

## Putting the Experience of Acting in its Place

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### I.

Although the notion can be found in Anscombe's *Intention*, the prominent role of direction of fit talk in contemporary philosophy of mind owes much to John Searle's *Intentionality*. In that work, Searle distinguishes states that have a mind-to-world direction of fit from those that have a world-to-mind direction of fit. Beliefs and perceptual states are satisfied when they fit the world; desires and intentions are satisfied when the world fits them. A correlative distinction is that between two directions of causation: states with a mind-to-world direction of fit are caused by their objects, whereas (some) states with a world-to-mind direction of fit cause their objects.

In chapter three of *Intentionality* Searle applies these notions to the analysis of the experience of acting. He begins with a supposed contrast between the experience of acting and visual experience:

As far as Intentionality is concerned, the differences between the visual experience and the experience of acting are in the direction of fit and in the direction of causation: the visual experience stands to the table in the mind-to-world direction of fit. If the table isn't there, we say that I was mistaken, or was having a hallucination, or some such. And the direction of causation is from the object to the visual experience. If the Intentional component is satisfied it must be caused by the presence and features of the object. But in the case of the experience of acting, the Intention component has the world-to-mind direction of fit. If I have this experience but the event doesn't occur we say such things as that I *failed* to raise my arm, and that I *tried* to raise my arm but did not succeed. And the direction of causation is from the experience of acting to the

event. Where the Intentional content is satisfied, that is, where I actually succeed in raising my arm, the experience of acting causes the arm to go up. If it didn't cause the arm to go up, but something else did, I didn't raise my arm: it just went up for some other reason. (1983: 88, emphasis in original; see also 1983: 123f.)

According to Searle, experiences of acting have a world-to-mind direction of fit and belong with intentions (and desires) rather than with beliefs and perceptual states. If Searle is right, we need to distinguish two types of experiences: those that are belief-like in their direction of fit, and those that are intention-like in their direction of fit.

I think that Searle gets the experience of acting back-to-front. Rather than having a world-to-mind direction of fit, experiences of acting have a mind-to-world direction of fit, where "the world" includes the agent. The experience of acting is veridical exactly when one is performing the target action. If no such action occurs, then the experience of acting is non-veridical. On my view, experiences of acting fail when they misrepresent (or, if you like, *misrepresent*); and rather than causing their intentional objects they are caused by their intentional objects. Experiences of acting, so I claim, belong with beliefs and perceptual experiences rather than with intentions.

## II.

An initial problem that confronts us in attempting to evaluate Searle's position is that he fails to distinguish two forms of 'the' experience of acting. Searle's official account seems intended to apply to the experience of *having* an intention in action. This reading makes most sense of Searle's claim that the intentional content of an experience of acting is identical to that of an intention in action: "... as far as Intentionality is concerned, the

experience of acting just is the intention in action” (1983: 91). As he puts it elsewhere, an experience of acting just is an intention in action with certain phenomenal properties (1983: 92). Since intentions in action are, roughly, tryings (Searle 1991: 298), we can think of experiences (as) of having an intention in action as experiences (as) of *trying* to do something.

But some of Searle’s examples suggest a conception of the experience of acting that includes not only experiences (as) of *trying* to perform certain actions but also experiences (as) of *actually* performing certain actions. (For ease of exposition I will drop the “as” qualifiers from now.) Consider the following example, which Searle takes from William James. A patient with an anesthetized arm is asked to raise it. The patient’s eyes are closed, and unbeknown to him his arm is prevented from moving. Upon opening his eyes, the patient is surprised to discover that his arm has not moved. What is the content of the patient’s experience? Searle describes it as an experience of *trying* but *failing* to raise one’s hand (Searle 1983: 89). This seems to me to be the wrong answer. Intuitively, the patient’s experience is one of *raising one’s hand* – that is, it is an experience of *satisfying* an intention. The patient is surprised to discover that his hand is not raised because he had experienced himself as raising it.

Searle’s view of experiences of acting cannot be extended to account for experiences of performing an action, for an intention in action couldn’t provide the intentional content of both the experience of having an intention in action and the experience of satisfying an intention in action. Might the experience of satisfying an intention in action simply be the state of performing the action in question *consciously* — that is, with certain phenomenal

properties? No, that can't be right, because — as we have just seen — one can have an experience of acting even when one is not acting.

Having distinguished these two forms of the experiences of acting, for ease of exposition I will follow Searle and refer to 'the experience of acting'. The arguments I give below for a mind-to-world direction of fit apply to both forms of the experience of acting.

