

Reasons for Being Flexible: Desires, Intentions, and Plans

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Mieux vaut ployer que rompre.
(Old French proverb)

Introduction

We often value being flexible. People frequently say that they are flexible about their working arrangements. “She hates me when I say that flexibility is not what describes her attitude toward my lifestyle.” A committee pompously announces that this time, they flexibly extend their deadline for the submission of project proposals and so on. Psychological or social flexibility—especially the one exercised *sensibly*—is an important aspect of everyday life in modern societies. In this context, it is no surprise that recently there has been an increased interest toward this idea in the social sciences. Within the last years, psychological flexibility (PF) has been recognized not only as an important performance enhancer, but also as a crucial component of our overall health and well-being (Gardner and Moore 2007; Kashdan and Rottenberg 2010). PF appears to be something both reasonable and good.¹

Interestingly, these findings—especially in psychology and organization science—are not surprising for the philosophy of action. Contemporary action theories in their own way explore the spectrum of problems specific for the psychological approach to agential flexibility. In this paper I shall try to argue that the distance between the competences of psychology and philosophy in the clarification of the importance of flexibility is actually quite small: they both may go hand in hand in this matter. What is more, they may mutually support one another.

For the purposes of this introduction, let me define psychological flexibility as, roughly, an agential *capacity to adapt to fluctuating environmental demands*. What this capacity implies is yet to be clarified. The literature devoted explicitly to PF is not very broad, but it contains quite complex and thoroughgoing investigations of the issue in question, so a synthetic and handy characteristic of PF—proposed from the perspective of psychological research—should not pose serious difficulties. But, before I try to reconstruct such an account of PF, we need to initially answer the following question: if at all, how exactly does philosophy approach the problem of PF?

I have suggested that the contemporary philosophy of action explores issues connected to PF in its own way. But, given the above rough approximation, it is not obvious where we should search for PF in action theory. Acknowledging the variety of approaches and views in the contemporary philosophy of action, even the idea of searching for something like one plain philosophical account of PF seems highly problematic. To avoid possible worries, my strategy will start from a two-step stipulation. First, the issue of flexibility can be approached by an exploration of its reverse side. Such phenomena as endurance, resistance, or rigidity of attitudes are common in our practices—and they are a fine material for discussion; they have been studied in philosophy in various contexts. If we approach this material in a suitable way, the question of PF should gain a more philosophical attire. Second, if PF is a mental issue that is easily describable in our everyday psychological language (vide my initial remarks in the first paragraph), our attention should be focused, basically, on those philosophical accounts which make use of *folk-psychological* concepts. The language of desires, beliefs, intentions, acts of will, plans, and the like, offers a rich source of knowledge that embraces both negative and positive phenomena on the reverse side of PF. Our desires can be stubborn, our beliefs fixed, plans inert, intentions firm, and so on. Since folk psychology is a part and parcel of the commonly accepted language used in the philosophy of action, the assumption that we express various aspects

of flexibility in natural language appears initially plausible and appealing. So, if we check the above two-leveled stipulation in more detail, we should be prepared to face the question of PF in action theory in a more direct and explicit way. The goal of this paper should now become clearer: on the ground of an overview of philosophical accounts of PF, I shall make an attempt at philosophical mapping of *the (in)flexible agency*.

The structure of this paper is as follows. My starting point is PF as it has been presented in psychology. I offer a synthetic view that embraces the most crucial aspects of flexibility and describes its functional roles and underlying mechanisms. Next, I move my attention onto the field of current action theory and discuss two elementary concepts we commonly use when describing our actions, intention and desire. Of course, many “theories of desire” exist (see Schroeder 2014) and there is no point in trying to discuss all of them under one heading. To show where the question of PF sneaks into the scene of action theory, I explore the idea of the *resistance of desire*, as proposed by Timo Airaksinen. The second concept to investigate at this stage is intention. As in the previous case, it is plain that there are many accounts of intentions and they play various roles in the phenomenology of action (see Pacherie 2008).

For the purposes of this paper, we need only something that can be interpreted as an approach to PF. Such an approach can be found in the idea of *stability of intention* or a plan, discussed famously by Michael Bratman. According to my interpretation, these two ideas, resistance of desire and stability of intention, allow to initially understand some important aspects of PF in action theory. To get a slightly more comprehensive view—and to supplement the outcomes gained on the grounds of the analyses of these two accounts—I introduce, in the third step, the concept of plasticity which comes from the so-called *praxiology* proposed by Tadeusz Kotarbiński (Lvov-Warsaw School). I try to show how this concept is still feasible and how it may enrich current philosophical accounts of agential flexibility. The strategy behind this stage of the paper is to enrich Bratman’s approach to psychological stability. The last part of the paper contains some remarks on the philosophical outcome of the interdisciplinary approach to PF.

