

The Scope of Intention: Action, Conduct, and Responsibility

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Abstract

Intention takes various forms. Must its objects be acts or activities? How much can be encompassed in the content of a single intention? Can intentions can have the content: *to A for R*, where '*A*' ranges over act-types and '*R*' over reasons for action, for instance *to keep my promise*? The question is particularly important on the widely accepted assumption that, for concrete actions (act-tokens) that are rational and have moral worth, both their rationality and their moral worth depend on the reason(s) *for* which they are performed. If intentions can have content of the form of '*to A for R*', should we conclude that (contrary to the position of many philosophers) we have direct voluntary control of the reason(s) for which we act? If intentions cannot have such content, how can we intend to do, not just what we ought to do, but to do it with 'moral worth'? This question is also raised by the idea that we can be commanded to treat others as ends in themselves – which presumably has moral worth. If the commandable is intendable, then, to understand commands and other directives, we need a theory of the scope of intention. This paper explores kinds and objects of intention, outlines an account of its scope, and brings out some implications of the account for moral responsibility.

Intending is widely considered a “practical” attitude. It is so conceived because it has an essential connection to action. One basis of this conception is an intrinsic element in intentions: by their very nature they are, in content, in some way directed to action. A second basis of the conception is relational: intentions are conceived as bearing a special relation to actions that realize them. It is, however, quite difficult to see just how to understand these aspects of intention. The second aspect has received far more attention from philosophers than the first.¹ My concern here is mainly the first: the nature of intention and the scope of its content. Without understanding this, we cannot adequately understand what it is to intend, and, in ethics, we cannot fully account for imperatives, commands, promises, or decisions. These include Kant's categorical imperative, the famous

¹ Detailed discussions of intention have been profuse since G.E.M. Anscombe's *Intention* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1957; 2nd ed., Oxford: Blackwell, 1963), but the usual focus is on their role in explaining action and, especially in this century, in providing reasons for action or determining moral responsibility.

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biblical love commandments, promises to love, and decisions to be less didactic. A fully adequate theory of obligation and moral responsibility must be supported by an account of what kinds of objects intention has; how its formation can be a response to commands, promises, and other intention elicitors in human experience; and what kind of control we have over its formation and realization.

1. Forms of Intention

It will help us to begin with intention-locutions. These indicate some of the variety of intentions themselves, though, as will soon be evident, we should not uncritically assume that every element in the locutions considered reveals an important aspect of intention itself. Some of the locutions are *infinitival*, e.g. 'to send a letter'. Some designate umbrella intentions *to bring about something*, for instance an improvement in relations with certain in-laws. Some designate other indefinite intentions, e.g. *to try to A*, where A-ing is an act but no act constituting the would-be trying is specified. Some non-actions represented by verbs should also be included, say to forgive and to be a good friend.²

A different category of intention-ascriptions includes the *objectual*, for instance intending some object for a purpose or intending someone to serve on one's committee. I can intend a sharp carving knife for a Thanksgiving turkey. Such cases show that we cannot take intention-ascriptions at face value – as clearly indicating what is intended. The intentional object of this "object intention" is not the knife but some set of acts concerning it. As in other cases of intention-ascription, these (if true) require the agent to have a concept of *some* action, but – except where one intends an *agent* to be or do something – need not indicate a particular act or a specific agent. In the knife example, the action, carving, is specified, but no agent is

² I have heard it said that forgiveness is an action, but I do not think so. I can say I intend to forgive, at least where I see why someone failed me and resolve to forgive the broken promise. But we can also say 'I intend to love', and surely 'love' here is not an action-reporting term (what intending to love one's neighbor comes to will be discussed below). Perhaps 'I intend to forgive' is typically a way of saying either that one will *express* forgiveness, which is readily understandable, or that one will try to achieve forgiveness, in which case 'try to' leaves open a number of possible forgiveness-related acts but does not designate forgiveness itself. An account of forgiveness is not possible here, but there is now much philosophical literature on the topic (including books by Charles Griswold and Glen Pettigrove).

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indicated. If I intend a bottle of wine for my hostess, this leaves open both who hands it to her (say my companion or me) *and* just what, if anything, I intend her to do with it.

