WHAT INFLUENCES ACTION IS NOT NECESSARILY CONSCIOUS

Robert F. Litke

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Abstract:

It is commonly supposed that what we know and believe influences what we do, that knowledge and beliefs provide us with considerations (rules, reasons, action-plans, etc.) which guide our action. Some recent discussions of human behavior makes this appear dubious. In particular, by holding that influential considerations must be conscious occurring events they make it appear that there is substantially less influence than we usually take for granted. In turn, this suggests that in large measure human action is unknowing, that agents often do not know what they are doing. In my view accounts leading to such conclusions are themselves dubious. I show that these accounts give rise to puzzles and paradoxes if they are taken as applying to routine sorts of everyday behavior (as their authors intend). I hope, in this way, to raise substantial doubt about the viability of these counter-intuitive accounts of human action.
What Influences Action is Not Necessarily Conscious

We typically assume that much of the accumulated knowledge and beliefs we bring with us to situations calling for action on our part may indeed influence what we do. Our knowledge of the rules governing an activity would be a case in point. More generally, we assume that we often have reasons for what we do, that these reasons reflect considerations our knowledge and beliefs afford us, and that these reasons or considerations somehow guide or influence what we do. However, rather than explicating these assumptions some recent discussions of human behaviour make them appear dubious. In particular, the view they give of how relevant considerations (rules, reasons, action-plans etc.) actually influence conduct makes it appear that there is substantially less influence than we usually take for granted. In turn, this suggests that in large measure human behaviour is unknowing and witless, that people typically do not know what they are doing!

In my judgment it is these accounts which are dubious and not these assumptions we are inclined to make. In what follows I will show that these accounts give rise to puzzles and paradoxes if they are taken as applying to routine sorts of everyday intentional behaviour (as their authors intend). I hope, in this way, to raise substantial doubt about the viability of these counter-intuitive accounts of human action.

Rules and Behaviour

Rules can figure in our reasons for action. Sometimes mentioning the rules one is following is a way of giving the reasons one has for acting as one does. Even though some conception of rule-following has frequently been a part of accounts of behaviour from Aristotle to the present, relatively little explicit attention has been directed to what this conception involves. An exception to this is Joan Ganz, *Rules: A Systematic Study.*

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1 I would like to thank the following for their useful criticisms: the anonymous referees and especially the editor of Philosophy Research Archives; the members of the Philosophy Department of Wilfrid Laurier University, especially Bob Alexander and Harry Reeder.

In her account, Ganz claims that there are three necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for an agent to be properly regarded as following or being guided by a rule:

1. the agent's behaviour must comply with (satisfy) the rule;
2. the agent must know the rule;
3. the agent must 'see to it' that his behaviour complies with the rule.\(^3\)

I see no difficulties with the first condition. It is her elaboration of what it is to satisfy the second and third conditions that leads to difficulties.

It is obviously true that one must know a rule, in some sense, before one can follow it. The interesting task is to specify this sense. Ganz suggests that one must be 'acquainted' with the rule. However, in the absence of an adequate theory of knowledge by acquaintance she stipulates the following as what she means when it is said that an agent knows a rule: the agent is able to articulate an explicit formulation of the rule or a close approximation of the rule while recognizing that he is not accurately reporting the rule.4 Thus to know a rule is to have (at least approximate) articulable propositional knowledge of how the rule is to be formulated.

Now it is clear that we very often fail to have such knowledge of the rules with which we comply. We learn from social scientists that we are often rather sensitively attuned to complex rules of etiquette governing our social behaviour.5 We learn the same thing about ourselves from logicians and linguists concerning our use of language. The same point can be made about the 'deeper' principles of morality as they are standardly proposed by ethical theorists. There is simply no question of typical agents having articulable propositional knowledge of such rules as these. Indeed, unless a person has some of the relevant theoretical background it is unlikely that he could even understand the complex articulations of the rules formulated by the experts, let alone recognize his behaviour as being or failing to

\(^3\)Ganz, pp. 28ff.
\(^4\)Ganz, p. 29.
be in compliance with such rules. On Ganz's view, then, and for several dimensions of our behaviour, agents typically do not know the rules they typically comply with. From this it follows on her account that they cannot follow the rules they comply with.

