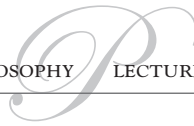

SOME REMARKS ON INTENTION IN ACTION

JOHN MCDOWELL

THE AMHERST LECTURE IN PHILOSOPHY

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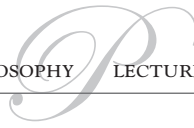
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ABSTRACT

I suggest that intentions for the future become intentions in action when the time for acting comes. The image of intentions as a kind of continuant helpfully accommodates progress in an action; a persisting intention in action changes its shape in respect of how much of what is intended lies behind it and how much is still in prospect. Specific motor intentions in the course of, for instance, crossing a street are shapes successively taken by a persisting intention in action. I argue against the idea that an intention in action relates *de re* to the action it is in. Finally, adapting Brian O'Shaughnessy's dual aspect conception of the will, I propose that when one intentionally engages in bodily action, the action's intentional character is an aspect of something that is also bodily through and through. The result stands in contrast with familiar philosophical pictures of the relation between mind and body.

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Some Remarks on Intention in Action

John McDowell

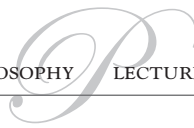
University of Pittsburgh

1. PHILOSOPHERS SOMETIMES TREAT “intention in action” as a technical term.¹ But a concept expressible with that phrase can be easily made out to be no more than part of common sense. I want to sketch a way of conceiving intention in action that we can be in command of just by being familiar with relevant regions of our ordinary language.

2. TO BEGIN ISOLATING SOMETHING we might mean by “intention in action,” we can distinguish it from intention for the future. An intention in action is an intention that is in the course of getting executed, so it is contemporaneous with doing whatever it is an intention to do. In that respect an intention in action stands in contrast with a prior intention, an intention to do such-and-such at some future time. A prior intention predates the action that is its execution, if indeed there is any such action, as there will not be if the person who has the intention is prevented or changes her mind or forgets.

One can do something intentionally without having had a prior intention to do it. One can act intentionally on the spur of the moment. But we can ask: when doing something in-

1 Robert B. Brandom hyphenates it into a single word, which implies that he is not treating it as a bit of ordinary language; see *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994). John Searle also hyphenates it in *Rationality in Action* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001). In *Intentionality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), he left it as three words.

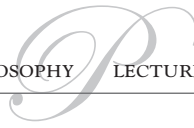


tionally *is* doing something one had a prior intention to do, how does the prior intention relate to the intention in action we implicitly acknowledge when we say the doing is intentional? I am going to begin working up to a picture of intention in action by considering an answer to this question given by John Searle. I think Searle's answer is helpful as a contrast to a different picture that I want to recommend.

On Searle's account, intentions in action are new items that a prior intention starts to generate when the time to execute it comes. Prior intentions and intentions in action are different even apart from the difference in their temporal relation to stretches of activity. A prior intention has as its object an action, doing such-and-such at some future time. But an intention in action, generated by the prior intention at its due time, has as its object not the action the agent is embarking on, but something Searle conceives as a component of it.

Consider, for instance, an intention harboured by someone standing on a kerb: the intention to cross the street when the light turns green. On Searle's account, when she sees the light turn green, that intention – a prior intention, an intention for the future – starts to *generate* intentions in action. The object of the intention for the future is crossing the street; the objects of the intentions in action that it generates are the limb movements that need to happen if the person is to cross the street. As those limb movements begin, she begins crossing the street. If all goes well, she gets to the other side, thereby completing an action of crossing the street. On Searle's account, the action is a causally structured complex: its components are, first, the intentions in action that the prior intention began to generate when the agent saw the light turn green, and, second, the limb movements on which the intentions in action are targeted, which the intentions in action will have caused.

I think it is clear that this is a bit of philosophical theory, not a spelling out of ways we learn to think just by learning to talk about acting intentionally. And I do not think Searle would dispute that. He would say there are philosophical purposes for which his theory is needed. I am not going to try to assess this claim directly. I have cited Searle's theory only as a foil, to bring into relief a different answer to the question how intentions in action are related to intentions for the future. I would claim that the different answer is more natural, and if that is right, it cannot be irrelevant to the philosophical purposes for which Searle thinks we need his theory. But I am not going to attend to that for its own sake.

