

Preliminaries of Action

A person can have a good motive to do something, but never lift a finger. Hence the approach to an action needs some further stage to get things going, and this is broadly covered by the word '**intention**'. Some actions, like recoiling from a wasp, may be so swift that no intention is formed - though we might call that a 're-action', rather than an 'action'. It is tempting to define an intention as the mental state which immediately precedes an action, but that is challenged by several counterexamples. Most actions need the intention to be sustained during the performance (which is particularly clear if the action is talking). It is not essential that an intention be enacted, since it can be interrupted, or even abandoned after second thoughts. And some actions don't turn out as they were intended, so that merely preceding the action is not enough to ensure a link with that particular action. An intention may be no more than a hope, or an endeavour, rather than a part of the action.

That said, the simplest case moves from a motive to an intention, and then to the action. If the action is complicated, the intention is almost forgotten in the complexities of performance. So a normal intention is the bridge between motive and action, and is thus of great interest, and any analysis or explanation of intentions will involve many other assumptions about thought, motive, reason and responsibility. Motives entirely concern ultimate goals, but intentions must focus on the particular means of achieving them. It is perfectly rational, though, to choose several possible means, selecting any one of them, and also to improvise other details during the action. Having an intention only entails finding some means of achieving the end, and abandoning the intention if the action seems impossible.

The explanation of an intention may be no more than the explanation of the motive, plus reasons why that moment for action was chosen, and why those means were employed. One approach suggests that the action itself is the best explanation of the intention, but not every detail of an action can be intended, so it would be hard to know which aspects did the explaining, without knowledge of the prior mental state. The standard explanation among empiricists (who downplay reason) is that a **belief** and a **desire** combine to form an intention. However, the same explanation is given for motives, so something more is needed to explain the focusing of motives in an intention. This might be something like 'taking ownership' of the desire.

Reasons or **judgements** can also be cited as the cause or explanation of an intention. Since intentions involve means in a way that motives do not, then presumably the reasons for an intention must include the reason why this moment and these means have been chosen. We might pause at this point to wonder whether animals form intentions. I've just watched a bird look around, spot something on the ground, pause for a moment, then fly down to it, which looked like an intention to me. However, people can intend to perform an action under one description ('eating') but reject it under another ('scoffing'), so language has a great influence in the human case.

An influential modern idea is that intentions are distinguished from motives by their '**normativity**'. That is, there is a new commitment to doing the deed, almost like a self-directed promise, which says that, if nothing intervenes, then this deed ought to be (and will be) done. If you state a motive, no one requires you to act, but if you state an intention then not performing it is a failure (unless you have an excuse – even if that is laziness). Of course, we can also have long-term intentions, which may take years to fulfil, and can vary as time passes.

An interesting phenomenon is **group** intentions, such as moving a piano upstairs, which no individual can intend. It may be the sum of individual intentions, but the individuals only intend to do their bit of the job. A bold assertion is that there is a distinct phenomenon of 'group agency' (and, presumably, group responsibility). Alternatively, we may inspire others to share our intention, or only commit to a conditional intention (for as long as the others commit).

Older discussions of action focus on **the will**, rather than on intentions. Modern neuroscience does not search for an object called 'the will', but we experience the launching an action by a distinct mental stimulus, which arises from an overview point (perhaps seen as an aspect of 'The Self'), where reasons are first evaluated. Since actions can be stopped or changed at the last moment, we have the impression that some part of us is 'in charge' of what we do. The will has been identified with the self, or with reason, or with the last desire before action, but it still seems a useful concept for philosophy of action (whether or not it is 'free' from external constraints). An early strong commitment was the view known as 'volitionism', saying an action entirely consists of the exercise of the will, but actions seem to require bodily movements and worldly objects, and not just private mental events.

A related approach sees the key idea about an action in its production by an 'agent'. This may be no more than a being with a mind, but a stronger view asserts the need for an agent is so basic that we must postulate a different type of causation from the normal bumpings of objects, and especially if the will is 'free'. This idea of '**agent causation**' doesn't postulate the specific mechanism of the will, but has the same feature of being the ultimate explanation of an action, about which nothing further can be said. The theory relies on causation being a real phenomenon, rather than being patterns of regular behaviour, and it must presume free will, if no further explanation is possible.

From earliest times philosophers were struck by the odd phenomenon of people acting against their obvious best interests. If a smoker wants to live and knows cigarettes can kill, they seem to be in state of contradiction. This is the problem of '**weakness of will**' (Gk *akrasia* – lack of control). This aiming at good but acting badly was compared to aiming at what is bad ('evil'), managing to do good by an effort of will (*enkrateia* – control), and simply wanting good and doing it ('virtue'). One response to *akrasia* was 'intellectualism', saying that only ignorance could explain smoking; the rival response said knowledge of what is right is overcome by rival desires. Thus the problem led to two contrasting theories of action, as either entirely arising from reason, or arising from a balance of conflicting forces and drives within the mind. Nowadays we can invoke unconscious drives as a source of action, which is plausible, but leaves us facing a mystery. We can ask the reason for the smoking, the cause of the smoking, or the motive for the smoking, and since contradictions in reasons or motives suggest a rather chaotic account of action we may prefer to speak of conflicting causes.