Flexibility—A Psychological Portrait²

Flexibility has been studied in psychology under different captions: human or adult resilience, ego-resiliency, resilient personality, psychological adaptation mechanisms, social flexibility, emotional flexibility, mental flexibility, and finally, psychological plasticity.³ It has been studied in a

variety of contexts, for example, cultural and social change, cognitive enhancement, tolerance of uncertainty, self-control, negative emotional experiences (e.g., long stress, personal loss), psychopathology and mental health (depression, anxiety disorders, borderline personality), adulthood and aging, or religion. And there are different methodological approaches to PF: biological, neurocognitive, and behavioral. Recent research on flexibility is very diverse. Flexibility—despite the fact that it is a newly developing concept—is relatively well recognized, both on the level of empirical studies (clinical psychology) and on the level of theory (Kashdan and Rottenberg 2010). Naturally, we cannot discuss here the empirical issues connected with PF. Still, some examples showing telling intuitions behind PF seem to be in place.

Experimental findings show that in certain situations people tend to choose to experience emotions that instrumentally support their goals, despite the fact that these emotions are hedonistically *costly*. Such agents may be more willing to suffer negative excitement than enjoy positive emotions, but they need to know that their *prima facie* undesirable short-term feelings will bring about desirable effects. Anger is an example. There is a study (Tamir, Mitchell, and Gross 2008) in which agents perform two roles: of a landlord and of a resident who did not pay her rent. In one scenario, the resident needs to pay her arrear quickly, in the other scenario the debt may be paid off in long run, after agreement. The first scenario requires people who play landlords to reach a goal in a confrontational way, the second to reach their goal collaboratively. In both scenarios, the “landlords” engaged in some additional activities to reach their targets. These activities tended to be opposite. In the first scenario, the “landlords” were likely to provoke and boost their anger (e.g., by listening to aggressive music); in the second scenario, the “landlords” were more likely to evoke and strengthen their positive attitudes and emotions. What is crucial in the first scenario is the “landlords” were much more *effective* when they provoked anger than when they felt good emotions. This study seems to impair our intuitions about the role of positive emotions.⁴ In this sense, the outcome is important, not only as evidence for functionalism, but as revealing some deeper consequences. We are prone to engage in more demanding activities than may *prima facie* appear. This has “real-world implications for hostile countries trying to avoid conflict, romantic couples going through divorce proceedings, corporations working on business deals, and students and employees working on team tasks” (Kashdan and Rottenberg 2010, 867). Such cases can be understood as instances of *flexible adaptability* and

this appears as something important for the picture of us as agents. This is only an initial idea that takes us closer to PF.

A good way to capture flexibility more directly is the literature on resilience. Resilience can be understood as a character trait or developmental process or outcome of the *adaptation to adversity* (see Zautra, Hall and Murray 2010, 4). Other authors define it as

a dynamic ability to temporarily change from modal reaction or perceptual tendencies to reactions and percepts responsive to the immediately pressing situation and, more generally, to the inevitably fluctuating situational demands of life. In particular, the ego-resiliency construct entailed the ability to, within personal limits, situationally reduce behavioral control as well as to situationally increase behavioral control, to expand attention as well as to narrow attention, to regress in the service of the ego as well as to progress in the service of the ego. (Block and Block 2006, 318).⁵

This definition captures one of the most basic and compelling aspects of PF: agents who lack it cannot perform optimally or cannot perform at all. Contextual inflexibility is problematic in other aspects also. It has a harmful impact on identity development, self-determination concerning values, and the development of a healthy emotional and cognitive attitude toward the present moment and toward other agents engaged in it. Excluding the so-called clinical pathologies (depression, anxiety disorders, schizophrenia, and the like), inflexibility can bear problems with regard to emotional experiences, engagement in difficult and meaningful tasks, and switching and balancing between life spheres (and hierarchies of values) and time perspectives (constructive use of time in general). Usually, in the light of the initial example, any overly rigid, context-insensitive psychological reaction can be perceived as a functional deficiency that has potentially a bad impact on our lives.

According to the initial intuition (supported by the definition of resilience), PF is defined as a broad capacity, but it should also be clear that it can be understood in a *resultant* sense, as exercised properly in a particular case. It can also describe acting itself in time (flexible performance). Regardless of these aspects, such a capacity should always work in contexts which require *adaptation*: perceptual-cognitive, affective-emotional, and motoric.

In their comprehensive study on PF, Kashdan and Rottenberg highlighted three significant issues (“the building blocks”) that support flexibility (2010, 870–71): *executive functioning*, *default mental states*, and *personality configurations*. A summary of their insights should be very handy for our purposes.

