

The intentional content of intentions

Handout
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1. DESIRES—BRIEF RECAP

In the previous classes, we saw that according to various philosophers, the content of desires need not be propositional. Here are some of the main issues discussed:

- As Stampe argued, at least some desires are not satisfied until their contents are *presently* true. Lycan's current desire to be invited to Wellington, for instance, won't be satisfied until he has been invited. That is, even if Lycan will indeed be invited, his desire is not satisfied until he *is* invited.
- As Brewer argued, one may have a desire directed towards an object (Dorothy desires a Harley Davidson) or a subject (Juliet desires Romeo).
- As Gordon pointed out, unlike beliefs, some desires may only be satisfied at times at which the subject still has the desire (my hunger will only be satisfied if I eat while still being hungry) while other desires may be satisfied even if the desire is no longer present (i.e. my desire for health).
- As Graff Fara and Lycan argued, Fiona's desire for a fish or Peter's desire to be famous may not be specifiable in terms of a proposition. Fiona's desire won't be satisfied if, say, she catches a poisonous, small fish; Peter's desire won't be satisfied if he becomes famous by doing a gigantic stupidity.

2. INTENTIONS—BAIER

- Baier suggests that intentions (i.e., I *intend* to exercise today) are central to understanding the intentionality of any mental states (the idea that mental states are directed towards some existing or non-existing thing¹—this idea is also sometimes expressed by saying that mental states represent). On her view, intentions cannot be analyzed away in terms of other mental states (say, in terms of beliefs and desires). She further claims that we might, nonetheless, be able to model the content of other mental states on the content of intentions. (Note that this is a bold claim that was not argued for in the paper).
- She thinks of intending as the production of voluntary actions. In producing voluntary actions, subjects accept their own limitations: they take their action as being part of the real world that have truths that go beyond what he subject has access to (she takes this limitation in access as a formal feature of intentions). In

¹ Recall that you may desire a unicorn or intend to find the fountain of Youth, even if none of these exist.

this way, she thinks there is a distinction between those aspects of an action that the subject intends and those that she merely accepts.

- The idea that intentions are intentions to act in the real world is what, according to her, distinguishes intentions from other mental states such as wants, wishes, hopes, and fears which need not be constrained by the real world.
- She takes an intention for a particular action as a part of a larger plan that the subject has and also as something that should fit within the context of her past and future intentional acts. (See the discussion on Harman below for more on this).
- For Baier, the possibility of not carrying out the intended action is an outlier case. In studying intentions, we should not be distracted by this case. Many contemporary philosophers (i.e. Lycan) will disagree on this. For them, intentions are to be understood functionally (in terms of its relations to the subject's inputs, outputs, and other mental states). They usually think that these functions can be realized even if the intended action is not carried out.
- Baier discusses Harman's idea that intentions (a) involve a plan as to how they are going to be achieved and that (b) this plan makes reference to those very intentions as being causally efficacious in bringing about the intended action (in this sense, according to Harman, intentions are self-referential). Baier wants to take on board (a) but modify (b) as follows. Instead of claiming that the plan refers to that very intention and takes it to be causally responsible for bringing about the intended action, Baier proposes that the plan makes reference to the subject's *skills*, as recognized by the subject, and as being causally efficacious in bringing about the intended action. (Note that she doesn't deny here that there are causal processes involved in bringing about the intended action).
- Baier points out that intentions can be nested. "My intention to ring the bell will be the intention to do that by pressing the button, as the intention to press the button is to do that to ring the bell. Neither intention stands alone, but each includes reference to its own tie to the other." (Baier, p. 402). In this way, the content of an intention can make reference to other intentions and in this way be part of a larger plan.
- Summing up, Baier proposes that the content of an intention:
 - (i) makes reference to a plan that consists of nested intentions, where each nested intention specifies the skills, as recognized by the subject, that according to her lead to the intended action; (i.e. the subject intends to do a pirouette by intending to move her legs thus and so, and her torso thus and so, and she intends to do this by exercising her ability to turn her legs in this and that way, her torso in this and that way, etc., etc.); and
 - (ii) includes a recognition that the subject's action can be described in other ways that are not accessible to her (i.e. the intended pirouette can be described in other

ways, for example, in terms of microphysical properties that may not be accessible to the subject).

