

Disjunctivism about Intending*

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Abstract. The overwhelmingly predominant view in philosophy sees intending as a mental state, specifically a plan-like state. This paper rejects the predominant view in favour of a starkly opposed novel alternative. After criticizing both the predominant Bratman-esque view of intention, and an alternative view inspired by Michael Thompson, the paper proceeds to set out and defend the idea that acting with an intention to V should be understood disjunctively, as (roughly) either one's V -ing intentionally or one's performing some kind of failed intentional V -ing, where the two disjuncts share no common state of intention. Instructive structural parallels to perceptual disjunctivism are pointed out, and the view is shown, unlike its rivals, to successfully extend to capture both prospective and present intention, thereby unifying the three different guises of intention.

I. INTRODUCTION

The nature of intentional action is the subject of a longstanding debate in philosophy. What happens when someone acts (intentionally), as David Velleman puts it in the title to his (1992)?¹ The standard approach seeks a reflective understanding of intentional action by means of reductive decomposition. When someone acts, the thought goes, her body moves.² And the movement amounts to or partly constitutes her acting intentionally just when it is caused by an intention or a desire to move her body in that way. For example, waving to a friend is said to involve intending or desiring to wave, which causes (in the right way) a waving motion of the arm. Non-intentional bodily motions such as spasms and reflexes are distinguished precisely by lacking any comparable causal antecedents: they are caused by physical factors, not mental states. Acting intentionally is thus standardly taken to be factorizable into two separable components –

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¹ One can address this question hoping to formulate a theory of action, or alternatively a theory of action-explanation (see Ruben, 2003: ch. 6 for the distinction). The target here is the latter. While different versions of causalism disagree about the exact metaphysics of intentional action, they are all united in endorsing a causal theory of action-explanation.

² To simplify the discussion, mental action is set aside here.

a desire or an intention coupled with a corresponding bodily movement, with the two related (in the right way) as cause and effect.³

Pervasive as this so-called ‘standard story’ of action is, it is certainly not without its detractors. Some are broadly sympathetic to the causalist template sketched above, yet propose more or less substantial modifications and refinements. Others are stauncher critics, rejecting causalism as fundamentally misguided. For example, agent-causationists suggest that nothing short of the agent herself could be the cause of genuinely actional bodily movements (Bishop, 1983; O’Connor, 2000; Mayr, 2011). And in a perhaps even more radical departure from the reductive aspirations of the causalist, some suggest that intentional action is in fact a primitive: a metaphysically *basic* notion, not susceptible to analysis or decomposition at all (O’Brien, 2007: ch. 8; Holton, 2015; Levy, 2013).⁴ The present paper aims *inter alia* to bolster the latter ‘action first’ approach and the burgeoning research program it inspires, by drawing out some of its theoretical virtues and extending its explanatory reach.

The label ‘action first’ reflects the inspiration drawn from the ‘knowledge first’ program, which famously turns traditional epistemology on its head: rather than seeking insight into the nature of knowledge through a reductive definition, we should regard knowledge as a fundamental, unanalyzable building block in our theorizing (Williamson, 2000; Carter, Gordon, and Jarvis, 2017). The arguments for treating intentional action in parallel fashion are various, some modeled on broadly similar concerns about the reductive project in epistemology. For example, the intractability of the causal deviance problem for causalism has been emphasized, and structural parallels have been drawn between it and the Gettier problem which notoriously impedes attempted analyses of knowledge (Levy, 2013). Additionally, it has been suggested that intentional action is ‘prime’ in Williamson’s (2000: ch. 3) sense of having no separable components. For – contrary to what we should expect if intentional action is a composite of

³ A sample of fairly recent defenses is Davidson, 1963; Goldman, 1970; Mele, 1992; Setiya, 2007, part I; and Smith, 2012.

⁴ Some may wish to include Anscombe (1957) in the same camp. I shall not take a stand on this interpretive issue.

mental state and environmental condition – one can arguably combine the mental element from one case of acting intentionally with the environmental element from a second case of acting intentionally, and get a third case that does *not* constitute acting intentionally (Holton, 2015). Moreover, a non-reductive yet informative account of intentional action has been shown to be available, offering further grounds for resisting the pressure to seek a reductive analysis (O'Brien, 2007: ch. 8).

These and other extant motivations for endorsing the 'action first' approach will not be discussed here. The focus will instead be on presenting a novel argument that provides indirect support for the view. The argument does not speak directly to the issue of whether intentional action is metaphysically composite or basic. Rather, it aims to demonstrate that, contrary to what the received view assumes, *V*-ing intentionally is in fact *explanatorily prior* to intending to *V*. An important question in developing the 'action first' approach concerns the extent of its ambitions. Does it 'merely' advocate treating intentional action as non-composite, or does it aim to establish also that action comes (explanatorily) first – at least within a local network of closely related elements of agency and mind, if not more broadly? To illustrate the choice, note that the aspirations of the 'knowledge first' program are clearly of the latter, more ambitious sort: Williamson (2000) provides a range of explanations – of belief, of norms of assertion, of evidence, and so on – in terms of the fundamental notion of knowledge. The present paper aims to make a step along a parallel route for intentional action, by showing how acting intentionally explains intending.

The crux of the argument is thus an account of intention in terms of intentional action. If sound, this effected reversal of the standard order of explanation shows that intentional action should be regarded as *explanans* rather than *explanandum*. But the account of intending defended below is meant to be attractive even independently of its association with the 'action first' line of thought; the hope is that even those not already sympathetic to the general approach will find

the account compelling in its own right. For this reason, the initial stages of the argument of this paper consist in problematizing extant views of intention, to convince the reader that an alternative is called for. That is the main order of business of section II. The bulk of the negative discussion in that section targets the dominant view of intention-*in-action*. And correspondingly, the constructive portion of the paper (sections III & IV) is devoted mainly to spelling out and defending a more adequate replacement view of intention-in-action. Only towards the end of the paper, and only more briefly, is the question taken up of how prospective intention fits into the alternative account proposed here. As the title suggests, the account in question is helpfully thought of as a form of disjunctivism. The precise meaning intended by this label and the reason for employing it will emerge in section III. We begin in the next section by drawing out some flaws of the orthodox Bratman-esque view of intention.

