

## Critique of an Argument for the Reality of Purpose

DANNY FREDERICK

Hunstan Lane, Old Leake, Boston, PE22 9RG, United Kingdom  
dannyfrederick77@gmail.com

ORIGINAL SCIENTIFIC ARTICLE / RECEIVED: 25–07–11 ACCEPTED: 05–03–12

---

**ABSTRACT:** G. F. Schueler has argued, against the eliminativist, that human purposive action cannot be an illusion because the concept of purpose is not theoretical. He argues that the concept is known directly to be instantiated, through self-awareness; and that to maintain that the concept is theoretical involves an infinite regress. I show that Schueler's argument fails because all our concepts are theoretical in the sense that we may be mistaken in applying them to our experience. As a consequence, it is conceivable that direct introspection of an event as a purposive action may be mistaken. I indicate ways in which the eliminativist may be able to explain why our perception and introspection is afflicted with systematic error.

**KEY WORDS:** Action explanation, eliminativist, infinite regress, introspection, perception, purpose, Schueler, theory-laden.

---

A scientific theory will often explain a range of observational facts by positing a set of theoretical entities of specific types, such as electrons. The theoretical entities are known, or assumed, to exist only because they are part of the successful explanation. If someone proposes an alternative theory, which posits a different set of theoretical entities (for example, oxygen instead of phlogiston), and this alternative theory better explains the same set of observational facts, and perhaps explains some other facts besides, the theoretical entities that belonged to the first theory may be jettisoned along with that theory.

We have a similar situation with regard to the teleological explanation of human action. The same set of physicalistically described behavioural facts may be explained by rival theories which posit different purposes of the agents. For example, the same physical behaviour could be explained in the following two ways. The first explanation says that there are two groups of students, each dressed in colourful costumes, performing the

following ritual in a cow pasture. Each group has a short meeting to discuss and vote on some topic, and then the individuals selected to present the conclusions of their group line up facing the other group. After a brief moment of silence, one person on each side yells out its opinion and then a fight breaks out which has to be broken up by people in striped shirts. Then the whole thing is repeated. The second explanation is that the students are playing American football. The two explanations might explain what happens on the field equally well; but the second explanation will also explain some things that the first does not, such as what the students later say about what they were doing. The purposes attributed to the students in the first explanation might then be rejected.

In the case of human purposive behaviour, however, it has been suggested that it may be possible to explain the physicalistically described behaviour in terms of underlying neurophysiological mechanisms, without referring to purposes at all. If this provides a better explanation than available purposive explanations, then we can entirely avoid the attribution of purposes to human agents, and we may dismiss human purposes as being as illusory as phlogiston. Proponents of this suggestion are “eliminativists” with regard to human purposes: they affirm that there are no human purposes; that, as a matter of fact, the concept of purposive action is uninstantiated in human beings. In a recent paper, Schueler (2009: section 6) offers two complementary arguments which are intended to show that this eliminativist affirmation is false because human purposive action cannot be an illusion.

In the first argument, Schueler makes a distinction between theoretical explanations and the underlying facts that they explain. The former involve theoretical concepts, such as those of an electron, oxygen or phlogiston. These are concepts that *apply to* the underlying facts in the sense that they explain them; but they are also *based on* these underlying facts in the sense that they are known to be instantiated only because of their place in successful explanations. The concept of purpose, however, is not a theoretical concept. While it is similar to a theoretical concept in that it *applies to* the observational facts about behaviour that can be explained by its means, it is not *based on* these underlying facts. For, we know of the existence of purposes independently of the success of any explanations in which the concept of purpose plays a part. Excluding unusual circumstances, such as self-deception, when I act for a purpose, I do not learn what my purpose is by formulating a hypothesis about my purpose and testing it against observations of myself. To use Schueler’s example, when I know that my purpose in running down the street is to get away from some bad guys, it is not because I somehow observe myself internally and then on some grounds attribute that purpose to myself, more or less in the

same way someone *else* who is observing or thinking about me might do. Rather, I am directly aware of what my purpose is. Acting with some purpose is itself a state of an agent, frequently perfectly conscious. Since we have direct awareness of (some of) our purposes, no neurophysiological advances can show these purposes to be illusory.

