

Intentions and Causes - Why do I do what I do?

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When asked why we did whatever we did, we usually can come up with a more or less plausible reason. This reason will normally take the form of an intention: I did this in order to obtain that. Now, our intention may well give a reasonable explanation for our action, but is it really the cause of the action? Not the "efficient cause", the "how" of the action, but the "final cause" in the Aristotelian sense, the essential "why" of the action?

Recent brain research seems to indicate that the neuron activity in the motor areas of the brain directly causing the pattern of muscle contractions constituting the action as a physical event in fact occurs a split second before our conscious decision to act this way. It is a commonplace in mainstream science that a cause should precede, or at least not antecede, its effect. This should be the case even for final causes: though the goal is in the future, the goal-setting is in the present, and should precede the action allegedly inspired by it. Thus, according to the research mentioned, it would seem that our actions are caused by some other factor, and that we, as we observe our own actions unfold, invent more or less imaginative and elaborate narratives to account for them, much the same way as ancient man invented gods and other spiritual powers to account for overwhelming natural phenomena. If so, what becomes of our much touted "free will"?

After Freud, it is broadly accepted that our conscious intentions in some cases indeed are mental constructions "after the fact", and that some hidden motive may be the real driving force behind our actions. But these hidden motives are, after all, also intentions, albeit unconscious ones. So what if even these unconscious intentions occur after the action is already set in motion? Is human behaviour, including our words and thoughts, in the end reducible to an admittedly very complex and dynamic pattern of causal stimulus-response relations? And are our intentions, and other conscious thoughts about our activity, just more or less inessential by-products of the actions we try to explain by them? Finally, how does this affect the age-old general debate on the necessity and usefulness of final causes?