alternative view suggests a significant point we need to consider to understand agency in decisions: intentional instances of deciding are nothing over and beyond deliberative processes.

To show this, I argued that the verb “to decide” demonstrates features of accomplishments verbs. The event of deciding is mostly a good fit to the category of accomplishments. In this picture, the occurrence of the decision is nothing over and above deliberative processes rather than a distinct event. Nonetheless, an account of deciding, which acknowledges the alternative view presented here still can face several significant problems. Thus, in the next chapter, we will discuss what these issues might be and how an account can avoid them.

CHAPTER 3

PROBLEMS IN AGENTIAL ACCOUNTS OF DECISION: THE CONTENT PROBLEM

3.1 Introduction

In previous chapters, we saw the category of accomplishment is a better fit for ordinary instances of deciding and how this helps us to better explain agency in decisions. Even though we decide on this picture of mental agency in decisions, this doesn't mean that agential accounts of deciding will not have problems in explaining the intentionality of decisions. In this chapter, I will mention some of these problems for any agential account of decisions, such as the content problem and the regress problem, and try to show how an agential account of decisions can avoid them.

3.2 The Regress Problem and The Simple View

According to a common insight of action theory, actions are intentional under some descriptions. (Anscombe, 1963; Davidson, 1963) Intentions causally guide the performance of the action the agent decided to do. At this point, the problem with decisions should seem obvious. If we explain actions through relevant intentions, how can we explain intention/decision in terms of agency? For ordinary bodily actions, the case would seem like this: one decided to do A and then she A's.

However, if we consider a decision as a mental action, there seems to be a vicious regress where the agent needs to decide to decide to A and so forth so that we can explain the intentionality of his decision-making. The idea is that if we acknowledge that forming an intention is itself an intentional action, it must also be caused by a prior intention. This means that the formation of each intention in the chain itself should be an action and explained by prior intentions. This leads to an implausible infinite regress. This is what generates the regress problem.

This problem forces the conclusion that one must non-intentionally acquire a decision-related intention (such as a decision to intend to A or a decision to decide to intend to A etc.) and this is, I think, a plausible conclusion. However, I don't think that this is a problem for all actional accounts of decision. One reason for such a conclusion is the practical and cognitive constraints human agents have. Decision-making, one way or the other, aims to get rid of practical uncertainty about a specific topic. In most cases, agents come to realize that they need to decide what to do without specifically deliberating about whether they need to decide at all. However, in more nuanced cases, agents can also deliberate about whether they need to decide whether to decide what to do. For instance, a lazy student might try to decide whether he needs to decide what to do about his assignment or simply ignores it for the time being. Then, he finds out that deciding to make a decision about what to do is the better option as the assignment is crucial for his graduation and there is not much time for that. At that point, he just decides that he needs to decide on the assignment.

This higher-order decision will provide motivation not to give up decision-making processes about what to do. Higher-order decisions are rare, but agents sometimes need them due to different reasons. Suppose that the student in the previous example has an extremely heavy workload for a relatively short period of time. He might need to deliberate about whether he needs to decide whether to work on the assignment. If he ends up with a positive decision to do so, then he will deliberate about whether to work on the assignment. Theoretically speaking, agents can even have third-order or fourth-order decisions. However, this would rarely be effective in real life. Although

one must admit, in the face of a regress problem, that a non-actional intention must start the decision-making processes at a point, this doesn't mean that decisions can't be intentional. In deliberating whether he needs to decide whether to work on the assignment, the student exercises mental agency with a particular aim such as time-management or effective distribution of his mental energy. If he decides positively, this explains the intentionality of his decision (not) to work on the assignment.

I think that one source of the regress problem is closely related to a problem about the content of the intention. The simple version of the discussion is this:

- 1) For any A-ing, A-ing is intentional only if one has an intention to A which guides the performance of the agent
- 2) If forming the intention to A is an action, we need a second-order intention to form the intention to A and a third-order intention for the second-order intention and so and so forth.
- 3) Therefore, forming the intention to A is never an action.