In the second argument, Schueler says that, in a normal case in which an agent acts with a purpose, the agent knows what that purpose is. Now, *suppose that the concept of purpose is a theoretical concept*. Then agents would know what their purposes are only by figuring them out. However, figuring out the purpose of an action is itself a purposive activity; and when an agent figures something out, they typically know that their purpose is to figure something out. But, then, to know that their purpose is to figure something out, the agent would have to have figured *that* out; that is, the agent would have to have completed another purposeful activity of figuring out, the purpose of which the agent will typically know; and so on ad infinitum. Thus, each normal case of acting with a purpose would be possible only if the agent carried out an infinity of purposeful activities, which is impossible for human beings, who have finite capacities. Therefore, the supposition, that the concept of purpose is a theoretical concept, is false. The concept of purpose must, then, be one that we can know to apply to our actions directly. In consequence, no neurophysiological advances can show that our purposes are illusory.

It seems to me that each of these arguments is unsound. The fundamental problem with each is that it depends upon a misconstrual of non-theoretical concepts. For, Schueler's distinction between theoretical and other concepts ignores a sense in which *all* our concepts are theoretical. In this sense, a concept is theoretical if we can be *mistaken* in applying it to our experience. If the concept of purpose is theoretical in this sense, the fact that it is not a theoretical concept in Schueler's sense presents no problem for the eliminativist.

It is a commonplace of the philosophy of science that even observational concepts are theory-laden and that observation statements are consequently fallible (Watkins 1984: 82–84, 247–78). All our perceptions are informed, or misinformed, by theories: the content of our perception (what we see something as) depends upon the theories we utilise in the observation. Two people who utilise different theories may see the very same thing very differently. For example, what a layman sees as an oscillating iron bar, with a mirror attached, sending a beam of light to a celluloid ruler, a physicist sees as the electrical resistance of a coil (Duhem 1954: 145). What someone unfamiliar with playing cards sees as a piece of white card with a colourful pattern on it, the rest of us see as a four of hearts. But the theories which inform our observations may be false. This is perhaps

obvious in the case of the physicist; but it is true also in more homely cases like that of the four of hearts. In psychological experiments, subjects who were briefly shown anomalous playing cards, such as a black four of hearts, reported having seen their normal counterparts (a red four of hearts or a black four of spades): it took repeated exposures for them to notice that the anomalous cards did not look right and, eventually, to describe them correctly (Kuhn 1970: 62–64). Their misperceptions were informed by a false theory, or expectation, to the effect that playing cards come in standard designs which exclude there being a black four of hearts.

Schueler might concede this point but object that all such cases concern observations that are informed by concepts that have been invented by us. Thus, while the physicist directly perceives something as electrical resistance, this is possible for him only because he has mastered a set of explanatory scientific theories which posit the existence of such a thing. If he later rejects some of these theories as false, he might, with some practice, be able to return to seeing things in the way that the layman sees them. Similarly, when we perceive something as a four of hearts, this is possible for us only because we have mastered a theory about playing cards which posits the existence of such entities. It is more difficult to imagine that we could all be mistaken about the existence of such a thing as a four of hearts (a whole practice of card-playing would have to be some kind of illusion) or that we could cease to see a four of hearts as a four of hearts; but both are at least conceivable. Schueler might continue that the same applies to eliminativist examples of concepts that have been shown to be mistaken by the progress of our knowledge (P. M. Churchland 1981: 78–82, 89–90; 1988: 43–45; P.S. Churchland 1986: 280–82; Rorty 1965, 1970). This is plainly so with respect to scientific examples such as the ether, celestial spheres, animal spirits, impetus, caloric and phlogiston. But it seems also to be the case with regard to other examples. Thus, the medievals saw mental disturbance as demonic possession, and some tribal people perceive thunder as godly anger. But, Schueler might contend, such mistaken perception-as is possible only where perceivers have acquired theories involving invented concepts, where the only reason to accept the existence of things instantiating the concepts is the explanatory success (real or imagined) of the theories that contain them.