3. INTENTIONS—DAVIDSON

- For Davidson, the content of an intention is a value judgment. If he is right, the content of an intention would be different from the content of a belief in that the former, unlike the latter, would require an evaluative element. For example, while the content of my belief that the sky is blue is the non-evaluative proposition that the sky is blue, the content of my intention to drink orange juice is, according to Davidson, that *it is good* to drink orange juice, or that I *ought* to drink orange juice (this is what he calls an all-out judgment, as we will see below).
- Davidson thinks that intentions cannot be (ontologically) reduced to beliefs, desires, and actions. His argument for this depends on considering what he calls ‘pure intentions’, which he contrasts with what he calls ‘intentions in action’. He thinks that if there were just intentions in action, there would be no problem in reducing them to beliefs, desires, and actions. However, he thinks that there are other intentions, which he calls ‘pure intentions’, that do not involve either a deliberation or an action and that cannot be so reduced. Let us begin by seeing why, according to Davidson, intentions in action *can* be (ontologically) reduced to beliefs, desires, and actions. We will then turn to pure intentions.

Intentions in action

- Intentions in action are intentions that involve an action, like “when someone nails two boards together with the intention of building a squirrel house” (p.2).
- According to Davidson, intentions in action involve the following two elements:
 - a pro-attitude (a desire, want, urge, prompt, etc.), which provides us with the reason why the agent acts the way she does, the goal that she wants to accomplish by performing the action. In his example, the pro-attitude could be a want and the goal could be to build a squirrel house. In other words, the agent wants to build a squirrel house and this is why she nails two boards together. (Note that the agent’s reason for acting need not be good; what is needed is just that it serves to rationalize the agent’s action, that is, to explain why she acted in the way she did; why the action was reasonable given her beliefs and desires).
 - a belief that, by performing the action, she will attain her goal. In our example, this would be the belief that that by nailing the boards together the agent will build a squirrel house.

Reasonableness

- But, in which circumstances is an action reasonable given the subject’s beliefs and pro-attitude? It is too much to claim that every time the agent has an intention in action, he engages in a deliberative or reasoning process (collects evidence,

produce hypotheses, etc.). Rather, Davidson requires only that the agent have pro-attitudes and beliefs such that if the agent were aware of them, he could reason that her action is a desirable one. Put differently, he thinks that the agent's beliefs and desires can be used as the premises of a practical reasoning. Take his example of adding sage to the stew to improve its taste. Here, the agent's belief is that adding sage to the stew improves its state and her goal (the content of her pro-attitude, let's say, a want) is to improve the stew's taste. He proposes to include as part of the content of the second premise the approval that the agent has towards improving the taste of the stew, making the content of the second premise evaluative. The practical reasoning could then be reconstructed as follows:

Premise 1 (belief): Adding sage to the stew improves its taste.
Premise 2 (pro-attitude): It is desirable to improve the taste of the stew
 (Or, I ought to improve the taste of the stew).
Conclusion (action): Add sage to the stew.

- Davidson notes that, because someone might have the belief expressed in premise 1 and the pro-attitude expressed in premise 2, and add sage to the stew for a reason that has nothing to do with them (she might do it accidentally or by mistake) we need to further specify that the agent added sage to the stew *because* of the reasons reconstructed in the above practical reasoning. He further proposes to cash out this *because* in terms of a non-deviant causal chain. Otherwise, the agent may have the belief and pro-attitude stated above, but have them cause her adding sage to the stew in a non-intentional way. (Note that Davidson does not argue for this in the paper we read).
- So far, we get the following reductive account for intentions in action: “an *action* is performed with a certain intention if it is *caused* in the right way by *attitudes* and *beliefs* that rationalize it.” (p. 6-7, my emphasis). Davidson, however, thinks that this account is insufficient in the case of pure intentions.

‘Pure intending’ or intending without action

- A subject is in a state of pure intending when she has an intention without having deliberated and without having acted on it. According to Davidson, once we accept this further form of intention, we have no reason to think that it is not also involved in at least some cases of intention in action. For instance, he thinks that actions that take a longer stretch of time or that have several steps involve acts of pure intending. His reason for this is that it would be very odd if merely starting the action changed in some important way the intention. So, in giving an account of pure intention he takes himself to be offering an account of intentions.
- Davidson thinks that pure intending to do something is neither knowing that one will do it nor believing for sure that one will do it.