Executive functioning allows to relocate or promptly alter cognitive sets and, thus, to shift our attention. In this matter, attentional control plays a crucial role since it is responsible for situational mind-changing or the revision of plans when suitable information appears. Through the reconfiguration of attentional resources, it provides perspective shifts and versatility in functional prioritizing strategies that are suitable in a particular context. In other words, it supports action with *imagination*. It also supports functional openness toward feelings and perception. Lack of proper executive functioning results in avoiding new experiences and, therefore, in overlooking the possibilities offered by occurring, especially sudden, events. Executive functioning also activates better information processing which positively impacts the ability to block some activities which have already been initiated and which occur as incompatible with new information about the immediate environment. Generally, executive functioning is crucial both for *intrapersonal fluency* in actions (results in individual effectiveness) and for *interpersonal standards* of behavior.

Default mental states work on the opposite side of our *mental economy*. While executive functioning may require full use of our mental resources, default mental states balance our energy used in actions and economize them by introducing habitual and propensitive regularities. Habits and default aspects of our psychology have a great impact on our actions since they allow automatizing the way in which we respond to various situations. Automated reactions save our mental and physical resources. Flexibility is partially possible because of these default aspects of our psychology, since they allow us to boost our information processing; reaction acceleration and balanced elasticity need a basis of broad regularities in which our mental economy can find its locus. Default options also inhibit overly flexible behavior. On the other hand, habitual and standardized reactions always require plasticity. Stereotyping, labeling, or rigid keeping to one and the same course of actions may be seen, to some extent, as savings in our mental economy, but they can have a bad impact on our effectiveness and proper functioning in general. This can be seen especially in new and demanding situations in which experienced agents tend to rely on their previous knowledge and superficial cues. PF is built on default mental states; it relies on their resources, but it should always fix and correct their potentially negative impact.

Personality configurations are relevant for PF in the meaning that some character traits support *openness* to completely new information from one's environment and the expansion of one's experiences. Here we can clearly see the source of inflexibility: Personal rigidity gives birth

to an excessive need for certainty (concerning oneself, other people, and environment as such) and this, in turn, easily leads to dogmatism, ideology, and conformism. Naturally, as in the case of default mental states, some degree of rigidity in personality is necessary for personal growth and self-governance. It is also related to our sociality (traditional values, group cohesion). Still, personality configurations that support PF should be suitably prioritized, since they are plainly related to personal development. We have evidence that a “heavy focus on conformity, obedience, security, and stability is inversely related to well-being” (Kashdan and Rottenberg 2010, 874). Finally, our psychologically understood autonomy (self-control), as a personality trait, also enables PF. It allows us to display curiosity and determination which—in combination with cognitive and emotional openness—have a positive impact on life satisfaction. Unsurprisingly, self-control can also be excessive. In this sense, it should be regulated within our personality configurations.

Let us take stock. Flexibility is crucial for our psychology in practice and it should be equally clear that it is also important theoretically. It is a dynamic construct which refers to perceptual-cognitive, emotional, and physiological-motoric vehicles of our activities. It is strongly supported by evidence in a vast amount of psychological literature. I have proposed to describe it as a capacity for adaptation in an unpredictable environment, but given its relative dynamic and balanced character, it is clear that it should also be considered *processually* (as a sensible exercise of such a capacity over time) or *resultatively* (as a suitable result of the application of that capacity).⁶ Overly flexible behavior may lead to behavioral impulsiveness and psychological instability in the same way as overly rigid attitudes may support rigidity and a dogmatic personality. Putting these issues aside, uncertainty or unpredictability of the environment appears crucial for PF. Unstable environment—something that should be considered as typical in our everyday practices—is what makes flexibility psychologically salient.

Basic Action-theoretical Insights into Flexibility: Desires, Intentions, and Plans

The picture of flexibility that can be elicited out from psychological studies should be attractive for action theorists on several levels. But, philosophy has had its own way in the initial detection of the most important issues related to PF. In this sense, our strategy of investigations now has the opposite direction to the one suggested by the first sentence of this section.

In the previous section, we have seen that PF is not possible without the so-called “default mental states” and those properties of our personality which are oriented toward stability and control. There is an interesting dialectic between them. Let me now discuss two selected action-theoretical approaches to basic concepts used in our language of action: Airaksinen’s account of desire and Bratman’s theory of future-directed intentions. We shall see that such a dialectic has already been detected in the philosophy of action.

PF in Airaksinen’s Account of Desire

At first glance, Airaksinen (2012, 2013a) proposes an approach to the concept of desire that may seem highly controversial from the perspective of the Davidsonian paradigm in action theory. This is so, because he does not consider desire as a standard and generally constructive aspect of our language in which we should describe our agency. Desires are not just wants (pro-attitudes) directed at a certain goal, to which we are committed and which can be achieved. Airaksinen has a kind of “post-Sadeian” view on desires (see Airaksinen 2013b)—our lives are full of them, but they are *unsatisfiable*; they are something that should be regulated, otherwise they produce longing, emptiness, or remorse. Although this view is both interesting and controversial, I am not going to discuss its feasibility here.⁷ I shall propose, rather, its general characteristic and focus on a selected, striking feature of desire.

