

Appropriating Disruption

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Conceiving disruption as anything but an obstacle could be a challenge for a theory, where intentional action is the paradigm of meaningful agency. In essence, disruption happens when things don't go according to plan. It involves an element of disorientation and doesn't seem to square with the kind of knowledge, agents are supposed to have of their actions. For, in addition to being immediate, knowing what one is doing entails access to the reasons for one's actions. Difficulty to account for them in this way casts doubt on their very character of actions. They resemble more closely perplexing events than manifestations of agency proper.

It is tempting to see the positive value of disruption as incompatible with this model. In this paper, I will aim to show why this is not the case. In particular, I will argue for two related claims. First, disruption has constitutive value for intentional agency. This can be helpfully clarified by looking at cases of agency over time. Second, the role of disruption in such cases supports the core expectation that intending implies knowing in a distinctly practical way.

I shall consider four cases: 1) loss of intelligibility from within a practice; 2) boredom as extinction of categorical desires; 3) intending a transformative experience and 4) pain and suffering at the end of life. Each case allows us to analyse specific changes or disconnects between reasons for action over time that would qualify as disruptive. Such changes are unlikely to come to light if we stay with textbook examples of intentional actions, which are typically one-step and synchronic. The proposed analysis will expand on the literature on strength and weakness of will, diachronically conceived. It will also draw some helpful contrasts with discussions on the extent to which habits can impede, but also support intentional action.

Part of my strategy is to explain why disruption appeared initially like a challenge for intentional action. Reflecting on the four cases above, I suggest two contributing factors. First, the focus on one-step synchronic actions in mainstream action theory might leave the impression that agency over time is just an aggregate or a sequel of self-standing actions of this type. Disvaluing disruption could be the flip side of construing meaningful agency as a flawless and effortless move from one intentional action to another. Second, the core expectation that intending implies knowing might be interpreted in a narrower way. This interpretation would fit well one-step synchronic examples but would fail to account for intentional actions of greater complexity, disruption notwithstanding. Since neither factor is required for theorising meaningful agency on the model of intentional action, I conclude that we should appropriate disruption rather than disown the model.