Ganz does not deny that ordinary agents ever have (at least approximate) articulable propositional knowledge of the rules they comply with. Sometimes they do. It would seem that this is especially to be expected where explicit formulations of rules played a significant role in learning the rule-compliant behaviour in the first place. Of course, this is not characteristic of how much of the above mentioned rule-compliant behaviour is learned. To a limited extent, then, and insofar as the rules are not unduly complex and theory-dependent in their formulation, agents may know the rules they are complying with. Here philosophically favoured examples come naturally to mind: the rules of games like chess.

It is not unlikely, then, that in cases like that of chess a player may know the rules in Ganz's sense of having (at least approximate) articulable propositional knowledge of them. But surprisingly it turns out, on Ganz's account of the third condition, that we seldom follow these rules that we do know in this way.

Ganz insists that some connection must obtain between the agent's knowledge of a rule and his rule-compliant behaviour before we are prepared to say that the behaviour is a case of following that rule. And she is correct in this for 'following a rule' suggests that the rule somehow influenced the agent's behaviour and it is always possible that the compliant behaviour is nothing more than coincidentally compliant. Even when the agent possesses the relevant knowledge it is possible that this knowledge may not have influenced the course of his behaviour. There is a difference, then, between following a rule and coincidentally complying with it (while knowing it) and marking this difference is the point of her third condition. What then does it mean to say of someone that he 'sees to it' that he complies with a rule he knows?

From the only example Ganz gives it appears that in her view 'seeing-to-it' is a conscious process that one explicitly goes through. As she says herself, "'Seeing to it' is a quite stringent requirement; it is applicable only to an active kind of procedure and is only satisfied by a deliberate reference or the like." Now I

7 Ganz, p. 34.
8 Ganz, p. 34, footnote 28.
take the adjective 'deliberate' to mark the fact that the process of referring to a rule is non-implicit in some way, that the rule is somehow actively before the agent's mind. Certainly this is in accord with her only example, that of the novice chess player checking candidate moves by constant reference to the rules he has memorized. Thus the influence which known rules can have on behaviour occurs when such rules are explicitly thought of in connection with the behaviour.

It follows directly from her account of the 'see-to-it' condition that an experienced chess player never, or almost never, follows the rules of chess. As she points out herself, the expert typically does not make explicit reference to the rules, but occupies his mind with matters of strategy, etc. More generally, 'habitual' rule-compliant behaviour is typically not a case of rule-following behaviour for the same reason: no explicit thought of the rules need be or typically is given by those familiar with the rules and for whom compliance is a matter of 'habit'. Indeed, it would seem that the better one knows the rules the less attention they require of one. Now since the bulk of rule-compliant behaviour of intelligent human beings is or quickly becomes more or less 'habitual' in this way, it follows that most rule-compliant behaviour fails to satisfy the 'see-to-it' condition for rule following.

Thus, extremely little rule-compliant behaviour can qualify as a case of following a rule: (1) for a number of dimensions of our behaviour we simply do not know the rules we comply with; (2) and for those we do know, the better we know them the less likely it is that we 'see-to-it' that compliance occurs. It is only on rare occasions, then, that someone actually follows a rule.

This is a surprising turn of events. Presumably the notion of 'rule-following' is worth investigating because it figures in so many accounts of behaviour. But Ganz's analysis of it makes it appear that virtually no behaviour is a case of rule-following. Both in ordinary affairs and in theoretical studies of human behaviour the conception of an agent following a rule has been an important one. But Ganz would reduce the role of this conception to the vanishing point. In ordinary affairs we commonly cite rules as our reasons for action on the assumption that we were following those rules; in Ethics, few assumptions are commoner than that agents learn and can follow rules; the same assumption is made in many contemporary accounts of social behaviour and of linguistic behaviour. But Ganz would have us believe that in all of this the assumption about rule-following is almost universally mistaken, that these many accounts of behaviour are based upon a serious misconception of what they are

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9Ganz, p. 34.
about. Thus accepting her analysis of rule-following would be a very costly matter in the over-all economy of thought about human behaviour. It is far from clear that her facile construals of the knowledge condition and the 'see-to-it' condition for rule-following merit such a cost.