- *Pure intending to do x is knowing that one will do x.* Against this claim, Davidson argues that an agent may not *know* her intentions. For example, “in writing heavily on this page I may be intending to produce ten legible carbon copies. I do not know, or believe with any confidence, that I am succeeding. But if I am producing ten legible carbon copies, I am certainly doing it intentionally.” (p. 11). Davidson thinks that the point carries over to cases of pure intending.
- *Pure intending to do x is believing for sure that one will do x.* Davidson argues against this too (though he accepts that sometimes *saying* that one intends to do something may imply that one believes she will do it). He points out that one could intend to do something while believing that something might prevent him from actually doing it. For example, Peter may intend to go to the concert while believing that he may be in prison that day. (Note that in this discussion, Davidson is focusing only in believing for sure, that is, on certainty; he seems to accept that if one intends to do x, one must believe that there is some chance that one will do x).
- Someone might resist the previous reasoning by arguing that intentions are really conditional on the occurrence of all the things that the subject believes might go wrong. In the previous example, it may be argued (Davidson here cites Grice) that the content of Peter’s previous intention is really that he intends to go to the concert if he is not in jail, if he doesn’t change his mind, etc. etc. Davidson responds that while it is true that some intentions are conditional in this way (i.e. I intend to leave the party early if the music is too loud), not all of them are. He claims that, in general, we do not make the content of an intention more accurate by specifying the conditions under which we believe what we intend. For one thing, there may be no way of offering a finite list that specifies what we think may prevent us from doing what we intend. Also, he thinks that the reasons for intending to do something come apart from the reasons for believing that one will do it. (This will become relevant on the dispute with McDowell below).
- Davidson further notes that the conclusion of a practical reasoning may be an action, as Aristotle believed, but it may also be an intention to perform an action (as in the case of pure intending). Think, for instance, of intending to do something but not yet performing the action, as in his example of intending to write the word ‘action’. “I am writing the letter ‘a’ of ‘action’, and I intend to write the letter ‘c’ as soon as I finish the ‘a’.” (p. 16).

Prima facie judgments vs. all-out judgments

- Consider the following practical reasoning (p.16):
 - P1: “I want to eat something sweet.” (or “My eating something sweet is desirable.”)
 - P2: “I believe this candy is sweet, and so eating this candy will be a case of eating something sweet.”
 - C1: “My eating this candy is desirable.”

Davidson points out that I can also express C1 using a demonstrative like this:
 C2: “This action of mine, this eating by me of this candy now, is desirable.”

He thinks this is important because it allows us to couple the value judgment (“is desirable”) directly on the action:

My evaluative reason for acting was, ‘My eating something sweet is desirable’. But of course this cannot mean that any action of mine whatsoever that is an eating of something sweet is something it makes sense to do—my judgment merely deals with actions in so far as they are sweet-consuming. Some such actions, even all of them, may have plenty else wrong with them. It is only when I come to an actual action that it makes sense to judge it as a whole as desirable or not; up until that moment there was no object with which I was acquainted to judge. Of course I can still say of the completed action that it is desirable in so far as it is this or that, *but in choosing to perform it I went beyond this; my choice represented, or perhaps was, a judgment that the action itself was desirable.* (p.16-17, my emphasis)

He is urging us to distinguish the kind of evaluative judgment involved in P1 from the kind of evaluative judgment that we couple with the action. In particular, we should not see the kind of judgment involved in P1 as a universal law, that is, as stating that “any action that is eating something sweet is desirable” but rather as what he calls a ‘*prima facie* judgment’: judgments that something is valuable in so far as it has some attribute. Moreover, *prima facie* judgments should not be associated with the intended action, for then we would have to say that it is reasonable to perform that action solely because it has a desirable attribute. Instead, the judgment coupled with the action should be an *all-out* or *unconditional judgment*, something that may be expressed as “this action is desirable.”

- This brings out the problem that, according to Davidson, arises from considering pure intentions: here, there is no particular action to which we can attach the all-out evaluative judgment. But then, we seem left solely with actions of a sort (i.e. eating something that is sweet, doing something that improves the taste of the stew), and hence, with *prima facie* or conditional judgments (i.e. eating x is desirable in so far as it is sweet; adding sage is desirable in so far as it improves the taste of the stew). Yet, this kind of judgments need not lead to actions that are reasonable “or we would be eating everything sweet”! (p. 17). The kind of judgments that lead to reasonable actions are all-out or *unconditional*: judgments that the action *as a whole* is good or desirable, and not just in so far as it has a certain attribute.
- Let’s turn to see how Davidson resolves this problem by modifying his account on intentions for action.