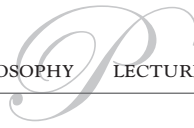


On this different account, when one sees the light turn green and starts crossing the street, it is not that an intention for the future starts to generate new items, intentions in action as Searle conceives them. Rather, what was an intention for the future *becomes* an intention in action. When one starts to do something one had a prior intention to do, say crossing the street, one's intention, now in action, is still directed at crossing the street, not at the limb movements that need to happen if one is to do that. In saying what the prior intention was an intention to do, one mentions a time: when the light turns green, in my example. When its time comes, what was a prior intention takes a new shape as an intention in action, provided the agent does not forget the intention, knows the time has come, is not prevented from acting accordingly, and does not change her mind.

What were prior intentions become intentions in action, on this picture, through the operation of an ability to keep track of time. My street-crossing case involves a very simple instance of that ability. One determines the time for acting as the time at which a recognizable thing is going to happen: one's intention is to cross the street when the light turns green. When that recognizable thing happens and the subject recognizes that the time has come, the intention becomes an intention in action. That is just another way to say she starts doing what she intended, and still intends, to do.

Of course the ability to keep track of time has more sophisticated forms also. And of course its relevance to a subject's psychological history is not restricted to the way intentions persist through time. The ability to keep track of time is operative whenever one keeps hold of time-specific thoughts as time passes. For instance, one can retain for a while a bit of knowledge one could express, when one acquired it, by saying "The light is turning green." One needs to express it differently later, perhaps by saying "The light turned green a while ago." It is the *same* bit of knowledge, persisting through the passage of time, that needs to be expressed in these different ways. Just so, it is the *same* intention, persisting through the passage of time, that alters from being an intention for the future to being an intention in action when its time comes, provided that it does not lapse through change of mind or forgetfulness, and provided that the agent knows its time has come and is not prevented from acting.²

² On keeping track of time, see Gareth Evans, *The Varieties of Reference* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), especially 192–6.



3. OBJECTING TO SEARLE'S CONCEPTION of how intentions in action relate to intentions for the future, Brian O'Shaughnessy points out that at any moment while one is, say, intentionally crossing a street, one has an intention that is still directed at the future. At any time during the crossing, one intends to go on crossing from the point one has reached to the other side.³

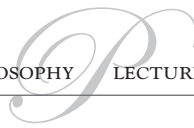
This intention, the intention to go on crossing, is not an intention in action in Searle's sense. This intention has as its object a prospective action: going from the point one has reached to the other side of the street. In contrast, the intentions in action that are operative in intentionally going on crossing, as Searle sees things, are supposed to have as their objects the limb movements that need to happen if one is to do that, items that are not themselves actions but that Searle conceives as components of actions.

In response to O'Shaughnessy, Searle acknowledges that after one has embarked on doing something one had a prior intention to do, an intention for the future persists into the time during which one is doing whatever it is. There is an ever-shrinking residue of the original prior intention, present throughout the time of acting as an intention whose object is still in the future: in my example, an intention whose object at any time is to go from the point one has reached to the other side of the street. (Searle writes of "the remains of the prior intention."⁴) But Searle still distinguishes this shrinking residue of the prior intention from the intentions in action that bring about the limb movements required for executing it. When one realizes that the time determined for acting by the original prior intention has come (when one sees the light turn green, in my example), the intention that was the prior intention starts to generate, directly, suitable intentions in action, and thereby indirectly to generate suitable limb movements. Thereafter, persisting in its increasingly residual form, it goes on indirectly generating limb movements, by directly generating intentions in action, as one goes on crossing the street.⁵

3 See "Searle's Theory of Action," in *John Searle and His Critics*, ed. Ernest Lepore and Robert Van Gulick (Cambridge, MA, and Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 271–88. O'Shaughnessy works with an example involving an intention to swim across the Channel from Dover to Calais. But the structure is the same, and I shall stay with my example of crossing a street.

4 See Searle's "Response: The Background of Intentionality and Action," in *John Searle and His Critics*, ed. Ernest Lepore and Robert Van Gulick (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), at 298.

5 See Searle's "Response," 298; see also *Rationality in Action*, 50–1.

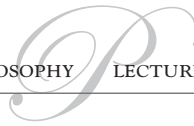


And this picture presumably applies also where there was no prior intention. Throughout an intentional street-crossing, even if there was no prior intention to cross the street, there must be an intention of the sort that, where there was a prior intention, Searle conceives as a shrinking residue of it: an intention directed, at each moment, towards an action that is still in the future, going from the point one has reached to the other side. Searle's picture must be that whether or not there was a prior intention, intentionally crossing a street involves a shrinking intention for the future that progressively discharges itself by generating intentions in action that in turn generate suitable limb movements.

