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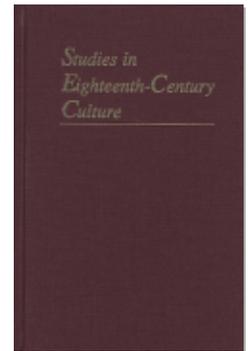
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Thomas Salem Manganaro

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Incoherent Intentions and the Need for Narrative

THOMAS SALEM MANGANARO

By standard philosophical accounts, if someone judges it best to do something and believes him or herself free to do it, then he or she will intentionally do it. But, as Donald Davidson and other analytic philosophers have asked, how then do we account for the phenomenon classically called *akrasia*, in which an individual freely and knowingly acts against his or her judgment of what it is best to do?¹ Modern philosophy has indeed struggled to understand how individuals freely contradict their stated intentions in their intentional actions.² This became a distinctive explanatory problem during the Enlightenment with the rise of mechanistic and materialist models of body and mind. In the tradition of Newton, philosophers from Hobbes through Godwin understood action as a physical event that could be explained in terms of the discrete bodily or mental states that precede it—readily-identifiable reasons, desires, affects, or passions. With these operating frameworks, it became difficult to explain or even characterize how an individual's action can fail to follow through on intentions. Yet precisely because *akrasia* poses problems to the dominant forms of causal explanation in this period, its appearance in Enlightenment writing tends to draw out the important role that narrative plays in investigating human agency. When *akrasia* surfaces in Enlightenment philosophy and literature, we indeed see the special epistemic privileges of narrative over causal explanation.

The second edition of John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1694) offers a particularly interesting meditation on akrasia. To revise the simpler theory of volition in the first edition, Locke asks how a man can pursue actions that go against his firmly-held resolutions.³ He gives a dual answer: on the one hand, he provides a mechanistic explanation—namely, man's action can be sufficiently explained by the states of uneasiness that determine his acting against his better judgment. On the other hand, he embeds the explanation in a narrative, which expresses the contradictory qualities of human intentionality in less resolvable and more provocative ways, and which disallows Locke from giving the causal explanation that his philosophy requires.

Locke's fictional narrative focuses on a drunkard who repeatedly acts against his resolutions. He sees

that his health decays, his estate wastes; discredit and diseases, and the want of all things, even of his beloved drink attends him in the course he follows: yet the returns of *uneasiness* to miss... the habitual thirst after his cups, at the usual time, drives him to the tavern... 'Tis not for want of viewing the greater good; for he sees, and acknowledges it, and in the intervals of his drinking hours, *will take resolutions to pursue the greater good* [italics mine]; but when the *uneasiness* to miss his accustomed delight returns, the greater acknowledged good loses its hold, and the present *uneasiness* determines the *will* to the accustomed action.⁴

Locke's use of narrative does the work of showing how a man can hold resolutions and then allow them to fail as grounds of action. Significantly, Locke does not merely describe the causal processes in the man's brain at the time of the action; he shifts between different temporal frames—at home and in the tavern—in order to convey how akrasia can shape the course of a person's life, and how it can reflect a problem of character rather than a momentary blip in one's constitution. His imprecise, metaphorical phrase, "the greater acknowledged good loses its hold," recalls famous literary examples of akrasia, from Euripides's *Medea* to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and provocatively evokes the experience of constitutional breakdown.

Nonetheless, the drama of the protagonist's failure is foreclosed by the passage's *explanatory* aims and by Locke's conclusion: "the present *uneasiness* determines the *will* to the accustomed action." Making this a story about addiction helps to justify the word "determines," suggesting a blind physiological determinism behind the action. But by turning to a determinist model of volition, Locke directly negates the idea of acting

against one's better judgment, for there is no longer free action at all. The narrative's account of the drunkard's struggle and ambivalence is washed away by Locke's more systematic philosophical aim.