II. THE RECEIVED VIEW, AN ALTERNATIVE, AND THEIR RESPECTIVE FAILURES

II.i *The Bratmanesque view*

A useful entry point into the contemporary debate about the nature of intention is through the question Anscombe famously poses at the outset of her hugely influential *Intention* (Anscombe, 1957), namely what unifies the three different guises of intention – prospective intention, intentional action, and the intention *with which* one acts? Different views can be sorted according to which item from this trichotomy they prioritize, treating *it* as the fundamental one which then explains the others and thereby unifies the entire set. The picture adumbrated in sections III and IV below assigns this role to *intentional action*. In contrast, the orthodox view opts for prospective intention. It is useful when assessing the plausibility of this latter view not to lose sight of the overall understanding it proposes of intention across its different guises. For a main complaint raised below is that the purported unification it offers turns out on closer inspection to be illusory.

We need first to get clear on the notion of *prospective* intention since, as mentioned, the standard view treats it as the linchpin. Prospective intention, then, is seen by the orthodox view as a distinct, and distinctly practical, *mental state*. The picture is developed most comprehensively by Michael Bratman (1987). He denies that intention is reducible to other mental states, specifically not to belief-desire pairs as Davidson (1980: essay 1) and others (e.g. Ridge 1998, Sinhababu 2013) suggest.⁵ Intention is a *sui generis* state, defined by a set of unique functional characteristics clustered around its primary functional role within the agent's *planning* economy. Intentions are essentially plan-like states that facilitate in various important ways our temporally extended agency. They are thought of as fairly stable and robust states. Once formed, we are disposed (and indeed rationally pressured) not to revise or reconsider them. There is likewise pressure to get our intentions to cohere with the rest of our psychology (pertinent instrumental beliefs and desires especially) so as to ensure they get executed, and abandon those intentions that cannot be executed.

These and similar functional attributes⁶ are thought to afford certain important advantages when it comes to our existence over time. The advantages in question include for example our ability to sustain complex projects, both intrapersonal and interpersonal, small- and large-scale; our being in a position to close off deliberation and avoid expending further time and effort working out what to do; our having certain practical fixed points in our foreseeable future which could then operate as premises in further reasoning and deliberation; and so on. In this way, Bratman can be thought of as putting forward a kind of transcendental argument (or perhaps an IBE): we are as a matter of fact creatures whose agency extends across time and who display certain capacities to do with devising and sustaining plans. In order to be such creatures, our psychology must include a state that enables these practices. And that state is a (Bratman-esque) intention. Hence, we have such states. Alternatively (or perhaps additionally), Bratman's

⁵ Davidson himself later famously changed his view on the matter; see Davidson (1980: essay 5).

⁶ Holton (1999: 245-6) adds to the list the role of intention in defeating contrary inclinations, as when we form intentions that (we hope) will help us guard against foreseen temptations.

argument could be given an evolutionary gloss. One might conjecture, not implausibly, that having plan-like states of intention afforded our ancestors advantages such as the above which enhanced their biological fitness, making it likely that intentions were selected for by natural selection.

This quick and rough sketch of the standard view of prospective intention should be enough to provide a workable picture of the derivative notion of intention-in-action or the intention with which one is acting (or one's present-directed or proximal intention⁷). When one is opening the window with the intention of getting fresh air in, the thought goes, one is in a mental state that is essentially the same as one's prior intention to get fresh air in (by opening the window). Indeed, in the typical scenario at least, one will have had the prior intention which later matures or evolves into an intention-in-action. Here is Bratman (1987: 108):

If my future-directed intention manages to survive until the time of action, and I see that this time has arrived and nothing interferes, it will control my action then. Present-directed intentions have a special relation to action, and future-directed intentions are the sort of state that will have this special relation if they survive until the time of action is seen to have arrived.

This is not to say that present-directed intentions are *necessarily* preceded by a corresponding future intention; Bratman explicitly allows that they need not be, and the point is fairly widely recognized among action theorists. Indeed, one attraction of the standard conception of intention-in-action as introduced originally by Searle (1983, ch. 3) has been that it makes possible the application of the causalist template even to cases where prior intentions are absent.

⁷ As the main text indicates, different labels are sometimes used to pick out the phenomenon we are trying to home in on. These differences are not everywhere purely terminological. For example, Mele's (1992: part II) notion of 'proximal intention' is conceived as a species of prior intention whose object is, or is about to, be executed, whereas Searle (1983, ch. 3) sees intention-in-action as a state distinct from prior intention that partly constitutes intentional action. (See also Brand's [1984] distinction between prospective and immediate intention, and Bach's [1978] distinction between intentions and executive representations.) These and other differences notwithstanding, however, there is a core of structural features common to all versions of the idea, as spelt out in the text, which sets them up for the criticism to follow.

Moreover, intention-in-action seems to provide materials for a response on behalf of the causalist to the sort of complaint most famously voiced by Frankfurt (1978). He objects that by focusing on the causal *antecedents* of what is going on when an agent acts, causalism crucially neglects the hallmark of intentional acts, viz. the agent's ability to intervene and thus control what is going on. Frankfurt goes on to offer this observation as a diagnosis for why causalism remains vulnerable to the causal deviance problem. But intention-in-action is construed not as a causal *antecedent*, but indeed precisely as a state that persists throughout the act. If vindicated, then, the standard conception of intention-in-action provides important resources for causalism when it comes to responding to some serious and longstanding objections (Pacherie, 2000).

Why believe the standard conception? The rejoinders it makes available to causalism are unlikely to convince those not already committed to the view.⁸ And as Holton (1999: 246) notes, it is hard to see how Bratman's argument for the planning conception of prior intention – whether it is glossed in transcendental, evolutionary or other terms – could be extended to support intentions-in-action, too. For that argument cites advantages to do specifically with managing *future* activities. Furthermore, however the standard conception of intention-in-action might be supported, the view itself is problematic. As already noted, prior intention serves as the model for the standard view when it comes to explaining intention-in-action, as well as to unifying the three guises of intention. To have a prior intention is to have a plan for the future, and to have a present-directed intention is to have a plan that is being executed. The essential difference between the two lies in the temporality of their respective objects (Mele, 1992: 145).