A less common and less often discussed intention-ascribing locution is *subjunctive*, for instance, 'intending *that* my students learn punctuation'. Normally one doesn't intend that something be so without having both a related intention *to* and a *tendency* to intend to do certain things which, in the case in question, are implicit in the intention or appropriate to fulfilling it. If I intend that my students understand why utilitarianism should not be described as the view that right acts are those that promote the greatest good for the greatest number, I likely have in mind and intend a series of explanatory acts. But suppose that in a prospective conversation with an old friend the latter says 'I intend that my children be well educated'. In a mood of identification with the friend, one could form a similar intention, say that one's children be freed of anxiety about tuition. At that moment one is of course disposed to form action-intentions, but one need not do so. If, however, this subjunctive intention persists, doing so is expectable.

We should also consider intending *to be*, for instance to be a friend to someone. This may be best understood in terms of a kind of intending *that*, say intending that one give the person support in stressful situations. This subjunctive construction is important in part because it can also encompass the content of a person's intentions to be of a certain character, say kind or more understanding. There may be still other intention-locutions best understood subjunctively, and later I will illustrate an important aspect of subjunctive intentions.

All of the cases considered are instances of intention conceived as a practical attitude, in a sense implying an essential connection with action (at least with some act-type). Even if, as with objectual and subjunctive intentions, no particular act is entailed by the concept of the intention in question, there remains a self-evident connection with action: the intention-ascription portrays the person as in some sense aiming at doing something. The ascription may not indicate, and the agent may not know, just what act-type(s) are intended or otherwise (if only in some implicit way) encompassed. Precisely for this reason, objectual and subjunctive intentions cannot be reduced to infinitival ones: they entail a readiness to form the latter but do not require a determinate set of such intentions. The same points hold for desire, to be sure, but desires need not imply the kind of commitment of the will implied by intending. Many of our desires even *to do* are far from committing us – and may be overwhelmingly opposed by our deepest plans.

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2. Sources of Intention

One of the routes to understanding intention is by way of its conceptually relevant sources. These are not just genetically informative, but indicative of elements in its nature. They are also important for understanding moral responsibility. We are responsible for intentions – in the sense that we are subject to praise or criticism for forming or harboring certain intentions – and so should do what we can both to form or nurture those that go with realizing desirable goals and to prevent formation, or at least, harboring, those directed to what is undesirable or wrong. Talk of responsibility for intentions may suggest their formation *prior* to action, but my concern with sources of intention extends to cases in which (as with actions as immediate responses) intentions are not formed before the intended action.

First, consider *volitional routes* to intention-formation. We often decide to do something. Deciding to A is a kind of manifestation of will, and as such it entails intending to A, even if not an awareness of intending to A. Resolving to A seems similar. But could there be hollow resolutions, as with some that one might list on New Year's day? Doubtless, but where resolution is volitional and not merely verbal, it is like decision (though 'decide' may also have "hollow" uses). The generic notion here is *willing*, which is familiar in at least some cases of trying as well as in some instances of achieving an aim. Here it suffices to note that we often consider options, decide on one, and thereby form an intention to do something or to try to do it. It of course does not follow, and is not true, that all intentions emerge from decision.

A second route to intention-formation is *doxastic*. A common case occurs when we form an intention upon forming an instrumental belief *given* predominant motivation to which the belief is relevant in a certain way. Suppose I am contemplating a prospect I don't see how to realize, say attending a favorite play. Then coming to believe that A-ing, say phoning a friend who has a subscription, will realize it can immediately lead to my forming the intention to A. Belief combined with trying constitutes another route to intention-formation. If one is trying to A, one already hopes or intends to A. If, however, there is some instrumental action, say B, that one intends as a way to bring about A-ing, one might suddenly realize that C-ing will definitely work and come to intend to C instead. Trying to open a jar by tapping its top may not be succeeding when one suddenly remembers an available pipe wrench. Straightaway one forms the intention to apply it.

