

Unconscious motives and intentional action

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ABSTRACT

Few philosophers would deny that unconscious motives enter into causal explanations of human behavior. But many would be reluctant to say that deeply unconscious motives have anything to do with the intentionality with which we act. I argue to the contrary that deeply unconscious motives can indeed contribute to agent-intentionality on the following condition: If she were self-aware and honest with respect to her unconscious motive, the agent would believe that it constituted her reason for the action of which it was a cause. I conclude that when an agent's conscious reasons are vague, confused, or self-deceiving, her unconscious *reason-grounding* motive may fill what would otherwise be a gap in her intentionality.

Key words: intentional action; agent-intentionality; motive; unconscious; reasons for action; moral responsibility; blame; Freud; John Wilkes Booth; Brutus

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Few philosophers would deny that unconscious motives enter into causal explanations of action. But many would be reluctant to say that deeply unconscious motives have anything to do with the intentionality with which we act.¹ This should not be surprising. Philosophers commonly view intentional action as voluntary action for which the agent has one or more motivating reasons that are either consciously held or easily accessible at will. It follows that motives that constitute reasons for action- that is to say motivating beliefs, desires and other causal mental states- must be either consciously held or readily accessible to consciousness in order to serve as determinants of agent-intentionality.²

In what follows, I shall argue that this is too narrow a perspective. My proposal is that deeply unconscious motives do contribute under certain conditions to an agent's intentionality. When they do, I call the contributing unconscious motive *reason-grounding*. I conclude that, when an agent's conscious or easily accessible reasons for what she does are vague, confused, or

¹ I define *deeply* unconscious motives as those that persist over time and cannot easily be retrieved at will. I assume they consist mainly of beliefs and desires. It seems to me doubtful that perceptions or emotions can be unconscious for very long. It's not implausible that unconscious memories of the objects of perceptions or emotions can persist, but I'm doubtful whether these unconscious memories are *motivating* in the absence of an accompanying unconscious belief or desire.

² Under an appropriate description, an action can be voluntary but unintentional: I voluntarily back my car up and *in so doing* run over the bike you left in my driveway, but I run over it unintentionally, since I have no motive or reason for doing so. Donald Davidson's well-known description reflects the view of intentional action I have in mind: "*A* can do *x* intentionally (under the description *d*) means that if *A* has desires and beliefs that rationalize *x* (under *d*), then *A* does *x*" (2001, 73). Many accounts of intentional action, including Davidson's, seem to take it for granted that agent-intentionality is rooted in consciously held or easily accessible motives and reasons. See for example Anscombe (1969), Frankfurt (1985), Dretske (1988), and Velleman (1992). Two philosophers who very briefly bring up a possible link between deeply unconscious motives and agent-intentionality are Goldman (1976, 123) and Williams (1981, 103).

self-deceiving, an unconscious reason-grounding motive can fill what would otherwise be a gap in her intentionality.

Let me begin with an illustration that seems at first glance to reinforce the presumption that deeply unconscious motives do not contribute to intentionality. Suppose that Brutus believes that Caesar intends to destroy the Republic. Moreover, Brutus wants to save the Republic and believes that by eliminating Caesar he will do so. Brutus's belief and desire constitute his subjective reason for getting rid of Caesar. But now suppose Brutus has a motive that he does not recognize: He is unconsciously envious of Caesar's popularity. He unconsciously wants the sort of acclaim enjoyed by Caesar, and he unconsciously believes that by eliminating Caesar, and thereby being hailed as savior of the Republic, he will be able to get it. I am assuming that Brutus's unconscious motive is so deeply buried that he cannot easily retrieve it at will.

At first glance, it appears that Brutus's hidden motive contributes nothing to the intentionality with which he plots against Caesar, since it is not involved in his conscious reasons for doing so. True, his unconscious motive is among the *causes* of his actions. His unconscious envy strengthens his determination to get rid of Caesar. But the causal connection is insufficient to demonstrate that envy is among Brutus's subjective reasons for eliminating Caesar. This would be true even if the motive were consciously held or easily accessible: a cause of action is not the same thing as a reason for action.