Let us start from a few distinctions.⁸ Desires are subjective states of mind that are different from mere decisions and needs.⁹ In a way, our agential subjectivity is built of desires. They constitute an agent’s architecture of cravings, propensities, and appetites. The architecture of desires is more or less complex, depending on who we are, what we have been doing in our lives, and who we want to be. This architecture usually occurs to be a blob—desires are unstructured, they have a tendency to proliferate without limits, to be inconsistent, and to conflict. This is so because we may—in our fantasy narratives—want anything, if it is only potentially real. Desires are different from mere detached wishes, which presuppose unrealistic (fictional) narratives. But they are also different from real needs, since there is no threshold beyond which desires cannot (and should not) be satisfied.

Unsatisfiability is a defining property of desires. A need to own a house of a certain size is satisfiable, because it is about an individual object meeting certain criteria; the desire to own a dream summer house

in Italy is never satisfiable, because, eventually, even a villa in Positano is not good enough. Even if it seems you have satisfied your desire, it occurs that it is not the same desire you had in the first place. “Needs are about tokens, but desires are about types” (Airaksinen 2012, 402). This is what makes Airaksinen’s approach to desire radically different from the most common version in action theory (e.g., the one that entered the BDI model). Desires are potentially harmful with respect to what being happy demands (Airaksinen 2013a).

I hinted at the beginning of this section that according to the view discussed, desires require a certain sort of regulation. They are potentially harmful, because of another defining feature, *resistance*. Intentional objects of desire are not desirable per se, but because we *stick to them* with our narrative about it. What is more, as they are often void, they have a tendency to escalate our energy consumption. They should give us firm reasons for action, but actually these reasons are only apparent. We resist this fact because it does not fit the narrative in which a desire plays its role of putative happiness maker. Desire is personally resisted, which means it does not evaporate after the moment in which it was expected to be satisfied:

A kind of residue remains, as if the person would remember what she desired when she desired. She has now gotten what she wanted, she thinks; therefore, her desire is no longer there. This is to say that the drive towards the object guided by the fictional fantasy narrative is also gone. Yet the memory trace of the desire still floats in one’s mind. What also remains is the original resistance to the desire and its fantasy narrative. The person must face the resistance that is no longer balanced against the drive, and then it can dominate the mind as regret or remorse. (Airaksinen 2012, 407)

Desires are inertial, because they are *resisted*; they leave *cognitive-affective sediments* in the narratives about us, our circumstances, and the goals of our actions. With this regard, they tend to produce psychologically detrimental outcomes. This is why they require regulation. How can we get rid of their bad outcomes? It is plain we cannot add another desire to fight former ones. This would lead us in a vicious circle. Therefore, it appears that we should control our individual wants without creating further want-structures. According to Airaksinen, we should just abandon them. “You just reject them as they are. You leave them behind without ever looking back. You forget them. You let them vanish” (Airaksinen 2012, 403). The abandonment of desires may restore normal attitude toward our goals.

Airaksinen has not developed his account in a direction that would allow to answer the question how such abandonment of desires is possible,

but let us make a brief estimate of this view. His approach interestingly illuminates the connection between the philosophical and psychological approaches to flexibility. If we look at PF from the point of view of his account, it occurs plain that inertial desires are cases of what in psychological literature is called “default mental states.” In this respect, the philosophy of action—inasmuch as it is marked by folk psychology—has always had much to say about these mental states. The idea of the resistance of desire confirms our initial stipulation—that PF can be approached philosophically by an exploration of its reverse side.

Airaksinen does not consider the potentially good facets of inertial aspects of desiring, which might be connected to our *bounded resources*. Perhaps little can be said about such positive outcomes of inertial desires, since—on Airaksinen’s view—they consume too much energy, are unsatisfiable, and bring harmful results. “They only grow stronger and multiply, become more urgent and bold, if you serve them” (Airaksinen 2013b, 372). So, we should forget them. No matter how peculiar this view is as a theory of desire, it can be quite compellingly supported by the insights of research in PF. Abandonment of such inertial desires is necessary for fixing our stance concerning our goals and narratives in which these goals can make sense. In other words, abandoning a desire is itself an instance of PF. Psychology can help explain how such a flexible attitude toward our wants is possible without engaging in additional wants. We already know that PF requires to reconfigure our mental resources and to change our perspective concerning what we desired. We can let our desires vanish since we no longer see them as important; our view on what matters has changed.

Although it has not been highly articulated, Airaksinen’s approach offers a good example of the competences of action theory concerning PF and it is a good case for the understanding that psychology and philosophy may—and indeed should—go hand in hand in some areas. Now, let us try to broaden and deepen this insight.

