Conscious Intentions and Mental Causes

Adrian Haddock

Alfred R. Mele. *Effective Intentions: The Power of Conscious Will.* New York: Oxford University Press 2009. 178 pages.

It is a commonplace that we intend to do things, and that – sometimes – when we are doing things, we are doing them because of what we intend to do. (I am die-casting because I intend to forge a sprocket. I am plucking my lute because I intend to compose a madrigal.) It is also a commonplace that – sometimes – when we are doing things because of what we intend to do, we are aware of what we intend to do. (When I am getting out my grappling hook because I intend to scale the cliff face, I am aware that I intend to scale the cliff face.) If we allow ourselves to indulge in philosophers' predilection for noun-phrases, we could express this last commonplace by saying that – sometimes – when we are doing things, we are doing them because of our conscious intentions; or, if we allow ourselves to indulge in this predilection still further, that – sometimes – our conscious intentions – cause our actions.

We do not seem to have travelled very far away from the realm of the commonplace into the realm of the philosophically and psychologically contentious. So, it can come as something of a shock to encounter a prominent neuroscientist telling us that "The seminal studies of the [neuroscientist] Benjamin Libet [have] suggested that conscious intention … cannot cause our actions" (Patrick Haggard, 'Conscious Intention and Motor Cognition', *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, vol. 9: 290-295 (2005), p. 291; cited on 72). Can it really be that, when we come out with these commonplaces – something which most of us do, in one form or another, every day of our lives – what we are saying is not merely of interest to neuroscience, but, in the view of certain prominent neuroscientists, probably false? What are these "seminal studies"? And do they really suggest what they are said to?

In his main experiment, Libet invited people to flex the wrists or fingers of their right hand "whenever they wish" (31) – although, presumably, within *some* sort of designated time period – and took electrical readings from their scalps as they did so. And he asked them to attend to when they first become conscious of a mental item, prior to their action, "that [he] variously describes as an 'intention', 'urge', 'wanting', 'decision', 'will', or 'wish' to flex" (32), and to report – with the help of a clock – the time at which they first become conscious

of this prior mental item. The result was that, across a significant range of cases, the time which people reported as the time of the onset of this consciousness was anterior to the time of the onset of their muscle contractions by about 200 milliseconds, but posterior to the time of the onset of 'readiness potential' by about 350 milliseconds. The concept of 'readiness potential' – from the German *Bereitschaftspotential* – is rather striking. In part, it is the concept of activity in the motor cortex the effects of which are observable on an electroencephalogram. But it is a concept which is instantiated only if, posterior to the occurrence of the relevant brain activity, a *voluntary* muscle contraction occurs.

Philosophers writing (mainly in Britain) in the 1950s and 1960s – notably J.L. Austin and Gilbert Ryle – offered rather stringent accounts of the conditions under which it is correct to describe something as 'voluntary'. (It is a fair bet that the conditions under which neuroscientists are prepared to describe muscle contractions as voluntary do not confirm to *these* strictures.) That Alfred Mele does not exploit these – now rather recherché – accounts in his critical assessment of the bold conclusions which have been drawn from Libet's experiments is not surprising, for Mele is typical of contemporary philosophers in rejecting these accounts. However, it is interesting to think about how his assessment differs from the kind of assessment which certain philosophers from this earlier generation might have offered, in part because it brings out just how questionable these bold conclusions are.

Mele's main foil is the psychologist Daniel Wegner, author of *The Illusion of Conscious Will* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002) – to which the subtitle of Mele's book alludes. Wegner takes the view that even though Libet's experiment can seem to suggest "that the experience of will is a link in a causal chain leading to action … in fact it might not even be that … [i]t might just be a loose end – one of those things, like the action, that is caused by prior brain and mental processes" (p. 5, cited on 32). As Mele reads him, what Wegner is trying to say here is that, even though Libet's experiment can seem to suggest that the relevant brain process is a cause of the experience of will which in turn is a cause of the action, it might be that the brain process is a cause of the action and the experience of will, but the experience of will is not itself a cause of the action. Given the bold and provocative thesis which the title of Wegner's book suggests, this is a surprisingly weak claim. Wegner seems to acknowledge that Libet's main experiment does not itself tell in favour of the causal impotence, with respect to action, of the experience of will.

