

Lecture I: 'Three Faces of Intention'

I. Preliminaries and Course Outline

Lectures 1,2 & 3:

- Is there a distinctive **faculty of the will**?
- Do we have the capacity to **form intentions** and act on them?
- Are intentions mental states at all? If so, what *kind* of mental states are these - are they **beliefs, desires, or some combination thereof**? Or might intentions be **sui-generis mental states**?
- Another way of stating this latter question is to ask whether we are forced to acknowledge 'intention' as a basic **psychological kind** in addition to belief and desire. Might there be functional roles which intentions play, which desires and beliefs are ill-equipped to explain?

Lectures 4 & 5:

- If we think that there *is* such a distinctive faculty of the will, are there phenomena which we can understand as **deficits** of this faculty?
- We'll explore this question with regard to two phenomena: **akrasia** (action against one's better judgement) and **addiction**.

Lectures 6 & 7:

- What is the **scope of the will** in our mental lives? What happens to our capacity to form intentions and act on them when we fall asleep and **dream**?
- Some contemporary theories of dreaming suggest that we ought to understand dreams as being inherently subject to the will. Is this view correct? Different answers to this question paint divergent views about the role and scope of the will in our conscious mental lives.
- Should empirical findings on **lucid dreaming** - cases where individuals appear to be able to exercise agency over their dreams - be taken to support this thesis?

Lecture 8:

- In the final lecture we'll return to some ideas discussed in earlier lectures and look at a number of prominent philosophical theories of desire.

II. Why care about intentions?

Ontology of mind: which basic psychological categories do we need to posit to explain mind and action? Can we explain talk of intentions in terms of action, belief and desire, or do we need to posit a further basic psychological category?

Ethics: attributions of intention seem to be central to moral evaluation (if I poison someone, you will react very different to me if I poison them unintentionally, compared to if I acted intentionally.) See also, the Knobe Effect: Consider an executive who, motivated entirely by the goal of maximizing profit, embarks on a policy that he knows will also cause environmental damage. Does he intentionally harm the environment? People tend to judge that a bad side effect is brought about

intentionally, whereas a good side effect is judged not brought about intentionally). The doctrine of double effect: It is worse to do something intending to do it than it is foreseeing something happening. How should we understand the notion of intentional action here?

Law: Standardly, in criminal law there two conditions that someone needs to meet in order to be guilty of criminal offence. 1) that one performs the guilty act 2) that one has the right state of mind to make them guilty. That guilty mind is often cashed out in terms of intention or doing something intentionally.

Aesthetics: how important are an artists intentions to the proper evaluation and meaning of an artwork? Arguably, this debate is sensitive to different views of the ontology of intentions (Livingston 2009).

III. The Puzzle of Intention

Anscombe's three uses:

- (1) **Future-directed intention:** I have an intention to take this course.
- (2) **Intention-with-which:** In taking this course I intend to learn about the will.
- (3) **Intentional action:** I am intentionally taking this course.

In (1) intention seems to be used to characterise a state of mind. In (2) and (3), intention more straightforwardly characterises action.

“where we are tempted to speak of ‘different senses’ of a word which is clearly not equivocal, we may infer that we are in fact pretty much in the dark about the character of the concept which it represents” (I, §1).

Contemporary work on the nature of intention starts from an examination of the relationship between these three uses of intention. **Is there a deep unity to these three uses?** If so, how should we understand this unity?

(NB. what are philosophers asking when they pose this question? Is this getting at an issue of our *concept* of intention? or, is the issue one of whether intention tracks a *unified psychological kind*? Or both? This is sometimes unclear).

The modern landscape of philosophical work on intention can be understood in terms of whether one places **methodological priority** on a particular sense of intention - i.e. which sense of intention one takes as central - and further - which sense of intention one takes other senses of intention to be reducible to.

IV. Intention as Doing

Where we end up on the questions of what it is to act with an intention, or to have an intention for the future, (i.e are intentions mental states?) can depend significantly on where we start.

One influential line of thought, evident in Anscombe and early Davidson is that we can reduce the senses of intention in (1) and (2) to (3): to one's acting intentionally. This view places

methodological priority on the *present* sense of intention, over future-directed intention, and seeks to secure unity in the three senses of intention in this way.

Early Davidson: "intention" does not refer to some mental state or property but is instead "syncategorematic": it is a verbal mechanism we can use to redescribe an intentional action in terms of the *reason* for which the agent acted.

On this view, we can understand the following sentence

"Cecily went to the lecture with the intention of teaching students about intention"

in terms of:

"Cecily's *reason* for going to the lecture was to teach students about intention".

Recently, these Neo-Anscombian views are having a resurgence with work from Michael Thompson, Richard Moran and others.

Why think this is right?

Michael Thompson: Intentions cannot be mental states - particularly propositional attitudes like belief and (some forms of) desire - because they are *not static* and do not take propositions as their objects.

That is, we normally speak of intending *to do* something, not of intending *that* something be the case. In intending to do something, one's relation to the goal of the action is constantly evolving as the *act-process unfolds*, and hence not one of statically representing a proposition.

On this view, 'Cecily intends to travel to London this weekend' is another way of saying that Cecily *is* travelling to London this weekend: the process is already unfolding. Here, Thompson is suggesting that speaking of future intention is just a way to indicate that very little progress in the action has been made.

V. Davidson on 'Pure Intending'

In later work, Davidson became convinced that this kind of deflationary analysis of intention was inadequate.

The problem: even if it is compatible with many cases of intention, there seem to be cases left over in which there is an intention *without any relevant intentional action*, or even deliberation, to reduce it to. These are often called cases of "*pure intending*."

The thought is that an agent might come to have an intention for the future – to build a squirrel house one day, as in Davidson's example — without ever having consciously deliberated about whether to build one, or decided to do so.

In these cases, the intentions one has (e.g. I intend to write a novel one day) might *never lead to any kind of action*; the agent might never even try to put nail to board, or sit down to write.

If we can nevertheless make sense of having the intentions to act in these kinds of case, then it looks as though we cannot explain what is going on in terms of any intentional mental activity or action.

Davidson concludes that intention must be some kind of attitude after all, and most subsequent theorists have agreed with this.

VI. Some further questions:

- Is it really true that we can't make sense of pure intending in terms of intentional action? what about viewing these as incomplete actions?
- Might there be other ways of motivating the idea that intentions are mental states which does not hinge on the possibility of pure intention?
- If one is convinced about the idea that intentions are mental states, what kind of mental states are these?

We'll look at some answers to these questions in the next two lectures, via accounts which seek to reduce (2) and (3) to the sense of future-directed intention in (1).