This implies certain differences in how each type of intention is ultimately characterized – most conspicuously, in the grain of the contents of each. The contents of prospective intention, as proponents of the Bratman-esque view often emphasize, must be rather general, leaving many

⁸ One might cite the allegiance to causalism itself in support of the standard conception of intention. After all, the former is an entrenched doctrine deployed in a range of discussions, both within and outside action theory. This move would shift the debate over to the credibility of causalism as a theory of intentional action, which is not directly at issue here. See the Introduction for a brief discussion and some references.

particular details unspecified so that it can display the sort of flexibility necessary to planning for an uncertain future (see e.g. Bratman, 1987: 3). But if intention-in-action is to fulfil its role of guiding and sustaining a token action in progress, *its* contents must be much more fine-grained, ensuring that *this* particular means and *that* particular path etc. are in fact successfully deployed to achieve one's goal. These superficial differences in how each type of intention behaves are nevertheless thought to allow for both to be subsumed under one unified functional role of *guidance*: One's prior intention sets out the general blueprint for what one will do, thus providing the basis, when the time comes to execute the plan and act, for more and more specific intentions-in-action to be formed. In this way, both kinds of intention ultimately serve to guide one's intended act.

However, as anticipated above, this basis for unifying the different guises of intention is in fact spurious. A closer look reveals that the picture proffered by Bratman struggles to capture certain paradigmatic cases of acting with some intention, and makes it hard to see how a guiding plan-like state could be the thread that unifies all three guises.

Consider first spontaneous acts, as when a ball is flung and its trajectory suddenly crosses one's field of vision (Bratman, 1987: 126). One reaches out and grabs the ball mid-air. Such acts are spontaneous but intentional; they are different in kind from such merely voluntary or 'sub-intentional' acts as pulling a face, fidgeting, or shifting position.⁹ Being intentional yet spontaneous, grabbing the ball and the like are not plausibly preceded by a prior intention-cum-plan. This in itself may not be a problem for Bratman's view since, as noted above, he explicitly denies the necessity of prospective intention for acting intentionally. The problem is rather that it is equally odd to think of such spontaneous acts as guided and sustained by a *present* intention. So for example, one will not typically choose a different way to intercept the ball upon realizing that

⁹ The reader not immediately persuaded that there are distinct categories of action here should notice that doodling, fidgeting and the like are often performed with no particular purpose or aim that one is trying to accomplish, nor are they typically done fully *consciously* (one may catch oneself pulling a face, for example). All this is *not* true of grabbing the ball one suddenly sees flying by.

simply reaching for it will not cut it. Similarly, one may give no thought to overcoming any obstacles that present themselves; the first hitch encountered may simply terminate the action taking place. No doubt one's bodily movements are guided and sustained by *inter alia* intricate mechanisms for the representation of various magnitudes such as the spatial location and dimensions of the target object, the speed and direction in which one's limbs are moving, and so on. But all this takes place at the *sub-personal* level, below the threshold of conscious awareness at which intentions operate. The phenomenology of spontaneous acts is hence at odds with the role assigned to intentions-in-action in performing them. Such acts need display none of the features typical of guiding and sustaining, contra what the standard conception maintains.

Bratman is aware of the challenge spontaneous acts pose to his view. In a brief discussion (1987: 126-7), he conjectures that when catching the ball spontaneously he may have no present-directed intention at all. Rather, he may be “executing some long-standing personal policy – for example, a policy of protecting myself from flying objects. I do not have a present-directed intention specifically to catch this very ball, but my action still involves an intention, namely: My general intention to protect myself in such circumstances” (1987: 127).¹⁰ However, some spontaneous acts fail to bear out this reply. Just think of a situation in which one acts spontaneously under entirely novel circumstances – or, for that matter, of the very first time one catches a flying object; in such cases, there will have been no relevant ‘policy’ formed in advance.

Some other cases further strain Bratman's strategy for unifying the guises of intention. As noted in passing above, part of the standard conception examined in this section involves the thought that intentions are subject to rational constraints of consistency. These constraints are thought to be essential for intentions to constitute feasible plans for action. For example, any pair of one's intended aims must be jointly attainable (at least as far as one is aware), on pain of

¹⁰ In the same pages, Bratman offers another response to the problem of spontaneous acts, suggesting that they “might best be characterized as actions that, although they are under the agent's voluntary control and are purposive, still are not intentional (even though they are not unintentional)”. But this seems like an unmotivated attempt to carve a niche tailored specifically for spontaneous acts.

irrationality. However, some cases discussed at length by Bratman himself (1987, ch. 9) seem to demonstrate that jointly inconsistent intentions *can* sometimes be rational. Thus one can intend two aims knowing they cannot both be achieved, but realizing that the best means to achieve either is to intend both. Bratman's much-discussed example of such a scenario is a video game with two targets one can aim at simultaneously, but only one that could be hit before the game terminates. Intending to hit both targets to increase one's chances of hitting one or the other seems a perfectly rational strategy.

Bratman's solution is to deny that one actually intends both aims. Rather, one is in a state that falls short of intending to hit each target and which, unlike intention, is not constrained by demands of rational consistency. This state, according to Bratman, is a kind of *desire* which plays much the same functional role that intentions play in ordinary situations:

Even if [in the video game] I do not, strictly speaking, intend to *A*, I do desire to *A*, either as a means or for itself, or both. Further, I do not merely desire to *A*. My desire is guiding my attempt to *A*: it is a guiding desire.

Bratman is led to postulate an ambiguity in 'V-ing with the intention of A-ing'. On the first, stronger sense, he suggests, the expression implies V-ing intentionally with a plan-like state of intending to *A*, which is subject to the demands of rational consistency. But the other sense merely implies 'endeavouring' to *A*, which involves a guiding desire to *A* not subject to demands of consistency. As Bratman puts it, "Demands for consistency and agglomeration drive a wedge between the intentional objects of intending, on the one hand, and of endeavoring and intentional action, on the other hand." [129??]¹¹

Such talk of driving a wedge between acting intentionally and intending clearly indicates a loosening of the unity of the three guises within the standard conception. Indeed, in a different

¹¹ Cf. McCann (1991) for a useful critical discussion of the way Bratman handles the video-game case. McCann charges Bratman with multiplying intention-like states unnecessarily.

place (2007: 51-2) Bratman countenances the possibility of creatures who lack altogether intentions-qua-plans, and concedes that they could still act intentionally on their desires. Our intentions turn out, on this picture, to be extremely useful expedients that help shape the kind of agents we are; but they are not essential to the very idea of (intentional) agency.