That is quite complex. Consider, in contrast, the simplicity of the alternative picture I described. On my alternative picture, when one is intentionally doing something that one had a prior intention to do, one's intention in action is what the prior intention *became* when the time it determined for action arrived. When its time comes and the agent knows it, the intention, provided it is not thwarted and does not lapse through change of mind or forgetfulness, takes on the new shape of an intention that has begun to express itself in action. And now the phenomenon O'Shaughnessy points to, the directedness towards a diminishingly future stretch of action, falls straightforwardly into place. It is just what one would expect of a persisting intention that has become an intention in action because its time has come, and that continues to be operative in the acting in which it expresses itself. Similarly with an intention that is at work in doing something on the spur of the moment – an intention that begins its career as an intention in action, rather than becoming an intention in action after a phase in which it is an intention for the future.

To make sense of how a prior intention becomes an intention that has begun to be executed, I invoked the ability to keep track of time. The present point is that an intention that is being executed persists, directed at a diminishing future, through the time it takes to do whatever it is. To make sense of that we need, not the ability to keep track of time, but the ability to keep track of how one's action is progressing. Unless one is keeping track of how far one has come, one cannot intelligibly intend to go on from there to the other side of the street.

O'Shaughnessy draws more distinctions than I am envisaging here. In his view, there is an overarching intention of crossing the street, which may or may not have previously been an intention for the future, but which, in either case, persists in its entirety after one has be-



gun crossing the street, though more and more of the street-crossing it is directed at recedes into the past as one goes on crossing. And there is *in addition* a continuum of intentions for the future, one for any instant during the period in which one is crossing the street, directed at progressively less extensive completions of the crossing. O'Shaughnessy conceives these future-directed intentions as caused by the overarching persisting intention of crossing the street, and so as distinct from it.⁶

With this continuum of future-directed intentions, O'Shaughnessy addresses the phenomenon Searle aims to accommodate by envisaging a single shrinking intention, perhaps a residue of what was a prior intention, intelligibly shifting in its future-directed content as one makes progress in one's action. But O'Shaughnessy's conception of the overarching intention of crossing the street seems enough to accommodate that phenomenon. Unlike Searle's shrinking intention for the future, O'Shaughnessy's overarching intention stays, as it were, the same size. It has, throughout, the whole intended street-crossing as its object. The extent of its directedness at the future shrinks, but shrinkage in its projected future is expansion in how much achievement lies behind it. And as far as I can see, this picture of the persisting overarching intention leaves unmotivated O'Shaughnessy's idea that there is *also* a continuum of future-directed intentions, each directed at a different remainder of the street-crossing, caused by the overarching intention and hence distinct from it. The shifting future-directedness is just what is to be expected of the overarching intention itself, as it progressively finds expression in crossing the street. Instead of the multiple intentions O'Shaughnessy invokes, with their orientation towards smaller and smaller continuations of what one is doing into the future, we need only consider successive shapes taken by a persisting intention in action.

The general form of the shifting future-directedness of intention in action is this: one intends to do whatever is needed in order to finish doing what one is doing. In the street-crossing example this idea functions in a particularly simple way. At any time in the course of crossing the street, what one still needs to do is to go on from the point one has reached to the other side of the street. But the same structure fits projects with more complex shapes, such as baking a cake or building a house. In these cases, when we spell out what is required if

6 See "Searle's Theory of Action," 274–5.

one is to finish doing what one is doing, at a moment at which one is some way into doing it, we need to introduce things to do with more complex relations to what one has already done. Having beaten the eggs, one needs to fold in the flour, and so on until the cake is baked. But the idea of going on until one has finished doing what one is doing still fits, for the content of the diminishingly future-directed intention that, on the picture I am recommending, an intention in action is.