However, Mele invites us to suppose that the experience of will is not a cause of action – just as Wegner conjectures – and then to ask what the upshot would be. The upshot would not be that our conscious intentions cannot cause our

 © ProtoSociology

actions, even if we assume that the idea of experience of will – the idea of consciousness of a prior mental item of the right sort; the sort of consciousness relevant to Libet's experiment – is the same as the idea of awareness of what we intend to do which figures in the commonplaces. For it does not follow from the fact that our experience of will is not a cause of our action that the will which we experience is not a cause of our action. Or as we might put it, given this assumption: it does not follow from the fact that our consciousness of our intentions cannot cause our actions that our conscious intentions – the intentions we have of which we are conscious – cannot cause our actions. Mele insists that this does not follow (107-8), and on this point he is clearly right.

But, the assumption which I have just invited us to make is – to say the least – questionable. This can be brought out by considering an intriguing point of congruence between psychologists such as Wegner, and at least one member of the aforementioned earlier generation of philosophers. In her remarkable monograph *Intention* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1957), G.E.M. Anscombe maintains that our intentional actions need not, and in many cases do not, have what she calls 'mental causes' – e.g., mental items, prior to our actions, of which we are conscious, which cause our actions. On this point, Anscombe stands foursquare with these psychologists and – it seems – against Mele, for it seems that Mele wants to insist not only that items of this sort can cause our actions, but also that there is no reason for us to deny that, in many cases, our actions are caused by items of this sort.

Given the assumption, we might say that her point is that, in many cases, conscious intentions do not cause our actions. But I have no doubt that she would reject the assumption – and, consequently, this way of putting her point – on the following ground. The commonplace idea of awareness of what one intends to do is not the idea of consciousness of a prior mental item, because to speak of what one intends to do is not to speak of an item prior to the action – which may or may not stand to the action as a link on a causal chain – but simply to speak of the unfolding action in a way which (e.g.) remains relatively noncommittal as to how far it has unfolded. Her picture is one in which, in the fundamental case, intentional actions are explained by larger actions of which they are phases or stages (I am plucking my lute because I am composing a madrigal; I am getting out my grappling hook because I am scaling the cliff face). We can re-describe a case in which an action is explained by a larger action in this way as a case in which an action is explained by an intention, as in the opening commonplaces. But that is not to speak of any item other than the smaller action or the larger action. It is simply to re-describe the case in a way which (e.g.) does not commit one to thinking that the larger action has

unfolded very far. (I say 'I am getting out my grappling hook because I intend to scale the cliff face' and not 'I am getting out my grappling hook because I am scaling the cliff face', not because I am *not* scaling the cliff face, but because my action of doing so is only in its very early stages). In this picture, awareness of what one intends to do is not awareness of an item prior to one's action, but knowledge of what one is doing – knowledge of one's action – which itself remains relatively noncommittal as to how much one has done. (For an extensive elaboration of this picture, see Michael Thompson, 'Naïve Action Theory', in his *Life and Action: Elementary Structures of Practice and Practical Thought* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008).)

As far as I can see, Mele does not reject the assumption. And that helps to explain why he thinks he needs to take issue with the conclusions of scientists such as Haggard and Wegner in order to hold on to commonplaces about action and intention such as those with which we began. Anscombe's work is interesting, in the present context, because it suggests that it is possible to hold on to the commonplaces without disputing the conclusions. For even if it was true that our actions *cannot* be caused by mental items, prior to our actions, of which we are conscious, the commonplaces would not be affected. We could still be doing things because of what we intend to do, and we could still be aware of what we intend to do when we are doing them. In this sense, our conscious intentions could still cause our actions.

To say this is not to dispute any of the substantive critical points which Mele makes in this exceptionally well-argued book. Mele has very sensible things to say, not only about the supposed consequences of Libet's experiments for whether our actions have mental causes in the present sense (chapters 2 and 3) and for the free will debate (chapter 4), but also regarding Wegner's work more generally (chapter 5) and about the epistemic status of consciousness-reports of the sort to which psychologists and neuroscientists frequently appeal (chapter 6). However, it *is* to suggest that there might be a way of thinking about action and intention which could face even the most provocative conclusions which Mele considers with something like equanimity.

Adrian Haddock
Department of Philosophy
University of Stirling
Stirling
Scotland

 © ProtoSociology