

## **Thomas Pink – Reason and Agency**

The purpose of Pink's paper is to show that the consensus since Hobbes, that agency should be explained by motivations, misses off half the subject; namely, the view that agency is (also) explained by practical reasons (rationality) – a view classically reflected in Aquinas. He describes the motivations behind the Hobbesean view and claims that, because these motivations don't apply today, the Hobbesean view should not therefore hold the field, and such philosophers as Donald Davidson ought to reconsider their positions.

### **Motivation-based theories of agency (eg. Davidson, Hobbes)**

In western philosophy, the commonly accepted understanding of agency is that actions are explained by psychological motivations. We do something intentionally if we do it for a purpose – if we have a “pro attitude” in mind that directs us towards some end, and a belief that our action is likely to bring this end about.

### **Davidson**

Davidson's views are substantially what Pink is reacting against, so it's a good idea to have read the paper quoted by Pink – namely *Intending* - though presumably *Actions, Reasons and Causes* and *Agency* are also useful background.

Davidson holds that for an action to be performed for a reason, the agent must have a pro attitude to a class of actions of a certain type, and a belief that the action in question belongs to this class.

We can also come to hold desires for reasons. However, even though motivated by reasons, we don't usually just choose to have a particular desire. Davidson explains this as arising because desire-formation is not usually purposive; we do not form desires as means to an end. Additional beliefs and desires might cause us to believe that doing a particular action might further the ends of those desires, but not that desiring to do that action would further those ends.

Is intending an action ? Davidson thinks not, because desire-formation is non-purposive. Pink thinks Davidson is correct to say that particular decisions to act aren't taken purposively as means to ends. As before, it's doing A rather than deciding to do A that's important. We deliberate about doing A, not about deciding to do A. Decisions aren't based on a pro-attitude to some end and a belief that deciding to do A will further that end, but rather a belief that doing A will further that end.

### **Hobbes**

Davidson's ideas of characterising human agency in terms of practical motivation aren't new but can be traced back to Hobbes, for whom a voluntary act proceeds from the will. This sounds irrelevant until Pink informs us that, for Hobbes, the will is equivalent to our beliefs and pro attitudes (“appetites” in Hobbes' terms), which define the purposes for which we act. As for Davidson, a Hobbesean does A just in case he has a pro attitude towards certain ends and a belief that doing A might bring them about.

Hobbes' approach is in contrast to Aquinas', whose account of human agency was based on an action-motivating capacity to apply practical reason.

### **Practical reason-based theories of human agency (Aquinas)**

Aquinas restricted the application of motivation-based theories of agency to non-rational animals. Instinct mimics the beliefs in rational beings that certain acts would further the ends desired. In contrast, adult humans possess a capacity for practical rationality – ie. to reason and form judgements about which actions they would be justified<sup>1</sup> in performing. For Aquinas, the will is a rational appetite. Pink uses a sentence full of buzz-words to unpack Aquinas' concept of the will; namely “an action-motivating capacity for decision-making and intention formation” ... deep breath ... “whereby (humans) could respond, well or defectively, to reason in practical form – to available rational justifications for and against performing specific actions”. So, the will makes decisions and forms intentions based on rational justifications pro and con a specific action<sup>2</sup>.

According to Aquinas, we can still botch our use of reason and thereby act irrationally. A voluntary action involves the operation of reason, whether effectively or otherwise. Exercise by us of practical rationality just is an action (or an equally voluntary restraint therefrom).

For Aquinas we are active when conforming to or violating the requirements of a practical agency-governing reason. Pink thinks that it's in our decision-making that we're particularly rational or irrational. So, our decisions to act are cases of agency – this is in stark contrast to the Hobbes / Davidson view. Hence, Aquinas held a dual-order theory of agency. Actions are not just the doing or refraining but also the prior deciding to do or refrain. It is up to us, and within our control, which actions we decide or will to do (just as it is within us actually to do them). Aquinas' view accommodates an important view of agency as commonly conceived – that it's up to me whether I decide to do A or B, just as it's up to me, when the time comes, whether I actually do A or B. Even Daniel Dennett agrees this is part of what free will seems to us to be. Deciding to act isn't something I can do inadvertently. But more than this, decisions to act are deliberate doings that determine our deliberate doings (sic) and exercise our capacity for self-determination<sup>3</sup>.

