

Reply to Ferrero

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Abstract

I respond to Ferrero’s comments on “What are Conditional Intentions?” in three parts. In the first, I address three arguments Ferrero gives for his account and against mine, the argument from requirement of a formal distinction, the argument from continuity, and the argument from the rational pressures of intention. In the second, I raise some problems for Ferrero’s views on the basis drawing out its consequences and testing those against cases. In the third, I consider in a more theoretical vein how reasons and intentions are related, and offer an explanation of why we should not read reasons for intentions into their contents.

1 Introduction

I want to express my appreciation for Luca Ferrero’s careful, generous, and stimulating response to “What Are Conditional Intentions?” My thinking was heavily influenced by his excellent article in *Noûs* (Ferrero 2009) and there are many points of agreement between us despite some important differences. In responding, I will concentrate on the most fundamental issue separating us, namely, whether certain conditions upon which our intentions depend (in the light of which what we intend is seen as reasonable) qualify the contents of the intentions that depend upon them, and respond to some specific questions that Ferrero raises about my account. I will not be able to address every issue that Ferrero raises, or even to deal fully with the ones I address, in the space available. But I hope to get some more considerations on the table in favor of my view.

For brevity, in the following I will call conditions open if (from the agent’s point of view) they are (i) unsettled, (ii) relevant to action, in that they give sufficient reasons for action or remove obstacles to action for which otherwise the agent has sufficient reason, (iii) ascertainable in time for action, and (iv) conditions over which, if the agent can exercise control, he has sufficient reason not to do so. Ferrero agrees that the issue that separates us is not the question whether a condition being open for an agent makes an important difference to how he plans and acts. If a condition is open, an agent will not act without ascertaining whether it obtains (or not), and is committed to investigating or being alert to whether or not it obtains and to acting then if he finds it does. What separates us is rather whether this marks the borderline between conditional intentions and unconditional intentions (my view), or whether it marks a borderline internal to the category of conditional intentions, and the related question whether the conditions that, in my way of thinking, provide reasons for (or remove obstacles to) action are to be thought of as qualifying the content of intentions we form nominally directed at those actions (Ferrero’s view).

On the latter point in particular, I maintain, in contrast to Ferrero, that these conditions are not to be read into an intention’s content. I think that when I form the intention to order apple pie for dessert, I form an intention whose content is [to order apple pie], though I form the intention only relative to assumptions about the conditions under which I do so (e.g., that a fire does not break out before the waiter arrives). Ferrero holds that this underspecifies the content: I intend [to order apple pie *in a world in which a fire does not break out before the waiter arrives, etc.*]. For Ferrero, this makes it a conditional intention, one whose content is qualified by conditions that bear on its rational formation. On the other side of the line for Ferrero are categorical intentions, intentions to do something no matter what. On Ferrero’s view, categorical intentions are the only unconditional intentions.

The difference between our views is not just a matter of where to draw the line between conditional and unconditional intentions in a set of items conceived the same way. Ferrero could subdivide his category of conditional intentions to separate out those with open antecedents, and call them *open conditional intentions*. If we agreed on the items being subdivided and the criterion for division, our disagreement would be merely verbal. But the disagreement goes deeper than this. For we disagree on the kinds of commitments that fall on either side of the line, as well as on the relation of the conditions to the intention. The differences are summarized in Figure 1.