4. ROBERT BRANDOM SAYS intentions in action are special among intentions in being able to be directed at particular actions.⁷ Going further in the same direction, George Wilson specifies intentions in action as intentions directed *de re* at particular actions.⁸

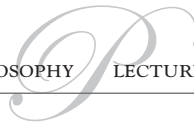
But it may be true of one that one is crossing a street though one is not going to cross the street; perhaps halfway over one is going to be knocked down by a bus.⁹ One's intention in action may be correctly specifiable by saying "I am crossing the street," even if one is not going to make it to the other side. So there may never be a relevant particular action of the sort that figures in the specification of one's intention in action – for instance a street-crossing. There may be no action for it to be directed *de re* at.

Reality comes to contain, as it were, a particular action of the type describable as "my crossing the street" only when it gets to be true to say "I have crossed the street." But by then the time for the relevant intention of crossing the street to be an intention in action is over. (The relevant intention; of course I may have embarked on another intentional street-crossing.) When an intention of crossing the street is an intention in action, it has behind it, at any point, a stretch of action with the particularity that comes with completion, signalled by the truth of a claim in the perfect tense: one has moved to *here* (to put it in a way that requires imagining oneself engaged in the action). But an intention that is still in action also looks forward to a stretch of action that may never emerge into reality as a particular achievement: moving from *here* to the other side. By the time there is a particular action of

7 *Making It Explicit*, 258.

8 See George M. Wilson, *The Intentionality of Human Action* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989).

9 See G.E.M. Anscombe, *Intention* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1957), 39. The logical point here is not special to intentional action; as Anscombe remarks, it may be true of something that it is falling over though it never falls over (perhaps someone catches it before it can be said to have fallen over).



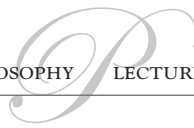
crossing the street for a thought of crossing the street to be directed at, one has crossed the street, and it is too late for the thought to have the nature of an intention. So there is no coherent way to suppose that it is particular actions that intentions in action are *in*. It must be wrong to think directedness at particular actions is the distinctive mark of intentions in action.¹⁰

I have framed the conception of the reality of particular actions that threatens the Brandom/Wilson doctrine in terms of a mode of thought to which tenses matter. Actions are a species of events. And I am urging an asymmetry between things that have happened, which I am allowing as particulars, and things that are going to happen, or things that are happening, which I am not.

Now someone may want to object that from a tenseless perspective there would be no warrant for this asymmetry.

Particular substances come into reality when they are, say, born or made. They depart from reality when they die or are destroyed. In contrast, it is natural to say that, like events of other sorts, particular actions, once they have acquired their particularity, have the kind of reality that is appropriate to events from then on. They become part of history – in a slightly peculiar, but intelligible, sense in which history can include events that have been forgotten. But in spite of this contrast, an asymmetry that corresponds to the one I am urging for events shows up for substances. Particular substances do not lose their particularity when they go out of existence – one can say, of a particular substance, that *it* no longer exists; whereas things in the category of substance that do not yet exist are not yet the particulars that, as we may awkwardly say, they are going to be. Thinking ourselves into a tenseless perspective cannot require us to hold that, when we revert to the perspective of a thinker in time, we need to distinguish two different logical forms for, say, “I am baking a cake,” one in which a particular cake is in question and one in which that is not so, though at the time when one might say such a thing one cannot tell which of the two forms one’s saying has. Suppose I am baking a cake. Perhaps a God’s-eye view, from outside the temporal unfolding of events, has

10 Wilson argues that his conception of intentions in action is needed in order to account for the logical form of various ordinary ways of talking about people doing things intentionally. What I am urging commits me to rejecting his arguments, but I shall not try to do that here.

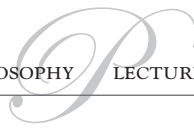


in its scope a cake that is going to result from my cake-baking. It will be a particular cake, certainly; after all, there is no other kind of cake, as Frege might have said. But it cannot be right to suppose that if that is so, then “I am baking a cake” – something intelligible only at a time-bound perspective – has a relational form, amounting to “There is a cake that I am baking,” and if not, not. What one says when one says “I am baking a cake” is not proved false if no cake results from one’s activities. (Consider “I was baking a cake, but I was interrupted.”) And this independence of the statement’s truth from a requirement that there be a cake that is going to come into existence must characterize a form such a saying has even if a cake is going to come into existence as a result of the activities described by the person who says it. It cannot be necessary to wait and see whether one’s cake-baking is going to be successful before one can know what logical form to attribute to one’s statement, “I am baking a cake.”