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To summarize the discussion so far: it is unclear, first, what reasons there are to accept the orthodox doctrine with its states of present intention, independently of a prior commitment to causalism. Second, a range of cases undermine the doctrine's strategy for unifying prospective intention with intention-in-action and intentional action: Spontaneous acts belie the functional role of guiding and sustaining assigned to present intentions; and cases of inconsistent yet apparently rational intentions are overcome by postulating intentional guidance by desires. In his attempts to establish the planning conception of intention, then, Bratman is evidently led to unpick the intuitively closely-knit triad of intention's guises. Surely there is room to explore a contraposition of this line of thought, taking the unity of the triad as grounds for rejecting the planning conception. But before we get to that, the remainder of the present section is devoted to pointing out, more briefly, the shortcoming of a different extant alternative.

II.ii The Thompsonian View

Opposition to the standard view of intention finds a stark voice in the view most prominently defended by Michael Thompson (Thompson, 2008: part II; Moran and Stone, 2009). Thompson's view of intention is offered as part of a more general proposal for a sweeping revision of contemporary action theory. The latter, dubbed 'sophisticated action theory', is conspicuous for its practice of explaining intentional action by appeal to mental states such as desires and intentions. But Thompson sees this explanatory practice as derivative of so-called 'naïve action theory', in which intentional acts themselves explain other intentional acts, and quite generally warns against 'searching for illumination in the thought of intention and

wanting as *states*' (Thompson 2008: 133). A detailed study of Thompson's overall position on action-explanation would be out of place here. Furthermore, and importantly, it is arguable that Thompson is primarily not after a theory of intention at all, at least not *prospective* intention. Nevertheless, a very brief statement of the central tenets of his view will help reconstruct a natural extension that covers intention, too – and reveal why the resulting picture ultimately falls short.¹²

Thompson and other proponents of the view he puts forth take traditional action theory to task for adopting an outlook of acts as point-like, near-instantaneous events as expressed in judgments with perfective aspect. They highlight rather the importance of viewing intentional action as a process unfolding over time, typically expressed using the imperfective. Once this latter perspective is adopted, the fundamental ('naïve') form of action-explanation comes into view – a form of explanation that consists in placing different stages of the act-in-progress within one broad process. The structure that holds together the different temporal stages of the process is calculative or teleological in nature. One is breaking some eggs in order to make an omelet, where this structure finds fundamental expression in how one *action* rationalizes another: One is breaking some eggs *because one is making an omelet*. A standard theory of action-explanation that hopes to understand action by casting the agent's mental states in the role of causal antecedents is not only guilty of gratuitous sophistication; it is bound to miss entirely the calculative structure that binds together different actions as means to ends, thereby making them intentional.

It is not hard to see how this view might handle intentions-in-action. Far from denoting a state of mind one is in, as the standard Bratman-esque view has it, acting with an intention is a matter of being in the midst of an action in progress, i.e. a matter of taking *means* towards the successful completion of one's (intended) aim. When *V*-ing with the intention of *A*-ing, one is

¹² I am grateful to an anonymous referee for valuable comments here.

taking the step of *V*-ing towards having *A*-ed successfully. In support of this, Thompson highlights the thinness of the line that supposedly separates at least some statements of acts-in-progress from statements of intentions in action. As Elizabeth Anscombe, one source of inspiration for this view, asks: ‘Is there anything to choose between “She’s making tea” and “She’s putting on the kettle in order to make tea”...? Obviously not.’ (Anscombe 1957: 40; quoted favorably in Thompson 2008: 132.) Thompson also discusses the ubiquity of “anticipatory” uses of the progressive’ (e.g. ‘I’m *V*-ing tomorrow’) in further support of the continuity between acting and intending. The canonical form for expressing intention, ‘I’m going to *V*’, is regarded by Thompson as a central instance of such anticipatory use, ‘an instrument for the expression of imperfective aspect – it expresses, as we might put it, the “prospective imperfective”’ (Ibid, 142).

This last, characteristically suggestive remark holds much of the little Thompson himself has to say about the nature of *prospective* intention (in this he follows Anscombe, who also marginalizes this guise of intention.) But a faithful reconstruction helps to fill in the lacuna with an eye to commenting on the (im)plausibility that emerges. The main difficulty with accounting for prospective intention in a Thompsonian spirit lies in finding a way to ground it within a calculative-intentional process – as both *intentional action* and *action with an intention* are grounded – which is not (yet) taking place. The latter are both species or kinds of acting, and so fit readily within the template of naïve action explanation adumbrated above, in which *actions* explain other actions. But how can a non-action like prospective intention find a footing here?

The basic idea is straightforward enough (I am here helped considerably by Small, 2012: §3). Seeing as “intention for the future is intentional action *in prospect* ... We simply shift from considering the calculative structure of intentional action *in progress* to that of intentional action *in prospect*” (Small, 2012: 166). Since there is no temporal-calculative structure binding *actual* actions here, the structure must inhere in the process *as represented in the agent’s thought*. Of central

importance here is the agent's *knowledge how* she is to perform the would-be action – that is, her knowledge of which means she must deploy in order to achieve her intended end.¹³ It is this knowledge of the instrumental structure of actions-in-prospect which mirrors the instrumental structure of actions-in-progress. Furthermore, it is such knowledge that makes it the case that one harbours a genuine intention and not merely an idle wish or aspiration.¹⁴ Now Small is (rightly) quick to warn against overstating the intention/aspiration distinction. One can surely intend to go to destination X next week before having decided – and hence, before knowing precisely *how* – one will get there (a point emphasized also by Bratman, as noted above):

“There is a significant difference between leaving it unsettled which of several options one could take, one shall take, and not having any idea of what the options are, not having any idea how to do what one intends to do ... One can intend to do *A* without knowing how one *shall* do *A* so long as one knows how one *can* do *A* ...” [2012: 169-170, emphases in the original].