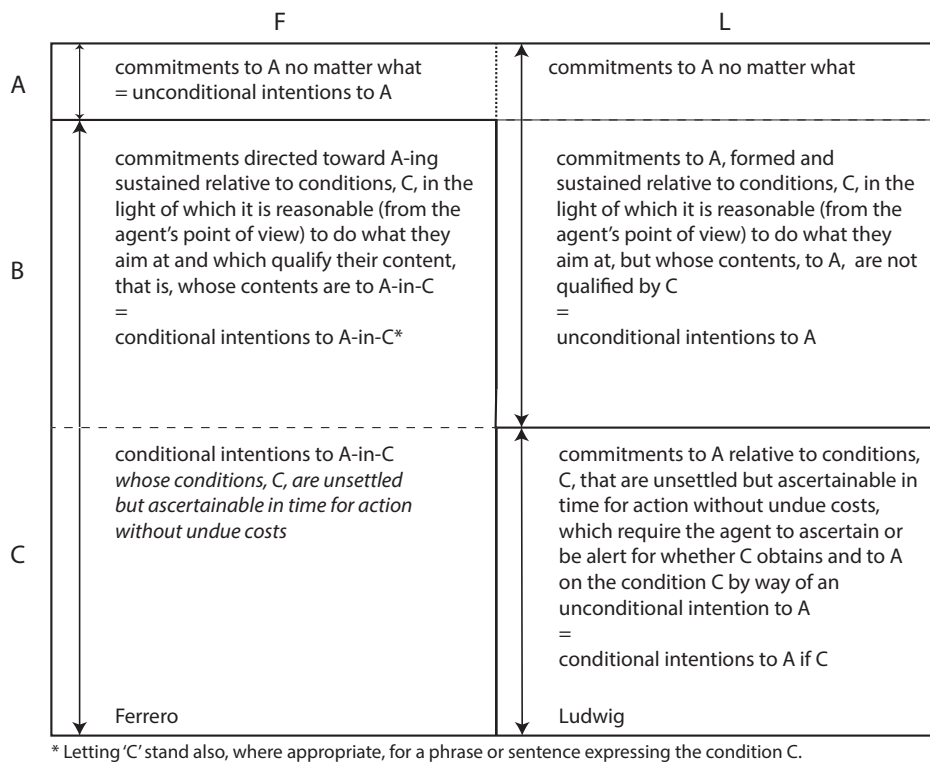


Figure 1.

The left column (F) represents Ferrero's view, the right column (L) mine. A dashed line represents a division in items of the same type. A solid line (no arrows) represents a division in types. Thus, Ferrero treats what I call conditional intentions (LC) and what I call non-categorical unconditional intentions (LB) as the same type (FB and FC). I treat (LB) and (LC) as different. Ferrero treats categorical intentions (FA) as different from everything in (FB and FC). I treat (LA and LB) as one type. Furthermore, the vertical solid line dividing the columns in row B and row C indicates that I treat the items there as different type than Ferrero, that is, LB is different from FB, and LC is different from FC, as well as, for me, LB being different from LC. In particular, whereas Ferrero thinks all the intentions in FB and FC have their contents qualified by the conditions in light of

which they are formed, I reject this. So the classification differs along two important dimensions with respect to differences of type. The only thing we agree on is the characterization of items in row A.

The most fundamental issue between us is represented by the solid vertical line between FB and LB. I say these intentions do not have their contents qualified by the conditions in the light of which they are formed, and Ferrero says that they do. In the following, I respond in three stages. First, I address briefly three arguments Ferrero gives for his account and against mine: (i) the argument from the requirement of a formal distinction, (ii) the argument from continuity, and (iii) the argument from the rational pressures of intention. Second, I raise some problems for Ferrero's views on the basis drawing out its consequences. Third, I explain why I think we should not take reasons for action to qualify the content of intentions directed at them. (While Ferrero says that we can't characterize what he calls restrictive conditions as "standing for *reasons*" (Ferrero 2009, p. 703), that is because he thinks this doesn't capture how they restrict the content of the intention; he does not deny they bear on the reasonableness of action.)

2 Arguments for Ferrero's position and against mine

(i) Ferrero suggests that we should characterize conditional intentions in formal rather than substantial terms. I think the suggestion (*sotto voce*) is that I did not conform to this requirement. I think I did characterize the difference in formal terms. I assign a different logical form to attributions of unconditional and conditional intentions, and different satisfaction conditions. We can use this to assess what is required of someone by a conditional intention to leave the party if it is 76.5F in Jakarta, even when the antecedent has no bearing (for the agent) on leaving the party. Could someone have such an intention, on my account? Yes. But it would be irrational, a rogue conditional intention, like a rogue unconditional intention to drink a can of paint, induced by a blow to the head. I am not sure whether Ferrero meant to suggest that having such a conditional intention out of the blue might be rational. I don't think so. However I allow that to make a point I could rationally form a conditional intention to leave the party if it is 76.5F in Jakarta. However, while the antecedent is not intrinsically a reason to leave in this case, it is a reason to leave in relation to the larger plan (to make a point) in which it is embedded.

(ii) Ferrero argues that we recognize an important continuity between a conditional intention to A if C and the intention an agent has when he ascertains that C, on the one hand, and when C becomes unsettled for him again, and he, as I would put it, now intends again to A if C but not unconditionally, on the other. Ferrero suggests that he can easily account for this intuitive continuity by saying that it is

one and the same intention to A-in-C throughout. He in effect issues a challenge to me to accommodate this sense of continuity. (Though one cannot directly demand that it be a continuity of intention without begging the question).