It is true that after one has brought one’s cake-baking to a successful conclusion, one can say “This is the cake that I was baking.” But we must not take that to supply the instance that made it true earlier to say “I am baking a cake,” construed as equivalent to “There is a cake that I am baking” – as if, when the cake comes into existence, one gets to be in a position to follow up something amounting to “There is a cake that I am baking...,” after an interval, with “...namely this one.”

Just so, at the time-bound perspective at which one might say “I am crossing the street,” the logical form of what one is saying cannot await a determination by what is going to happen – so that “I am crossing the street” relates me to a particular action of crossing the street if there is going to be one (that is, if I am going to get to the other side), and not if not. The logical form of “I am crossing the street” must be determinable from the time-bound perspective at which alone it so much as makes sense. And that requires us to say that such a statement does not relate me to a particular action, even if I am going to get across the street. But I am assuming that “I am crossing the street” exemplifies the appropriate form for expressing my intention in action when I am crossing the street. So it must be wrong to suppose that its being an intention in action consists in the presence of a *de re* relation to a particular action.

While one is performing an action of a sort constituted by a terminus – like crossing a street, which is not complete until one has reached the other side – one is engaging in various activities: perhaps moving one’s legs in a certain way, or walking *simpliciter* rather than



from somewhere to somewhere.¹¹ Activities occupy time in a different way from actions. As soon as one has embarked on an activity, the activity is all there, in a way that is indicated by the fact that one can attribute it with a use of the perfect tense: as soon as one is walking, one has walked. (Of course this does not imply that the current stretch of walking is over.) Since the activity is all there at any moment, we can, if we like, conceive it as an object, a *res*. And then it seems harmless to characterize a shape taken by one's intention in action, at any time in one's progress across the street, as the intention, concerning one's current relevant activity, that it contribute suitably to crossing the street. That is as close as we can get to the Brandom/Wilson doctrine. Intention in action can be seen as relating *de re* to relevant activity. But that is not to say that intention in action relates *de re* to the action it is in.¹²

5. AS I SAID, O'Shaughnessy countenances, besides the overarching intention of crossing the street (to stay with my example), a continuum of exclusively future-directed intentions, one for each moment in crossing. I suggested a simplification: instead of those distinct and multiple future-directed intentions, consider the diminishingly future-directed aspect of the persisting overarching intention itself.

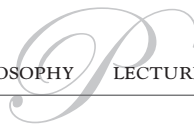
Now O'Shaughnessy also envisages another set of intentions that would figure in someone's crossing a street: intentions directed at moving one's limbs in the necessary ways.¹³ The idea is that these intentions reflect motor skills – not just the ability to make the movements needed for the routine exercise of a skill such as walking, but sometimes a more finely-tuned responsiveness to circumstances, as when one puts a foot down carefully to compensate for an unevenness in the surface.

Here we are closer to Searle's intentions in action than anything so far has brought us. But as O'Shaughnessy insists, these intentions are still distinct from intentions in action in

11 There are issues about whether by abstracting from the whence and the whither one can arrive at a concept of walking *simpliciter* that is a concept of activity as opposed to action, but I shall simply barge past them. I am using the idea only to exemplify a general structural point.

12 In this section my pervasive and deep indebtedness to Michael Thompson's "Naive Action Theory" (Part Two of *Life and Action: Elementary Structures of Practice and Practical Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008)) is especially palpable.

13 See "Searle's Theory of Action," 278.

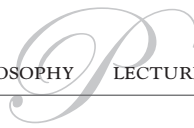


Searle's sense. An intention in action in Searle's sense has as its object a limb's moving thus and so, whereas an intention of this kind has as its object one's moving the limb thus and so.

Here too I see no need to multiply intentions as O'Shaughnessy does. O'Shaughnessy conceives these detailed motor intentions as generated by the overarching intention, the intention to cross the street in our example, and so distinct from it. But we need not follow him in this. We can see motor intentions, rather, as shapes taken by the overarching intention as it expresses itself. In the picture as we already have it, persisting intentions change their shape from being intentions purely for the future to being intentions in action, when a subject recognizes that the time for acting has come. And once they have taken on the guise of intentions in action, they change to having less in prospect and more behind them of what they are intentions to do, as an agent makes progress in a project. In the same spirit, we can say that these same intentions, intentions to do things like crossing streets, change from one determinate short-term motor shape to another as they express themselves in acting.