The flexibility of prospective intention is surely a datum that any credible theory should accommodate. However, at the same time it seems to imply that, contra the Thompsonian view, the agent's thought when intending for the future need not represent the kind of calculative structure allegedly essential to it. To see this, consider my intending now to go on sabbatical abroad in three years' time. I have never done so in the past, and have not discussed with anyone the practical aspects of my plan. Hence it is not as though there are several means I know I *could* employ, but I've not yet settled which of them I *shall* employ. No: my situation is rather that I am entirely ignorant of the issues that need to be decided and the procedures that need to be carried out etc. before I can go. It is thus safe to assume that at this moment I do indeed have “no idea as to what the options are” when it comes to making the necessary arrangements for going on

¹³ Small also emphasizes the agent's knowledge of *what* she is doing and *why*, but these are not immediately relevant to the ensuing doubts about his view.

¹⁴ See also Baier (1970). Setiya (2008) highlights the significance of knowledge-how in a closely related context.

sabbatical. And yet this (perfectly common) instance of mere knowledge of ability, as we might call it, seems to detract nothing from the intuitive possibility of my intending to go.

Now to be sure, I probably still know *that I can* go on sabbatical: After all, as we may suppose, many others in my department have gone over the years, so I know there must be some way I could do it, too. One might therefore concede in response that while right now I may not know how I can *go* on sabbatical, still I know how I might *find out* how I can go, which is in turn a means of knowing how I can go. But the response misses the point of the objection. The point is that I can postpone *all* calculative thoughts about my intended aim. Thus, supposing I presently do not even know how to find out how I can go, I may decide to postpone finding *that* out too... And so on, leaving my prospective intention as thin as a mere entry in my mental diary. So long as the entry can (as I am aware) actually be carried out, given that others have done so, there seems nothing in my current state of calculative ignorance that prevents me from genuinely intending to go. This point is accommodated by the account of intending articulated in the next couple of sections, and represents an important point of disagreement with the Thompsonian account.

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Rounding off the critical discussion in this section, let me reiterate that the aim here has not been nearly as ambitious as to conclusively refute either the mainstream Bratmanesque or the Thompsonian view. More modestly, the aim has been to raise enough doubt about both views to warrant exploring an alternative. And indeed, as we have seen, the former view is tailored to prior intentions and does not happily extend to acts that are already in progress, while the latter may be a better fit for acts in progress, but fails to capture ubiquitous forms of prospective intention. The next section defends a more promising alternative, which captures both kinds of intending.

III. FROM PERCEPTUAL DISJUNCTIVISM TO INTENTIONAL DISJUNCTIVISM

III.i *Structural parallels*

To get a handle on the view to be developed here, start with the structural analogue from which its title derives. ‘Disjunctivism’ is a label most closely associated with a familiar and striking view about the nature of perceptual experience.¹⁵ When one has a *veridical experience*, the experience matches reality: one perceives some object *O*. When a mismatch occurs, one of two other forms of perceptual experience are instantiated – either an *illusory* or an *hallucinatory experience* as of an *O*. According to the orthodox Cartesian view,¹⁶ in all three cases one has exactly the same kind of mental experience. Perceptual disjunctivists deny this. On their view, in the so-called ‘good case’ in which one veridically perceives an *O*, one’s experience is essentially different from the unveridical ‘bad case’.¹⁷

At the heart of perceptual disjunctivism is therefore a negative thesis. How deep it cuts is a matter of some dispute. Minimally, disjunctivism involves the denial that good and bad cases instantiate the same *mental (experiential) type*. This leaves open the possibility of *some* mental similarities between the two kinds of case, which some disjunctivists at least are happy to concede (Johnston, 2004; Byrne and Logue, 2008; Snowdon, 2005). All disjunctivists trivially accept that the good and bad cases are subjectively (‘from the inside’) indistinguishable from each other, and all agree that this and whatever further commonalities may exist falls short of supporting assimilation of the cases to the selfsame mental kind.

¹⁵ Some classic defenses of the view are Snowdon, 1980–81; McDowell, 1982; and Martin, 2002. Epistemological disjunctivists (such as McDowell) are impressed by the difference in the epistemic status of veridical and unveridical experiences. Disjunctive theories have recently begun to crop up in action theory, applied to bodily movements (Haddock, 2005), acting for reasons (Hornsby, 2008), and events (Hillel-Ruben, 2003, Ch. 5; Hillel-Ruben, 2008). There is no space to discuss these views here.

¹⁶ The label is borrowed from Byrne and Logue, 2009. Various, and otherwise very different, theories about the nature of perceptual experience all subscribe to the Cartesian view – e.g. sense datum theories, intentionalist theories, and so on.

¹⁷ There is some controversy among disjunctivists as to whether to group illusions under the good or the bad case. This dispute is sidestepped in what follows, since the primary aim is to develop a rough analogue of perceptual disjunctivism for intention rather than engage with the debate over perception proper.

Beyond its negative core of rejecting the Cartesian view, does disjunctivism offer any constructive insight into the nature of perceptual experience? Disjunctivists are typically naïve realists, who hold that veridical perception is constituted by the mind-independent features and objects perceived (see Nudds, 2009 for a recent overview). But it remains contentious among disjunctivists whether any substantive account of the unveridical case can be provided, as for example Dancy (1995) and Langsam (1997) attempt to demonstrate; or whether alternatively, as Martin argues, the disjunctivist should insist that “there is no more to the phenomenal character [of hallucinations] than that of being indiscriminable from corresponding visual perceptions.” (Martin, 2006: 369; see also Martin, 2004).

