

An enigma of agency

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Wenn ich meinen Arm hebe, *versuche* ich meistens nicht, ihn zu heben.
(L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, Teil 1, 622)

1 The issue

In 1972, the American philosopher Irving Thalberg published a collection of essays addressing different issues in the philosophy of human action that he viewed as "enigmas of agency".¹ Thalberg did not address the most puzzling enigma of agency, which is obviously Klaus himself; and although I have been inspired by this particular enigma in choosing the topic of this squibble, I must follow Thalberg as well and address a less significant puzzle, to which I am more confident to find a solution.

One of the questions raised by Thalberg is why certain actions that require a certain degree of agency of their subjects are still intuitively qualified as non-intentional. More specifically, as suggested by Wittgenstein's quote, one may wonder if it is plausible to count among actions intentionally caused by an agent also those that seem to require just a trivial effort, as suggested by the incongruous use of verbs implying an effort, such as *manage* or *try*. In this brief squibble, I will address this question through the discussion of a special class of intentional actions and their linguistic expression. I will be concerned with a case of action of *yielding control*.

In recent joint work with Klaus (Donazzan, Raffy & von Heusinger 2020), we discussed the semantics of causative verbs that, in different ways, express an act of yielding control from their subject to a (potentially) distinct participant. In the literature on causative verbs, it is well known that languages differ with respect to the lexical field covered by single items, therefore I will consider the English verb *let* to be representative of a family of cognate verbs belonging to this precise causative type, which I will call LET-verbs and whose semantic characterisation is given below.

The main features of LET-verbs are the following. First, as shown by the contrast between (1a) and (b), they seem to subcategorise for animate and thus potentially intentional subjects.² Second, LET-predicates imply that the entity to which control is transferred acts intentionally, but, as evidenced by the contrast between (2a) and (b), the action of yielding control can be either deliberative (2c) or non-deliberative (2b) – in other words, Peter must be willing to run downstairs, but Mary may be willing to let Peter run downstairs or not.

- (1) a. Mary let Peter run downstairs.
b. #The hole in the ground let Peter run downstairs.
- (2) b. #Mary let Peter run downstairs against his will.
b. Mary let Peter run downstairs against her will.
c. Upon second thought, Mary let Peter run downstairs.

In Donazzan, Raffy & von Heusinger (2020), we characterised the yielding of control to a rational entity by deliberative action as an act of *authorisation*, and the case where control is yielded non-deliberatively as a failure to prevent the action, which we called the *not-oppose*

¹ Thalberg (1972).

² One exception, discussed by Donazzan, Raffy & von Heusinger (2020), is that of dispositional causers, which can be interpreted as having a build-in intentionality as well. I will not discuss this case here.

interpretation of LET. Crucially, as evidenced by the contrast in (1), failing to prevent, although non-deliberative, also implies *a certain kind of intentionality*. We may intuitively relate intentionality to the existence of an alternative course of action - by using LET, we attribute to Mary the ability to prevent Peter from running downstairs if she wanted to, but even so, the modifier in the sentence would then express a contradiction. Therefore the puzzle raised by LET-verbs is: if Mary lets Peter run downstairs against her will, in what sense could she intend to let him run? Could we qualify as intentionality the property that opposes unwilling Mary and a hole in the ground?

2 Intentions with(out) control

A possible way to look at the matter is hidden in Wittgenstein's remark. There is a strong intuition that verbs such as *try* imply that the predicates that they further embed denote an intentional action. Thus, Anscombe says that "the primitive sign of wanting is *trying to get*",³ and this interpretation has been extended to intentional action in general.⁴ Intentionality, in this sense, could be used to discriminate between properties and actions, as expressed by predicates denoting, respectively, states and events. To a closer look, however, this characterisation is not perfect either: while it is fine to say that one tries to be happy, it seems less felicitous to say that one tries to be sick, despite the fact that one can equally *want* to be so.

