

MOTIVES AND INTERPRETATIONS

by

Ulrike Heuer

University College London

1 Introduction

As a philosopher of action, this is my first encounter with Waismann's work in moral psychology. In this paper, I will explore one of the themes of Waismann's rich and evocative essay *Will and Motive*. In *Will and Motive*, Waismann addresses a number of related questions and topics which are central to understanding intentional agency. He sets out to explain what willing is, and what it is not, and how it relates to having motives. The essay is written in an unusual open-ended way, presenting a wealth of observations about language and experience in a truly exploratory fashion.

Waismann poses and answers to some extent questions like the following:

1. Is there an act of willing involved in every action?
2. Is there even any such thing as 'an act of willing'?
3. How does it relate to knowledge of the future and uncertainty?
4. How does willing relate to phenomena in the vicinity, such as wishing?
5. What are motives, and what is a motivational explanation of an action?

By way of giving an introduction, I will briefly sketch Waismann's answers to the first three questions, before I home in on question 5, the topic that I want to discuss in some more detail.

The so-called act of willing.

Waismann is skeptical that there are 'acts of the will.' There is a psychological phenomenon, willing, but it is not present in all actions. The phenomenon, as Waismann sees it, occurs for instance when a person reflects on what to do and experiences a conflict. He remarks that "will always goes with some resistance and is directed towards overcoming that resistance" (59). According to Waismann, the phenomenology of willing is the phenomenology of overcoming resistance which in turn presupposes conflict. Thus when there is no conflict, there is no willing.

"[I]f I decline flatly to be an accomplice to a crime, the question arises whether this was really an act of will: I did not wrestle with myself before deciding not to do it; I did not first feel and then suppress a temptation; in short, what is missing is precisely what is characteristic of willing. From an external or legal point of view my refusal may look like an expression of my will; but seen from inside I did not will; nor would I say: 'I have decided not to participate in this crime'; I would say this only if I had contemplated the idea, entertained the possibility, and then dropped it." (83)

Waismann is aware that this is somewhat counterintuitive. But he insists on the resistance-view of willing, as I will call it, because there is nothing but the experience of wrestling with resistance that he can make out as a candidate for the phenomenon of willing in ordinary mental lives.

Willing, knowledge and uncertainty

This leads Waismann to his answer to question (3): If we can foresee a decision with certainty, it's not a decision anymore. Knowledge about the future can disable the will: "Willing is possible only in the grey area between knowledge and ignorance." (78) We cannot will what we know is going to happen anyway, even though we can desire it, nor can we will what we know we are going to do. If I simply know what I will do, my doing does not

involve the will, since then again there would be no resistance. Therefore "...willing is tied up with the *inability to foresee*." (83)

I am not quite sure why Waismann thinks this is an implication of his struggle-, or resistance-view of the will. Is it impossible to know in advance that I will go through a struggle, but that I will resolve it in a particular way? Take, for instance, the case of an addict who foresees both that he will struggle, and how it will end, and compare him with a person of strong will of whom the same is true ("going to the gym is a struggle each time, but in the end, I always go"). The addict is perhaps weak-willed and therefore the drug-taking should not be seen as an expression of his will. But it would be odd if the same were true of the strong-willed person.

You may think (and perhaps Waisman thought?) that when a person knows what she will do, then there can be no struggle or resistance. But examples of the kind I gave you show that this is false. The weak-willed and the strong-willed person each exhibit both features that Waismann focuses on: they both experience a struggle, and eventually resolve it, and they both know how it will end. According to Waismann, the first is the mark of willing, the second makes willing impossible. If my interpretation of the examples is correct, then what Waismann says can't be right. Furthermore, since the cases are symmetrical in these regards what explains the involvement of the will in the case of the strong-willed person cannot be the mere experience of struggle. Thus, as it stands, Waismann's view of the will doesn't seem correct. Perhaps it is possible to amend it: willing is not just struggling against resistance but perhaps struggling and persevering. But even so, willing would be compatible with knowing in advance how one will act.

