

# Davidson on pure intending

PHIL 43503  
Jeff Speaks

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## 1 The independence of pure intending

In “Intending”, Davidson presents a problem for his earlier theory. He offered an analysis of intentional action as action caused in the right way by the right kind of belief/desire pair. He now (p. 88) notes that the following view is very plausible:

one intentionally  $\phi$ s  $\iff$   $\phi$ s with an intention.

In his earlier analysis, Davidson sought to avoid a theory of intentional action which made essential use of the intentions of agents. Instead, he regarded talk of intentions to be shorthand for talk about acting with an intention, which was, given the above equivalence, to be analyzed in terms of the the theory of ‘Actions, Reasons, and Causes.’

One way to think of Davidson’s idea is in terms of a distinction from Anscombe which we’ll discuss between three different uses of ‘intention’:

1. Intentions to act.
2. Intentions in acting (acting with an intention).
3. Intentional action.

Davidson's former view was that (3) is the fundamental use, and that (1) and (2) ought to be analyzed in terms of (3).

But Davidson now thinks that this. Sometimes we talk about the intentions of agents ((3) above) even when those intentions are never realized in action, and hence when it is never the case that the agents perform an action *with* that intention. Davidson calls these cases of *pure intending*.

Davidson's argument seems to be this:

1. One can have an intention to act which never issues in action.
  2. Some intentions to act never become intentions in acting. (1)
- 
- C. Intentions to act can't be analyzed in terms of intentions in acting.  
(2)

This is a form of argument familiar in philosophy. We try to analyze a property  $F$  in terms of some other property  $G$ ; one then argues against the analysis by showing that there are cases in which  $F$  is instantiated without  $G$ . The conclusion is then that  $F$  is independent of  $G$ .

Some examples to think about: the argument from illusion; the example of counterfeit money.

This is Davidson's first conclusion: cases of pure intending must be understood as independent of intentions in acting and intentional action.

## 2 The primacy of pure intending

This leads to a further worry. Once we recognize the reality of pure intending, Davidson says,

“it is quite incredible that this state or attitude ...should play no role in acting with an intention. ‘Our inability to give a satisfactory account of pure intending on the basis of our account of intentional action thus reflects back on the account of intentional action itself.’ (88)

What is the problem here for Davidson's earlier theory?

At this point, Davidson seems to think that it is a constraint on a satisfactory theory of intentional action that it should be given partly in terms of intentions to act.

What is the argument that his earlier theory is *not* a theory of this sort? Why not think that intentions to act just *are* combinations of beliefs and desires of the sort that Davidson earlier called ‘primary reasons’? On this view, to intend to  $\phi$  would be, for some property  $F$ , to desire to perform some action which is  $F$  and believe that  $\phi$ ing is  $F$ . Can you think of any counterexamples to this view of intentions to act?

### 3 A simple theory

This constraint might suggest the following very simple analysis of intentional action in terms of intentions to act:

$A$  intentionally  $\phi$ s  $\iff A$ 's  $\phi$ ing is caused by  $A$ 's intention to  $\phi$ .

Why this seems to help with at least some cases of deviant causal chains.

Davidson never really considers this sort of simple theory – or, at least, he never really considers the idea that this is all that there is to be said about the nature of intentional action. Why might a theory of this sort seem unsatisfactory?

Davidson seems to think that a satisfactory theory of intentional action should not rest with intentions to act as unanalyzed primitives. On one reading of Davidson, then, he doesn't so much reject the simple theory sketched above (or something similar to it) as seek to supplement this sort of theory with an analysis of the nature of intentions to act. These analyses will typically be in terms of some combination of beliefs and pro-attitudes.

From p. 89 on, Davidson considers various attempts to explain the nature of these sorts of pure intentions.

### 4 Analyses of pure intending

#### 4.1 *Intending to $\phi$ is believing that one will $\phi$*

Davidson gives two arguments against this analysis:

- i. One can intend to  $\phi$  without believing that one will  $\phi$ . The example of the man who intends to make out a will to provide for his children without believing that he will (92). The example of the carbon copies. (Are these really cases in which we have the relevant intentions?)
- ii. Intentions to  $\phi$  cannot be beliefs that one will  $\phi$ , since the reasons for the former are different than the reasons for the latter. My reasons for intending to get up early in the morning (preparing early for seminar) are different than my reasons for believing that I will (trust in the reliability of my alarm clock).

There is also another, more obvious argument, which he does not give: I can believe that I will  $\phi$  without intending to  $\phi$ . Example of an unwilling drug addict.

#### 4.2 *Intending to $\phi$ is wanting to $\phi$*

Davidson thinks of wanting, or desiring, to perform an act of a certain type as a certain kind of judgement: a judgement that acts of that sort are, in some respect, desirable.

This suggestion fails for the obvious reason that one can find an action of a certain type desirable — one can, in Davidson’s terms, make a prima facie judgement as to the desirability of an action — without intending to perform that action. (Because, for example, one wants other things more.)

#### 4.3 *Intending to $\phi$ is an all-things-considered desirability judgement*

However, Davidson thinks that the preceding suggestion is on the right track. While intentions are not desires or wants, they belong to the same broad category: they are a type of desirability judgement. The difference is that they are not prima facie desirability judgements, but rather all-things considered desirability judgements: they are judgements to the effect that of all the actions I am able to perform, given by beliefs about the world,  $\phi$ ing is the best:

“For a judgement that something I think I can do, and that I think I see my way clear to doing, a judgement that such an action is desirable not only for one or another reason but in the light of all my reasons; a judgement like this is not a mere wish. It *is* an intention.” (101)

#### 4.4 *Intending to $\phi$ is believing that one will $\phi$ because one (i) desires to $\phi$ and (ii) believes that this desire will motivate one to $\phi$ .*

This more complex suggestion is not one that Davidson considers, but is a variant of one proposed by Wayne Davis (in “A Causal Theory of Intending”). On this view, the intention to  $\phi$  requires both the belief that one will  $\phi$  and the desire to  $\phi$

Is this a more successful analysis of intention?