The flaw in this objection is that even concepts that are not invented as part of explanatory theories, which are thus not theoretical in Schueler's sense, are still theoretical in the sense that we can be mistaken in applying them directly in our perception. All of our ordinary observational concepts impute to their instances a typical nature (features, relations or behaviour) which transcends the content of any finite set of observations (Popper 2002: 76, 440–46), though this typical nature may be indicated in an in-

determinate way (Kuhn 1977: 301–19). Thus, each of these concepts is an implicit theory.<sup>1</sup> Assume that we have identified some concepts of observable things, such as rocks, trees and water, which are utilised by uneducated people and have not been invented for explanatory purposes (thus, they are not theoretical concepts in Schueler's sense). Even so, some of these people who perceive something as a rock may be inclined to change their minds if, when they reach out to touch the thing, their hands pass through it. Some who perceive something as a tree will probably accept that they are mistaken if they see the thing waddle off. Similarly, people who say that a particular liquid is water because it looks, smells and tastes like water will probably change their minds if the liquid starts to burn a hole in their tongues.

The same seems to hold for the concept of purposive action. We did not have to figure out that other humans are purposive agents. We naturally perceive other humans as purposive: even one-and-a-half-year-old children make conjectures about other people's goals (Pinker 2002: 31–40, 55, 60–63). But we can misperceive another's goals, as when I see a woman as waving to me when she is in fact shooing away a bug, or when I perceive an unintentional action as intentional. We can perceive behaviour that is not even an action, such as a reflex, as purposive. We could conceivably perceive a robot as a purposive agent too. Indeed, young children, and also some people in tribal cultures, experience the world in an animistic way, directly perceiving inanimate things as purposive agents (P. M. Churchland 1981: 74; Piaget 1929: 169–251). The fact that some behaviour of other people is perceived by us as purposive *directly*, without the intervention of concepts we have *invented* to explain their behaviour, is consistent with that behaviour not being purposive.

Of course, each of us naturally conceives of ourselves as a purposive agent and much of our behaviour appears to ourselves in introspection as purposive. But why could it not be the case that we are mistaken here too? We know we can be mistaken in introspection. For example, people make mistakes about the reasons for, or the influences on, their own thoughts and actions, often being misguided by a priori theories they hold (Nisbett & Wilson 1977); and philosophers disagree about the phenomenology of thought (Schwitzgebel 2008: 257–59). So, it seems arbitrary to maintain that in the case of introspection of *our own purposive action* we cannot be mistaken. Indeed, Schueler admits cases of self-deception in which, through introspection, we misidentify the purpose of our action.

---

<sup>1</sup> This is *not* to affirm that these concepts are *implicitly defined* by the theories in which they figure. For cogent criticism of that account of theoretical concepts see Feyerabend (1981a), Kuhn (1977) and Popper (2002: 51–54).

Why could we not also be mistaken in thinking that an action of ours is purposive at all? Schueler does not give us an answer.

It might be objected that it is difficult to see how we could be mistaken about such a thing. However, the difficulty of conceptualising ourselves and our own actions as non-purposive is the difficulty of abandoning an ingrained conceptual scheme for a new and conflicting one. Such difficulties can be overcome, as happened, for example, when Newtonian physics supplanted Aristotelian physics or when Newtonian theory was in turn supplanted by relativity theory. It might be admitted that it is *conceivable* that we are mistaken in attributing purposes to our actions, but objected that it seems highly *unlikely* that it should really be so. However, in 1846, when Newton's theory had yielded the successful prediction of the existence of Neptune, it seemed highly unlikely that Newton's theory could be mistaken. It might be objected that, in previous scientific revolutions, the transition from one conceptual scheme to another was aided by the explanatory successes of theories that used the new scheme, whereas we do not yet seem to have any examples of successful explanations of human action which show that people who took themselves to be acting purposively were actually not acting purposively at all. However, the eliminativist will say (Feyerabend 1981b: 165–66) that the research programme of eliminative materialism is at too early a stage to expect such examples, but that such examples will be forthcoming as and when the programme is successfully developed. It is at least conceivable that this will happen.