But Waismann's resistance-view of willing gives rise to a peculiar puzzle: When we experience a struggle, or resistance, it is because we have different motives pulling us in different directions. According to Waismann, resolving the struggle is what we call willing. But what then moves us to action? The motive, or the will? Furthermore: Is the will determined by the motives? And is the action determined by the will? Willing, on Waismann's view, is the active ending of a struggle of motives. But how does the motive figure in the explanation of an action then? Either it or the will appear superfluous in

explaining why a person acts. This puzzle occupies much of Waismann's subsequent discussion. For the remainder of this paper, I will focus on the view of motivational explanations that he develops in his essay.

2 Motivational explanations

Towards the end of the essay, Waismann raises the question what motives are, and what we are doing when we try to explain an action in the light of the agent's motives for it. His most important and original contribution to our understanding of agency is here.

Waismann begins by considering what motives are. He notes that we can speak of motives in a very broad sense:

“they may contain anything: reasons, aims, intentions, hopes, inclinations, desires, cravings, inhibitions, interests, one's situation in life, consideration for others, duty, social position, awareness of one's right, a surge of passion, ideals, moods, an inner voice, physical condition, something irrational, and God knows what else.” (115)

However, we can also distinguish between two more specific senses: the motive can be a *Triebfeder* (drive), or a *Beweggrund* (purpose). There are “goal-setting [motives] and those that are not goal directed” (112). They serve different functions in the explanations that we offer. Purposes play a role in “in order to...” explanations, as: ‘Why did you do it? I did it in order to pay my debts.’ Here the motive of the action is ‘to pay my debts’. Other motives don't come in in this way. Take jealousy: it may well be the motive of an action, but not because the jealous person acts in order to express his jealousy.

In what ways do motives like jealousy then explain our actions? This is the question to which Waismann wishes to give an answer in the final parts of his essay. The answer comes in two parts, a negative and a positive one: first he sets out to explain and reject the traditional view of motivational explanations (§18); then he develops a positive alternative.

3 The negative arguments

According to the traditional view, when we act, the motive is an internal psychological state of which we can know through introspection, and it triggers or causes the action. Thus the motive causally explains an independent event which is the action.

As Waismann sees it, everything here is false. The motive is

1. not an internal psychological state.
2. We do not know it through introspection.
3. It does not trigger an action,
4. and there is no causal explanation in which the motive is the cause and the action the effect.

Let me explain Waismann's arguments for those four claims.

He starts with an observation: we often have very uncertain knowledge of our own motives. When we try to explain our actions by providing the motive that guided us, we often struggle; we keep changing our mind; when the explanations we offer are criticized by others, and even when we take a critical look at them ourselves, they tend to crumble: 'was that really why I did it?' If we our motives were internal psychological states that we know through introspection we should expect to have a firmer grip on them.

To focus our minds, Waismann gives us the example of Raskolnikov when he confesses to Sonya that it was he who killed the pawnbroker, as well as her half-sister, Sonya's friend Lizaveta. (§16) Raskolnikov appears in a state turmoil, when Sonya finally guesses what it is that he wants to confess. It is then that the question arises 'why did he do it?'. Before committing the murders, Waismann suggests, Raskolnikov was busy preparing, thinking about the danger, struggling with his nerves, but he did not try to 'fathom his motives'. So, in a sense the motive did *not* precede the action – or in any case, Raskolnikov was not aware of it. Waismann identifies five steps of the exchange between Raskolnikov and Sonya in which they try to answer the question why he did it:

- (i) Did he do it because he was hungry, or in order to help his mother, Sonya suggests? No, it wasn't that simple or straightforward. Raskolnikov suspects that there was something distinctively more 'evil' at work. But what is it?
- (ii) "I wanted to be a Napoleon: this is why I murdered her", Raskolnikov announces. He wanted to test whether he is an exceptional person. After all, he had been thinking a lot about how an exceptional person acts, overcoming the ties and shackles that bind ordinary mortals. But as he announces it, it sounds hollow. It is a theory he had, but it is not truly why he did it. "...all that is sheer nonsense, empty verbiage...", he declares. But once again: why did he do it then?
- (iii) He killed her for the money! But Sonya objects that that can't be right. And Raskolnikov agrees. He replies, curiously, "You see yourself that it was not like this; and yet I told you everything honestly and truthfully." "Yes" says Waismann, "that is the peculiar situation in which we find ourselves when we try to fathom a motive: we are perfectly honest, and yet we see that it is not like this, that we have left out something, that what really happened was something different." (123) But what, really, was the motive then? Raskolnikov struggles, he considers his situation, the time leading up to the murder, and what he was thinking about.
- (iv) He wanted to take a risk, he says – a bit like in the 'exceptional person' explanation in (ii), but unlike Napoleon, he didn't do it for a higher purpose. He did it just for himself, he now says. He is trying to be as honest as he can be, eschewing all self-delusions – but it is not a very good explanation nonetheless. In transgressing moral boundaries, he proves to himself that he is an exceptional person – does that really make sense? He doubts it. Hence, he makes a fresh start:
- (v) He was led astray by the devil. While he was brooding in the dark, something came over him, "something foreign which does not originate in his will and takes possession of him", Waismann comments (125). Again, Raskolnikov rejects all nobler motives, and tries to be brutally honest. Has he nailed it this time?

