

A NOTE ON WANTING TO DO SOME PURPOSEFUL
ACTION

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At the conclusion of his article 'Wants and Causes', *Logique et Analyse* No. 55 September 1971, Professor Schild writes:

We say that if X wants Y, though it does not follow that he must do Y even if there are no countervailing factors, it does mean (in part) that *if* he were to act he would cease his activity when the goal was reached, and (as a rule) while performing the action his behaviour would indicate some sort of 'pursuit' of the goal, thereby confirming his desire. (P. 706)

And this (as he tells us on pages 692 and 702) is meant to be an account of wants which will be of use in giving a causal explanation of purposive behaviour in terms of wants.

I want to argue that the attempt to define or account for all wants to do something purposeful in terms of the cessation point of and goal-revealing behaviour associated with the action in question is doomed to failure because (1) not all wants to do some purposeful action which is directed to the achieving of some goal will entail a point at which, when reached, the want must be said to cease because fulfilled; and secondly because (2) not all actions which can be construed as being in pursuit of some goal will give indications of that pursuit in the agent's behaviour.

(1) I will start on my argument by making the following distinction concerning wants in general:

(a) *wants which have a fulfillment point*

These will include such wants as —

(i) *the want to have some particular experience*

For example, the want to see the film 'Jules et Jim', which

want will presumably cease once the film has been seen.

(ii) *the want to possess something for a short time*

For example, a want to borrow someone's sports car which will usually cease (at least for a time) when the sports car is returned.

(iii) *the want to consume something*

For example, someone's want or desire for an ice-cream, which will presumably cease (at least for a time) as soon as the ice-cream is eaten.

(b) *wants which have no fulfillment point*

These will include such wants as —

(i) *the want to possess or own something indefinitely*

For example, the want to own a painting by Picasso.

(ii) *the want to be something*

For example, the want to be a poet or the want to be the most beautiful woman in the world.

(iii) *the want to do something more or less continually*

For example, the want to keep fit.

Now, only wants of type (a) which are also wants to do some purposeful action can be said to entail that "if he [the one who wants to do some purposeful action] were to act he would cease his activity when the goal was reached" because only wants of type (a) can be said to have a fulfillment point.

However, and this is the crux of my first point of contention with Schild, many wants to do some purposeful action will occur among wants of type (b), that is among wants which have no fulfillment point and so cannot be said to cease when the goal has been reached.

In detail, wants of type (b) (iii) will be wants to do something, often some purposeful action, without there being a fulfillment or ceasing point. Consider, for example, the case of a person wanting to keep fit. Such a person does not want merely to do 'push-ups' on Wednesday and go for a run on the following Friday. He wants and intends to exercise more or less continually because he wants to be continually fit. His

goal is an open-ended one in the sense that it stretches on into the indefinite future.

Other examples of wants of type (b) (iii) which are also wants to do something purposeful, would be a child's wanting to read and write, a seminarian's wanting to say mass, and a writer who is afflicted with *accidie* wanting to write again.

(2) Now I want to dispute the second part of Schild's conclusion, namely his assertion that 'X wants Y' (where Y is a purposeful action) entails that "(as a rule) while performing the action his [X's] behaviour would indicate some sort of 'pursuit' of the goal, thereby confirming his desire." I suggest that many goal-directed actions will give no indication at all that they are so.

For example, if a woman goes for a stroll in order to relax her nerves before her oral examination in philosophy, it may well seem to an onlooker that she is strolling aimlessly. There is no indication as to what her aim is in walking up and down or even if she has any particular aim.

Other examples of actions which do not reveal what goal or purpose they are aiming at or pursuing would be, someone's reading Bertrand Russell's *History of Western Philosophy* (Is he doing it to pass an examination or to pass the time or to improve his knowledge of western philosophy or for enjoyment or what? It may never be apparent to an onlooker. If the reader's purpose ever does become clear it is likely to only after a considerable amount of time.), someone's staring out to sea or apparently staring out to sea (Is the person concerned vaguely looking for a ship or aeroplane that might be about? Or is he a coast-watcher checking on ships and aeroplanes in the area? Or is he abstractedly staring out to sea while ruminating on Einstein's General Theory of Relativity? Or is he waiting for his wife? If he were doing any of these things, could he ever be said to be revealing his pursuit of them by this behaviour?)

One could go on multiplying these sorts of examples. Indeed so many purposeful activities do not reveal their purpose to an onlooker that it seems rather wild to say that "as a rule"

a person's behaviour while engaged in purposeful activity will reveal the goal or purpose of his activity.

In conclusion, then, I feel that Schild's thesis is seriously weakened if, as I think he must, he can only say:

We say that if X wants Y, though it does not follow that he must do Y even if there are no countervailing factors, it does mean (in part) that *if* he were to act he would cease his activity when the goal was reached *given that the goal was the sort of one that had an achievement point*, and that (*though by no means as a rule*) while performing the action his behaviour *might* indicate some sort of 'pursuit' of the goal, thereby confirming his desire.

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