Modifying the account for intentions in action to account for pure intentions

- Consider again Davidson’s account of intentions in action: “an action is performed with a certain intention if it is caused in the right way by attitudes and

beliefs that rationalize it.” He thinks this account is misleading because the reasons it offers are not generally *all* the reasons that the agent took in consideration to perform her action and, because of this, knowing an agent’s intention is insufficient to reconstruct her practical reasoning. Knowing her intention tells us that the agent considered the action as a whole desirable, whereas knowing her pro-attitude (her want, as stated in P1) and her belief (as stated in P2) only tells us that a certain feature of the action is desirable.

- Davidson proposes to fix this problem by claiming that the content of an intention is:
 - (i) an all-out evaluative judgment to perform an action; and
 - (ii) that this judgment is conditioned on the rest of the agent’s beliefs.
- Having only (i) would lead to the problem pointed out above. Having an all-out judgment for eating anything sweet in the nearby future would be mad—it would lead me to eat nearby poisonous candy. Davidson claims that adding (ii) fixes this problem: it is not mad to have the all-out judgment *given the rest of my beliefs*, for instance, given my belief that I won’t eat poisonous candy in the near future. So my all-out judgment for eating sweet things does not include eating a poisonous candy.
- Note further that the idea is not that the content of the all-out judgment is conditional in form, but that the unconditional judgment is itself conditioned on the subject’s beliefs. In other words, he thinks the intention assumes but does not make reference to my current beliefs about the future. “the belief is not part of what I intend, but an assumption without which I would not have the intention.” (p. 19)
- Summing up: Davidson used to think that intentions involved a pro-attitude (whose content was expressed by means of a prima facie evaluative judgment) and a belief. He now proposes that intentions should be accounted for in terms of a pro-attitude (whose content is expressed by an all-out evaluative judgment) conditioned on the rest of the agent’s beliefs.
- Has Davidson offered a full ontological reduction of intention? The account is non-reductive in the sense that it requires an attitude that was not previously recognized, and all-out judgment. The account is not spooky, however, for this attitude can be seen as falling into the same genus as other previously recognized attitudes. Davidson thinks the best he has achieved in so far as a reduction is concerned is showing that “intending and wanting belong to the same genus of pro attitudes expressed by value judgments. Wants, desires, principles, prejudices, felt duties, and obligations provide reasons for actions and intentions, and are expressed by *prima facie* judgments; intention and the judgments that go with intentional actions are distinguished by their all-out or unconditional form. Pure

intending constitute a subclass of the all-out judgments, those directed to future actions of the agent, and made in the light of his beliefs.” (p. 22)

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Question for discussion: Could there be a case in which the genie shows us a possible world where our intention is “semantically realized” and yet, we react by saying “No! That is not what I intended! I did not intend it that way!” in a similar way in which we had in the case of desires?

4. INTENTIONS—MCDOWELL

McDowell's proposal

- McDowell proposes that “the content of an intention in action is given by *what one would say in expressing it*, and the proper form for expressing such an intention is a statement about what one is doing: e.g. ‘I am doing such-and-such.’” (p. 415, my emphasis). For example, the content of my intention in action to raise my hand is “I am raising my hand”, something that can be said at anytime while one is raising one’s hand. The content of other intentions considered above would be: “I am eating something sweet”, “I am adding sage to the stew”.
- Yet, not any utterance of the progressive “I am doing such-and-such” expresses an intention. “I am crossing the street”, for instance, could be said as one is wheeled through a street in a wheelchair. To account for this, McDowell distinguishes between uses of the progressive present in the first person that express an intention and those that do not. In the case where I am wheeled through the street, I need *observational knowledge* to learn that I am crossing the street; in the case where I do so intentionally all I need is *practical knowledge*.
- McDowell’s qualified proposal is thus: “The content of an intention in action is given by what one would say in expressing it, or what one would say *in stating the practical knowledge one has in executing it*, which comes to the same thing. And the appropriate form is ‘I am doing such-and-such’”. (p. 417, my emphasis)