Is any one of these 'the right explanation'? Is there even such a thing as the right explanation? Raskolnikov's earnest search for a truthful explanation suggests that, indeed,

there is. Some of the purported explanations were discarded as wrong. Doesn't that show that there must be a right one? But is there even a fact of the matter? On Dostojevski's view, the right interpretation is the one that sticks in the sense of 'becoming true' because Raskolnikov's subsequent life will be shaped by it. But Waismann doesn't settle for this view, at least not yet. Leaving open whether any of these explanations identifies the true motive, Waismann describes the five-step journey as Raskolnikov "feel[ing] his way towards the motive" (125). Raskolnikov does not know what his motive is when he starts. He tries to find out by conducting 'thought experiences', and by trying to determine his own character: trying to determine what kind of a person he is.

The uncertainty, and the series of re-interpretations that it leads to, sit badly with the traditional view. They shed doubt on the claims that our motives are internal psychological states which we know through introspection, giving support to Waismann's first and second claim, for why would it be so difficult to know our motives if they were psychological states that we can know through introspection?

However, Waismann is aware that this question may well have an answer which is compatible with the traditional view: some of our motives are not fully conscious, and exploring them reflectively meets with resistance. Much of Freud's theory can be seen as explaining why this is so, how it happens and how the resistance can be overcome. There may be deep unconscious obstacles. But even beyond the Freudian deep unconscious, more mundane reasons (furnished by vanity, embarrassment, or unrealistic self-images) can keep us from taking a good, hard look at our motives. Raskolnikov certainly tries to do just that. But perhaps he falters in the process each time. What counts in favour of this reply on behalf of the traditional view is that when there are no such obstacles, we often know our motives very well: why do I turn out the light? Because I'm tired and want to go to sleep. Why did I walk here from the hotel this morning? To participate in the Waismann Conference. I am not uncertain or doubtful when I give these answers.

Waismann considers this rejoinder but rejects it: we fail to be certain of our motives even in cases in which there are no obstacles, he maintains. The 'peculiar instability' of our motives may sometimes be explained by Freudian resistance, but not in all cases – and Waismann

claims that uncertainty and instability are pervasive. The explanation of any complex action is subject to it. (126f) That I can know why I switch out the light is owed to the simplicity of the action, and not to the lack of Freudian suppression of the motive. In more complex cases we may fail to gauge the motive, even when there is no suppression involved (I discuss an example of this kind below: Waismann's motive for writing his essay).

Waismann's reasons for (1) and (2) are perhaps not conclusive. But they do something to cast doubt on the traditional view. And they also begin to make the case for (3) and (4): it seems that it is not a condition of a successful motivational explanation that the motive precedes the action – at least the agent needn't be aware of the motive prior to action. Causes, however, precede their effects.

In addition, in §18, Waismann makes a different case for the third claim: motives do not trigger actions because they are not independent causes of the action. Again, he focuses on an example, the example of acting out of hatred. Imagine a person kills another out of hatred – and we know as much. That is: we know the motive in this case. Does the emotion, the hatred, which is the action's motive, causally explain the action? What *is* the emotion independently of the action which manifests it? There may be other actions which manifest it too: speaking badly about the victim, turning away from her, engaging in fantasies of harming her, etc. But that doesn't help. We need to identify the emotion *independently of all of these actions* if it is to be their cause. This, says Waismann, is not possible. If we subtract all the outward signs of the emotion, what we are left with may be nothing more than a "calm thought", the belief perhaps that the intended victim is hateful. But that thought is not an emotion, let alone the passionate one that could explain the killing of a person. It alone could hardly be the motive of the killing.