So long as his motive is hidden from view, Brutus doesn't consider that it constitutes even so much as a hypothetical reason for eliminating Caesar, let alone as his actual reason for doing so. But what if Brutus's motivating envy breaks through into his awareness for a fleeting moment? Should we then say that it contributes to the intentionality with which he plots against Caesar? It does if he acknowledges its significance. But suppose on the other hand that Brutus,

after having glimpsed his envy of Caesar for a fleeting moment, sincerely but mistakenly denies any connection between his envy and his intention to do away with Caesar; he regards his envy as merely a shameful character defect on which he prefers not to dwell. I'm now imagining that, even when he's briefly conscious *of* his envy, Brutus doesn't believe *that* his envy is one of his motives for plotting against Caesar, or that it constitutes his reason for doing so. The motivating force of his envy remains locked up in his unconscious. Once again, it seems to follow that envy has no bearing on the intentionality with which he plots against his enemy.

I now want to suggest that the picture I have just sketched is incomplete and therefore misleading. Consider, first of all, that we cannot describe Brutus's envy as irrational. Wanting what someone else has can certainly constitute a reason for all sorts of actions, including murder. I am now going to stipulate that, were he to face it clearly and honestly, Brutus *would* recognize that his envy constituted a motivating reason he has for plotting against Caesar. Of course, if he suddenly became self-aware and honest with respect to his envious desire, Brutus might well recoil in shame and call off his plans. He would nevertheless understand that his shameful motive gave him a reason to *want* to assassinate his enemy.

Brutus's hidden motive is, under the right counter-factual conditions, a *reason-grounding* one. In that respect, it has much in common with the consciously held motives. If we focus on how Brutus *would* view his motive, were he self-aware and honest with respect to it, his envy seems a part of his rational self, and as such a contributor to the intentionality with which he plots against his enemy.

Why did we not pay more attention to the rational side of Brutus's hidden motive from the outset? Perhaps we were struck not only by Brutus's ignorance of his motive, but by the conditions of his ignorance. Following the Freudian view of repression, we may have assumed

that Brutus didn't choose to push his motive out of sight: it wasn't up to him that his envy lay buried in his unconscious. We may also have assumed that he didn't choose to discount the significance of his envy, when it fleetingly entered his awareness; his false belief that his envy was unrelated to his plans to kill Caesar occurred involuntarily. Let us grant for the sake of argument that these assumptions are warranted. Still, we ought not confuse Brutus's lack of insight and control with respect to his motive with the nature of the motive itself. Brutus's envious desire to have something like Caesar's acclaim, and his belief that killing Caesar will enable him to get it, are features of his rational self, even while they remain hidden from view, and even though he discounts the significance of his envy when it briefly surfaces. His envious desire and his belief as to how it can be satisfied are no less rational because Brutus happens to be ignorant of these mental states, nor any less rational because his ignorance is not chosen.

Let me try to strengthen my argument with a further example: Suppose that I am building a birdhouse. My avowed reason for doing so is that I love birds, and I believe building the birdhouse will not only provide them with food but enable me to watch them. Suppose further that a motive without which I would not build the birdhouse lies outside my awareness: I unconsciously want to avoid spending time with my wife and children and unconsciously believe that by working on the birdhouse I'll be left in peace. Once again, I'm going to stipulate that my unconscious desire cannot easily be retrieved at will. Now suppose that, while happily hammering pieces of wood together, I briefly and spontaneously become aware that I'm not being bothered by my wife or children. I tell myself that being left in peace is merely a welcome side-effect of what I have chosen to do. However, were I self-aware and honest, I would correctly believe that my *wanting* to be left in peace constituted my motivating reason for building the birdhouse. As in the case of Brutus, my avoidance-wish is reason-grounding; as

such it contributes to my intentionality. Indeed, it plausibly contributes more to my intentionality than does my desire to feed and watch birds, since it would constitute my *primary* reason were I self-aware and honest with respect to it. (By *primary* reason, I mean that if I vetoed it, I would not build the birdhouse.) Interestingly, if we grant that moral responsibility for action is in part a function of agent-intentionality, then my hidden motive plays a substantial role in establishing my moral responsibility for building the bird house. If I am to blame for building the bird house rather than spending time with my family, it may be in part because my unconscious motive plays a significant part in grounding the intentionality with which I act.