Intentional disjunctivism, the view being developed here, displays some key parallels with its perceptual namesake which help bring its structure into view. It too turns on denying a standard assumption of a common mental type thought to be instantiated in all instances of a familiar mental phenomenon – in this case, the phenomenon of acting with an intention. According to intentional disjunctivism, the good case in which one successfully carries out one’s intention to V (i.e., V -s intentionally) and the bad case in which one merely (failingly) intends to V do *not* instantiate some selfsame mental type, specifically not a state of intending to V . The constructive component of the view once again echoes a central structural feature of perceptual disjunctivism/naïve realism, illustrated above – namely, the suggestion that the bad case is derivative of the good case. In a rough and preliminary statement of intentional disjunctivism, unpacked and refined below, we can say that one has an intention-in-action to V just in case *either one is V -ing intentionally or one is performing some kind of botched intentional V -ing.*¹⁸

¹⁸ Williamson at one point suggests that ‘[m]ere believing is a kind of botched knowing’ (2000: 47). That remark is later unpacked in chs. 9 and 10 of (Williamson, 2000), where the argument is made that one’s evidence consists of one’s knowledge, and that knowledge is the norm of belief. Compare also the point below that acting intentionally is the perfective form of acting with an intention to Williamson’s further comment that ‘knowing is ... the best kind of believing?’.

III.ii *The argument from paralysis*

Instructive parallels with perceptual disjunctivism can also be gleaned from the sort of considerations typically raised for and against the view. As noted, perceptual disjunctivists concede the undeniable subjective indistinguishability of veridical and illusory experiences. But the concession may be turned against them. Consider the following gloss on the well-known argument from illusion. The subjective indistinguishability could be taken to *imply* that veridical and illusory episodes are mentally identical; any difference between them can then only consist in how each episode comes about (Dancy, 1995: 421). Disjunctivists who reject this implication face pressure to explain how it could fail to go through. If the subject has no way of telling the two experiences apart, how could they possibly differ in mental character? ‘For what more can there be to the character of conscious states of mind than a subject can herself discern when she reflects on them?’ (Martin, 1997: 98. See also Sturgeon, 1998: 182-184, and Langsam, 1997: 187-188).

A similar line of thought can be deployed against intentional disjunctivism. A structural parallel of the argument from illusion – call it the *argument from paralysis* – is familiar from debates over the nature of intentional action. A good case in which one successfully raises one’s arm can be subjectively indistinguishable from certain limiting bad cases of paralysis or anesthetization. Take a blindfolded subject whose arm suddenly (perhaps unknowingly) becomes paralyzed. Such a subject can at least *try* to raise her arm, but no sensation or proprioception could reveal to her that she is failing. Further, when the blindfold is finally removed, the subject may be surprised to learn her arm has stayed still (James, 1950: 490-492). Here too, subjective indistinguishability is seen as a guide to mental identity, with the only difference between the cases thought to lie in their environmental effects. The conclusion is that both acting intentionally and merely trying to act involve a mental attempt (McCann, 1975; Armstrong, 1981: 69-70; O’Shaughnessy, 1980: 265-267; Dancy, 1995: 423-425).

The argument is highly contentious. The existence of purely mental, so-called ‘naked’ acts of trying is disputed by some (Wilson, 1989: 155-156; Cleveland, 1997). Likewise the claim that acting intentionally entails trying to act (Wittgenstein, 1953: §622; O’Brien, 2012; Snowdon, 2001). Such controversies about the nature of trying can be entirely bypassed here, however, since it is anyway the version of the argument that substitutes *intending* for trying which supposedly cuts against intentional disjunctivism. A blindfolded subject whose arm suddenly (perhaps unknowingly) becomes paralyzed can at least *intend* to move her arm; this limiting bad case can be subjectively indistinguishable from the good case in which the subject successfully raises her arm. With subjective indistinguishability taken as before to indicate mental identity, the only difference between the cases is thought to lie in their environmental effects. The conclusion is that both acting intentionally and merely intending to act involve a mental state of present intention. But the argument cannot stop there if it is to support the orthodox view and undercut intentional disjunctivism. The thought must be that the mental identity of the paralyzed and the healthy subjects somehow ramifies to cover the entire spectrum of cases, implying that acting with an intention *invariably* entails a state of intending.¹⁹

How damaging is this argument to intentional disjunctivism? The argument from illusion exerts pressure on perceptual disjunctivists to explain how subjectively indistinguishable states could nonetheless be mentally distinct. But notice first that it is not obvious that the argument from paralysis should be similarly glossed in terms of subjective indistinguishability. It is clear why subjective indistinguishability might be thought an identity criterion for mental *experiences*. But when the focus becomes the individuation of intentions rather than experiences, it is arguably *functional* not phenomenal equivalence which should be the operative relation. After all, as illustrated above, intentions (and mental states more generally) are standardly characterized in

¹⁹ Compare Armstrong (1981: 70) who regards the positing of mental attempts in all intentional action as a ‘natural’ further step of his argument, claiming that ‘once [the presence of trying in cases of paralysis] is admitted, by far the simplest conceptual hypothesis is that this sort of mental event is an ingredient in *all* action, the paralysis case simply revealing clearly what is present in all cases’. The parallel claim for states of intention-in-action is disputed below.

functional terms. Now when cast in functional terms, the argument from paralysis does not in fact favour the orthodox view over intentional disjunctivism. (It will become clear shortly that sticking to the original, phenomenal gloss of the argument leads to the same verdict.)

On any reasonable, non-tendentious understanding of ‘functional’, there are in general conspicuous functional differences between a good case in which a subject successfully (intentionally) V -s, and an arbitrary bad case in which her intentional V -ing is botched in some way (this may not hold in the limiting bad case of complete paralysis; more on this in a moment). The latter case but not the former typically involve trying to V again, or choosing different means to V , or abandoning V altogether, or ... Any inclination to overlook or disregard these differences may stem from one-sidedly occupying the more common point-like temporal perspective on action flagged by Thompson and others (see II.ii above). But when acts are viewed as progressing over time, the possibilities of making adjustments to one’s pursuit of one’s goal, of changing course etc. become all too salient. Keeping sight of the progressive outlook on action may thus be a useful antidote for the reader who sees no functional differences between successful and botched acts.²⁰

A slightly different way of making the same point in favour of intentional disjunctivism is this. The fact that a subject’s intentional performance of V -ing is botched will typically figure differently in explanations and predictions of her behaviour compared to her successfully (intentionally) V -ing. If one knows that a subject’s V -ing is botched, one is able to explain why she is trying again, or changing course, or aborting, etc. If one knows that a subject is successfully V -ing, one is able to explain why she is pleased with herself, or why she is bragging, or why she intends to W (for which V -ing is a necessary prior step), etc. And since mental states and events are individuated partly at least by their characteristic contributions to explanations of behaviour, it follows that the good case and bad case differ mentally. (The orthodox approach

²⁰ Compare Thompson, 2011, which makes a related point in a different context.

may attempt to dismiss the claim to functional differences between the cases. A response along these lines is considered in sec IV below.)

