

The Normativity of Intentionality: a Conventional Issue?

The purpose of this study is to examine the relation between intention and normativity, as understood both by Oxonian philosophy of language (J.L. Austin) and post-Wittgensteinian philosophy of action (E. Anscombe), in order to shed light on the relevance of the concept of *intentionality* for contemporary philosophy, notably through the work of the French philosopher V. Descombes.

As J. L. Austin showed, speech is not only a way *to say* something about the world, but also a way to act upon the world *in saying* something. The assertion that the nature of speech should rely on its descriptive ability to represent correctly a certain state of the world is a bad picture of the use of language, a “descriptive fallacy”. If using language can be understood as performing a speech *act*, “meaning” can no longer be merely related to the content of a proposition, i.e. its sense and reference. However, if we follow Austin, the illocutionary “force” of a speech act does not rely on a mystical causal relation between words and action, but is rather the effect of a *convention*. Hence, as opposed to the locutionary and perlocutionary dimensions of speech, the performativity of the illocutionary is bounded by conventional rules. As he puts it, “*there must exist an accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect, the procedure to include the uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances*” (*How to Do Things with Words*, 26). The aim of philosophy is to make an accurate description of the rules that govern our uses of language, in relation to context. Thus, the conventional feature of speech acts is what enables us to describe *how we do things with words*.

I shall focus here on the debate of the connection between *convention* and *intention*. In this perspective, intention in action or in speech (what we shall call “meaning” by opposition to “sense”), seems to exceed the scope of the analysis of language, since it cannot be that easily described by a series of rules. The fact that I mean or not what I say does not necessarily depend on the conventional procedure I invoke: insincerity is a kind of infelicity that can always affect speech acts. In a certain sense, I remain free to promise that I will come with you to the cinema tomorrow and secretly think, “in my mind”, that this is not my truthful intention. I would have performed some kind of speech act in uttering that promise, but the fact that I did not mean to keep my promise is an abuse of procedure. Intention is *implied* but not *entailed* by convention. This irreducible fact seems to show us that a structural gap between *meaning* (“vouloir dire”) and *saying* (“dire”) is always at stake in our uses of language. The need for a concept of intention arises from the inevitable risk of misunderstanding, and raises for Austin the important question of our responsibility towards what we do or what we say (cf. “Three Ways of Spilling Ink”, 1966).

Indeed, Austin's classification of speech acts is built upon the investigation of the different possibilities of failure in language (cf. "A Plea for Excuses", 1966).

On the other hand, as E. Anscombe (*Intention*, 1957) and L. Wittgenstein (*Philosophical Investigations*, 1949) also stressed out, the study of the grammar of *intention* can shed light on how we conceive action. If the analysis of language can in return explain action, it's because the investigation of language games can help us to apprehend the logical structure of our concepts (intention, voluntary/involuntary, reason, etc.). Thus, there must be some kind of normativity in intention that enables us to describe its logical structure. This normativity is drawn by the grammatical analysis of language. Therefore, my aim is not to get rid of the concept of intentionality, but rather to explore its relevance in terms of normativity. In what sense can we say that intentionality is a normative feature of meaning? The issue of the normativity of intentionality is actually addressed by V. Descombes in *Les Institutions du sens*, (*The Institution of Meaning: A Defence of Anthropological Holism*, 2014), with an Anscombian and Wittgensteinian approach. According to Descombes, intentionality cannot be adequately illustrated by the image of a mental arrow directed towards the objects of the world it intends to catch. Descombes criticizes the traditional concept of intentionality as a relation between a subject and an object, the mind and the world. Historically, the concept of intentionality has been conveyed since Brentano and Husserl as a way of explaining the supposed directedness of our mental attitudes. However, the idea that intentionality is an essential feature of our language which can receive (or not) a fulfilment by reality, is a misconception of the nature of what we can call "the intentional". Hence, conceiving intention as something that is supposed to be carrying meaning in speech acts, as Searle's theory depicts it, cannot properly grasp the nature of intentionality. As a matter of fact, describing the difference between speech acts in terms of its direction of fit (the ability for language to fit the world or in reverse for the world to fit speech) is a misunderstanding of the grammar of intention. Inspired the philosophy of E. Anscombe, V. Descombes gives an interesting account of the link between intentionality and normativity, by defining it as the production of an "ordre du sens" (which can be equally translated by "order *in* meaning" and "order *of* meaning"). If "meaning" cannot be characterized as an internal process of the mind preceding "saying", it is because our uses of the concept of intention never imply some kind of causal relation between the intent and the intended. My point is to draw attention on an important dimension of intention: because of its logical structure, intentionality opens the path for a picture of normativity which, on the contrary to conventionality, is not predetermined *a priori*.