Although some philosophers reject 1 (which some call The Simple View), they defend similar principles where intentions are specific enough to ensure that relevant action is caused by it. Even though the simple view is not specifically focused on the problems we will discuss about mental agency in decisions, we will discuss similar insights presented in it for the content problem. Basically, premise 1 in the aforementioned argument is a statement of what Bratman calls "The Simple View", according to which "for me intentionally to A I must intend to A..." (1984, p. 377). However, the Simple View is generally found to be implausible. Bratman thinks that the Simple View imposes an unnecessarily strong link between intentions and intentional actions.¹¹ He thinks that such a strong link between the two is also "insensitive to differences in the demands of practical reason" (1984, p. 383).

¹¹ Bratman tries to show the limitations of The Simple View with a thought experiment, which involves playing two video games. He argues that in a scenario where one tries to hit two targets, one can know that hitting both is impossible due to the nature of the game. In this scenario, two games are linked in a way that hitting both targets is impossible. Even this is so, I can "know it is difficult to hit either target, so I again decide to play both games simultaneously; I see the risk of shutting down the machines as outweighed by the increase in my chances of hitting a target." (p. 383) Supposing that I hit target 1, Simple View suggests that I must intend to hit target 1. However, the case suggests that I must also intend to hit target 2. Since I know that I cannot hit both targets, these intentions are in

Rather than the Simple View, Bratman argues for a version of the Single Phenomenon View. The basic idea is that intentions to act and intentional action both involve a state of intention. He argues that intentionally A-ing is not necessarily explained by only the intention to A as the Simple View suggests. To make sense of this, Bratman introduces what he calls *motivational potential*. If an agent is able to A while executing an intention to B, the motivational potential of B-ing includes A-ing. (1984, 396-399) Keeping intricacies in his account aside¹², his alternative principle might be something like the following:

1*) For any A-ing, A-ing is intentional either if it is caused by an intention to A or if one has an intention to B, which causes the agent's A-ing, and A-ing is within the motivational potential of his B-ing.

Although this kind of a principle might accommodate some problems in the action theory, I don't think it would be useful to solve the regress problem for decisions. Bratman's alternative suggests that we do not necessarily need an intention to A for the explanation of intentional A-ing. Nonetheless, we still need a prior intention to form an intention or another intention to B which causes my forming an intention. This will generate a similar regress at the end of the day. There might be other alternative principles as well. However, I argue that the regress problem of decisions arises due to a more fundamental problem: the content problem. Once we understand how an account of decision-making can avoid the content problem, the regress problem won't show anything further than practical constraints agents have.

3.3 The Content Problem and A Solution

In ordinary cases of intentional action, the role of relevant intentions is to initiate and guide the action throughout the performance. When I intend to grab a cup of coffee, what determines whether I will be successful in acting as I intend is my intention to grab a cup of coffee. Intentions set a criterion of success for the performance of the

conflict, and having both of them "would involve me in a criticizable form of irrationality." (p. 383) However, this conclusion is implausible as the strategy in the thought experiment seems to be reasonable. Thus, Bratman argues that we need a more nuanced account than The Simple View to explain the relationship between intentions and intentional actions.

¹² See Bratman (1984, pp. 394-399, 400-403).

action. Further, I will describe relevant movements of my body as my grabbing a cup of coffee with the help of this intention. However, in the case of deciding, what the relevant intention might be seems obscure. A good option might be *the intention to decide what to do* as agents generally, and naturally, are not sure about what to decide before they perform deliberative processes. The problem with this is that such a content provides little guidance or control to the agent so that he can be counted as intentionally deciding.

Shepherd's solution to this problem is twofold. He argues: (i) that deciding, the event of forming an intention, is an extension of deliberative activities "as the part that concludes an episode of deliberation" (2015, p. 343), and (ii) that deliberation is a kind of skilled mental activity. Let us explore these claims. Shepherd notes:

[D]eliberation is skilled mental activity. On this suggestion, deliberation is viewed as activity initiated, guided and sustained by a relevant intention: the intention to decide what to do. Further, deliberation is constituted by the exercise of mental capacities in deploying various mental operations—mental analogues of motor schemata. Call these mental operations deliberative strategies. (2015, p. 345)

Some examples of these deliberative strategies are imagining or comparing different options. When agents face a practical problem, they employ these kinds of mental operations throughout the process of deliberation with the aim of terminating deliberation with a proper decision in accordance with their conditions and constraints. In this picture, attentional attunement to practical conditions the agent has, and consideration of the relevant feedback, are important. This is analogical to a dancer's performance:

The hip swivel is produced when attention-mediated (perceptual) feedback causes an adjustment to Sue's intention to dance: when this causes an adjustment in how Sue's intention guides the sequencing of various motor schemata, or in the generation of subordinate intentions or motor commands that fill in the details of the original intention's plan. Analogously, an intention formation is produced when attention-mediated (perceptual or cognitive) feedback causes an adjustment in how the intention to decide what to do guides the sequencing of various mental operations, or in the generation of the mental operation of intention formation that fills in the details of the original intention's plan. (Shepherd, 2015, p. 347)

Once these two claims are established, Shepherd thinks that decisions need not be considered as "automatic culminations' of deliberative activity." (p. 349) This

suggests a criterion for the intentionality of decisions. A decision is an intentional action if the agent's deliberative strategies are initiated by his intention to decide what to do and if it helps the agent to guide the process by remaining attentionally attuned to the practical constraints he has.

3.4 A Partial Revision of Shepherd's Account

My solution to the problem of the content in deciding is similar to Shepherd's approach, although it differs in a certain way. Shepherd is not interested in whether the event of deciding is a momentary event of intention formation. His account just offers a way to demarcate intentional and non-intentional cases of intention formation by an appeal to the significant relationship between this event and deliberative activities, which is a skillful mental activity. (2015, p. 348) This seems to conflict with my deciding-as-an-accomplishment approach: deciding is not a momentary event of forming an intention.¹³ Deciding is nothing over and above these deliberative processes' coming to an end. I think that this approach captures the process-like character of deciding better and makes my account easier to adopt the kind of solution Shepherd suggests for the content problem.

Thus, I argue for a slightly revised version of his account. Accordingly, deciding is closely related to deliberative activities such as attending, imagining, and hypothesizing as deciding is just these activities' coming to an end. Agents start deliberation with a general intention to decide what to do when they are in practical conflict about a certain topic, where they do not clearly favour a particular course of action. Throughout these deliberative activities, the agent's intention evolves in accordance with, and in relation to, the cognitive attunement to his current situation, goals, deciding motivations, and normative values. These activities he engages in help him to adopt his intention in the process of deciding and to form sub-intentions related to the practical problem in question. For instance, a basketball player might form the intention to make a teardrop shot and start performing related actions. Throughout the process, with the help of his perceptual attunement to the

¹³ In a looser interpretation, it might be argued that the decision itself is more like a mental state and it can be the result of deliberative activities. However, the scope of my objection does not involve this as I am only concerned with the momentary event of deciding, which is the occurrence of the decision.

environment, he might form a sub-intention to change his shooting hand in the air as it is forced by the perceptual feedback. This helps him to organize the execution of the general intention by adjusting the performance as it goes in time. This is an ordinary example of skillful bodily activities. A similar story is applicable to decision-making.

Recall the example of a basketball player's skillful bodily actions. This time, the focus is not on the physical actions that he performs, but on the decision leading up to them. Suppose that the basketball player has the intention to decide what kind of play he needs to appeal to in the last possession of the game. While dribbling the ball, he is trying to decide what to do. Realizing that defenders laid back, he might think that the best option would be a teardrop shot and form the intention to make a teardrop. Then, he would need other sub-intentions about the details of this decision. In this way, his general intention to decide what kind of a play he will make evolves in time by producing sub-intentions related to the practical problem at hand. This process ends up with a particular decision when the agent successfully terminates these deliberative processes, which is guided by the general intention to decide what play to make. All of this is possible only when he engages in the activity and attends to the circumstances his deliberative processes require.

One reason for the plausibility of an account of deciding as a skillful mental activity lies in the nature of decision-making. One might argue that in cases of bodily skillful activities, we still have an intention that is specific enough at the beginning of the performance while the intention to decide what to do is too open-ended for guiding the performance of action. However, deciding is, by its nature, epistemically open: it is an activity determining a particular course of action as favorable for the agent and providing the agent's commitment to it. One must take this feature of decision-making into account to determine whether a decision can be agential at all. It seems that decision-making can't be guided by a relevant intention in the way that a skillful bodily action can since the content of the relevant intention in decision-making is problematically open-ended.

