

Comment on Knobe and Burra

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Abstract

In my commentary I consider Knobe and Burra's experimental approach to examining intention and intentional action in regard to folk psychology. As I reflect on their findings, which suggest that there may not necessarily be a privileged correspondence between the terms intention and intentionally as concepts, I begin to question the possible implications of this claim. Specifically, I raise questions regarding areas in which there might be reasons for pairing the concepts together and whether or not, in any practical sense, this conceptual connection could ever be eradicated.

Joshua Knobe and Arudra Burra provide us with a close examination of the terms "intention" and "intentionally". At first glance it appears as if these words should necessarily be allied in some way, if only because a familiar resonance fills our minds when we hear such similar sounding words used in close proximity. Indeed, it is difficult at times to comprehend how a person could exhibit the behavior of acting *intentionally* in the cognitive sense while at the same time being alleviated from the responsibility implicated in the directed mental state that is *intention* in the volitional sense. Yet Knobe and Burra argue that there is no reason to assume a privileged correspondence between the two concepts. The tendency to do so, they maintain, is the result of a discussion which is conducted primarily in the English language (K&B, 2). When they shift their attention to different languages, it raises the possibility that these terms are not in fact fundamentally associated.

If the aforementioned relations are to be considered legitimate and not merely coincidental, then they should be able to withstand cross-cultural comparisons. Hence Knobe and Burra make several analogous translations across a number of languages, but to best make their case they focus on the Hindi "jaan" or "to know" and its adverb counterpart "jaan-bujhkar" or "knowingly". *Jaan*, the authors relate, is a fair equivalent for the root of 'intentional' and thus, "...the word

for 'intentional' is derived from the word for 'know.'" (K&B, 11) This is quite different from intentional's English origin in intention. They then demonstrate the significance of this distinction through the use of two experimental conditions, referred to as the help/harm vignettes.

The first vignette shows that, in English, a clear distinction is made between an intended action versus what is simply foreseen as occurring. The disparity in how the outcomes are viewed depends solely upon the moral status attributed to the act in question. If an outcome is deemed morally bad, then it is likely to be considered the result of an intentional act. On the other hand, if an outcome is perceived as morally good then that result is generally relegated to the rank of an unintended consequence. When the same test is administered in Hindi, randomly assigned participants were again far more likely to attest that the act was done "knowingly" when the outcome was viewed as morally bad or harmful. Consequently this consistent co-variance shows that, while the underlying folk psychology seems to be no different from a moral standpoint, any notion of a privileged morphology between the concept of intention and intentional action falls apart.

Knobe and Burra's approach is unique in that it focuses chiefly on multi-lingual root words in order to invalidate the anglo-centric

supposition that intention and intentional action must be fundamentally related. However, prior to reaching the conclusion that these words are only accidentally related, perhaps the authors should also consider other reasons for which they might be paired together. Might it not also be reasonable to suggest that different forms of the word intention are used in diverse, distinct ways depending upon the circumstances? There is, it seems, still a difference between doing something intentionally and doing something accidentally or unintentionally. If I was intending to pick up a glass but unintentionally knocked it over and spilled the liquid from it, there are no moral consequences to examine. In cases like this, both intention and intentional action seem at least somewhat united when contrasted with a mutual opposite, that is, unintentional action. Despite this observation, if Knobe and Burra's claims are correct and "...the word 'intentional' is misleading about the concept it expresses," we might ask, where does that leave us philosophically? (*K&B*, 11).

At different points throughout the article, the authors refer to the work of other researchers which discredits the apparent contradictions involved in claiming that one may act intentionally or cognitively without having the intention or volition to bring about a certain result (*K&B*, 3, 6). While it is not the focus of their investigation, Knobe and Burra seem to have provided corroborating evidence as to how this division is possible. This is why I believe that we should further examine the ethical implications involved in the folk interpretations of acting intentionally. If common sense wisdom does indeed lead a majority of persons to link intentional acts to moral status, then perhaps some of the most observable applications of these types of judgments are employed by the criminal justice system. It is here where we may depart from the domain of experimental vignettes and seek real life applications.

Criminal trials involve a multi-step process. First, an accused person must be deemed competent to stand trial with evidence that the person had a capacity to act intentionally. That is, the accused must have been able to form a cognitive awareness of acting purposefully. Secondly, having established competency, the prosecution must prove that the person did in fact act intentionally in some behavioral manner.

The question then becomes a matter of *mens rea*, or whether or not there was criminal, volitional intent behind an action that would make it both morally and legally reprehensible. It is this specific concept of intent that separates the murder from the mistake, or the hero from the villain.

Therefore it would seem that a system which is based both upon acting intentionally in a behavioral sense as well as forming a concept of willful intent, would be well advised to take note of Knobe and Burra's experiment. If we can show a linguistic variation between multiple communities and root words, then is it also possible that standards of evidence could similarly be based upon an errant morphology?

Nonetheless, linking "intention" with "intentionally" is a habit so deeply entrenched that I question whether, from a practical standpoint, we could ever impress this difference upon the everyday understanding of the general public. It remains to be seen how we could realistically expunge this wayward connection from common usage. Perhaps another folk psychology experiment could ask participants to define intentional action without using the concept of a purpose or intention. These results could potentially provide more insight into the practice of making interpretive conclusions that are based on semantic intuitions. Yet it may still be wise to continue considering the potential implications of Knobe and Burra's work and their repudiation of the notion that there is a substantial, privileged relationship between the concept of intention and that of intentional action.

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