Here is how I meet the challenge. What is same across these transitions is the underlying structure of practical motivation. Think of it this way. Idealizing a bit, fix my preferences, and then consider, relative to a range of fully specified possible worlds in which I exist, what I would all-in want to do. Now select a subset of those worlds each of which is compatible with what I believe (or accept) but in which there are other things relevant to what I would all-in want to do which are open for me. I form conditional intentions on those open conditions. What remains fixed as I learn about whether those conditions obtain or not is what I want all-in relative to the full specification of the worlds left open relative to belief. This is what on my account corresponds to Ferrero's "underlying deep structure, with its conditional dependencies" (sec. 9). However, there should be an important shift in my practical commitments depending on whether I think that the world is one in which C obtains, or is one in which it does not, or one in which it is open and ascertainable in time for action. And this is something that Ferrero agrees with. My account captures both the common structure and the differences in the structure of the commitments in these cases. Moreover, what I think constitutes the continuity is the same thing that Ferrero does except for the principle that the conditions in light of which an intention is formed qualify its content.

Why do I maintain, though, that when someone intends to A if C and recognizes that C, he forms an unconditional intention which is distinct from his conditional intention? And why did I say that this is analogous to the transition from a prior intention to an intention-in-action?

The reason for saying that the conditional intention generates a distinct unconditional intention is that both the commitments they express and their satisfaction conditions are different. First, if I intend to A if C, I do not just take the means to A-ing that are available to me. If I intend to run *if* the incumbent does not: I do *not* register, I do *not* raise money, I do *not* campaign. I do try to find out whether incumbent will run or at least I put myself in a position to learn whether or not she will. In contrast, if I intend to run flat out, then I *register*, I *raise money*, I *campaign*, and so on. My undertaking these things does not wait on anything else. There is a corresponding difference in the satisfaction conditions. The unconditional intention is satisfied iff I do what I intend as the result of executing my intention to do so. The conditional intention to A if C is satisfied iff either the antecedent does not obtain or it does and I then A as a result of a corresponding unconditional intention to A formed upon coming to believe that C.

I drew an analogy with the transition from prior intention to intention-in-action. These are different because they have different satisfaction conditions. An

intention in action is *de re* about the action that one is performing. A prior intention need not be executed, and hence is not *de re* about any action. Thus, there is a shift in content from prior intention to guiding intention, from doing a thing of a certain type to doing this now. This difference shows up in the contribution in logical form of the adverb ‘intentionally’ in a sentence like ‘I moved the bench intentionally’. To say I moved the bench intentionally is to say (roughly) that (a) some event *f* of which I am agent brought about the movement of the bench, (b) I intended of *f* that it bring about a moving of the bench, and (c) my intention was satisfied (see Ludwig 2007 and Ludwig 2016, ch. 8). Thus, the satisfaction conditions of a prior intention include that it bring about what it aims at by way of a corresponding intention-in-action. This is analogous to the requirement that a conditional intention to A if C imposes that, on the condition that C, it bring it about that one A’s through execution of a corresponding unconditional intention.

(iii) Ferrero thinks my account is not adequate to the forms of criticism available that arise from rational pressures imposed in the case of conditional intentions. Ferrero aims to bring this out by appealing to the rational pressures on agents who intend to A if C and then ascertain that C obtains. In this case, if the agent is presented with the means to A, there is rational pressure, intuitively, to take those means. Ferrero thinks my account has difficulty accommodating this because it should be possible on my account for someone to ascertain that C, but not form the unconditional intention to A. In that case, the agent, Ferrero says, “cannot be *directly* subject to this criticism” but only indirectly by way of not having formed the unconditional intention to A. I agree. But this isn’t the usual case. Even on Ferrero’s account, one may intend to A-in-C and ascertain that C and then lose the intention, or fail, when the moment for action comes, to form relevant intentions-in-action. Then the same thing could be said, namely, that the agent cannot be directly subject to the forms of criticism that arise from the rational pressures imposed by the relevant intention. And this would be the translation of the situation as represented on my account into Ferrero’s account.

3 Problems with qualifying the content of an intention with what justifies it

In this section, I develop nine intuitive objections to Ferrero’s account. These aren’t decisive, but they raise some puzzles about how the account conforms with our common sense judgments, and prepare the way for the discussion in the last section. (i)-(v) raise puzzles about the consequences of reading restrictive conditions into the contents of intentions generally, and (vi)-(ix) raise puzzles about this when they are open conditions.