Actually, there are mental actions other than decisions that have this feature of epistemic openness. One can act on such unspecific intentions in other cases, too. Think of the way you solve a sudoku puzzle. Once you form an intention to solve a sudoku puzzle, you will need to perform various actions such as trying out different combinations of numbers or imagining different possibilities. All these activities, the completion of which is solving the puzzle, have the aim of solving the puzzle in common. Once these activities are completed, this means you have solved the puzzle. Naturally, before completion of these activities, you don't know the solution to the puzzle as this would make the activity meaningless. However, none of this seems to imply that the activity of solving the puzzle is not an intentional action.

Activities heavily relying on improvisation also present a similar picture. Suppose John has a role in a theatre play and he is allowed to improvise in certain scenes. Once John intends to improvise a scene, he doesn't know where exactly the scene will end up. He performs certain actions such as uttering a sentence, introducing an object, or reacting to some people from the audience. Yet, he doesn't know exactly where the scene is going and doesn't know what the result is going to be. He will figure it out as he performs. Once all these activities come to their conclusion, the scene is crafted by John. His creating the relevant scene by improvisation doesn't seem to be just a thing that happens after his activities on the stage.

Deciding has a similar kind of epistemic openness for the agent. While performing deliberative activities, one doesn't exactly know what kind of a decision he will end up with. This is the point of making a decision. In the way I can intentionally solve a sudoku puzzle without really knowing what that would amount to (and hence not aiming at any particular solution), I can intentionally decide what to do without knowing in advance what decision I would make (and hence not aiming at any particular decision). I can make a decision without knowing which particular decision I will end up with in the way I can improvise a scene without knowing what kind of artistic product I will end up with. In these cases, epistemic openness is unavoidable and intrinsic to the nature of activity. This epistemic openness doesn't

undermine the status of improvisation as an action. It doesn't seem to me that things the improvisational actor does are things that just happen to him.

To make this clear, consider, for instance, how we assign responsibility for improvised actions. It seems that we generally hold the actor responsible for what he does while we do not have this attitude for things that just happen to him. The epistemic openness doesn't harm the possibility of moral responsibility. As an actor should still be responsible for the improvised scene, and the puzzle-solver for solving the puzzle in a particular way, an agent is responsible for intentional instances of decision-making. Throughout the improvisation process, what happens on the stage doesn't happen without his control and input. An agent is responsible for intentional decisions as an actor deserves appraisal or blame for his performance.

3.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I discussed some problems in explaining the intentionality of deciding such as the regress problem and the content problem. I argued that the regress problem is closely related to what Bratman calls "The Simple View" and a similar principle is implicitly assumed in the discussion of the regress problem in intentions. Thus, the regress problem seems to be an expansion of a deeper problem about the content of intention. To solve the content problem, I revise Shepherd's suggestion of deliberation as skillful mental activity and argue that decision-making is a skillful mental activity. Although deciding has epistemic openness in a problematic way, it seems that one can intentionally perform certain actions with intentions that have problematically open-ended content.

CONCLUSION

I have argued that the implicit metaphysical assumption in Strawson's account is widespread in many accounts of mental agency. The assumption was that for a mental behavior A, A-ing occurs only after certain processes, which might (not) be agential, that lead up to an event of A-ing. This leads many philosophers to argue that decisions cannot be agential. However, I argued that this difficulty can be overcome.

To that end, I have benefited from the Vendler-Kenny typology of verbs to show that the decision-as-an-accomplishment approach is more intuitive than Strawson's metaphysical picture. I have also argued that other alternative accounts of mental agency, which do not problematize the assumption in question, can only offer a partial solution. The basic idea is that one must acknowledge that deciding is nothing over and above deliberative processes and decision is the result of deliberation. Lastly, I discussed some problems an account of mental agency of decisions can face such as the content problem. My solution to the problem was a version of Shepherd's account, which argues that deliberation is a mental skillful activity.

Overall, the way we conceptualize events involved in decision-making affects what we should think about the scope of mental agency in decisions. I argued that some decisions can be a direct result of the exercise of our mental agency. A pessimistic account of mental agency such as Strawson's account might look reasonable. Nonetheless, once we appreciate that we should replace the metaphysical picture his

account implies with the deciding-as-an-accomplishment approach, it is possible to leave theoretical room for intentional instances of decision-making.



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