Indeed, some philosophers who are incompatibilists about free will can already understand how we may be mistaken about attributing purposive actions to other people and to ourselves, at least if they admit that determinism may be true. For, some philosophers maintain that, if determinism is true, not only do we never act freely, but we never act at all. Thus, Alvarez (2009) and Steward (2008, 2009) argue that agency is essentially a two-way power, involving the ability either to do or to refrain, in which case a causally determined event cannot be an action. If this is right and if it is also possible that determinism is true, then it is possible that none of us are purposive agents. We can arrive at the same conclusion from a slightly different angle. For, if an action is fully determined by a sequence of causes beginning before the agent was born, then it is not up to the agent *what* action is being done or *whether* it is being done, in which case, it seems, the agent can hardly be doing it intentionally. But if an action is not intentional, it is not done with a purpose. So, if determinism is true, there are no purposive actions. Since it seems possible that determinism is true, it could be the case that each of our introspections of purposive action is mistaken. However, these sorts of arguments, though convincing to some (including this author), are of limited force, since they may have



little appeal to compatibilists about free will, or even to incompatibilists who think that determinism is impossible.

If we do eventually discover that when we perceive others as acting with a purpose, and when we introspect our own activity as purposeful, we are misperceiving behaviour that is in fact purely mechanical, we should then modify our conceptual scheme, perhaps jettisoning the concept of purpose entirely, at least in theoretical discussions. Perhaps people who master the new neurophysiological theory of human action could come to *perceive* their own actions and those of other people as purely mechanical events, just as the physicist sees the electrical resistance of a coil. However, it seems more likely that we would be unable to stop seeing human behaviour, either that of other people or our own, as purposive actions, even though we think we know better (Strawson 1974, 11–13, 18–19). If that were so, we could still, when we are engaged in theoretical discussion, acknowledge the error in our perceptions. This would be parallel to what we do in the case of the Müller-Lyer illusion: even though we know the two lines are of equal length, we cannot help seeing them as of different lengths; but we discount this as mere seeming.

It might be objected that the eliminativist owes us an explanation for why we take our own behaviour, and that of other people, to be purposive, that is, an explanation for why we have the concept of purpose and are naturally inclined to apply it directly in our introspections and in our observations of others. In response, the eliminativist might say, in a way familiar from evolutionary psychology, that our perception of things in that way enables us to develop theories about human behaviour which are simple and which, though false, yield roughly accurate predictions for the sorts of situations we are likely to encounter. There might then be an evolutionary advantage to us having such concepts and the propensity to develop such theories, rather than true theories which may be far more complex. For the losses in accuracy of prediction may be only marginal for the bulk of our everyday circumstances, while the resources saved by not building greater brain power may be large and may produce substantial benefits if used in other ways, for example, to build stronger arms and legs. In short, our survival and reproduction may be enhanced because we have a simple conceptual scheme which is systematically misleading in at least some respects.

Anyone who doubts whether a false theory could be useful in negotiating our way in the world should recall that, even though relativity theory has superseded Newton's theory, and the latter is false if relativity theory is true, scientists at NASA use Newton's theory, rather than relativity theory, to plan their space explorations because it gives results which

are accurate enough for practical purposes while being much simpler to use than relativity theory.

An alternative, or complementary, form of explanation of our employing the concept of human purpose could refer to the evolutionary advantages of the bonding and social organisation that are possible if creatures appear to themselves and to each other to be purposive, even if they are not. This explanation would naturally be linked to an eliminativist explanation of morality. Moral concepts are observational, rather than theoretical in Schueler's sense (McNaughton 1988: 55–57). For instance, if we see a man punch an innocent bystander, we directly perceive his action as wrong. Of course, as with all observational concepts, we can be mistaken in the direct application of moral concepts in our perception. For example, if we learn that the two men were actually stunt men rehearsing a fight scene and no blow was struck, we may concede that we did not perceive a wrong action. But it is also conceivable that moral concepts have no instances at all, as error theorists maintain (Mackie 1977: chapter 1). An explanation for why we are prone to this systematic mistake may be offered in terms of the evolutionary advantages of the co-operative behaviour that is possible and likely if creatures take their actions to have moral qualities (Pinker 2002: 53, 168–69, 242–44). In a somewhat similar way it has been proposed that humans have evolved to employ a concept of God, not because it is instantiated (it might or might not be), but because it generates emotions and attitudes that aid survival and reproduction (Hamer 2004). Of course, all such evolutionary explanations need working out in detail, and unexpected problems with them might emerge when this is attempted.