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A third case in which intentions are formed is phenomenologically less prominent. Suppose one has the habit of reaching for the right shoe first when dressing. In the morning, seeing it across the room, one might then intend to get it without even considering the option of reversing one's procedure. Reaching out a hand when introduced to someone is similar, though given certain cues one may be ready to form the intention to abstain. It is interesting to note here that habit need not imply any specific conceptualization of the action in question, say *to put on the right shoe first*. The intention might be simply *to put on that shoe now*, where 'that' designates the right shoe one is viewing. For some cases, moreover, an objectual intention might do; I might, as I take a pair of shoes from the rack, simply intend the right and left ones for the respective feet without the notion of order's figuring in the content of my intention.

In some of the cases illustrated, there is an event that *triggers* intention formation: either a belief forms and completes the sufficient conditions for intending, where there is already a desire to do the deed, or a habit is activated by ongoing activity or by circumstances. Perhaps we can also speak of a trigger where an obviously needed response is intended in suddenly encountered circumstances, say where an opportunity to A is suddenly seen. Walking in England, an American starting to cross a street might, having looked for traffic the wrong way, unexpectedly see an approaching car and form an intention to wait for the green light. In this fourth case there are standing beliefs connected with standing motivation to avoid getting hit. Yet the behavior is not mere reflex. Neither is withdrawing a hand from a hot stove, though some instances of the corresponding movement might be.

A fourth kind of case is a sudden attraction to doing something, as where it fits some overall purpose one has or even occurs as part of a plan or prospect one suddenly wants to realize. Planning a party, I may be reminded of Jack, perhaps by glimpsing a letter on the table. I immediately form the intention to invite him to the party.

In all four cases considered, there is some event in consciousness that yields an intention, something in consciousness that, even if not a trigger of intention, is a phenomenally perceptible element. There is a fifth case that does not entail such perceptibility. It occurs where standing motivation to A becomes predominant over competing motivation or, in another kind of case, over inertia. The agent may be torn between attending a play and attending a symphony scheduled for the same night. In time, one of the desires can become stronger than the other in such a way that, on being asked what one will do that night, one can find oneself truly saying one is

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going to go to the symphony. One *might* have heard the composer's music and enjoyed it, which might, without one's realizing it, strengthen the desire to attend the symphony; but no such event is necessary for spontaneous motivational predominance.

3. The Range of Objects of Intention

Much about the range that the objects of intention can have is now apparent in outline; but there are important cases not so far identified. Here it will suffice to focus just on objects of intentions *to*. The 'to' is commonly followed by specifications of act-types, including activity-types. The usual paradigms of intention discussed in the literature are single-act intentions. But, in addition to intending, say, to shake someone's hand as a greeting, there are complex sequences we can intend, though the expected conditions for doing a deed need not all figure in the content of intending it.³

If we think of the objects of intentions *to* as limited to such acts and activities, we miss an important element that often comes into the scope of an intention. What we do is done in some *way*, and sometimes this *manner of action* is important and intended. To be sure, a manner of an intended action need not itself be intended. Intention is not closed even under believed consequences, including expected manners of performance: I can intend to phone someone at 7 a.m. and believe that this will wake a teenage child, yet not intend to wake the teenager; and we can intend to ask help of someone, believe that we will do it timidly, but not intend to do it timidly.

One might think that acts described by an adverb of manner are simply acts simpliciter and that therefore intending to A *M-ly*, where M is a manner of acting, reduce to intending to B, for some act-type B, identifiable without such an adverb. Suppose there is an at least approximately equivalent act-type, as in some cases of declining a request decisively and refusing it. It does not follow that *to B* is the content of the original intention. The intention may have a precise content lost by any but an exactly equivalent substitution. Moreover, in principle any act can be performed in more than one way, and to provide an act-name that absorbs the adverbial modifier

³ One can intend to find something out by consulting reference works, or intend to speak to someone who is visibly occupied with driving. Neither all that one believes is involved in consulting those works nor, of course, someone else's driving, is in the content of these intentions – of what one intends.

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(as 'yelling' absorbs voicing in a certain loud tone) can be misleading, and even when it is not false, it may easily conceal an important dimension of behavioral assessment. It matters greatly *how* we do what we do, for instance whether we correct a child's speaking error gently or harshly.⁴ Eliminating adverbs of manner in favor of "simpler" act-reports may both reduce clarity and impair normative appraisal.