### III.

I think there are three reasons to prefer my view to Searle's. First, it makes better sense of the way in which we are naturally inclined to talk about experiences of agency. Consider the patient with the paralyzed arm. What is he likely to say on discovering that his arm has not moved? Here is what I think I would say: "My experience misled me. I felt as if I raised my arm, but I guess I didn't." In other words, I would treat my experience of acting in just the way I treat my visual experience: viz., as purporting to tell me how things are with some chunk of the world — in this case, a chunk of the world that involves me. Strangely, Searle himself points to a parallel between experiences of acting and visual experiences without appearing to notice that the parallel is at odds with his own account (see 1983: 87).

A second argument for preferring my view to Searle's concerns the epistemic role of experiences of acting. As Searle points out, our knowledge of our own actions is grounded in our experiences of agency (1983: 90). It seems plausible to suppose that our beliefs about our own agency are justified by our experiences of agency in much the same way that beliefs about our immediate physical environment are justified by our visual experiences. My visual experience provides me with defeasible warrant for

thinking that there is a cat in front of me, and my experience of agency provides me with defeasible warrant for thinking that I am raising my arm. But it is difficult to see how experiences of agency could justify beliefs if they have a world-to-mind direction of fit. The idea seems to be a non-starter: desires and intentions can't provide reasons for belief. Indeed, this is part of what motivates the very notion that there are distinct directions of fit. Only states that present the world (where 'the world' can include the agent) as being thus-and-so can constitute reasons for believing that the world is thus-and-so.

Note that a form of this argument goes through even if one rejects the claim that experiences of acting provide *direct* justification for beliefs about agency. It might be suggested that the belief that one is acting is justified by the belief that one has an intention in action, together with the background belief that one's intentions in action are normally satisfied. I am not convinced by this proposal, but let us assume it for the purposes of argument. The question is: what justifies the belief that one has an intention in action? Presumably Searle would claim that this belief is justified by the experience of acting – understood here as the experience of having an intention in action. But if the experience of having an intention in action has a world-to-mind direction of fit — as Searle holds — then we are back to the original problem: how could a state with a world-to-mind direction of fit justify a state with a mind-to-world direction of fit?

A third argument for my view is that it opens up explanatory space that Searle's view closes off. Consider Wallace, who has the delusional belief that he is moving the clouds. He has this belief because he has an experience of moving the clouds. Clearly something has gone wrong here, but what? At least part of what has gone wrong is that the conditions of satisfaction on Wallace's experience of acting are not met. On Searle's

view, this must mean that Wallace is trying to move the clouds but failing. But there is another possibility. Perhaps Wallace has no such intention. Perhaps the only thing wrong with Wallace is that he experiences himself as doing something that he is not doing — and is not even *trying* to do. I am not suggesting that we should account for Wallace's pathology in this way; rather, my point is that we should take this account seriously. The problem with Searle's view is that it has no room for such accounts.

#### IV.

I now consider three objections to my view.

Here is the first objection. “If I have this experience [of acting] but the event doesn't occur we say such things as that I failed to raise my arm, and that I tried to raise my arm but did not succeed.” (Searle 1983: 88) The argument is rather compressed, and would benefit from some elucidation. I think it is meant to go something like this: “When we have an experience of *A*-ing but don't *A*, we conclude — rightly — that we must have had an intention that was not satisfied. Therefore, the experience of *A*-ing must itself be an intention.”

We have already seen where the objection is vulnerable. Rather than concluding that we must have had a failed intention to *A*, we could conclude that we merely experienced ourselves as intending to *A*, and we did not in fact intend to *A*. And perhaps in some cases this is what we should conclude. Searle assumes that there is only one “joint of intentionality” between experiences of acting and their target actions. I think there are two. There is a joint between experiences of acting and intentions (or, if you like, intentions in action), and there is a “joint” between intentions (intentions in action) and actions. I suspect that we tend to assume that dissociations between the experience of

agency and agency occur at the second joint rather than the first. That is, when we experience ourselves as trying to *A* but failing to *A* we put the blame on our tryings (our intentions in action) rather than our experiences of trying. Perhaps this assumption is reasonable; perhaps it is a general truth (about *our* minds, at least) that experiences of intending (trying) are more reliably satisfied than are intendings (tryings). Nonetheless, this thought should not blind us to the fact that there are two ways in which experiences of acting can occur in the absence of an appropriate action.

Second objection: if experiences of acting have a mind-to-world direction of fit then it should be possible for actions to be unaccompanied by experiences of acting. Indeed, one might expect it to be common for actions to be unaccompanied by experiences of acting, for objects of perception are generally unaccompanied by perceptions of them. But—so the objection continues—we don't find actions unaccompanied by experiences of acting. Indeed, Searle tells us that it is *impossible* for an action to occur without an accompanying experience of acting (1983: 88).