(i) On my view, my intention to retire next year on the basis of having enough

money then to do so is satisfied just in case I retire next year as a proper result of my intention to do so. More is required for Ferrero. It must also be the case that I then have enough money to do so, since that qualifies the content. In other words, the intention is successful only if objectively the reasons I had for intending hold up.

Suppose I form an intention for the reasons above, and so I retire on the first of the year. Suppose that the United States government, on the verge of default, has only been kept afloat by loans from the IMF and Germany, but Germany, piqued by the discovery that the NSA has been spying on its Chancellor, decides on New Year's Eve not to refinance the debt they hold. In consequence my savings bank cannot cover its obligations, and likewise for the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation. Did I retire intentionally all the same? It seems to me that it would be astonishing for anyone to claim that in fact I did not retire intentionally. I would not have done so, to be sure, if I had known what was happening! But though I based my decision on faulty information, I did carry out the intention I had. The prediction that Ferrero's account makes, however, is that I did not retire intentionally. For on Ferrero's account, what is announced by 'I retired intentionally' (given my reasons) is that I retired with enough money as a proper result of my intention to do so.

(ii) Intentions may persist though we have forgotten why we have them. For example, I may be at the grocery store buying items on my list and suddenly wonder why I am buying strawberry gelato. The reason is that my wife and I are having some friends who love strawberry gelato over for dinner (though we don't care for it ourselves). But I have forgotten about it. I shrug and put the strawberry gelato in the cart. I don't remember what the conditions are that make it rational, but I assume that there are some, and so I go ahead and do what I clearly intended to do. On Ferrero's account, this doesn't make sense. He has to say not that I forgot why I intended to buy strawberry gelato, but that I forgot what my intention is. But it seems clear that I do know what I intended, just not why. It would be very puzzling how I could have an intention, and be acting on it, but not know what it was that I intended.

(iii) Intentions often give rise to subsidiary intentions directed at intermediate steps. Those subsidiary intentions are reasonable only if they are thought to contribute to the satisfaction of the intention in whose light they are formed. On Ferrero's account, it seems that that should be read into their content. Suppose that I intend to kill a colleague of mine. I falsely believe him to have a peanut allergy. With this in mind, I form the intention to put peanut dust in the egg salad sandwich he brings to work every day. I grind up some peanuts. I take the dust to work in a salt shaker. I watch my colleague put his lunch bag in the refrigerator. When no one is around, I take out his sandwich and sprinkle peanut dust on the egg salad,

replacing the sandwich where I found it. My intention to kill him misfires, but my intention to put peanut dust in his egg salad sandwich, and my other subsidiary intentions, seem to have been successfully carried out. But if the content of that intention is to put peanut dust in his egg salad sandwich in conditions under which it leads to his death by his eating it, it looks as if my subsidiary intentions were not after all carried out successfully. This seems to be the wrong result. I successfully carried out my intentions at every stage of the plan, but it misfires because I was wrong about his allergies.

(iv) Fourth, a related objection: Primitive actions are those we do but not by doing anything else. I open the door by turning the knob. I turn the knob by grasping and rotating my hand. I do not move my hand by doing anything else, so the movement of my hand is a primitive action. Sometimes we perform such actions for their own sake. Most primitive actions are performed as means to further ends. A corollary of the point in (iii) is that if the further end toward which I aim does not come about, my intention to perform a primitive action (so qualified) was not successfully carried out. Thus, I did not perform a primitive action, and, in consequence, I did not do anything. This is a counterintuitive result.

(v) Suppose that I have multiple sufficient reasons to do something. For example, I want to pay back a debt because it is the right thing to do, it maintains good relations with my debtor, and I have a legal obligation to do so. Any of these could figure as the antecedent in a conditional intention in ordinary speech if unsettled for the agent: I intend to pay back the debt, if that is required to maintain good relations with my debtor, for example. All provide sufficient reasons, and I may decide (and so form an intention) to pay back my debt for all three. Does my intention to pay back my debt change if I lose one of these reasons to do so? No. It is the same intention, even if I lose one or two of the reasons I have for doing it. I still intend to do the same thing. But according to Ferrero's account, I don't retain the initial intention if I lose one of the reasons, because all of those are read into the content of the intention.