A further dimension of complexity in the objects of intention is that of 'scripts'. These might be conceived as encapsulated complex intentional contents. Consider intending to play a piano piece that is memorized so well as to be second nature. When one plays it in fulfillment of the intention, one intends each note (that goes right), though the intention might be objectual; but one could not even describe the whole sequence, nor need one have the thought of each behavioral element in the script as the occasion to act occurs. A simpler case would be a script for leaving a message when one is issuing phone invitations to a party. Intending to invite Liz via her voicemail might encapsulate a series of sentences and even an intonation, speed, and volume. There is no sharp distinction between scripted content of an intention expressible without a detailed conception of an activity and, on the other hand, an unspecific, perhaps generically conceived, activity content, but at least this much is clear. A script is relatively determinate in that it expresses or prescribes a behavioral sequence that, at least in simple cases, can normally be described in some detail in advance, whereas some activities one can intend, such as talking with a friend about a film, are far from routine and are describable beforehand only in outline.⁵

Might the scope of intentions also include a purposive element, say a reason for the intended act as well as a conception of the act itself? To see the problem, consider intentions whose objects appear to be acts purposively described. Suppose I promise to help Clarence clean out his messy garage in the spring and by then he inherits a fortune and doesn't need my help. Asked why I'm taking the

⁴ For discussion of how adverbs figure in action theory see, e.g. Donald Davidson, 'The Logical form of Action Sentences', in *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980). Detailed discussion is found in ch. 3 of my *Means, Ends, and Persons: The Meaning and Psychological Dimensions of Kant's Humanity Formula* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁵ The variety of scripts is greater than here indicated. One possibility is a *de re* grasp of a complex kind of behavior, as where someone who hears and well remembers a tune forms the intention to sing *that*.

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trouble when Clarence has hired someone to help and perhaps even forgotten my promise, I might say: 'I intend to help him because I promised to'. Note first that this is ambiguous. It might mean roughly (1) 'The reason why I intend to help him is that I promised to' or, by contrast, (2) 'I intend to help-him-because-I-promised-to', where this ostensibly specifies the *content* of the intention and not *why one has it*. Can an intention have such a content? We can also be said to intend to A in order to B, say to meet a friend in order to plan an event. This is not a case of intending-to-A-for-R but of attributing both an intention to A and a purposive explanation of it. The attribution indicates both what is aimed at and what motivates the aim.

There are perhaps circumstances in which I can intend *that* my helping be explainable by my promising. This intention might embody an intention to do something that causes that explanation relation to hold. I might, e.g., get my brain manipulated so that my making promises does in fact explain why I do the promised deeds. But do phrases of the form of 'A-ing for R', where R is a reason, report any act or activity? Surely this, like 'A-ing from a sense of duty' and 'A-ing for the purpose of helping her', is a double-barrelled report indicating items in two categories: an action, which is an event, and a reason as a motivational element (e.g. to live up to my duty), which is not an event. We must not let the difference between *what* is done and *why* it is done be obscured by our desire to act for the right kinds of reasons combined with the not unnatural thought that, being something we can say we intend, 'to A for R' simply designates doing something. We can also say we intend to be upright citizens, and this plainly does not imply that 'being an upright citizen' designates doing.

The considerations just noted are not the only possible explanations for misconceptions of locutions like 'I intend to do it because I promised to'. Ascriptions of intentions, especially 'further intentions' (and further aims in general) have considerable power in describing what people are doing. Consider the question 'What is he *really* doing?' This presupposes that (1) he is doing something more than the salient deed referred to, such as helping an elderly woman with her groceries, and (2) that this further action is supported by a significant reason (carried by some intentional element, such as a *hope* of financial gain, even if not necessarily by intention). An implication of such parlance is that one cannot tell what people are doing (intentionally) without knowing at least one appropriately governing reason for their doing it. Now suppose this is so. This does not entail anything about the question whether reasons can enter the

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content of the presumed underlying intention. The most important point it shows is that one (objectually) can intend one action to bring about another, say intend assisting with loading groceries to provide an opportunity to pickpocket their owner. This concerns the relation between intended acts, not between an action and a reason for it, and it does not imply that the agent has an intention whose content has the form of 'to A for R'. Similarly, expressions like 'intending to B by A-ing' are informatively double-barrelled: forward-looking (toward a desired result of A-ing) and instrumental. The 'by' indicates how – by what action(s) – the agent intends to achieve the result, not a reason for aiming at it. The scope of intention can also include behavioral consequences of the 'target', *focally* intended, act – one might loosely call these *penumbrally intended* – but it does not follow that it can include the (or a) reason for which the act is to be performed.