Moreover, there is a paradoxical result of her analysis which also has to be counted in the cost of accepting it. As was indicated above, the point of the 'see-to-it' condition is to mark the difference between cases where one's knowledge of a rule influences one's behaviour and cases where no such influence obtains. Her construal of this condition gives rise to the following result: (i) seeing-to-it requires paying explicit attention to some rule: that is how rules influence the course of one's behaviour, according to Ganz; (ii) the better one knows rules the less attention they require of one - the rules take care of themselves, so to speak; (iii) but the less attention paid to rules the less they apparently can influence us; (iv) thus the better one knows some rule the less influence it will have on one's behaviour! I submit that it is a paradoxical position which suggests that one won't follow rules because one knows them too well.

Surely the point of mastering rules to the point where we may take their influence for granted is to release our attention for other matters. To suggest that this must diminish their influence on our behaviour is to create puzzles where there are none. It is more reasonable to suppose that rules influence our behaviour in some other way than by our consciously referring to them.

We have some reasons, then, for rejecting Ganz's view of how we know rules and of how such knowledge influences behaviour. In fairness, however, her account does not have to stand alone. It is, I believe, an instance of a type and it will be strengthened or weakened according to how adequate these other more general accounts of human behaviour are found to be. Let us turn to them now.

Reasons and Action

It is commonly supposed that people sometimes have reasons for their actions, that these reasons reflect considerations they have made, and that these reasons or considerations somehow guide or influence these actions. One view of these matters closely approximates Ganz's view of rules and rule-following. In his article, "Reasons for Action", James Rachels gives us a clear illustration of the type of position I have in mind. First, he correctly insists upon a knowledge condition:

reasons are connected with reasoning; an agent's reasons are considerations which figure into his reasoning about what to
do. Now if an agent is not aware of a certain consideration, then he cannot take it into account in his decision-making; thus, there is an epistemic gap that must be bridged before a consideration can enter into the agent's reasoning and thereby become his reason for acting.10

He also briefly explores the conditions under which this knowledge condition is satisfied and offers two possibilities. On one version the agent must know of a consideration and believe that it is the case. On the stronger version the agent must know that the consideration is the case.11 Rachels opts for the stronger version. On his view the gap is bridged by the agent's knowing that certain considerations are true.12

Now it is clear that one must know of a consideration before it can serve an influential reason. However, I am undecided as to whether or not an agent must also believe a consideration to be true before it can be a reason for his action. What does seem evident at this time is that there are problems with the strong version which Rachels adopts.

In the first place, to insist that a consideration be true before it can serve as a reason makes a puzzle of the common enough situation where we act on reasonable but false considerations. Suppose that I have very good evidence to support my view that the house is on fire: a heat sensitive alarm is going, I smell smoke, etc. On the basis of this I call the fire department, only to find out that there is no fire. (The alarm is defective; the smoke came from my neighbour's house.) Suppose that on another occasion I merely imagine that I have such evidence, say in a dream, and upon awakening I again call the fire department. Again there is no fire. In both cases the consideration which prompted me to call the fire department was that my house was on fire and in both cases this turned out to be false. Now I would have said that I had good reasons in the one case and bad reasons in the other. Rachels, on the other hand, would have us

11 Rachels, p. 179
12 Rachels, p. 180
believe I had no reason in either case. I suppose, further, that it follows on his view that my actions in these two imagined cases are equally unreasonable, a view that I'm sure the fire department would not share.

Second, to insist that an agent must know a consideration to be true before it can serve as a reason for his action is to further strip us of many of our reasons. We often must act on considerations where there is no question of us knowing whether or not our considerations match the facts as they are. Are we to conclude that all these actions as well should be considered as having no reasons, as being unreasonable? And is it really true that we cannot distinguish alternative actions as being more and less reasonable whenever the supportive considerations for every alternative fall short of the high standards of knowledge? I think not.