Motor skills are anyway presupposed by the very idea of intentions to do things like crossing streets. But in making their role explicit, I have added a third item to the background against which the shifting career of a persisting intention is intelligible. I was already appealing to the ability to retain thoughts through the passage of time, and the ability to keep track of the progress of actions. The third item is the ability to move one's limbs as executing one's intentions requires. These are all things on which the changes of shape undergone by an intention to do something like crossing a street depend.

We need to avoid a certain implausibility in spelling out the idea of short-term motor shapes taken by intentions to do things like crossing streets. One's limb movements in walking are surely not intentional under descriptions that involve the specifics of what one does at a given moment with one's hips and knees. Normally competent walkers do not know what they do when they walk at that level of description. What we can say is, perhaps, that one's movements are intentional under specifications like "moving as walking requires," or perhaps "moving as stepping over that obstacle requires." Ordinary competence in walking determines which movements, described in terms of what one does at the relevant joints, conform to such specifications; that determination is not a task for the practical thinking that intention belongs to.

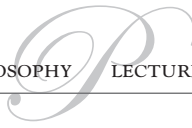


6. I HAVE DIVERGED from O'Shaughnessy in rejecting the multiplicity of intentions that figures in his picture. I want to differ from him in another way as well. O'Shaughnessy does not allow the title "intention in action" to any of the intentions he countenances. He thinks there is something wrong with the very idea of an intention in action. I have been working with the thought that we might refuse to count as intentions in action the items Searle applies that label to, intentions whose objects are that one's limbs should move in certain ways, but that we might apply the label to different candidates: in particular, to the persisting overarching intentions that O'Shaughnessy himself acknowledges. But O'Shaughnessy would have no sympathy with that.

O'Shaughnessy's scepticism about intention in action is in the first instance directed against the way Searle uses the notion. With intentions in action as Searle conceives them, it is not just that they are not prior to the actions they are said to be in. That would not be objectionable by O'Shaughnessy's lights. Searle's intentions in action are supposed to be in the actions in another sense besides that merely temporal one: they are supposed to be components of them. And O'Shaughnessy finds it unintelligible that anything deserving to be conceived as an intention might, as he puts it, "actually enter the precincts of the action itself."¹⁴

The implications of this are more general than hostility to Searle's idea that an intention might be in an action by being a component of it. If we accept O'Shaughnessy's prohibition on intentions entering the precincts of action, we have to suppose that the intention of crossing a street – to fix on the single item to which I have suggested we can reduce the multiplicity of contemporaneous intentions he countenances – relates to someone's crossing the street only from outside. Compare, perhaps, how an intention that a tree should fall might be conceived as relating to the tree's falling, if the intention is realized in one's sawing through the tree's trunk with the result that it falls. I do not want to defend Searle's idea that intention might be in action by being a component of it. But I want to resist any suggestion that the relation between intention and action is appropriately modelled on the relation between an intention operative in sawing through a tree's trunk and the falling of the tree, understood in such a way that – to echo O'Shaughnessy – the intention does not enter the

14 "Searle's Theory of Action," 282.



precincts of the falling.¹⁵ I want to urge that the intention of crossing a street, conceived in the Protean shape-shifting way I have recommended, should not be conceived as related to one's crossing the street only from outside.

I shall spell this out by exploiting another region of O'Shaughnessy's thinking.

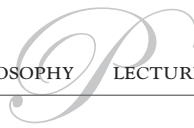
In his groundbreaking work on the will, O'Shaughnessy presents a dual aspect conception of physical, or bodily, action.¹⁶ Acting physically is exercising motor capacities. And exercising a motor capacity is as such a bodily phenomenon. But according to the dual aspect conception, it is also psychological, and not just in an isolable component but through and through. A psychological concept, expressible by "willing," applies not to some supposed psychic initiating occurrence, but to the relevant bodily goings-on, those describable as a subject's exercising a motor capacity, in their entirety. Willing is not something that causally initiates bodily acting and perhaps supervises it from outside. Willing is in the acting, not in the sense that willing is part of an action, but in the sense that "willing" is a characterization of the acting itself, apt for capturing its psychological aspect.

