Lecture 3: 'Intentions as Distinctive Practical Attitudes'

I. Recap

Last week we examined various accounts of intention which seek to reduce future-directed intentions to belief-desire pairs. This was viewed as part of a larger project which seeks to secure unity in the three senses of intention by giving methodological priority to future-directed intention.

We saw how initial formulations of a view of this sort face three key objections: (i) The 'belief about doing' objection, (ii) The 'reason-choosing objection', and (iii) the objection from 'the distinguishing features of intention'.

Our question for today: do these problems motivate an alternative picture of intention according to which are sui-generis mental states which are irreducible to mental states like beliefs and desires, or can they be accommodated on a revised version of the belief-desire model of intention?

II. Bratman's Planning Theory of Intention

As we saw last week, Belief-Desire Models of Intention start by examining the characteristic features of belief and desire (direction of fit, rational profiles etc.) and using these to explain the similarities between these mental states and intentions.

An alternative methodological approach: what functional roles do intentions play? What kind of attitude is best suited to play these roles?

"My approach to intention is, broadly speaking, within the functionalist tradition in the philosophy of mind. I take it that our common-sense understanding of various types of mental states depends on the supposition of appropriate, underlying regularities within which these states are embedded". (1987;9).

What future-directions intentions reveal is that we are planning agents who frequently form intentions in advance rather than simply deciding what to do when the time comes. As we saw last week, these intentions are characteristically *controlling* (they lead the agent to perform the action directly) and *stable* (they're resistant to rational revision to some threshold of new information).

 Why bother doing this? What functions do future-directed intentions serve for cognitively and epistemically limited agents like us?

Five Functions of Intention:

1. Deliberation curtailment: intentions 'lock in' the output of deliberation. This is important for epistemically limited agents like us, given that information is scarce and costly to attain. We should limit the amount of time we spend looking for information and reasoning on it. Holton (2009;3): Intentions provide us with a way of 'storing' our decision so that we act on it tomorrow without reconsidering it.

2. Intra-personal co-ordination: intentions are necessary for agents to co-ordinate their own activities. When we think about *why* we should want to make a decision now about how we

will act tomorrow, or next week, we find that this is important given that many of our subsequent actions are dependent upon what we decide to do. Related to Self-Knowledge: intentions enable us to know about ourselves.

3. Inter-personal co-ordination: intentions are necessary for agents to co-ordinate their activities with others. We have reasons for forming future-directed intentions insofar as this allows us to communicate and co-ordinate on information we already have.

4. Resolving indifference incommensurability: intentions provide a means by which we can solve cases we looked at last week, which appear to be unsettled by appealing to an agent's beliefs and desires, and where rational deliberation does not provide sufficient grounds for making a decision. e.g. choosing between two equally good options at lunch (it's still important that we make a decision in such cases), Sartre's young man.

5. Temptation: again, why should we want to make a decision now about how we will act tomorrow? Another consideration here is that there may be some factor that will stop us reasoning well: we might be tempted to do the opposite. If you are going resist temptation, one thing you might need is something which 'locks in' your earlier judgement about what is best. Holton: this looks to be something like an intention.

Bratman's planning theory of intention takes these roles to be best played via a unique kind of mental state, or practical attitude viz. an intention, which is distinct from beliefs and desires.

According to the Planning Theory, intentions are mental states that play these roles by serving as the building blocks in our plans. In particular, intention facilitates these forms of intra and interpersonal co-ordination in part by imposing structure of practical deliberation —- forming an intention changes how we ought to go on in our reasoning about what to do.

This is because, according to Bratman, intentions are subject to certain rational norms which do not apply to other mental states which we looked at last week e.g. consistency requirements (such as no mutually incompatible intentions), means-end coherence (roughly, intend the means that are believed necessary for accomplishing your intended ends).

"We form future-directed intentions as parts of larger plans, plans which play characteristic roles in coordination and ongoing practical reasoning; plans which allow us to extend the influence of present deliberation to the future. Intentions are, so to speak, the building blocks of such plans; and plans are intentions writ large" (1987;8).
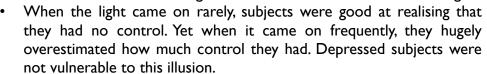
III. Psychological Evidence for Intentions?

Holton:

"[This account] shows us why it is that having intentions would be beneficial. But that does not by itself show us that we have them. After all, wings may be beneficial, but we certainly lack them… It would be good to know if there is solid psychological evidence that we have intentions along something like these lines" (2009;20).

Evidence for stability:

- Alloy and Abramson (1979): subjects asked to judge how responsive the main light was to the pushing of the button - estimating the degree of control that the button gave them over the illumination of the light.
- When the light came on rarely, subjects were good at realising that they had no control. Yet when it came on frequently, they hugely overestimated how much control they had. Depressed subjects were not vulnerable to this illusion.
- Could over-confidence in one's abilities be beneficial?
- Gollwitzer (2003): in non-depressed agents, over confidence comes and goes depending on the attitude of the agent. In 'deliberative mindsets' they are less prone to illusions of control, compared to 'implemental' mindsets in which the agent is focused on implementing a prior decision.
- Holton: 'these last features take us back to the idea of the stability of intention. For the idea there was exactly that agents are less ready to consider new information once an intention is formed than they would have been when they were in the process of forming the intention'. (8).