There are two levels of agency – first order agency (eg. deliberately raising a hand) but also second order agency that exercises our capacity (by our own deliberate doing in making decisions) to leave ourselves motivated to perform particular first-order actions. So, in contrast to Davidson, Aquinas thought that decision-making is an action, though neither thought that decision-making need be purposive.

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<sup>1</sup> Does he mean morally or rationally justified ?

<sup>2</sup> Note : look up what Pink has to say contra Aquinas' intellectualism – Pink seems to separate the intellect from the will, which is purely executive rather than deliberative in his view. See *The Psychology of Freedom* where Pink defends his *voluntarist* theory.

<sup>3</sup> In case I forget, it seems that much of Pink's exegesis of Davidson and the “motivation” approach to agency is a *reductio ad absurdum* to show that it misses off (and has to miss off, on its own account ... hence all the discussion of motivation to do, rather than motivation to decide to do) the most important part of agency (the decision-making itself) and leaves only the execution.

Aquinas distinguishes commanded from elicited actions. If my deliberations reach a conclusion that (to achieve some end) I ought to perform some action, then in effect I command myself to perform the action, which is accordingly purposive. However, according to Pink (rather obscurely) Aquinas thought that there were also non-purposive elicited actions prior to the commanded actions. This action is the decision to act (rather than the action itself). We don't deliberate about the act of deliberation<sup>4</sup>. The decision to act is elicited rather than commanded by practical reason. However, such elicited actions (decisions) are as much actions as are the actions decided upon since they are exercises of practical rationality.

The concept of second order agency was common currency in the late middle ages, though controversies arose about whether it should be conceptualised in intellectualist or voluntarist terms – ie. whether it is the intellect itself or the will apart from the intellect that is free.

Summary of scholastic versus early modern view : the scholastics considered that human agency is the exercise of practical rationality – that there is a second-order agency consisting in the operation of a rational appetite by which we can use practical reason to motivate ourselves. The early moderns denied the operation of second-order agency and restricted agency to the first-order action under purposive motivation.

### **Reason in practical form**

Human agency is characterised by rational & practical justifications – exercises of our rationality governed by reason in practical form. At last Pink gets round to saying what he means by this, ie. what it is for a mode of justification to be practical. How would we persuade someone to perform some action ? Pink suggests by persuading them that the action would cause (or, better, constitute) a desirable outcome. So, practical reason is directed towards the ends at which the agency might aim. On this analysis, agency is means-end justifiable. Performing a particular action counts as agency only in case the rationality of that action depends on the ends of, or furthered by, the action being desirable. Why this restriction ? Because agency relates to the exercise of control; not universally, because we can still act as agents under compulsion<sup>5</sup>, but at least our exercising control over and through the act performed<sup>6</sup>. Anything that counts as a genuine doing – an act - must by nature allow it to be an exercise of control, including its governance by reason<sup>7</sup>. Practical rationality, therefore, governs the exercise of control. Means-end justifiability just is reason governing the exercise of control.

With this theory as a basis, we understand the common intuition that desires are passive, not formed by deliberate acts. However, we've made no appeal to the non-purposiveness of desires. What makes desiring to do A rational is the desire-

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<sup>4</sup> I'm not sure what Pink means here, and my translation may be in error. We don't deliberate about the deliberation, but do we not deliberate about the decision ? The decision is the culmination of our deliberation, rather than the deliberation itself.

<sup>5</sup> But we wouldn't be called a free agent in this case. Still, agency and freedom are not co-extensive.

<sup>6</sup> Presumably, the compulsion must be of the "soft" sort – ie. compelled on pain of death (we could refuse and face the penalty), not compelled to hit the ground having been thrown out of the window, where we are a patient rather than an agent.

<sup>7</sup> Re-read this passage. Can't make sense of it. Plummeting seems to be ruled out as an action (correctly) – hitting the pavement isn't the same sort of event as hitting a punch-bag.

worthiness of doing A, which is itself justified by the desirable ends that doing A might further. So, desire isn't means-end justifiable - justified as directly furthering the desirable ends - but is one step back from this.

When does deciding or intending count as agency ? Only when the intention is formed in a non-desire-like way, as an action where the rationality of the intention depends on the likelihood of that intention itself furthering desirable ends, and not just of the object of the intention (the act intended) doing so. Deciding or intending counts as agency only if making the decision or intention is itself means-end justifiable.