PF in Bratman’s Account of Intentions and Plans

Desires are related to intentions. If you really desire X, your desire will affect your actions in a way that you will want X (or something close to X). If you are committed to what you want, you will intend actions that are aimed at bringing it about.¹⁰ Still, this relation will not be crucial for the point of this essay. I shall focus, rather, on Michael Bratman’s theory

of future-directed intentions, since it is very useful both for supporting the idea that action theory is competent in describing default mental states and for showing how our psychological resources, which are responsible for being flexible, may work in specific spheres of agency.

Bratman's so-called *planning theory* (1987) is complex; let me describe only what appears as necessary for our purposes.¹¹ Bratman's approach concerns future-directed intentions (in different terminology: distal intentions or prior intentions) that are roughly equivalent to our commonsensical understanding of plans (in the sense of *having a plan*). They refer to intending now to do something later. They are understood as mental states of a pro-attitude with a specific commitment. This commitment is revocable: "given new information, or a change in what I want, I may well reopen the question and reconsider" (Bratman 1987, 16). Intentions as plans are *partial*; decisions on how to fill a plan with details can be left for later consideration. Intentions are *hierarchically structured*: goals embed means. They are prompters of practical reasoning running other intentions. They are conduct controllers because of their stability. If you intend to go to the movies tonight, the question of whether to go is settled for you as a "default" until the time of action. Your "intention resists reconsideration: it has a characteristic *stability or inertia*" (Bratman 1987, 16).

According to Bratman, future-directed intentions are subject to norms: consistency, coherence, agglomeration, and reasonable stability. (1) Intentions should be consistent internally (consistency between intentions in a larger practical network) and externally (consistency between intentions and beliefs). (2) It should be possible to agglomerate two or more rational intentions into a larger intention. (3) Intentions relating to practical goals demand coherence with intentions regarding the appropriate means of achieving these goals. (4) Intentions should be stable over time in the sense that they should involve an appropriate resistance to change (Bratman 2009, 153). We will focus on the last issue.

We see that stability—pace now its synonym, inertia¹²—is understood both as a defining feature of intention and as a norm. Intentions for the future are our "defeasible defaults," but this aspect of intending should be *sensible*. Why does stability work as a norm? It reveals a hidden pragmatic—and according to Bratman—rational character of our agential psychology. We tend to retain our future-directed intentions; such retaining generally supports the fulfillment of our desires.¹³ But what makes such stability sensible? Prior intentions are not stable automatically. Such stability should be rational: we should retain or

reconsider our intentions, depending on the specific circumstances. This normative dimension of stability is connected with what Bratman calls a “two-tier approach to nonreflective (non)reconsideration” (Bratman 1987, 64–71). It is a model of agent rationality. A general description of this model may be as follows. The higher tier determines our general pragmatic habits not to reconsider prior intentions (their “defaultness”); the lower tier is concerned with the assessment of rationality in the case of a particular action: stability as being *reasonable* (Bratman 1987, 35, 68). In other words, the reasonable stability of future-directed intentions is a *noninertial stability*. It is context dependent: how much each tier enters the panorama of actions will depend on the specific circumstances. A reasonable agent will always have his or her dispositions to reconsider and non-reconsider in a sensible equilibrium. According to the main idea behind the planning theory—at least behind its face value—the stability of intentions also concerns our plans.¹⁴

The stability of a plan is generally a long-term feature of that plan: I do not constantly adjust the stability of my plans. To do that would undermine the point of having plans. . . . Rather, the stability of my plan is largely determined by general, underlying dispositions of mine. (Bratman 1987, 65)

Let us take stock. There are two parallels between Airaksinen and Bratman in their approach to default mental states in the light of PF. The first similarity refers to *inertial aspects of our agential psychology*. It does not matter here that Airaksinen speaks of desiring and Bratman of intending. The point is that both of them refer to some specific feature of our mental states, some underlying propensities and dispositions that support staying on the same track concerning the course of action and what matters in that course. In psychological research, such propensities are taken to be pragmatic enablers of PF. Flexibility is built on default mental states, but it should also fix their potentially bad impact. And here is the second similarity. Airaksinen understands that the abandoning of our desires has the power to regulate their potentially harmful aspects. Bratman understands that the stability of intentions should be *rational*. We should reasonably retain or reconsider our intentions suitably to our beliefs or changes in what we want. Executive functioning requires relevant modifications and reconfigurations of our mental resources.

There are also very important differences between these two theories. Bratman, in his nuanced approach to “nonreflective (non)reconsideration,” seems to fully acknowledge the importance of the requirements of executive functioning. His detailed investigation on the rationality to reconsider

and retain our plans (1987, ch. 5) and the consequences of not meeting the standard of reasonable stability for normal, nonpathological functioning (Bratman 2012, 83–84) makes his approach consistent with the recent research on PF. This is how we can interpret the interplay between the rationality of (non)reconsideration and the inertia of intention, on the one hand, and the requirement of executive functioning and default aspects of our mental states on the other. This is crucial in the light of the purposes of my endeavors in this essay.