Now O'Shaughnessy is impressed by the thought that willing, so conceived, belongs to animal life in general, whereas intending does not. Intending is not universal in animals. O'Shaughnessy marks the restriction by saying that intention can be attributed only to animals whose behavior is future-directed in a certain distinctive way. Consider a cat slinking along, belly to ground and with whiskers twitching, in a way that can be explained by saying it is stalking a bird. That explanation implicitly invokes a projected future in which the bird has been caught.¹⁷ "It's stalking a bird" answers a version of the question "Why?" in terms of

15 I put it like this to leave room for ultimately querying the idea that the intention does not enter the precincts of the falling. I am going to urge that intention informs, and so enters into the precincts of, at least one's moving of one's limbs when one engages in bodily action. But why should this exteriorization of intention stop at the boundaries of one's body? Why not say my intention informs my felling of the tree? And then, by way of an identification of the tree's falling with my felling it, we get to the thought that my intention informs the tree's falling. (This note is a beginning on a response to a proposal by Anton Ford.)

16 See *The Will: A Dual Aspect Theory*, 2 vols., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980). There is a helpful brief statement of the dual aspect conception in the opening pages of O'Shaughnessy's paper "The Epistemology of Physical Action," in *Agency and Self-Awareness*, ed. Johannes Roessler and Naomi Eilan (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), 345–57.

17 On the future-directedness of intention, see *The Will*, 2:303–30.



which G. E. M. Anscombe famously isolates intentional action. In fact this example of the attribution of intention to animals other than human beings is Anscombe's own.¹⁸

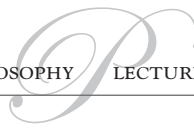
So the concept of intention has a more restricted application than the concept of willing, even before we consider the special form in which the concept of intention applies to agents are responsive to the question "Why?" – as the bird-stalking cat of course is not. O'Shaughnessy accommodates this distinction between intending and willing by holding that intending is *additional* to the willing that just is acting conceived in a way that focuses on its psychological aspect. Intending belongs to a higher region of the psychological. Intending is not merely psychological but mental. Intending causally initiates willing – that is, acting – and supervises it from outside its precincts.

We certainly have to acknowledge that the idea of intending is different from the idea of willing plain and simple, willing as it is found in animals that do not have intention. But do we have to agree with O'Shaughnessy that intending is additional to willing? Why not conceive intention in action as a special form taken by willing, in animals that are at least, as we might put it, proto-rational? That would allow us to go further than O'Shaughnessy does with the dual aspect conception of bodily action, as both physical through and through and psychological through and through. If intention in action is a species of willing, then, like the willing plain and simple to which O'Shaughnessy restricts the concept of willing, it can be in action, not in the Searle-like sense that it is a component in actions, but in an O'Shaughnessy-like sense, that it just *is* acting, characterized in a way that captures a now more sophisticated psychological aspect that this kind of acting has.

It may seem a problem for this proposal that willing in O'Shaughnessy's sense just is acting. In contrast, intending makes its appearance not only in the form of intention in action, but also – in rational animals – in the form of intention purely for the future. Intention purely for the future cannot be just what willing is: that is, acting, characterized in a way that brings out its psychological aspect. But surely intention in the course of being acted on should be just what intention purely for the future is except that its time is present.

But everything depends on the direction in which we take that equation. We might think it requires us to base a conception of intention in action on an independently intel-

¹⁸ See *Intention*, 86–7.

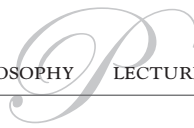


ligible conception of intention purely for the future. That would threaten the possibility of supposing that intention in action is a species of willing – that it just is acting, on the part of an animal that is at least proto-rational, but described so as to highlight its psychological aspect. But we do better to centre our conception of intention in general on intention in action, and frame our conception of intention purely for the future in a way that suits how intention in action is best understood.

Once intentions purely for the future are on the scene, we are concerned with rational animals, and we can say an intention is the kind of thing that can be arrived at by practical reasoning (though intentions need not be acquired like that). Practical reasoning can be for the future. I can reason about which bus to take tomorrow, and conclude by forming an intention to take the one that leaves at 8.28. But that should not dislodge us from holding that when practical reasoning is about what to do now, drawing the conclusion is acting, as Aristotle says. It would be better to say: drawing the conclusion is beginning to act.