*Pace* Searle, there is good reason to think that actions do occur without being accompanied by experiences of acting. Or, more carefully, it is extremely plausible — and apparently coherent — to think that actions can occur in the absence of any experience of acting. Consider, first, the anarchic hand syndrome (sometimes also known as “the alien hand syndrome”). Individuals with this disorder have limited control over one of their hands. For example, the hand might pick food from a neighbour's plate. Patients will say such things as, “I didn't do that, my hand did”. And suppose, as seems plausible, that they say such things because they have no experience of acting with regards to the movements of the anarchic hand. The movements of the hand do not *feel*

like their own actions. On Searle's view, this implies that anarchic movements could not constitute actions. 'If it [the experience of acting] didn't cause the arm to go up, but something else did, I didn't raise my arm'. But it seems to me that it should be an open question whether or not the anarchic movements of such patients are actions. Perhaps we should say that the agent did pick food from his neighbour's plate, he merely failed to *experience* himself as doing so. I find it hard to see why Searle might reject such proposals as incoherent, for he allows that intentions in actions can be unconscious (1983: 92). If intentions in action need not be conscious, then it would seem possible to have action in the absence of the phenomenology thereof.

Hypnosis provides us with another context in which it seems plausible to suppose that actions occur unaccompanied by the experience of acting. According to some theorists, hypnosis involves a disorder in those mechanisms that generate the experience of acting, but it leaves (relatively) unscathed those mechanisms that are responsible for action production (see e.g. Blakemore, Wolpert & Frith 2002; Kirsch & Lynn 1997). Again, my point here is not that this proposal is correct, but that Searle's view rules out an apparently plausible hypothesis as conceptually incoherent.

Of course, neither case is decisive. Searle might deny that the anarchic movements of the anarchic hand patient constitute actions — at least, he might deny that they constitute the *patient's* actions (Peacocke 2003) — and he might deny that post-hypnotic behaviours constitute actions. Such denials would seem to me to be special pleading, but perhaps they can be motivated by something other than the need to save Searle's view. So let's consider another class of actions: automatic actions. Consider what it is like to walk or drive while lost in deep thought. Are these actions accompanied by an experience of



acting? There is room for reasonable doubt here. Perhaps there is an experience of acting in such cases that is merely recessive or backgrounded; perhaps there is no experience of acting at all. We need not attempt to adjudicate this dispute here, for what matters in the present context is that the status of these movements as constituting actions does not depend on whether they are accompanied by experiences of acting. It would be very odd to argue that walking while lost in thought is not action because it is not accompanied by an experience of acting.

A third objection to my view is that it assumes some version of the higher-order monitoring (HOM) account of consciousness. And, if so, doesn't that mean my view is hostage to the fortunes of HOM accounts of consciousness?

The first thing to say here is this: *if* my view assumes a HOM account of consciousness, then it is likely that Searle's view assumes that HOM accounts of consciousness are false. Whether the supposed relationship between my view and HOM accounts is a liability or an advantage would then depend on the prospects of HOM accounts. And on this point, of course, there is nothing even approaching consensus. Tying the prospects of my view to those of HOM theories would increase its attractiveness in the eyes of some and decrease it in the eyes of others.

But in fact there is no deep connection between my view and HOM theories. Roughly speaking, HOM accounts hold that a state is conscious when it is the object of a suitable higher-order state. (HOM theorists differ amongst themselves concerning what kinds of HOM states generate consciousness.) The disagreement between Searle and myself concerns the attitudinal component of experiences of acting. Neither of our views says

anything about what makes such states conscious. As far as I can see, both views are consistent with HOM account of consciousness, but neither view entails HOM accounts.

## V.

I end on an ecumenical note. Searle's approach to the phenomenology of first-person agency in *Intentionality* is monistic. He refers simply to "the experience of acting", and does not broach the question of whether a variety of contents might be built into this experience (or 'these experiences'). However, recent work on the phenomenology of agency suggests a more variegated picture of the phenomenology of agency (Bayne & Levy in press; Horgan, Tienson & Graham 2003; Marcel 2003; Searle 2001). Among the various contents that can enter into the phenomenology of agency are experiences of intentionality, experiences of voluntariness, experiences of deliberation, experiences of effort, and, perhaps, experiences of causation. Now, even if 'the experience of acting' has a mind-to-world direction of fit, it is possible that some other component(s) of the phenomenology of agency have a world-to-mind direction of fit. To take just one possibility, perhaps an experience of deliberation — an experience of "making up one's mind" — is satisfied exactly when it plays a causal role in the making up of one's mind. I am not myself convinced that this is right way to think about the intentional structure of the experience of deliberation, but the idea has some appeal. Examining it in any detail, however, is beyond the scope of the present essay.<sup>1</sup>

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