Still, there are two significant complications concerning this rough interpretation of Bratman. I defend the view that Bratman's approach to PF is unreasonably limited in two related aspects: First, he actually excessively stresses the role of inertial and default aspects of our stable psychology in action, and, second, he ignores an important dimension of it.¹⁵ Let me briefly give reasons for this interpretation.

Despite its overall *sensibility and balanced significance*, the two-tier model of practical rationality may be understood as an implicit criticism of flexibility. Bratman refers to three issues to support the highlighted role of the stability of our agency: (1) *The snowball effect of intentions*: acting on an intention changes the world—this makes it increasingly sensible to continue to act on that intention; (2) *costs of reconsideration* by resource-limited agents: revision of an intention takes time, uses various mental resources, and may require rethinking other courses of action on which one had earlier settled; and (3) *propensities favoring non-reconsideration*: given our limited mental resources, we frequently depend on general, nondeliberative habits and strategies which to some extent favor non-reconsideration (Bratman 2010, 12–13).

Indeed, there is a tension between the requirements of being psychologically *flexible* and for being reasonably *stable* as pictured by Bratman. It seems that the source of such tension comes from the overrating of the role of default mental states at the expense of executive functioning and personality configurations (as openness). Bratman also appears to one-sidedly understand the role of cognitive limitations. We already know that resource boundedness does not exclude the possibility to reconfigure our mental resources and use them in a creative, flexible way. Bratman does not say anything about this. The reasons he gives to support stability significantly constrain the import of his “two-tier approach.”

Here comes the second limitation in Bratman's approach to PF. The strategy of seeing psychological stability through the prism of “non-reflective (non)reconsideration” deliberately ignores a specific aspect

of maintaining the stability of agency, namely, *abandoning intentions without reconsideration*.

I will be making the simplifying assumption that an agent abandons a prior intention only as a result of some form of reconsideration of that prior intention. . . . In an earthquake I might just abandon my prior intention to play bridge tonight without engaging in anything that amounts to reconsideration of that intention. (Bratman 1987, 183, note 1)

From the example of the resistance of desire we have seen that abandonment of our mental states is fairly optional and *reflective*. Now, we are faced with the issue of abandoning of intentions which are nonoptional and *nonreflective*. If we recognize the fact that there are many such bigger or smaller “earthquakes” in the lives of planning agents, we have overriding reasons to simply abandon our plans at least as often as we have reasons to retain or nonreflectively reconsider them! Then we should understand the reasons for PF better. We also see that Bratman trod a very promising path in action theory, but he did not explore it satisfyingly. It is time to try to do this.

Toward a Philosophical Account of Flexibility: Plasticity of Planning

The phenomenon of nonreflective abandonment of intentions constitutes a remarkable dimension of our agential psychology. This is so because it perfectly shows, as I believe, PF in an unstable and fluctuating environment of actions. In other words, what Bratman thoughtfully disregarded occurs to be the crux of the matter when it comes to flexibility in action. In this context, the philosophical approach to planning offered by Kotarbiński appears as more than important. Consider the following:

Every plan deals with future events, therefore at the moment we formulate it we do not know all the circumstances which will accompany them. Hence a plan must *leave room for some uncertainty* and conjectures concerning the course of events and states of affairs assumed by projected actions. And what if things happen otherwise? In order to cope with such a situation a plan should indicate, or at least admit of, certain modifications of its schedule; it should contain nothing which makes a modification of this sort impossible; nothing should prevent *switching from one track to another*. (Kotarbiński 1983, 26, my italics)

According to Kotarbiński, all plans should be *plastic*. This idea is a recurring motive in all his works (1962, 1965, and 1983) where he proposed his account of plans.¹⁶ He understands plasticity as a standard of planning.

This does not capture PF as a capacity, but, no doubt, such a capacity must be assumed if such a standard is applicable. And, to the extent that it is applicable in an unstable (or uncertain, fluctuating) environment, it can be interpreted as a supplement to Bratmanian stability. This is why Kotarbiński's idea of plasticity is still fresh. Do we have anything more than metaphors entangled in the above quote?

Kotarbiński (1962) suggests that a plastic plan should be *underdetermined* with regard to the means that are considered to reach its goal. Such underdetermination may come in different, more or less strong forms; in every case this means that it always depends on an agent, her goal, and the specific circumstances of her plan of how many alternative paths she includes in her planning. Anyway, planning has to be *deliberately* underdetermined in this matter. Sometimes our plans should be perfectly open and optional—partial, as Bratman would say—and sometimes we have to consider various scenarios and alternative paths because we cannot be sure what will be successful. To illustrate this, consider an example.