(vi) There is a puzzle about how Ferrero can accommodate the difference in function between intentions to A on the assumption that C, where that C provides a sufficient reason, and intentions to A if C, when it is open that C. For him, each is simply an intention to A-in-C. But in fact they behave very differently. In the former case, one simply acts, in the latter case, one will not act unless one ascertains that C obtains. The former is a commitment to A—the latter is clearly not. They seem to be different forms of commitment. It is difficult to see how to capture this in Ferrero's account because they are given exactly the same forms—in fact, it is exactly the same commitment (see ix below in this connection). We need to acknowledge in the *form* of the intention the difference in the practical commitment it entails (see section 8 of the paper). It should be formal and not

substantive in Ferrero's terms.

(vii) Suppose C is open for an agent who will take one of two courses of action depending on whether C or not-C. This is a common occurrence in contingency planning. Suppose, for example, that if C, then it is best to A, and if not-C, it is best to B. On my view, the agent has two conditional intentions, to A if C and to B if not-C, which are rationally cotenable because only one can issue in an unconditional intention. On Ferrero's view, these are rather an intention to A-in-C and an intention to B-in-not-C. But this is to have two intentions with incompatible contents. *Prima facie* this violates Bratman's Principle of Agglomerativity, which holds that it is rational to intend to A and to intend to B only if it is rational to intend to A and B. But it is not rational to intend to A-in-C and to B-in-not-C because it is clear from the content that this cannot be successfully executed. Perhaps Ferrero can argue that when it is open that C, one can rationally have both intentions, but the question is why, since whether C is open does not make a difference to the type of the intention in question (this is connected with (vi)).

(viii) With respect to the scenario in (vii), suppose the agent thinks that she has discovered that C obtains. Then she decides to A (rather than to B). But what has she decided exactly? According to Ferrero, she already intended to A-in-C, and so does not acquire a new intention at all. There is nothing to decide. But the result of a decision to do something is the formation of an intention to do it. The decision *marks* the formation of the commitment.

(ix) Suppose that I intend to go to the party if my crush is going to be there. Suppose that it is in my control whether or not she goes, but that I decide not to exercise control. In this case, I will not do anything to try to ensure that she does go, and I am not committed to doing so. This seems to be possible. However, on Ferrero's account, I intend to go to the party in the condition that my crush is going to be there. This is like intending to have apple pie à la mode (I won't have it any other way). If I intend to A, then I am committed to doing something toward ensuring that I bring about A. If I intend to have apple pie à la mode, I am committed doing something to bring it about not merely that I have apple pie, but that I have apple pie with ice cream. Returning to the intention to go to the party in the condition that my crush is going to be there, given that it is in my power to bring this about, and that I am committed to it, I seem to be committed to bring it about also that my crush is going to be at the party. But as noted, it does not follow from my intending to go if my crush is going to be there that I am committed to taking any steps whatsoever toward ensuring that she goes to the party.

4 The relation of reasons to intentions

What is the relation of reasons to the intentions they support? Ferrero and I agree that intentions are conditioned by our preferences and beliefs (their practical background). We agree that where preference or belief changes in a relevant way, there is pressure for intention to change as well. This is an important point. What gives point to intention, and makes it intelligible to an agent, lies in its practical background. Intention is in a certain sense subservient to its reasons. The question is how properly to accommodate this point.

I sketch an account that aims to accommodate this point while still allowing intentions to be detachable from their reasons. The account is not original. It is Donald Davidson's account of the relation between practical reasoning and intentions formed on that basis. Davidson 2001 argued in "How is Weakness of the Will Possible?" that the conclusion of a bit of practical reasoning cannot be detached from the considerations that support it. He drew an analogy with probabilistic reasoning, in which the conclusion we reach is not detachable from the evidence we have for it. Suppose I judge it is unlikely to rain because the sky is red at twilight (red sky at night, sailor's delight). Since additional evidence (that the barometer is low) might reverse the judgment, the judgment about the likelihood of rain cannot be detached from its basis. The transition to unconditioned belief is made in accordance with "*the requirement of total evidence for inductive reasoning*: give your credence to the hypothesis supported by all available relevant evidence" (p. 41). A similar point applies to practical deliberation. It may appear desirable to eat this chocolate pudding insofar as it is sweet. But if I learn it is poisoned as well, I will reverse my judgment. If I then learn I will be tortured in five minutes, I may reverse my judgment again. So judgments about what it is best to do given our beliefs and preferences are conditioned by those beliefs and preferences. They are not detachable. When we are faced with a decision about what to do, given time constraints and resources for investigation, we take as much into account as we can, and ideally we make an all-things-considered judgment. That judgment too will be conditioned by the reasons for it. It will not be an all-out or unconditional judgment. Davidson argued that an unconditional judgment corresponds to the commitment to act. It is the fateful step in which one detaches a conclusion (in the form of a commitment) from the evidence. This was also an element in his argument for the possibility of weakness of will, which arises, on his view, when one's unconditional judgment does not align with one's all things considered judgment, and this was part of the argument for their being distinct. The gap is bridged by what Davidson called the Principle of Continence (the analog of the requirement of total evidence): "perform the action judged best on the basis of all available relevant reasons" (Davidson 2001, p. 41), which is to say, judge unconditionally best what is judged best relative to all available relevant reasons. On this view,