Let's be a bit more precise. The traditional view that Waismann attacks assumes that the motive is an internal state, and everything external, and observable may be caused by the motive, but it is not itself part of the motive. The external expressions of the motive include both bodily excitations and actions. If we subtract all these, Waismann suggests, then we are left with nothing but a calm thought. A thought of this kind is a very unlikely contender

for a motive of all the external occurrences. She killed him because she thought that he isn't very likeable? Hardly.

A proponent of the traditional view may reject the suggestion that she must distinguish between a motive and its effects by demarcating the boundaries of internal and external signs. She may maintain that actions are caused by motives, but bodily excitations and feelings are part of the motive. After all they are not actions. Thus, what Waismann's argument actually shows is that motives cannot be purely internal states, but not that they cannot be causes of actions. They must at least have a feeling component, which in turn is realized in a bodily change. If the emotion is thought of as the cause of the bodily excitations that are 'felt', then Waismann's worry seems pertinent. There simply isn't anything left, resembling an emotion, that could do the causing. If all external manifestations of an emotion (actions being only one of them) had to be explained by some internal state, we wouldn't be left with anything that could plausibly do the explaining. Thus, Waismann suggests that "[t]he emotion is *discharged* into the action, and the best thing to do is *to count* the actions *as part of the emotion*." (130; emphases by Waismann) But, my imagined defender of the traditional view objects, this conclusion is hasty, even granting the basic premise that emotions are not purely internal states. We should count *some* external expressions as part of a motive, but not the actions to which it leads. Waismann does not consider this possible rejoinder on behalf of the proponent of the traditional view. Perhaps he would have found it *ad hoc*.

Instead, as he continues, the emotion includes the various actions which are expressions of hatred as its parts: When the emotion reaches a certain strength, it becomes conceivable that it would be discharged into an action of killing, but even when its strength is much lower it is discharged into actions: actions of a different kind, such a turning away, avoiding, or speaking ill of someone. Therefore, the emotion always includes certain external expressions and is unsuited to provide a causal explanation for them.

As Waismann notes, none of this precludes the possibility of giving a causal explanation of an action – it may even support the view that we can provide such explanations (131): there is, after all, a sequence of events leading up to and continuing through an action which

might be understood as one event causing another. But calling any of these events “the motive” would be a mistake. There are motivational explanations, but they are of a different kind. The motive entails the action and thus its role is very different from that of a cause.

This is Waismann’s argument for (3) and (4).

Donald Davidson in his seminal papers ‘Actions, Reasons, and Causes’ (1963) brushes aside Wittgensteinian worries about causal action explanation. He addresses two such objections: First, motives or reasons are not events – hence they cannot be related in a causal explanation. Secondly, the relation of a motive to the action is ‘logical’ not causal. I will not discuss Davidson replies to those challenges here. But whether or not they are successful, note that Waismann’s objections to the causal theory are not those. They don’t turn on the success of these by now familiar objections. In this way, they strike me as fresh and challenging.

4 The positive account

What kind of an explanation is the explanation of an action in the light of its motive then? Is it just a fantasy? No, says Waismann. But we need to understand these explanations in a way which is very different from the traditional view. They are *interpretations* of an action, attempts to make sense of it. As he puts it: “a motive is a kind of meaning.” (133) Think of Raskolnikov again: All the five explanations he considers could make sense of the killings; each of them provides a possible interpretation of Raskolnikov’s actions.

However, Waismann introduced the five steps to illustrate the instability of these explanations. If the explanations make sense, why does Raskolnikov discard them, one after another? Because while those are possible interpretations of the killing, they weren’t *his* motives. None of them is the right interpretation. They may be entirely false, or half-truths, as the case may be. But what then makes a motive “his”, and an interpretation the right one? Clearly not just its ability to make sense of the actions that he in fact performed.