To be sure, no such functional or explanatory differences may exist when comparing a good case with a corresponding bad case of complete paralysis; the argument from paralysis turns on eliminating any disparities of this sort. But nothing much follows from the functional equivalence of such good and limiting bad cases, specifically not the presence of states of intending in *all* instances of acting with an intention. For the case of complete paralysis is set up in a very particular way – the subject is blindfolded and otherwise cut off from her environment, she cannot monitor or correct her performance, etc. – so as to neutralize the typical functional differences. This may not detract from the credibility of the case as such; but importantly, it does prevent it from representing good evidence for the presence of a state of intending *across the board*, which is after all what the standard view maintains. Such a carefully constructed case as complete paralysis is too rare and exotic to shore up the sweeping doctrine propagated by the orthodox view. (Exactly the same conclusion applies if the argument from paralysis is couched in terms of the phenomenal rather than the functional equivalence of the good and bad cases, as the reader can verify).

IV. DISJUNCTIVISM ABOUT INTENTION-IN-ACTION

IV.i The view

Enough has been said by now to clear space for intentional disjunctivism. The rough version of the view, adumbrated above, states that having an intention-in-action to V consists in either V -ing intentionally or performing some kind of botched V -ing. A more precise statement requires bringing in the concept of *further intention*. One can gather wood with the further intention of making a fire, and one can do so for its own sake. Acknowledging the distinction, intentional disjunctivism states that *one is V -ing with the intention of A -ing (i.e., has an intention-in-action*

to *A*) just in case either (i) one is *V-ing* intentionally and one's *V-ing* explains or constitutes one's *A-ing* intentionally, or (ii) one is performing some kind of botched intentional *A-ing*, where (i) and (ii) do not instantiate a common mental state of intending to *A*.

One's *V-ing* explains one's *A-ing* when *A-ing* is the content of a further intention, for example when one is gathering wood *because* one is making a fire; otherwise, *V-ing* constitutes *A-ing*. The terse formulation of the bad case conceals a broad range of possible scenarios, illustrated above, including ones where different means are chosen, where the act is aborted entirely, and so on. These correspond to various different ways in which one's *A-ing* may be botched. One's fire-making may be botched because one is failing to gather wood as intended, or alternatively the wood one *is* gathering may be too damp, or ... The motley nature of instances falling under the bad case suggests that 'botched action' is a fairly thin basis for grouping them together. But that should not count against intentional disjunctivism, since the view does not aspire to identify any deeper commonality here. Its central insights are the mental distinctness of the good and bad case, and the primacy of the good case when it comes to explaining the bad case in particular and intending in general.

The explanatory primacy of the good case flows naturally from a picture on which acting intentionally is what might be called the *perfective form* of intending. There is a straightforward sense in which *A-ing* intentionally is the best kind of *V-ing* with the intention of *A-ing*; what the genus tends towards, the species accomplishes successfully. And it is typical of instances of the perfective relation that the exemplar among them is prior. Consider instruments. To explain the nature of a clock, one must first appeal to a properly functioning clock rather than a broken or dysfunctional one. The latter can only be understood by reference to what it lacks compared to the former. Or again, to explain what a hand is, one must first characterize a healthy, not a deformed hand. The latter is what it is only insofar as, and only in the particular ways in which, it

falls short of being the former.²¹ (No suggestion is being made that either organs or instruments should be defined disjunctively.)

IV.ii Explanatory indispensability

It has been argued above that the orthodox functional conception of intention-in-action fails on its own terms given the conspicuous functional differences between successful and botched acts, which intentional disjunctivism highlights. In response, proponents of the orthodoxy will reject the purported existence of genuine functional differences between the cases. They are instead likely to ascribe the *appearance* of such incongruences to a differential triggering of the dispositions comprising states of intentions-in-action. The generic state of intention-in-action postulated by the orthodox view can be understood as consisting of various functional dispositions, triggered differentially in accordance with conditions in the subject's environment. For example, the state of intention might include a disposition to deploy different means if the ones intended prove unavailable or ineffective; a disposition to \vee again if one's earlier attempt is unsuccessful due to circumstances no longer obtaining; a disposition to abort if all fails; and so on. Which such dispositions actually manifest themselves in behavior and which do not is determined by the conditions for their manifestation obtaining or not. What intentional disjunctivism sees as functional differences between the good and bad case are then really mismatched manifestations of the selfsame network of dispositions in different environments. A response along these lines thus relegates the mental dissimilarities intentional disjunctivism claims to identify to the extra-mental environment.

The response can be bolstered by pressing the idea that genuinely distinct mental items must make genuinely distinct contributions to explanations of behavior. Opponents of disjunctivism

²¹ The hand example is borrowed from Ford (2011), who argues that intentional action is the perfective or as he calls it, the 'essential' form of action, as opposed to unintentional action. Ford aims to question the prospects of a reductive decomposition of action, and hence the structure of his argument and its target is rather different from the present one. I have doubts about Ford's argument, but cannot take up the issue here. For more details, see Levy 2013.

may claim that postulating mental differences between the good and bad case yields no such explanatory payoff, and is therefore a specious move. A multi-dispositional state of intention-in-action of the sort described above, coupled with the actual environmental conditions, can carry all the explanatory load, rendering dispensable the disjunctivist thesis of mentally distinct events. But the attack is unsuccessful, since the dispensability charge is demonstrably false. Disjunctivism sometimes affords explanatory resources not available on the orthodox view.