Not all unconscious motives are reason-grounding. Sometimes unconscious motives are divorced from the agent's rationality and so do not contribute to his intentionality. The assassin of Abraham Lincoln, for instance, could have been driven by just such an irrational unconscious motive. Let us first grant that John Wilkes Booth had ample conscious motives for killing Lincoln: he blamed the president for launching a war against the South, believed that he deserved to be killed for doing so, and hoped by killing him to avenge the Confederacy and perhaps prolong the war. But let us suppose that Booth harbored an additional motive that was entirely hidden: he unconsciously associated Lincoln with his own father, the celebrated Shakespearian actor Junius Brutus Booth, and he unconsciously wanted to kill Lincoln *as if* the president were the father he both admired and resented.³ Suppose further that Booth belatedly discovered his hidden motive long after he had killed Lincoln. Imagine an improbable world in which Booth is captured alive but spared the death penalty because of the court's doubts about his sanity. Many

³ My imaginary Booth is not entirely fanciful. John Wilkes closely resembled his father physically and saw himself as his father's rightful successor on the stage. At the same time, the son suffered as a consequence of his father's alcoholism and erratic behavior and, once it became widely known that John Wilkes and his siblings were illegitimate, the taunts of neighborhood children. As for my suggestion that Booth could have substituted Lincoln for his own father, it should be noted that Junius Brutus Booth and Abraham Lincoln had traits in common: Both achieved great fame, both were temperamentally kindhearted, both were anti-slavery, and each was devastated by the deaths of several of his young children. Titone (2010) discusses in detail the biographical facts I have mentioned.

years into his life imprisonment, Booth discovers an early volume by Freud that has somehow made its way into the prison library. Booth finds himself fascinated by the theory of the Oedipus Complex and, following several telltale dreams, he comes to believe correctly that his resentment of his own father was a cause of his animosity toward Lincoln and a cause of his wanting to kill him.

Will my imaginary Booth see his newly discovered motive as constituting one of his reasons for having killed Lincoln? Almost certainly not. Nor would he have seen his hatred of Junius Booth as constituting a reason to kill the president, or indeed to kill *anyone*, if he had suddenly, during the time he was plotting against Lincoln, discovered his hidden motive and faced it squarely. I am assuming that Booth was never so deranged as to think that it made sense to kill someone who stood *in place* of Junius. Indeed, had he discovered that he was projecting his hatred of his own father onto Lincoln, he would likely have recoiled from his intention to harm the president, not just because his motive was shameful (as in the case of envious Brutus), but on account of its utter irrationality. I conclude that my imaginary Booth's irrational hidden motive had great causal significance but no bearing on the intentionality with which he plotted against Lincoln.

So much for the Booth who is driven by an irrational motive. Let us now consider Booth differently, as someone who harbors a deeply unconscious motive that resembles the hidden envy I earlier attributed to Brutus. The historical evidence strongly suggests that the real Booth was intensely envious of the success achieved by his late father and by his older brother, Edwin Booth. It's not implausible that the actual Booth was motivated by an unconscious desire to perform a daring act that would bring him fame beyond what Junius and Edwin had achieved. Nor is it implausible that his unconscious desire was paired with an unconscious belief that

killing Lincoln in a theater and then revealing himself to the audience by leaping onto the stage would draw something like the attention riveted on a great actor during a climactic scene. Had he discovered his hidden motive during the time he plotted against Lincoln, Booth might have decided to veto the manner in which he was planning to kill Lincoln. Or, if he was extraordinarily self-absorbed, he might have consciously embraced his hidden motive. Either way, he would have seen that his motive was among his reasons to *want* to kill Lincoln in a spectacular fashion. Booth's hidden wish to kill Lincoln in such a way as to draw attention to himself before an audience was, just like Brutus's envious desire, a *reason-grounding* motive that contributed to the intentionality with which carried out the deed.⁴

Of course we need look no further than the facts that Booth was not coerced, nor subject to irresistible impulse, nor lacking in conscious reasons, to be confident that he killed intentionally, and that he thereby satisfied an important condition of being a morally responsible killer, quite apart from what was driving him from below. But there may be cases where unconscious motives, once they are discovered, fill an apparent gap in an agent's intentionality. I am thinking of cases where an agent's conscious reasons for her actions are vague, confused, or thoroughly self-deceiving. In such cases, the agent's conscious reasons either do not express any well-defined purpose that she has for her actions, or they fail to correspond with any *real* purpose that she has for her actions. In such cases, there may be an unconscious motive that fleshes out what would otherwise seem to be a case of fairly weak agent-intentionality.

