

"Kill", "Intend to Kill", "Kill Intentionally" – On the Knobe Effect and the semantics of intentional action.

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Abstract: In a series of recent papers, the philosopher and moral psychologist Joshua Knobe has brought to light an intriguing asymmetry in people's semantic judgments on the intentionality of specific actions in ordinary language. The asymmetry is now commonly referred to as “the Knobe Effect”. In one of Knobe's scenarios (Knobe, 2003b), Jake is described as a character trying to kill his aunt to inherit a certain amount of money: “*One day, he sees his aunt walking by the window. He raises his rifle, gets her in the sights, and presses the trigger. But Jake isn't very good at using his rifle. His hand slips on the barrel of the gun, and the shot goes wild... Nonetheless, the bullet hits her directly in the heart. She dies instantly.*” More than 90 percent of the subjects tested by Knobe answer positively to the question “*did Jake intentionally kill his aunt?*”. However, less than 30 percent give a positive answer to the analogous question “*did Jake intentionally kill the bull?*” in a situation in which Jake is trying to shoot a bull to win a certain contest, and manages to hit it by the very same chancy process.

While Knobe and his critics have emphasized the moral contrast between the scenarios and widely discussed whether the ordinary concept of intentional action does involve a moral component or not, they have said relatively little about the semantic analysis of the adverb “intentionally” proper. In further experiments, however, Knobe observed a semantic contrast between minimal pairs involving the expressions “intended to help” and “helped intentionally” (Knobe, 2004). Furthermore, Knobe distinguishes between a skill sense of “intentionally”, and a moral sense of the word. In this paper I propose to examine into more detail the hypothesis that “intentionally”, in “A intentionally did X”, might indeed be ambiguous between two senses: a “bouletic” or “goal-directed” sense, according to which the agent's *goal* or *motivation* for his action(s) was to achieve X, and an “epistemic” or “action-oriented” sense, whereby the agent could *foresee* or *control* that his action(s) would indeed achieve the result X. If correct, this analysis suggests that in the aunt's scenario, most people disambiguate the question by favouring the goal-oriented sense of “intentionally”, while in the bull's scenario a majority of people refer to the action-oriented sense. In each occurrence, however, both senses should remain available, as suggested by the fact that judgments can diverge among speakers within each scenario. Like Adams and Steadman's (2004a,b), the present account favors the view that “intentionally” is morally neutral, but that the disambiguation depends on pragmatic mechanisms influenced in part by moral considerations. I will discuss the question of the derivability of the ambiguity here postulated, and examine to what extent this analysis can be used to explain the results obtained by Knobe in other scenarios, in which the agent could perfectly foresee and thereby control a certain consequence of his action, but in which this specific consequence is a side-effect of his action, subordinated to a distinct goal.

Main References

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