A CEO is interviewing candidates to fill up several positions. One reasonable explanation for this behavior, which the disjunctivist can provide, is that the CEO is expanding the business. The orthodox view will instead offer the explanation that the CEO intends to expand the business, dismissing the disjunctivist proposal as needlessly extravagant. But here at least, the orthodox explanation is in fact inferior, since its *explanans* makes the *explanandum* less likely to occur. Were the CEO not in fact expanding the business – e.g. because her strategy for expansion was stalling – she may well have intended to expand while hesitating to hire new staff. The possibility of such scenarios loosens the connection between *explanans* and *explanandum* on the orthodox picture. Less figuratively, the probability of the CEO interviewing new staff, conditional on her intending to expand the business, is lower than the probability of the CEO interviewing new staff, conditional on her actually expanding the business. Substituting the orthodox explanation for the disjunctivist one suffers explanatory loss.²²

One might try to compensate by augmenting the orthodox explanation with the relevant extra-mental, environmental conditions. For example, one could suggest that the CEO is interviewing new staff because she intends to expand the business and (as a result) the business is being expanded. The strategy is unlikely to succeed, however, since it is susceptible to the notorious problem of causal deviance. Suppose the CEO intended but failed to expand, while at the same time news of her intention triggered a hostile takeover which resulted in expansion.

²² Compare Williamson (2000: 60–64) who makes a similar point about knowledge in the course of arguing that knowledge is a mental state. See also Gibbons (2001).

Given the possibility of such deviant scenarios, the augmented orthodox *explanans* would still make the *explanandum* less likely. The troubled history of attempts by action theorists to eliminate causal deviance, which will not be rehearsed here, offers little hope of getting around this problem and demonstrating that orthodox explanations are everywhere at least as good as their disjunctivist counterparts.^{23, 24}

No claim is being made here that the disjunctivist explanation is *invariably* superior to the orthodox one. The foregoing argument was offered in response to the charge against disjunctivism that the mental distinctiveness of the good and bad case it posits is in fact specious because explanatorily dispensable. To rebut this charge, it is enough to demonstrate the existence of cases where disjunctivism makes an explanatory contribution unmatched by the orthodox alternative.

V. CONCLUSION

The present case for disjunctivism about intention-in-action is now complete. Section II argued that a novel understanding of intention-in-action is required. Two central extant views were criticized. The considerations motivating the predominant, Bratmanesque plan-based view depend on a prior commitment to the standard causalist view of action explanation, and are hence unlikely to move the uninitiated. Moreover, the view itself does not comfortably handle cases of spontaneous intentional acts. And finally, considered on its own functional terms, the view portrays intention-in-action as essentially dissimilar to prior intention, leaving too much of a gulf between the two kinds of mental state to vindicate their unity. The other view examined in

²³ One can always tack on the familiar Davidsonian ‘in the right way’ clause as a way of eliminating the threat of causal deviance. But it should be clear that this sheds no explanatory light on the connection between the intention and its effect in a way that could illuminate the *explanandum* in question.

²⁴ Thompson (2008, part II) highlights the practice of explaining actions by reference to *other actions*, as in ‘I’m breaking eggs because I’m making an omelet.’ In fact, Thompson suggests that this so-called ‘naïve’ form of action-explanation is *primary*, in that it entails but is not entailed by explanations in terms of mental states. The argument in the text thus seems to converge with Thompson’s on an important point, while at the same time adding the explanation for why it is unlikely that any conjunction of mental state and environmental conditions will turn out to be an equally good explanatory resource.

section II, Thompson's view of intending as acting, was shown to be extensionally inadequate when we reflect on intentions that do not involve even the most preparatory measures – e.g. when the intended action is in the remote future or when the intention itself is extinguished prematurely.

Sections III and IV defended a more promising alternative view of intention-in-action, which eschews the idea of states of intention-in-action and treats mere intending as a botched replica of acting intentionally. The argument from paralysis against intentional disjunctivism was shown to fall short of its stated aim. It fails to vindicate the orthodox assumption of a common state of intention-in-action, given the ubiquity of salient functional differences between mere intending and acting intentionally, which undermine rather than underwrite the orthodox view. The attempt to downgrade these differences to mere environmental effects of the mental was exposed as a failed defensive strategy; the disjunctivist schema sometimes provides superior explanations of behavior and is therefore indispensable.

It should be clear how intentional disjunctivism, if viable, supports the 'action first' line of thought. It demonstrates the fruitfulness of deploying a basic notion of intentional action as an explainer, unlike the received view in philosophy which treats intentional action as itself a target for (reductive) explanation. But even assuming its overall soundness, the argument of the paper so far shows how such an explanation might go for intention-*in-action*. As such, it reveals how two of the three guises of intention are connected: Intentional action is the fundamental of the three, and intention-in-action is explained disjunctively in terms of it. For completeness, we must explain what unifies all three guises, including prospective intention.

Speaking loosely, prospective intention can be thought of as a note in one's mental diary or an entry in one's mental to-do list. Such talk does not preclude thinking of prospective intention as a mental state, and intentional disjunctivism is not committed to rejecting this thought (unlike, for example, Thompson's view). The arguments given in previous sections target only the

purported existence of states of intention-in-action, with the further implication that the standard view of intention *as such* is flawed arrived at indirectly, based on its inability to provide a credible unified picture of all the different guises. Disjunctivism understands future intention in parallel fashion to intention-in-action. A prospective intention to V is explained disjunctively as *the state in virtue of which, if it persists until the time comes to V , one will either V intentionally or perform some kind of botched intentional V -ing.*

The view is compatible, not only with the general idea that prospective intention is a state but also more specifically with the Bratmanesque version of this idea adumbrated above, which sees prospective intention as a plan-like state. Moreover, it leaves open the possibility of spontaneous intentional acts not preceded by prior intention. In the more common case where there *is* a preceding state of intention, it is extinguished when the time comes to act. This is once again congenial to thinking of prior intention as plan-like: When the time comes to act, the plan has no role left to play.

The reader will recall that the main flaw in the Thompsonian view of intending identified in §II.ii above lies in its unsuccessful attempt to transpose the temporal-calculative structure which binds actions in progress, over to the agent's thought when she harbours a prospective intention. That flaw does not beset the disjunctivist view endorsed here when combined with the 'action first' approach, which it is meant to compliment. For while intentional disjunctivism does, like the Thompsonian view, ultimately explain intention in terms of intentional action, its insistence to regard the latter as a basic primitive obviates the urge to seek illumination in its temporal or calculative structures. The existence of such structures in itself is not denied but it is not taken as a defining feature that imposes parallel structures on intention, either. In this way, the resulting view of intention retains the sort of flexibility required to accommodate prospective intentions that exemplify no such structure.

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