McDowell's criticism to Davidson

- Unlike for Davidson, for McDowell the content of an intention in action does *not* include evaluative elements. According to McDowell, for instance, the conclusion of Davidson’s practical reasoning is “I am eating some candy” and not “It would be good to eat some candy”.
- According to McDowell, the problem with Davidson’s proposal is that it incorrectly assumes “that practical reason is reasoning towards the truth of a *proposition*.” (p. 415, my emphasis). For him, intentions are rather the exercise of a practical conceptual capacity (though he does not elaborate on this). According to him, Davidson has failed to offer a genuine account of *practical* reasoning.

Anscombe says that we obscure Aristotle's discovery if we take practical reasoning to be reasoning towards the truth of a proposition. No doubt the conclusion that one ought to give the man money, or that giving him money is all-out desirable, is in some sense practical. [...] Even so, reasoning that persuades one *that those things are so* is reasoning towards the truth of those propositions. So by Anscombe's light it is not practical reasoning at all. But that is just how Davidson fits his account of intentions into what is supposed to be an account of practical reasoning. (p.421)

- Further, McDowell notes that Davidson's account would not give us the right way of expressing how we *go on* acting intentionally. At best, it expresses the onset of an intention in action (though he argues against this as well; according to McDowell something non-evaluative such as "I'll eat some candy" would be better).

Going on intentionally doing something cannot be equated with drawing a conclusion from some practical reasoning, any more than going on believing something can be equated with drawing a conclusion from some theoretical reasoning, even if the way one came to believe it was by considering the premises of the reasoning and drawing the conclusion." (p.422)

For McDowell, the right expression is the continuant assent to the proposition I am eating candy, or I am having some pig's tripe (in his example, which highlights the temporal dimension of the action in question).

- McDowell argues that Davidson is wrong in claiming that a practical syllogism without an all-out judgment is incomplete since it only tells us some of the agent's reasons for performing an action. For McDowell, what the reasoning tells us is that those reasons *were enough* for the subject to perform the action, that *they outweighed all other considerations*. But if this is so, he continues, there is no need for adding an extra all-out judgment. Moreover, McDowell claims that this serves to offer a better account of the weak-willed (see below).
- Summing up: For McDowell, the point of a practical syllogism is to spell out the subject's reasons for action and to register that the agent performed the action and not, as Davidson suggests, to register that the subject moved from a *prima facie* judgment to an all-out judgment.
- Note that McDowell does not discuss pure intending.

Weakness of Will

- McDowell thinks that his account gives us a better account of the weak-willed than the one offered by Davidson. Let us first consider the latter.
- *Davidson's account of weakness of will* (This account comes from a paper we did not read but that McDowell discusses) Davidson's account depends on the distinction between *all-things-considered judgments* and all-out judgments. An all-things-considered judgment that action A is more desirable than action B is a judgment of the form "A is more desirable than B in so far as [...]", where the dotted section is filled out with all the considerations that, according to the

subject, are relevant in determining the desirability of A over B. Despite including all relevant considerations, according to Davidson an all-things-considered judgment is still a prima facie judgment, for it is still a judgment in so far as something is the case (even if that something includes everything that is relevant to the subject on that matter). In this respect, the judgment is formally different from an all-out or unconditional judgment. Davidson's account of weakness of will appeals to this distinction: he thinks that the weak-willed person makes an all-out judgment in favor of A even if she makes an all-things-considered judgment in favor of B, and therein lies her irrationality. That is, she intends to perform action A against her own all-things-considered judgment that B is better.

- *McDowell's account of weakness of will*
 A weak-willed person acts for a reason that she takes to tell less compellingly in favour of doing what she does than she takes some other reason to tell in favour of doing something else. By acting for that reason, she reveals that she takes it to be enough to act on. As before, saying this is just registering that she acts for that reason. She is irrational in that she acts for a reason that, by her own lights, is not as good a reason for doing what she does as another reason she has is for doing something else. (426-427)
- McDowell thinks his account is preferable to Davidson's because he does not ascribe to the subject (incorrectly, on McDowell's view) the belief that she takes her action to be all-out preferable. All that is ascribed to her is that she judges that her action has something that counts in its favor and that that thing is what moved her into action, even if by her own lights there were stronger considerations that counted against it.