Assume I have a plan to meet a friend in California, where I will be traveling a lot. My friend is on a job market in academia and he is to move to a university city. Suppose he has offers from four Californian universities, say, San Francisco (where I will be staying), Los Angeles, Irvine, and Davis (where I will be traveling to). In two months, he will move to one of these university cities. It seems clear that my plan to meet a friend in California has to be deliberately underdetermined and partial. It consists of the intention to meet him in San Francisco which is accompanied by three other intentions: to meet him in LA, to meet him in Irvine, and to meet him in Davis. All these intentions are, so to say, *incomplete*, since they are pro-attitudes with only *limited commitment*. But all of these intentions have to be, to some extent, present in my intentional framework that is designed to achieve my goal. This explains their limited character and this secures my final success.

Now, let me theorize a bit on the above example. We need basically two interconnected things. First, what is the psychological mechanism that allows flexible agents to be plastic as pictured in the example? And why exactly is plasticity suitable to associate abandonment, without reconsideration, of our intentions with PF? Begin with an explanation of the mechanism that allows us to realize such a deliberately underdetermined plan. Here we can use Richard Holton's (2008) account of intentions. Holton calls such "incomplete" intentions partial, but in order not to confuse them with Bratman's idea of partial character of

intention, let me use my term. The definition of incomplete intentions is as follows:

Incomplete intention: An intention to ϕ is incomplete iff it is devised in planning to achieve an end E and it is accompanied by one or more alternative intentions also devised in that planning to achieve E . (Holton 2008, 41)

This definition supports and improves our understanding of plasticity. When it comes to the demands of flexibility, it does not matter how many alternative scenarios we add to reach our goal in planning. All the options embedded in these scenarios are incomplete as *intentions*. Still, they constitute, as Holton says, “competing live possibilities.” Now, what does it mean to abandon an incomplete intention in plastic planning?

It is plain that in plastic planning, our incomplete intentions have to be consistent both internally and externally (with other intentions and beliefs) to the extent that it is required by the probability of their success. To abandon one or more incomplete intention in our complex planning structure, the probability of success for other incomplete intentions has to be considerably increased. When relevant new information from a fluctuating environment arrives, it makes some of the incomplete intentions incompatible with the plan’s end. This means that we abandon incomplete intentions when they become incompatible with the knowledge about our environment. There is neither the need nor even an option to reconsider them. The reasons for abandoning an incomplete intention are basically overriding—that is why we should leave them—so we only need to be sensible enough to face this fact. There are two aspects of such abandonment, praxiological and psychological. The former aspect of abandonment of incomplete intentions can be seen, if we interpret it as *getting rid of what is useless* as elements of our system of intentions toward effectiveness.

If I plan to meet a friend in California, partially intending to meet him in four different places, and, after some time, I get information that he has not been invited to SF, and that he has refused an offer from Irvine, the scope of my intentions should be limited. I abandon some of my incomplete intentions, as they cannot be completed. They become incompatible with my goal and keeping them as before in my plan would not bring me any closer to the goal.¹⁷ Plasticity as a *process of the organization of intentions* provides better executive functioning. Plastic planning appears as a direct implementation of the PF.

The latter aspect of such abandonment should now be clearer. We are resource-limited agents, so it is not psychologically pragmatic to maintain useless and energy-consuming multiplied intentions—those that cannot

bring about the effects that we look for. What is more, abandonment of these intentions helps us retain our psychological stability.

Let me sum up the above discussion. If my interpretation of plasticity in planning is sound, we have gained at least two key results. First, there is a very interesting relationship between Bratman's approach to psychological stability and Kotarbiński's plasticity. The latter can be seen as a supplementation and enrichment of the former. Second, plasticity in planning appears to be a good philosophical concretization of some ideas proposed in psychological research. In this sense, it proves in a very direct way our initial assumption that the philosophy of action by its own methods explores the spectrum of problems peculiar to the psychological approach to agential flexibility. If plasticity means that the mode in which we respond to demanding situations concerning our plans—when we are forced to abandon some intentions or plans—is conditioned by PF, we find an evident argument for mutual support between psychological research and philosophy of action.

Conclusions

The interplay between philosophy of action and psychology is apparent when we focus our attention on the issues related to flexibility. Given the discussion of Airaksinen's, Bratman's, and Kotarbiński's ideas in the context of PF (as approached in the psychological research), it becomes understandable that this concept is multifaceted. The functional roles of flexibility and their overall significance should be understood contextually. In other words, the value of being flexible—evaluated with regard to the architecture of our desires, retention or reconsideration of our intentions, and how we abandon our plans—cannot be considered without reference to the social and ecological setting of our actions.

The role of PF is different for fully stable environments and for fluctuating circumstances. Sometimes a dose of increased rigidity can be enough to be a psychologically flexible agent; sometimes we need highly specified skills and inventions to respond flexibly to environmental demands. The same refers to inflexibility. There are different conditions in different ecological settings for blaming someone as inflexible. In this sense, (in)flexibility depends not only on the agent's executive functioning, her default mental states, and personality configurations, but also on (in)stability of the environment in which she acts. This is further crucial lesson from our interdisciplinary investigations of PF. I take it as manifest that the correlation between the agent's psychology and that agent's environmental setting results in the *intersubjectivity* of the conditions for PF.