Something has gone wrong. I suggest it is a mistaken view of the epistemic conditions under which a consideration qualifies as a 'reason' that is the source of these difficulties. As in the case of Ganz's account, we may agree that an agent must know of (be acquainted with, be aware of) a consideration before it can be his reason for action, but we should reject the further suggestions made by Rachels about the epistemic relations an agent must have with his reasons for action. In particular, it should not be required of reasons for action that the agent know them to be true.

Recognizing the fact that knowledge of a reason (consideration) is not sufficient to show that an agent has acted on that reason Rachels proposes an analogue to Ganz's 'see-to-it' condition:

13 One might think to save Rachels' account by suggesting that my reason for both cases is that I believe my house is on fire. Not only would it be true that I would have such a belief but it would also be correct to say that I was acting on this belief when I called the fire department. But Rachels has specifically argued several pages earlier that beliefs are not reasons.

14 A third problem is this. I do not think that all considerations serving as reasons for action are necessarily of circumstances. Some considerations may be non-propositional in nature, having as their content policies of action, principles, rules, and in general, behavioural procedures or ways of doing things. We have procedural knowledge of such things.
One other matter is important here; that is a point connected with the difference between knowing something and thinking of it at any given moment.... [S]uppose John buys some stock, and says that his reason was that the market is bullish: this entails not only that he knows that the market is bullish, but also that this consideration was actively before his mind when he bought the stock (or, when he decided to buy it). In saying this was John's reason we are saying that this consideration prompted his action, and for this it is not enough merely that he know it. For he could know it and yet not think of it, in which case he might as well not know it so far as his action is concerned. The point is that if knowledge is to influence conduct the agent must not forget, overlook, or otherwise fail to think of what he knows when he comes to act.... [A]cting on a reason is a matter of acting on some consideration that is actively before one's mind.  

It is clear from this passage that on Rachels' view reasons for action actually influence conduct only when such reasons are explicitly thought of in connection with the behaviour. Such reasons could be referred to as actually influential reasons for action. This would serve to contrast them with potentially influential reasons for action, those considerations one might have taken into account (because one knows of them) but didn't. On Rachels' view, it is a necessary condition of actually influential reasons for action that they be explicitly considered by the agent in connection with his action. Hereafter, I will often refer to such reasons simply as 'reasons for action'. Potentially influential reasons will not concern us any further.

This view of actually influential reasons for action as conscious, occurrent events is not entirely uncommon. Rachels reports that he finds it in Hobbes. I find approximately the same view in A.I. Gold-

15 Rachels, pp. 180-81.
What makes this type of account attractive is that it can be clearly stated and easily understood. Further, it gives one the impression that one can verify whether or not a reason or consideration was influencing behaviour by simple conscious review. The trouble with this type of account is that it leads to puzzles and paradoxes.

To see this we can reflect on any complex, learned, but spontaneous or quickly executed action. Take the example of an accomplished pianist. After many weeks of careful and concentrated work he is thoroughly familiar with a piece of music. He knows it. He can now concentrate on giving a certain interpretation of it in a performance. He doesn't have to explicitly consider which notes to play next (or specifically how to play them);\(^{17}\) they no longer require his conscious attention; they are too familiar for that. Moreover, explicitly considering which notes to play in a certain well-mastered passage may interfere with his concentration and have the effect of bringing about mistakes in playing. Nothing unusual in any of that. What I wish to stress here is that what is true of piano playing in these respects is true of a host of other human activities. It is not idiosyncratic in these mentioned features.

\(^{16}\) Alvin Goldman, *A Theory of Action* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970). Goldman claims that talk about reasons for action can be analyzed in terms of action-plans which cause the relevant behaviour and which consist of occurrent wants and beliefs. Moreover, he insists that for the relevant wants and beliefs to be influential in bringing about the behaviour they must be both occurrent and conscious. See especially pp. 56, 78, 86-88, 103. I take it then, that Goldman has committed himself to the view that those considerations of an agent which actually influence the course of his conduct are conscious occurrent events. It may be that Goldman and Rachels would give different accounts of how best to construe 'reasons for action'. They apparently agree, however, on the substantial matter of how our conduct comes to be influenced by our considerations.