Narrative thus presents itself as a competing philosophical mode that comes into tension with, and indeed threatens, the systematic aims of Enlightenment causal explanation. Narrative plays an especially rich role in interrogating the disconnect between intentions and actions in Rousseau's *Confessions* (1781), which is perhaps the most sustained examination of an "akratic" in all of eighteenth-century literature. Throughout the autobiography, Rousseau describes the many wicked acts he committed in his life, here recalling the examination of weakness of the will in St. Augustine's *Confessions*. But unlike Augustine, Rousseau not only confesses to his akratic moments, but also he seeks to identify their underlying causes in order to clarify his understanding of his true self. As Jean Starobinski and Paul de Man have observed, Rousseau's confessions are accompanied by explanation and excuse. As a result, we again see a clash between the pursuit of firm causal explanations and the pursuit of narrating intentions.

The most memorable example of this occurs in Book Two: Rousseau describes how, as a young man, he stole a ribbon from a home and blamed it on Marion, an innocent maidservant. Though at first this appears to represent a case of knowingly acting against one's better judgment, Rousseau goes on to say: "Never was deliberate wickedness further from my intention than at that cruel moment. When I accused that poor girl, it is strange but true that my friendship for her was the cause."⁵ He thus reinterprets his former act, not as one of akrasia, but as consistent with underlying intentions that are now made clear. But how does a feeling of friendship cause him to accuse Marion not in a fit of absent-mindedness, but repeatedly, "boldly," and "to her face"?⁶ And how is Rousseau's interpretation of these acts compatible with the meaninglessness he attributes to the utterance—"I threw the blame on the first person who occurred to me?"⁷ Rousseau attributes his accusation of Marion to intentional conviction, to meaningless confusion, and to a repressed sentiment of friendship. The narrator's attempt to solve the puzzle of his actions thus makes the causality leading from intention to actions less, rather than more, evident.

A further consequence is that the reader must not only reinterpret the scene of blaming, but also the intentions of the narrator himself. For the latter's selective presentation, representation, and interpretation of his former self raise new questions about the self under investigation. In instances such as this, Rousseau's self proves resistant to linear analysis and, thus, as Peter Brooks has pointed out, it is at odds with the eighteenth-century genre of "a

portrait moral, a kind of analytic topography of a person” consistent with the kind of “system of man” pursued by Locke.⁸ Instead, Rousseau’s self can only be approached in the form of a narrative that seeks to interpret the indistinct connections between his reasons, judgments, feelings, intentions, and actions.

Locke and Rousseau both demonstrate the repercussions of the Enlightenment’s intellectual shift from Greek and Scholastic conceptions of action in terms of narrative to a conception of action in terms of physical causation. One consequence is that narrative begins to stand out as a separate and competing form of philosophy. As these moments in Locke and Rousseau demonstrate, storytelling is able to capture the enigmatic qualities of intentionality and action in ways that the systematic philosophy cannot. Indeed, examination of eighteenth-century philosophical and literary representations of disordered volition shows that narrative form yields actual philosophical insights, for in resisting causal continuity, it can offer richer if not truer representations of selves and their inconsistencies.

NOTES

1. Donald Davidson, “How Is Weakness of the Will Possible?” in *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2001), 21–42.

2. For extended discussions of akrasia and weakness of will in contemporary analytic philosophy, see, in addition to Davidson, the work of Amélie Rorty and Alfred Mele. For histories of the concept, Risto Saarinen, *Weakness of Will in Renaissance and Reformation Thought* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2011) and Tobias Hoffmann, ed., *Weakness of Will from Plato to the Present* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic Univ. of America Press, 2008).

3. Locke revises his model of volition in the first edition, where volition follows from beliefs or judgments so that wrong actions necessarily follow from wrong beliefs—a view that recuperates the Socratic position in Plato’s *Protagoras*.

4. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1975), bk. II, sec. 35, 253–54.

5. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions*, trans. J. M. Cohen (London: Penguin, 1953), 88.

6. *Ibid.*, 87.

7. *Ibid.*, 88. For a discussion on whether Rousseau’s utterance of Marion’s name is an unintentional signifier or a thoroughly non-linguistic sound, Paul de Man, “The

Purloined Ribbon,” *Glyph* 1 (1977): 28–49, and Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels, “Against Theory,” *Critical Inquiry* 8.4 (Summer 1982): 723–42.

8. Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), 32–33.