So, the problem with this interpretationist approach is that there may be too many possible interpretations, and it is not clear how to narrow them down, based on Raskolnikov's 'true' motives, since our only steer is that a motive must explain an action by making sense of it. Earlier Waismann argued that introspection directed at internal psychological states cannot help us because we wouldn't be left with anything that is suited to make sense of an action (the case of killing out of hatred). But observing the external expressions of the motive is compatible with a number of interpretations: it cannot help to distinguish between right and wrong interpretations either.

Should we just say that there are a number of interpretations, but none of them is the 'right' one or discloses the 'true' motives? That would be to abandon Raskolnikov's soul-searching as a misguided attempt, since he clearly looks for the right interpretation.

How then do we, and how does Raskolnikov, identify his true or real motives? Waismann explains how, using yet a different example: "Why did I really undertake to write this treatise of the will [= Will and Motive]?" (132) Here are some of his motives:

1. "[T]he question interests me".
2. "[P]hilosophers have unduly neglected it".
3. "I am dissatisfied with what I have read about the will and feel a need for greater clarity".
4. "I hope that ... I will arrive at some new point of view".
5. It is "a good case for testing the power of linguistic analysis".
6. "I find it stimulating to try my hand at a problem so many important philosophers have bypassed and thus to measure myself against them".
7. "I ...find the task of writing itself tempting".
8. "I had...a feeling of *tua res agitur*, for I suffer from a certain lack of will power and would like to get clear about the nature of my condition."

Thus, his motives fall roughly into three categories: (i) his personal interest in the topic (1, 8), (ii) his ambition, and perhaps even a sense of duty to contribute to a better philosophical understanding of the subject (2-5), and (iii) a desire to take on the challenge of writing itself (6, 7). All these explain Waismann's decision to write the essay.

But wait! There was never such a decision, Waismann maintains. He started writing without any conscious awareness of these motives. They are all supplied just as interpretations of what he did, after the fact: as motivational explanations. "I was not conscious of some definite reason why I wrote down those ideas unless it was a kind of curiosity to see where they would lead me." (132)

So how can they explain his writing then? Aren't they just irrelevant? Possible explanations they may be, as Raskolnikov's case illustrates, but his motives they are not: "But if I simply started to write and felt no trace of any of these motives, what right did I have to pass them off as motives?" (133) However, motives may be unconscious without being unreal. They may be present, even if Waismann wasn't aware of them at the time. Introspection may be a very uncertain guide for this reason. But how then do we figure out what motivates us? Here is Waismann's answer "what right did I have to pass them off as motives?": "I would say: because I know myself fairly well, which means: because I know from experience which motives I can ascribe to myself and which ones I cannot." (133)

On the interpretationist account then, putative motives, if they are suited to explain the action, need to be filtered through self-knowledge. Knowing from experience what kind of a person I am, what can motivate me, leads to a narrowing down of those possible interpretations. This sits quite well with Raskolnikov's case: the reason why mere greed is rejected as a motive is not that it couldn't explain the action, but rather that Raskolnikov isn't the kind of person who would act in this way. Raskolnikov's self-knowledge is confirmed by Sonya in this case who rejects the interpretation because it is inconsistent with her knowledge of Raskolnikov, thereby showing perhaps that he isn't just evading an unpleasant truth. This narrowing down might still leave us with several motives, but that is just as well: there can be more than one 'real' or 'true' motive.

5 Objections

I want to articulate the view a bit more clearly by exploring its ability to counter a couple of objections:

1. Self-knowledge builds up and changes over time, as Waismann is aware. As a result, we don't get a stable account of our motives. If we think about something we did two years after it happened, our view of what would have motivated us may have changed – and with it the interpretation of the action. But, thinks Waismann, this is just how it is: even the filtered account of our motives isn't definite or stable. It is open to continuous revision, and re-interpretation. So there remains a lingering question whether there really is such a thing as *the* motive of one's action, and, to the degree that there is, whether we can find out about it. Waismann final conclusion is: "The view we have arrived at does at least one thing: it makes it possible to understand how there can be errors about our own motives." (134) But the talk of 'error' suggests that there is truth, and Waismann continues to waver on this: One way to think of the process of interpretation that Waismann describes is that it is about getting at the right interpretation. But somewhat in tension with this reading, the instability and changeability of the interpretation turns out to be one of its permanent features. Thus, it isn't clear that there is a fact of the matter. Is soul-searching trying to unearth the real or true motive of an action? If not, how should we understand the ambition to "get it right" (which the case of Raskolnikov so strikingly illustrates)?
2. And how do we even come by self-knowledge, if not by knowing of the motives of our actions directly, and not just through interpretation? Is there a way of explaining how self-knowledge can be acquired and work as a filter that wouldn't be question-begging? Could, e.g., the fact that one interpretation is more capacious than another, and can make sense of more of a person's actions, show that it invokes the person's real motives?
3. So far, we've been talking about motives in the very broad sense in which, borrowing Waismann's expression, they "may contain anything". But, as you may remember, he distinguishes two narrower senses, one of them being motives as purposes or reasons. Are the purposes of our actions, and the reasons for which we act subject to the same kind of interpretation and re-interpretation, and therefore in constant flux? Acting from a motive is wider than acting for a reason in two respects: (i) motives may or may not be conscious, but the reason or the purpose for which one

acts is a consideration that the agent is normally aware of prior to acting. (ii) While reasons or purposes make actions intelligible as having something to be said in their favour, not all motives do that, even if they all make sense of the action to some degree, or show it as having a certain meaning: that she killed him out of hatred may make sense of the killing, but it doesn't reveal anything that, from the agent's perspective, counted in favour of the action. By contrast, explaining an action as a killing out of greed implicitly reveals the agent's reason for it: an agent can have acted out of greed only if she believed that she would gain by the action which – if the explanation is correct – would have been her reason for acting as she did.

Waismann draws our attention to two features: the uncertainty and instability of motives, and the fact that they are often ascribed on the basis of the action even when the agent wasn't aware of them prior to acting. Might this hold only for certain motives: viz. 'Triebfedern' (drives), in particular those that are unconscious, but not for motives in the sense of 'Beweggrund' (reason, purpose)? If action explanations in the light of an agent's purposes or reasons are unaffected by Waismann's arguments for the instability and uncertainty of motives, then perhaps the traditional view would not be false for this kind of explanation: *it is* not uncertain, or unstable.

But hasn't this been refuted by the Raskolnikov example? Raskolnikov thought about the money, and about helping his mother and his sister. These considerations figure twice in the five steps. He was aware of them prior to his action, and they counted in favour of his action: they are putative reasons for acting as he does. But *were* these the reasons for which he acted? Both Sonya, and Raskolnikov himself reject that he did it for the money because he is not that kind of a person. So while he considers those reasons, it is uncertain, and doubtful given his character that he acted for them.

So even if a reason for which a person acts or a purpose is something that the agent is aware of prior to action, we may get the same kind of instability and uncertainty that occurs with other motives. Here is why: agents are normally aware of quite a number of reasons for and against acting in a certain way. But for any one of those

reasons, they may deny – as Raskolnikov does – that that is the reason for which they did it. It was *a* reason, all right, and even one that he considered, but not the one for which he acted. Thus the problems of instability and uncertainty that Waismann points out affects motives not only insofar as they are unconscious and mere drives. They affect motives in the sense of ‘Beweggrund’ as well.

And once again, there is the question whether or not there is a fact of matter, when we claim that we acted for a certain reason, but not for others we were aware of, or whether the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves are just that: stories.¹

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¹ T.M. Scanlon (2008: 60) claims that any reason of which a person is aware contributes to the explanation his action. He cannot truthfully claim that he acted only for one of them, but not for the others, unless perhaps he regards a reason as defeated, in the circumstances. He cannot turn them on and off like water tabs: “when one sees several considerations as counting in favor of the same action, one cannot choose to act on one of them rather than another . . . there is no such thing as choosing, or “singling out,” one of them as the reason that one is acting on” (Moral Dimensions, 60) The idea here seems to be that those considerations that we are aware of as reasons for acting in a certain way exert a causal influence which isn’t ‘up to us’. Thus, on Scanlon’s account, all the reasons for acting that Raskolivnov is aware of, are reasons for which he acted and which explain his action. (For a critical discussion see Walen (2009) and Heuer (2015)). Waismann’s anti-causalist view of interpretation provides an interesting challenge here.

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