This case suggests how the role of intentions in framing act-descriptions can be understood without countenancing intentions with the kind of purposive content we are exploring. One might think that at least for basic acts for which two or more reasons we have are eligible grounds, we can intend to bring about, at will, their being performed *for* one of these reasons in particular. But is this so? Granted, we can immediately bring about A-ing for R provided that we can A *and* our only way to A is on the basis of R, as where my only reason to shake your hand is *to greet you*. But this is really bringing about A-ing for R *by* A-ing – there is only one reason available to yield the deed: A-ing is performed at will and its performance of course guarantees that the only route to that performance has been traversed. Suppose, however, that I have a reason of self-interest as well as a promissory reason to help someone with a task and each reason is strong enough to yield the deed. Can I at will bring about my doing it for the promissory reason? And does intending this even make good sense? I might do things that justify my expecting that I *will* do the deed for the preferred reason. But the expectable is not thereby intendable; and intending to *cause* oneself to A for R does require having an intention whose content is to-A-for-R.

It should be clear, then, that from the point that a further intention or further aim in A-ing, say to achieve G, can yield and often does yield, a better description of what the agent is doing in A-ing, we may not infer that descriptions of the form of 'A-ing for R' are act-reporting phrases. That acts can bear many descriptions on the basis of the agent's relevant intentions shows much about the number and scope of underlying intentional attitudes, but does not justify taking any act-description to be a combined report and explanation. We have

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also seen that one reason not to take 'A-ing for R' to be an action-report is that we do not have, and do not take ourselves to have, the needed control over the reason(s) for which we act, and we do not normally intend to do anything we do not take ourselves to be in general able to do. But there is a more important and perhaps better reason.

Questions and explanations are very important in individuation. Given different questions about the same phenomenon, where answering one, say 'Why did S A?', leaves open importantly different answers to the second, say 'For what reason(s) did S A?', an item cited in properly answering the former should not be identified with an item properly cited in answering the latter. This is especially evident where the answers specify entities in different ontological categories, such as events and desires. Now the question 'What did S do?' is not properly answered by 'S A-ed for R' – to that one might respond: Never mind *why* S did it – that is a further matter and for the jury to decide. Similarly, 'For what reason did S A?' is properly answered by 'For R' – that S A-ed is presupposed, and various reasons are eligible. Such erotetic individuation is important. When a statement constitutes a proper and direct answer to one question and not to a second, and the counterpart point holds for a second statement regarding the second question, this is a strong indication that the two statements report different kinds of thing.⁶

⁶ Suppose, however, that 'What did S do?' could be properly answered by 'S A-ed for R', say A-ed in order to appear kind (where 'to appear kind' expresses the reason). If A-ing-for-R can *itself* be performed for a reason, we must apparently countenance the idea that, for reason R_1 , S can-A-for-R. But that higher-order act can presumably also be for a reason, R_2 . This is not to imply a vicious regress. That would arise if intentionally A-ing entailed intention to A-for-a-reason *and* the higher-order act this requires must itself be intentional. Still, this picture forces us to posit, for agents with finite comprehensional capacities, a kind of intentional action that – contrary to the most plausible conception of intentional action – *cannot* be for a reason. Call A-ing-for-R a double-barreled intentional act – double-barreled because there is both a report of a first-order intentional action and a specification of a higher-order explanatory condition, *for R*. A double-barreled intentional act, as intentional, is still for a reason; we thus need to posit further intentional acts involving $R_1, R_2 \dots$ etc. But, for every agent with finite capacity, there would be a kind of brute double-barreled intentional action, A-ing for R_n , where n is too large for the agent's comprehension in the relevant way, to which the idea of intentional action as action for a reason would not apply. This is an implication action theory can readily avoid. See ch. 2 of W.D. Ross, *The Right and the Good* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1930), on this point.