I would like to submit that what seems to be relevant for *try*-verbs is a further inference related to control: we may suppose that most psychological states, like *being happy*, can be understood as being under the control of their holders,⁵ while physical states generally resist this interpretation. The difference in acceptability, then, could be explained by supposing that *try* expresses intentionality plus control. If control can be severed from intention, then, we may be able to discriminate also between the two interpretations of LET-verbs: non-deliberative actions of yielding control should imply intention without implying control.

The circumstances under which intentional action does not imply control, however, need to be further specified. One possibility that I would like to explore here is that control is related to intention only if intention is interpreted as goal-oriented. The idea, defended in particular by Michael Bratman as an argument for the distinctiveness of intention (Bratman 1987), is that intentions fall into different categories, and only one of them comprises intentions that are parts of a plan – that is, that are intentions directed towards a goal. One of the examples discussed by Bratman is that of a man who runs a marathon and wears down his sneakers. Suppose that the man knows that running the length of a marathon will wear down his sneakers, and, while he would reasonably prefer to preserve his sneakers, he eventually decides that it is the price to pay. Can we say that he intends to wear down his sneakers? Bratman's answer is that his knowing the consequences that running the marathon has on his sneakers allows us to conclude that he certainly intends to do so, and yet we can't say that having his sneakers worn down was his intention when he was running the marathon (and certainly, we may add, we couldn't say that he tried to wear down his sneakers, in these circumstances). This "weak" intention, while morally and legally significant, is not goal-oriented, because it cannot be considered as an intention which is conceived in order to bring further consequences on its own.

Given this, and our conclusions with respect to the interpretation of *try*-verbs, we would expect the *try*-test to give us a hint in order to discriminate between intentional LET-events. Example (3) is the report of a woman who escaped from a potential shooting in a parking lot.

³ Anscombe (1963: 68).

⁴ Cf. Bratman, who remarks that "the 'primitive sign' of an intention to A is trying to A" (Bratman 1987: 121).

⁵ Unless they express psychological states, such as being furious or sad, which in commonsense psychology are characterised precisely as episodes of losing control.

- (3) *The driver never spoke to her as he glared at her before getting out of the pick up and getting the rifle from beneath the back seat, she said. That's when she decided to bolt. "I'm not going to sit here and let him shoot me" she remembers thinking. "I took my baby in my arms and rushed toward the store".⁶*

The context provides enough information to infer that the woman pictured the shooting as a consequence of her *not opposing* the driver's action. Embedding the LET-verb under *try* yields an infelicitous sentence - to sit still in her car would have been intentional for the woman (as she could choose between sitting and running away), but obviously it would have not been conceived as an action directed towards the goal of being shot, as the use of *try* in (4), on the contrary, seems to suggest.

- (4) That's when she decided to bolt. #“I'm not going to sit here and try to let him shoot me” she remembers thinking.

Conversely, English *let* can be embedded under *try* when the action of yielding control is understood as both intentional and goal-oriented. In the context of (5), the event of Obama coming to know their proposals is in itself the goal of the activists, which lead to their arrest.

- (5) *The Nashville-based doctor was arrested again [...] two days after President Obama said in his 2010 State of the Union that he would listen to anyone with a “better approach” to reform. “Well, we had a serious set of proposals and tried to let him know”, she said of her arrest [...]*⁷

To conclude, actions of unwillingly yielding control, and actions that respond to unreflective or spontaneous behaviour such as raising an arm or blinking, probably fall into the same category of *weak* intentions. I must intend, in a weak sense, to raise my arm, but I do not intend to do so as part of a larger plan on its own. As an unreflective and ancillary action, then, raising an arm when fetching the book on the top shelf would not imply control in the relevant sense. In the same sense, Mary may be held responsible of the fact that Peter ran downstairs in (2b), but she did not let him do so with a goal in mind. In this sense, while acting intentionally, she did not control her yielding of control.

References

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⁶ <https://www.charlotteobserver.com/news/local/crime/article140208923.html>

⁷ <http://www.pnhp.org/news/2017/january/medicare-for-all-a-uniting-call-to-action-in-the-age-of-trump>