\(^{17}\) Many of the central points to be made against the Rachels-Goldman view could also be made by focussing on procedural considerations concerning how the notes are to be played rather than on propositional considerations concerning which notes are to be played. To argue in this way, however, would require an understanding of how procedural knowledge figures in action and of how procedural knowledge should be represented in verbal form, matters which would intolerably complicate and lengthen this paper.
On the occurrent view of influential reasons for action, the pianist has very few such reasons for playing the notes he is playing: just those he happens to explicitly think of prior to or while playing them. It seems that if he really concentrates on the interpretive aspect of what he is doing he may have no such reasons for playing those notes at all! Of course he will have many reasons for the interpretive things he is doing but (virtually) none for his note-playing. This is not very plausible. However, when it is remembered that the pianist's note-playing is like much of our daily, complex, learned, quickly executed behaviour it is seen that all this is at some variance with how we ordinarily think of reasons for action.

For example, there is something extremely odd in the suggestion that whether or not the pianist had an actually influential reason for playing a certain note is to be determined (by the pianist and by observers) by reference to the explicit states of consciousness accompanying or preceding his note playing. That is simply not how we would ordinarily settle the question. Moreover, the occurrent view of reasons for action generates paradoxes we do not have with our ordinary conception of reasons for action.

First there is the paradox of decreasing reasonableness. Although we can speak of the reasonableness of an action quite apart from any reference to the reasons the agent of the action actually has for that action, I think there is always a tacit assumption that the agent of the reasonable action has (some of) those reasons in virtue of which the action is thought to be reasonable. This is shown by the fact that we would give up the claim that the action was a reasonable one if it came out that the agent had none of those reasons for his action which we thought of as making it reasonable. The opposite is also true: 'unreasonable' actions become reasonable as we come to appreciate the agent's reasons for them. Thus the reasonableness of an action is a function of the reasons the agent has for that action.

Now, on the occurrent view of reasons for action the following paradox arises: increasing familiarity with a piece of music means decreasing explicit attention to the notes making it up; decreasing attention being paid to those notes means decreasing reasons for playing them; thus the more familiar a pianist becomes with a piece of music the fewer reasons he has for playing the notes making it up and the more unreasonable the action of playing them becomes! And in general for human action which is well learned and quickly executed, the more familiar one is with the considerations which bear on one's doing it the less reasonable one can be in doing it and the less reasonable the action of doing it becomes.

A second paradox which parallels the one we found with Ganz's account also arises, that of the decreasing influence of knowledge on action. Because both Rachels and Goldman have taken the position
that a consideration influences our conduct by means of being explicitely thought of in connection with our conduct, the following holds true: the better a pianist knows a piece of music the less he explicitly thinks about it the less his knowledge of the piece influences his playing of it. I submit that this is not only paradoxical but that it brings us to threshold of absurdity when the correct parallels are drawn with well learned, quickly executed human action in general. The point of mastering many things is precisely to free up our attention so that it may be spent on other, more demanding things. We do not thereby lose a controlling influence over our behaviour but enhance it.

Goldman has attempted to forestall something like the above line of attack. It is useful to show that his remarks fail to do so since they do seem plausible and they may occur to others as well. Consider the following:

I must emphasize, therefore, that having occurrent beliefs and occurrent wants does not imply reciting the content of these beliefs and wants in one's head. Somehow human beings have the ability to grasp an indefinite number of things in the mind in what seems like a single flash. As I walk down the street, for example, I am aware of all of the following facts in a single stroke: that the curb is to my left; that the street starts to curve a few yards away from me; that there are many people crossing the street, both men and women; that a neon sign is to my right; that a woman with a green hat is walking toward me; that dusk is falling; that it is warm outside: etc. I am aware of each of these things during a single moment, and in this sense I have occurrent beliefs of them during this moment. But I certainly do not describe these things to myself, nor do I even concentrate on them. I simply take them all in effortlessly.18