⁴ Booth could have had other reasons to kill Lincoln in a theater. He knew, for example, that the president's box would be poorly guarded. But a recent book on the Booth family (Titone, 2010) suggests that Booth's craving for fame and his wish to surpass his father and brother were indeed involved in his plotting against Lincoln. Especially telling is the fact that critics noted Booth's handsomeness and agility but sometimes ridiculed his clumsy diction, comparing his performances unfavorably with those of Junius and Edwin. It's also noteworthy that in the year before the assassination, the two brothers appeared together in a production of *Julius Caesar*, in which John Wilkes played Mark Antony to Edwin's Brutus. In killing Lincoln, Booth was able to play something like the role that had been assigned to his far more successful brother.

Let me illustrate my point by supposing that Booth was thoroughly self-deceived with respect to his conscious reasons. A moment ago, I imagined that Booth's envious craving for fame unconsciously determined his selection of a theater as the setting for his assassination of Lincoln. But I didn't claim that his craving for fame was his only real motive for killing Lincoln. I assumed that his conscious reasons for doing so were *real* reasons, even if they may have been based on distorted beliefs. I now want to imagine that Booth doesn't really care about punishing Lincoln or avenging the South. He has deceived himself into believing a false set of reasons for what he intends to do. His *only* real motives for killing Lincoln are his unconscious desire to surpass his father and his older brother, and his unconscious belief that carrying out a daring assassination will guarantee him everlasting fame: a villain's fame perhaps, but fame nonetheless.

Massively self-deceived Booth is acting out a script that has nothing to do with his actual purpose in killing Lincoln. Although he acts voluntarily, he is in the dark as to why he is doing what he is doing. If we focus on his massive self-deception, he seems a weakly intentional agent, almost akin to someone who is sleepwalking or hypnotized.⁵ But when we focus on his hidden motive, we see an important aspect of Booth's rational self: we have located a missing piece that makes up for the apparent deficiency in the intentionality with which he plots and kills.

Recall for a moment Booth as I imagined him at the outset: driven by an irrational substitution of Lincoln for his own father. The irrational motive was divorced from Booth's moral responsibility for two reasons: First, it contributed nothing to his intentionality. Second, the Booth who was irrationally driven to kill Lincoln probably couldn't help it that his irrational

⁵ I won't discuss in any detail whether a somnambulist or hypnotized person acts voluntarily and intentionally. For an analysis of action during sleepwalking and under hypnosis, see Williams (1994). For a contrasting view, see Moore (1997, 294-307). The point I want to emphasize here is that Booth, in as much as he is massively self-deceived, is not as *strongly* intentional as he would be if his avowed reasons were his real reasons.

motive was inaccessible; I'm assuming (roughly in line with Freud) that unconscious *resistance* prevents irrational motives that have deep roots in childhood trauma from surfacing.⁶ If that is correct, it follows that Booth's failure to know about his irrational motive in time to veto acting on it wasn't his fault and doesn't contribute to his blameworthiness.

The Booth who is massively self-deceived, on the other hand, harbors a motive that *is* linked with his intentionality. For that reason, it has a bearing on his moral responsibility. It constitutes the *end he would have in view* (to modify slightly Anscombe's famous phrase) were he self-aware and honest with respect to his motive. The end-in-view in self-deceived Booth's case is, I hardly need add, morally very bad; his killing Lincoln solely in order to be famous makes Booth a worse man than if he had genuinely believed he was acting justly and doing what was best for the South. It makes matters even worse if he was responsible for failing to connect the dots between his conscious ambition and his plot against the president. Perhaps his hidden motive was not so far removed from his conscious thinking that he couldn't, with some soul searching, have gained access to it in time to veto what he planned to do. Perhaps it was his fault that he didn't know himself better than he did.

On the other hand, self-deceived Booth may have lacked the capacity either to see through his self-deception or to discover his hidden motive. (The former would probably depend on the latter.) In that case, we may be tempted to view him as *less* blameworthy than someone who is in full conscious possession of her motives, or who has the opportunity and capacity to gain access to them. My own intuition is that self-deceivers are usually at fault for their self-deception. Defending that intuition would take far more time and effort than I have put into this short essay. The point I want to emphasize is this: Whether we see self-deceived Booth as *less* blameworthy or *more* blameworthy than someone who is in clear possession of her motives, the

⁶ On the psychoanalytic concept of resistance, see Freud (1949, 58-62).

fact remains that Booth's unconscious, reason-grounding desire to surpass his father and brother makes him a different kind of *intentional* killer than would have been the case, had his avowed reasons for killing Lincoln been his real reasons.

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