the intention corresponds to the unconditional judgment. The intention then is also logically detached from the reasons for it, though its rationality depends upon them through the Principle of Continence. So the intention looks back essentially to its reasons for its legitimacy, though neither its form nor its content make reference to them. This allows intentions to be satisfied when they are based on false beliefs (2.i), to persist when we have forgotten the reasons for them (2.ii), for the stages in a plan to be carried out successfully when one is mistaken about their relation to one's ultimate end (2.iii-iv), and for their content to remain the same when one loses some but not all sufficient reasons for them (2.v).

In contrast, Ferrero looks for a deeper connection between an intention and its reasons which he locates in their qualifying its content. This is tighter even than the connection Davidson identifies between practical judgments conditioned by their reasons and those reasons; for Davidson the form of the judgment involves a specification of the considerations, but not in the content of what is justified. It seems to me, however, that treating the conditions in the light of which we form intentions as qualifying their content distorts the relation between the reasons and what they are reasons for, in two ways.

First, the reasons are to justify *what one intends*. But if one reads them as qualifying the content of the intention, then one loses the structure of the justification. Suppose I intend to eat in order to gain strength. My justification, spelled out, is that if I eat, I will gain strength, and gaining strength is desirable. If we read the reason into the intention, we get: I intend to eat-in-conditions-in-which-eating-leads to-gaining-strength. Why is that? I might say: because I want to gain strength. But that wasn't my justification for intending to eat. It was mediated by eating being a means to that end. But eating *per se* is not a means to the end of eating-in-conditions-in-which-eating-leads to-gaining-strength. To justifying instrumentally eating-in-conditions-in-which-eating-leads to-gaining-strength, I'd have to specify some further end that this particular sort of eating leads to. So if we read the condition that supports (relative to my preferences) the intention to eat into its content, we lose the actual means-end structure of the reasons for the commitment.

Let me draw an analogy with belief and desire. Some beliefs and desires are basic in the sense that they are not based on others. But some are based on others. I believe that the sun will rise tomorrow because it has always arisen in the past. Here we do not qualify the content of the belief with the reasons for it. Similarly for instrumental desires which we have because satisfying them leads to the satisfaction of other desires. For example, I want to earn a salary *inter alia* so that I can afford to eat. We don't qualify the content of the instrumental desire with the reasons for it. This would distort the relation of the reasons for the attitude to its content. The same thing should be said about the relation of intentions to their reasons. In each case, I want to say, it is a condition on the proper understanding

of the rationale for the attitude that we distinguish its content from the reasons for it.

Second, there is a problem in reading restrictive conditions into the content of intentions they provide reasons for because they provide reasons for a commitment to act. To include the conditions that provide reasons in the content is to treat them as providing reasons for the agent to be committed to *those conditions themselves* being brought about or maintained (this was the source of the difficulty in 2.vi and 2.ix). But restrictive conditions do not *ipso facto* provide agents with reasons to bring those conditions themselves about. For example, suppose that I would run for office if and only if the incumbent does not run. And suppose I think that the incumbent will not run. I am committed to running. But while the incumbent not running provides me with part of my reason to run, it gives me no reason to ensure that the incumbent will not run.

In sum, I believe that Ferrero is right that we need to respect the way in which intentions are deeply dependent on the conditions in the light of which they are seen to be reasonable. But I think (1) we can respect this while maintaining their autonomy in both form and content from the conditions seen as supporting them, and (2) that trying to secure the connection by reading the conditions as restrictions on the act type to be performed distorts the relation of reasons to the commitments they support. If this is right, the dependency of an intention on the conditions in the light of which it is formed is not the right model for the special category of conditional intention. I submit that the concept of a conditional intention proper is that of a commitment to ascertaining whether a condition obtains relevant to acting and to forming an unconditional intention to act on the condition that it does.

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