Pink says that he has argued in *The Psychology of Freedom*, that decisions to act are means-end justifiable events because the will is a capacity we exercise in the application of practical reason. Decisions co-ordinate over time the performance of our actions and facilitate reason's government of first-order agency. Decision in advance lets us know what actions we will perform in the future and allows the co-ordination of present and future actions and ensures the diachronic justification of actions. Pink argues elsewhere that the action-co-ordination function of decisions is what makes them means-end justifiable; and this applies not just to "A or not-A" but "A or B". This ties in with our ordinary conception of second-order agency - of deciding what (not just whether) to do. This is only true if the decision itself, and not just the act decided on, is means-end justifiable and explained in terms of ends.

The ends furthered by deciding now to do A, and those actually furthered by later doing A, may differ - and do so in a way that impacts on our effective co-ordination of actions over time. However tempting it is to perform an act compared to the alternatives, it may still not be rational to decide to do it. Decisions to act only fulfil their function of co-ordinating our actions over time if they ensure a persistent motivation up to the time of action to act in accord with the decision. If we're likely to change our mind when it comes to actual performance, it may not be rational to decide to perform the action in the first place. Action-coordinatory justifications for taking particular decisions depend on that decision being motivatory - ie. as making us more likely to perform the action itself<sup>8</sup>. This is what makes decisions<sup>9</sup> (rather than only actions) means-end justifiable.

Pink alleges that decisions can be means-ends justifiable even when they are not purposive. He first explores the (he says, important) link between means-ends justifiability and purposiveness by looking at acts (rather than decisions). If doing X is means-ends justifiable (it furthers some desirable end) then it is rational to perform the act motivated by this reason. So, doing X for means-ends justifiable reasons therefore implies that doing X can be purposive, motivated by the beliefs about the ends supposedly furthered by doing X. However, there can be non-purposive means-ends justifications for doing X. Pink says that even though A is motivated to do X, which is means-ends justifiable, this doesn't mean that A is motivated by beliefs about what ends doing X would further or that A is doing X purposively as a means to an end<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> I originally wrote "The co-ordinatory process depends on the decision being an adequate indicator that the action decided on will be performed." While true, this isn't the point Pink was making.

<sup>9</sup> This is probably the critical argument in the paper ?

<sup>10</sup> What is he on about here ?

As Pink has said before, intending to do X and doing X can have different justifications, related to the potentially different ends furthered by intending to do X and actually doing X. Not surprisingly, having an action-coordinatory justification depends on the decision being a good action co-ordinator – ie. leaving one with a lasting motivation to perform the action. The ends likely to be furthered by deciding to do A and actually doing or attempting A are likely to differ if the connection between the intention and the action is weak. Our decision to decide to do A isn't then settled by whether it would be good to do or attempt A in the future.

However, ordinary decisions do have a good connection between decision and action, leading to convergence of ends likely to be furthered by the decision and the future action. Questions of decisions and actions need not then be separated. So, practical deliberation is usually about the actions rather than the decisions. By default, we ignore the ends furthered by the decision. Motivations for deciding to do A are therefore about ends likely to be furthered by doing A, not those likely to be furthered by deciding to do A. Consequently, our first order, but not usually our second order, actions are purposive. In Aquinas' terminology – our first order actions are commanded by reason, our second order actions only elicited.

Aquinas felt that voluntary agency in general was means-ends justifiable. He believed that our decisions or willings, as well as our actions, could be rationally deliberated about as means to ends, and so be commanded. Reason can judge that it would be good to will something and command that act of will. This is consistent with actions of the will being non-purposive. What was essential was its practical, rather than purposive, mode of justification. To act is to exercise rationality governed by reason in action-governing form<sup>11</sup>.

### **The development of motivation-based accounts of human agency**

Pink rehearses yet again the two alternative accounts of human agency. Firstly, Aquinas' theory of human agency based on practical rationality with means-ends justification of both decision and action. This was subsequently challenged by the Hobbesean tradition viewing agency as purposive motivation, with decision not usually being purposive; leading to doubt that there is agency or freedom of the human will.