Recall that in footnote #16 I showed that Goldman is committed to the view that those considerations (wants and beliefs) of an agent which actually influence the course of his conduct are conscious occurrent events. It is to these that he refers in the above passage. Such considerations occupy one's attention - they fill one's consciousness, as he says;19 they are things to which one gives

18 Goldman, pp. 94-95.

19 Goldman, p. 86.
conscious attention; they occur or fail to occur to one at specific moments in time and this determines whether or not they can influence our conduct.21

A quick review of my argument will show that I have based it on these latter features of influential considerations (reasons). At no point have I assumed that reasons or considerations must be recited in their full propositional form to receive explicit attention. I have specifically argued that it is the assumption that reasons must be explicitly attended to for them to be influential that leads to absurd consequences. Thus Goldman's remarks fail to stem this line of attack.

What then of his plausible suggestion that human beings have the ability to grasp an indefinite number of things in the mind in what seems like a single flash? While this may be true I see no reason whatsoever for insisting that this feat must be done in some explicit, conscious way. To see this let us consider his claim to be aware of a variety of facts while walking down the street. "Aware" is ambiguous. It may mean that one is informed of, has knowledge of something. It may mean that one is conscious of, is specifically alert to something. In the latter case awareness is a conscious, occurrent event (process), whereas in the former case it clearly isn't. Now it is not unreasonable to suggest that one may be consciously aware of a variety of facts while walking down the street. One can attend to or be alert to a variety of things at the same time. On the other hand, one can also be oblivious to such things while walking down the street. One's mind may be occupied with other things entirely. Nevertheless one could at the same time be tacitly aware of or subliminally aware of (i.e., non-consciously aware of) this variety of things as well. I take it that one point of such expressions is to capture the fact that we can receive and make use of information without our doing so in an explicit, conscious way. So the mere fact that one is aware of something does not show that one is in an occurrent, conscious state with respect to it. That claim has to be made out on its own. Moreover, this should alert us to the possibility that being aware of or knowing of a consideration (reason) may be a nonconscious phenomenon and to the possibility that such knowledge may influence the course of behaviour without its having to do so in some conscious, explicit way.

Be that as it may, in the face of this failure to sidestep the argument of this paper, I submit that we need a more plausible view of actually influential reasons for action. Obviously what the

20 Goldman, p. 103.
21 Goldman, pp. 87-88.
pianist is doing in playing the notes constituting the piece of music is structured by his knowledge of this music and his knowledge of music in general. This knowledge was acquired by him over a period of many weeks, in the case of the particular piece, and over many years, in the case of his knowledge of music in general. Although this massive body of knowledge could not be explicitly referred to by him in the course of playing the piece nevertheless it does seem to afford him good reasons for playing the notes he does whenever he plays correct notes, whether he explicitly thinks about such matters at any given moment or not. In fact, if the question does arise as to his reasons for playing a certain note he would not likely try to remember what explicit states of consciousness he underwent while playing the music but, rather, would try to remember what notes the piece of music called for at that point. In other words, he would draw on his knowledge of the music to answer the question about his reasons; he would not draw on his knowledge of prior mental events. Now the same is true of much of the complex, well learned and quickly executed activity that human beings engage in in their everyday lives. A view of reasons for action and of how such reasons or considerations influence action which makes these things seem mistaken, puzzling or paradoxical is, I submit, a mistaken view. The same verdict applies to Ganz's account of rule-following as well. The inadequacies of the Rachels-Goldman type of account serves only to reinforce our misgivings about her account in the previous section.

Conclusion.

I submit that the examined views of human behaviour cause more difficulties than they clear up. What is required is a less restrictive conception of those considerations which actually influence behaviour (reasons, rules, action-plans, etc.) and a less naive conception of how such influence takes place. Moreover, I see no reason for giving up the assumption that our accumulated knowledge and beliefs influence what we do. Rather, we should explore ways of articulating the knowledge and beliefs which we apparently exploit in nonconscious ways in the course of everyday activity. Surely as ordinary agents we do typically know what we are doing. It is inadequate philosophical accounts of action which makes it appear otherwise.

Robert F. Litke
Department of Philosophy
Wilfrid Laurier University
Waterloo, Ontario
Canada