Thus, eliminativists who think that human purposes, and purposive actions, will eventually be shown to be illusory by the progress of science can concede the claims made in Schueler's arguments while denying their ultimate conclusion. With regard to the first argument, they could (and, I think, should) concede that the concept of purpose is not theoretical in Schueler's sense. It is, rather, an element of a conceptual scheme that is part of our biological inheritance, so that our own behaviour (and that of other people) usually appears to us directly as purposive. But eliminativists will maintain that we may eventually discover that this appearance is deceptive, that human behaviour does not instantiate the concept of purposive action. If they are right, then what we take to be our everyday knowledge of our own purposes is either not knowledge at all, or is fallible knowledge, that is, useful falsehood that we might eventually discover to be false and which we might even be able to replace with something more serviceable. With regard to the second argument, they could (and, I think, should) concede that, since the concept of purpose is not a theoretical



concept in Schueler's sense, we did not invent the concept for explanatory purposes and we do not normally figure out what our own purposes are. But they will maintain that the concept of purpose is theoretical in the sense that our direct application of it is fallible and that it might even have no instances at all. It is therefore conceivable that future advances in our knowledge will show human purpose to be illusory.

### References

- Alvarez, M. 2009. "Actions, thought-experiments and the 'principle of alternate possibilities'", *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 87, 61–81.
- Churchland, P. M. 1981. "Eliminative materialism and the propositional attitudes", *Journal of Philosophy* 78, 67–90.
- . 1988. *Matter and Consciousness*, revised edition (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press).
- Churchland, P. S. 1986. *Neurophilosophy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press).
- Duhem, P. 1954. *The Aim and Structure of Physical Theory*, second edition, tr. P. P. Wiener (Princeton: Princeton University Press).
- Feyerabend, P. K. 1981a. "On the interpretation of scientific theories". In his (1981c: 37–43).
- . 1981b. "Materialism and the mind-body problem". In his (1981c: 161–75).
- . 1981c. *Realism, Rationalism and Scientific Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Hamer, D. 2004. *The God Gene* (New York: Doubleday).
- Kuhn, T. 1970. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, second enlarged edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).
- . 1977. "Second thoughts on paradigms". In his *The Essential Tension* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 293–319.
- Mackie, J. L. 1977. *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Harmondsworth: Penguin).
- McNaughton, D. 1988. *Moral Vision* (Oxford: Blackwell).
- Nisbett, R.E. & T.D. Wilson. 1977. "Telling more than we can know", *Psychological Review* 84, 231–59.
- Piaget, J. 1929. *The Child's Conception of the World* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul).
- Pinker, S. 2002. *The Blank Slate* (London: Penguin).
- Popper, K. R. 2002. *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (London: Routledge).

Rorty, R. 1965. "Mind-body identity, privacy, and categories", *Review of Metaphysics* 19, 24–54.

———. 1970. "In defense of eliminative materialism", *Review of Metaphysics* 24, 112–21.

Schueler, G. F. 2009. "Interpretative explanations". In C. Sandis (ed.), *New Essays on the Explanation of Action* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan), 112–31.

Schwitzgebel, E. 2008. "The unreliability of naive introspection", *Philosophical Review* 117, 245–73.

Steward, H. 2008. "Moral responsibility and the irrelevance of physics", *Journal of Ethics* 12, 129–145.

———. 2009. "Fairness, agency and the flicker of freedom", *Nous* 43, 64–93.

Strawson, P. F. 1974. "Freedom and resentment", In his *Freedom and Resentment* (London: Methuen), 1–25.

Watkins, J. W. N. 1984. *Science and Scepticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).