Pink's alleged reasons for the Hobbesean move :-

1. scepticism about human practical rationality (radical anti-Pelagianism)
2. reconceptualisation of rational agency
3. scepticism about practical reason

#### **1. Scepticism about human practical rationality**

Belief in second-order agency depends on human rationality. In the western Christian tradition, this rationality is in tension with the doctrines of the fall and original sin. Anti-Pelagianism views the fall as damaging to practical rationality. The damage may

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<sup>11</sup> Isn't all this either circular or repetitious ?

not be total, with the will retaining a rational appetite, but the pull is away from a practical reason-based conception of human agency. Pink claims that for Calvin, the reason of fallen humanity has no motivational power whatever. Our motivations are no longer affected by rational judgements. The quote from Calvin's Institutes is to the effect that natural man's ability to make accurate moral judgements and act on them is, while not eradicated, seriously ruined<sup>12</sup>. Pink sees Calvin as seeing human motivation descended to animal appetite; Calvin's point relates to what is truly good for man (in the light of eternity). Calvin claims that, like an animal, man follows the inclination of his nature without reason or deliberation. Even if an impulse of nature propels him to seek the good, this does not constitute freedom of the will as it proceeds from impulse rather than from reason. Calvin thinks that for freedom of the will, man needs to discern the good by right reason, then choose the good, then follow it.

## **2. The reconceptualisation of rational agency**

Aquinas' account of human agency left a rift between the psychology of rational humans and that of non-rational animals. On Aquinas' view, the psychological attitudes key to human agency – the will and the intellect – are entirely absent in animals. Secondly, he espoused reason-dualism, where the non-rational passions and sensory capacities of both humans and animals were material, though the distinctively rational intellectual faculties of human agency were immaterial.

Hobbes accepted that humans could undertake practical reason while animals could not, but held a materialist account of human nature central to his metaphysical and political project, in which human psychology was continuous with, if more developed than, animal psychology. Human agents do not have immaterial psychological attitudes lacked by animals but only more complex and various action-explanatory psychological attitudes of the same kind. Hobbes applied what had been an exclusively animal theory of agency to humans. Both human and animal agency is explained as a product of the will – in which purposive motion is explained by the deliberative interaction of desires for ends and beliefs about how such ends might be achieved. Distinctively human practical reasoning arises through language rather than immaterial psychological faculties. While the psychological states of beliefs and attitudes are language-independent, in humans they can be recorded and expressed in language. According to Hobbes, language and concomitant reason is an invented tool enabled by our greater intelligence which enables us to reach general conclusions from particular cases. There are no greater differences between reasoning and non-reasoning beings that between humans who can and cannot write. While not sceptical about human reason (as was Calvin) Hobbes did not appeal to reason in accounting for human agency, which is just a special case of animal agency.

## **3. Scepticism about practical reason itself**

Hume thought that human agency is not governed by reason at all. For Hume, the will is a phenomenological marker for subsequent action, rather than a locus of rational appetite and second order agency; it is merely an internal impression we're conscious of when we make a bodily movement or perceive something.

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<sup>12</sup> Note that Calvin is talking about the natural man, not the new man in Christ. The context is also moral judgement.

Pink thinks there's no necessary connection between adoption of the motivation-based conception of human agency and scepticism about practical reason. We might still adopt an accurate practical reason-based model of common-sense psychology, but yet doubt that our ordinary conception of our own agency is correct. However, this isn't the usual position, for those who put forward the motivation-based theory of agency usually do so as an explanation of agency as commonly conceived. Hobbes denied that belief in an agency of the will was common sense, but was rather a scholastic invention.

Pink, however, thinks that belief in an agency of the will must be part of common-sense psychology for Dennett to recognise it as such. He also thinks that it can be accounted for by a practical reason-based conception of agency combined with decision rationality; both our decisions and the actions they explain are governed by the same practice-governing reason, however different they may be in their motivation.

In conclusion, Pink claims that the practical reason-based model of human agency is central to the history of the subject and explains our ordinary conception of agency. If Hume is right and agency isn't governed by reason at all, it will fail to be an adequate account, but Pink doesn't discuss the matter here. What Pink doesn't like is that the motivation-based theory is just assumed unreflectively and the practical reason-based model neglected. Pink is particularly disappointed in Davidson, who does not share the (alleged) intellectual preconceptions that motivated the motivation-based theory, which Pink summarises as:-

- A radically anti-Pelagian theological anthropology
- Denial of the normative in human psychology<sup>13</sup>
- A desire for a language- and reason-independent continuity between humans and animal psychological attitudes and faculties
- Outright reason-scepticism

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<sup>13</sup> Ie. that human psychology tells us what we ought to do ("ought" in a reasonable or moral sense) ?