Intention for the here and now is, if you like, a kind of thought. But it is practical in the sense that assenting to such a thought just is beginning to act in a certain way, for instance starting to cross a street; and continuing to assent – not revoking one's assent – is continuing to act, for instance continuing to cross the street. An intention for the future is, by all means, a thought of the same kind, apart from the time difference. But the way to accommodate that is not to distance intention for the here and now from acting, on the ground that intending purely for the future is not acting, but to conceive an intention for the future as a potential action biding its time. When its time comes, provided the agent knows its time has come and is not prevented, and provided she does not change her mind, it will become an instance of willing – that is, acting. On these lines we can sustain the extended version of the dual aspect conception that I was envisaging. We can say intention in action is the form that is taken, in intending animals, by willing, which we can conceive in an expanded version of O'Shaughnessy's way. Intention in action just is the acting that it is in, under a characterization that brings out its psychological aspect, a psychological aspect that is more sophisticated than the one captured by talk of willing plain and simple.

The picture of intention for the future as potential action biding its time is no more than an application, in the context of the extended dual aspect conception, of the idea I urged at the beginning of this lecture: that intentions for the future become intentions in



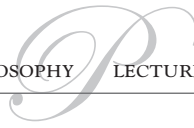
action when their time comes, provided the agent knows the time has come, and is not prevented, and does not change her mind. According to the extended dual aspect conception, talk of intention in action is just talk of acting intentionally, framed so as to emphasize its psychological aspect. Since there can be intentions for the future, acting intentionally can be, though it need not be, the mature form of something that was already present before acting was under way. An intention for the future stands to the acting one engages in when one starts to execute it, or, equivalently, to the intention in action that it becomes at that point, as a caterpillar stands to the butterfly it becomes in metamorphosis.

7. I HAVE BEEN WORKING with an image of intentions as a kind of continuant whose instances change their shape as time passes.

The first kind of shape-shifting I considered was the shift from intention purely for the future to intention in action. That is what I have just proposed redescribing by saying that an intention purely for the future is an action in waiting, and it matures into an action in progress when its time comes. Action in waiting is something whose essential nature is that in due course, failing prevention or change of mind or losing track of time, it takes on the shape of action in progress.

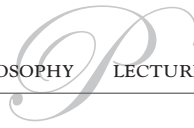
The second kind of shape-shifting was in respect of how much of what an intention is an intention to do has been done and how much remains to do, and the third was in respect of the specifics of the (more or less) skilled bodily movements that an agent is engaging in at successive moments in intentionally doing something like crossing a street. Here my suggestion has been that to talk of an intention in action as a continuant that changes its shape as time passes is just a way of talking of the unfolding of an action intentionally undertaken. This should bring out that though the image of intentions as a kind of continuant is helpful for some purposes, it should not encourage us to conceive intentions as self-standing items; talk of intention is just talk of an aspect of behavior that manifests practical rationality, action that is under way or anticipated.

I want to end by stepping back and saying something, very briefly, about why we should be interested in the possibility of incorporating intention in action, contrary to O'Shaughnessy's own view, into a version of his dual aspect conception of bodily action.



As O'Shaughnessy notes, a capacity to move limbs at will is characteristic of animals in general; it is not special to rational animals. That can make it tempting, perhaps almost irresistible, to conceive facts about practical rationality at work – including the full-blown intentional character that a bit of behavior is marked out as having if its agent is responsive to Anscombe's question "Why?" – as just additional parts of the truth about bodily behavior, distinctive of the special case in which bodily behavior is engaged in by a rational animal. On this view, movings of limbs that are intentional are, in themselves, just what movings of limbs are in an ordinary animal, and the intentional character is extra to – it is natural to say "*behind*" – those goings-on, which in themselves have no more to do with rationality than bodily movements on the part of non-rational animals. And then it is overwhelmingly natural to cash out the image expressed by that use of "*behind*" like this: the operation of practical rationality that is registered by describing a bit of behavior as intentional is related to the agent's movings of her limbs as cause to effect. My extension of O'Shaughnessy's dual aspect conception yields a contrasting picture, in which intentional bodily behavior is itself informed by practical rationality, not just a result of its operations.

And such a conception seems clearly attractive. If rationality can be *in* bodily activity as opposed to *behind* it, we have a vivid contrast with a familiar picture according to which a person's mind occupies a more or less mysterious inner realm, concealed from the view of others. If physical activity can be rationality in action, as opposed to a mere result of exercises of rationality, we have a vivid contrast with the tendency to distance a person's body from the mind that is the seat of her rationality.



Acknowledgments

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