In other words, how flexible an agent is, is not only a matter of the person's typically individual psychological conditioning, but also a matter of *the way we see this conditioning* in relation to its environmental context. This leads us to the problem of the social interpretation of flexibility. Apart from many evident social benefits of PF, such as better cooperation, trust, or other "social glues," there is a question of how much (in)flexibility as an individual capacity is marked by intersubjective conditions. This is a delicate issue which may be subject to further philosophical and psychological work.

The aim of this essay was to show the connections between psychology and philosophy when we develop a competent approach to PF. Undoubtedly, philosophy of action has had more normative aspirations in this matter than psychology, but—given the overall sense of what flexibility implies—this should not be seen as a vice. Both approaches turn out to be useful for one another. On the one hand, we have seen that psychological distinctions can be employed to interpret philosophical approaches. On the other hand, the competences of philosophy occur to be very strong when it comes to the elucidation of some important dimensions of PF. Behind the interplay between the two disciplines, which I have tried to describe in this paper, there is a significant complexity of our psychological makeup that reveals the interplay between competing tendencies and skills. We understand ourselves as agents better when we fully acknowledge their roles.¹⁸

Notes

1. For the reasons which I introduce below, I use the idea of PF as also embracing the *sociological* dimension of agential resilience.
2. This section largely borrows insights, examples, and references from Kashdan and Rottenberg (2010), Reich, Zautra and Hall (2010), and Thurston and Runco (2011). In a few places, I paraphrase passages from Kashdan and Rottenberg (2010).
3. Naturally, these different captions suggest relatively different interests in research. In what follows I abstract from any such differences, since they are beyond the concerns of this essay.
4. These intuitions are, for example, at the heart of ethics—from Aristotle through utilitarianism to pragmatism—and of some approaches in psychology (anger as a harmful emotion).
5. Cited also by Kashdan and Rottenberg (2010).
6. Besides psychological factors that support flexibility (executive functioning, default mental states, personality configurations), psychologists used to also distinguish *cognitive flexibility* (CF), understood as the readiness with which the person's concept system changes selectively in response to appropriate environmental stimuli (Scott 1962, 405), and an elementary *physical flexibility* (PhF): the scope of movement in a joint and length in muscles that cross the joints to produce motion. There is empirical

- evidence that PhF supports CF, and CF has a positive correlation with PF (Masley et al. 2009).
7. To the extent that Airaksinen distinguishes desires from mere choices, there are some parallels between his view and Gerhard Seel's (2015). Both of them share the same distrust to the standard view on desire in the Anglo-Saxon tradition in action theory. Discussion of this issue would require a separate study.
 8. My presentation is built mainly on Airaksinen (2012), but I also use his other essays (2013a, 2013b).
 9. Airaksinen also recalls Michael Smith, who defines desire as a disposition (Airaksinen 2012, 394). To be sure, dispositions are usually understood as different from subjective states of mind. In what follows, I ignore this incongruence as of minor importance. He also treats *desire* as a synonym for *want*. But, in this case, he adds: "what I really mean is that 'want' is a motivational component that exists in desiring" (Airaksinen 2012, 395).
 10. This is a very general clarification of the relation in question; I put things deliberately roughly—without being committed here to any specific account of desire or intention. For Airaksinen's strategy in explaining the relation between intending and desiring, see Airaksinen (2014, 449–50).
 11. See my two papers (2015 and submitted) where I discuss Bratman's theory in much more detail. These two works are also theoretically important for my present account of PF.
 12. I criticize Bratman's identification of stability of intention with inertia in my paper (Makowski submitted).
 13. Of course, from Airaksinen's perspective we cannot satisfy our desires. Indeed, what we can satisfy are our needs.
 14. The identification of future-directed intentions with plans may seem problematic. In Makowski (submitted), I try to differentiate these two concepts sticking with Bratman's official stance: plans are different from future-directed intentions "... because of their increased complexity (as compared with relatively simple intentions)" (Bratman 1987, 29).
 15. This criticism does not refer to Bratman's approach to stability in his essays on temptation and anticipated regret. I elaborate a bit on this in Makowski (2015).
 16. This account contains some peculiarities which are endemic to the action theory of Kotarbiński. I critically discuss these peculiarities in Makowski (2015).
 17. I have given an example which involves many incomplete intentions, but plasticity works also in much less complicated planning in which we have only two incomplete intentions. We prove our plasticity also by the abandonment of fully fledged intentions—when information from our environment cancels some aspects of our plans. I cannot discuss this question here, however.
 18. My work on the article has been supported by the Polish National Science Centre (Grant No. DEC–2011/03/B/HS4/04162). Special thanks to Timo Airaksinen for his comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

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