Evidence for control:

- If intentions were controlling (i.e. they move agents to action directly without the need to reconsider whether to act), we would expect to find that agents who formed intentions to act would be more likely to perform acts than those who have not yet formed intentions.
- Gollwitzer: Goal intentions (categorical) vs implementation intentions (conditional)
- Gollwitzer: implementation intentions increase the likelihood that subjects will act as they plan. They cause the agent to be sensitised to the relevant cues.
- Holton: 'so we have good evidence that intentions can be controlling…provided we have formulated the implementation intentions in ways that tie them to perceptible cues, intentions enable us to act in ways that do not require us to deliberate further'. (9).

IV. Sinhababu's Revised Belief-Desire Model of Intention

Back to Objections (i-iii) we discussed last week. These and related objections are often proposed as damning objections to belief-desire accounts of intention, but is there a version of the belief-desire model of intention which can accommodate these features of intention?

Sinhababu thinks so. In his paper '*The Desire-Belief Account of Intention Explains Everything*' he puts forward a revised account which purports to avoid the consequences of the simple belief-desire model. He argues that critics of desire-belief models of intention have failed to pay sufficient attention to relevant features of desire which explain the features of intention they appeal to.

Revised Belief-Desire Model: A intends that φ if A has a desire and belief such that for some behaviour B and situation S:

(1) A desires that φ.

(2) A believes that S will obtain, and that A's B-ing in S would make φ more likely.

(3) If A were to believe that S obtained, the desire and the belief would, with out further practical reasoning, produce motivational force causing A to initiate B-ing.

- Strictly speaking, Sinhababu presents this as an account of intention to φ as a "an appropriately situated desire" to φ — but we can also view this as a compositional account which takes (1)-(3) as constitutive of what it is to intend to φ.
- Situation S in (2) accommodates those both in the present and future, thus providing a unified account of intention in line with the puzzle of intention we find in Anscombe.
- Doesn't cash out the belief involved in intention in the same way as Davidson does, and so arguably avoids the problems we discussed last week for his evaluative account.
- This is an account of the sufficient conditions for intending — "an account of how intention is psychologically realised in human beings" (682). (Intentions could be realised in different ways in artificial agents).

Overcoming Objection III: The Distinguishing Features of Intention

(a) Commitment: Sinhababu argues (a) is easily explained by appeal to desire's ability to motivate action when combined with means-end belief.

(b) Stability:

Sinhababu distinguishes two features of intention that stability, in Bratman's sense, picks out:

(i) First, we don't constantly reconsider our intentions.
- He thinks this doesn't require a robust explanation. In fact, we can reconsider intentions without any new information (where vivid images intensify pre-existing desires).
- e.g. we we don't often reconsider our beliefs without new information either.

(ii) Second, we don't usually form new intentions that conflict with existing ones ('exclusion').
- Sinhababu thinks we can explain this by appealing to our beliefs about the future.
- All we need for a future desire to give an option deliberative stability here is a belief about our future actions, and that this explains how and why intentions are often easily revised:

"Suppose that at 8am Mike believes that at noon he'll intend to go to [lecture] and that he'll be able to get there. Even if he has no desire to spend noon that way at present, his belief about his future intention will prevent him from seriously deliberating now about whether to do things at noon he can't do [if he's at the lecture]". (691).

(c) Means-end coherence: 'desires themselves are inputs in deliberation'. 'As we deliberate, desires direct our attention, pointing out potential means and combining with means-end beliefs to form new intentions":

"The intention to go to [to lecture] is made of a desire to go to [lecture]. Riding an appropriately timed bus focuses the agent's attention on the causes and effects of going to lecture" (693).

Overcoming Objection II: Reason-Choosing

According to Setiya, we ought to reject the desire-belief model of intention on the basis that it cannot account for the 'active and selective character of this attitude we have toward our reasons for action'.

How is it possible that we have two reasons for action, one of which comes from a stronger desire, and one which follows from a weaker desire, and we can choose to act on the weaker of the two?

Answer: The desire-belief view allows for reason-choosing by allowing a second-order volition to block the strongest desire supporting some action from motivation it, so that a weaker desire is the sole motivator.

"While I don't know the reason Setiya chose for writing his book, I can explain how he chose. He had a number of desires which pushed in favour of writing the book, and because of which he saw a number of reasons for writing. He desired to write the book for some reasons rather than others. If this desire about which reason to act on was strong enough, it could exert motivational force blocking any decision to write which he believed arose from the wrong reasons".

•   How often do we actually choose our own reasons?

V. Future-Directed Intention and Acting Intentionally

Simple view: to do something intentionally is to do something *with an intention* to do it.

Counterexamples: (i) catching a ball thrown at you. Did you unintentionally catch it? (ii) Bratman's video game example (both guns cannot hit the target, so you can't intend to do something impossible. Suppose you do hit the target, intentionally. But you didn't form an intention to hit it with whichever gun you fired which hit it. Bratman thinks this is an intentional action which is not an action you intended).

Holton: Intentional action as a *normative catgeory*, (The Kobe Effect) while intention is a psychological category.

Looking Forward

•   Where does this leave us with respect to belief-desire models of intention? Should we posit intentions as sui-generis mental states in their own right, or is Sinhababu correct in thinking that we can reduce talk of intention to talk of belief and desire?
•   Next time: move away from theories of intention and the will to examining how the will is deficient in various ways: akrasia, weakness of the will, and addiction.