

Intention, Belief, Practical, Theoretical

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abstract

In my 1987 book I tried to understand intentions as, in the basic case, elements of larger and typically partial plans whose primary roles in our lives are ones of coordination and organization, both cross-temporal and social.¹ I called this the planning theory of intention. Central to the planning theory is the idea that intentions – in contrast with ordinary desires -- are both embedded in characteristic regularities and are subject to distinctive normative pressures for consistency and coherence.² There is, in particular, a rational demand that one's intentions, taken together with one's beliefs, fit together into a consistent model of one's future. And there is, further, a rational demand that one's intentions be means-end coherent in the sense, roughly, that it not be true that one intends E, believes that E requires that one intend means M, and yet not intend M.³ These norms of consistency and coherence are operative in a planning agent's practical reasoning.⁴

How should we understand these rational demands for consistency and coherence of intentions (given relevant beliefs)? Here we may be impressed by two ideas. The first is that intention seems in some way to involve belief. Different views

¹ Intention, Plans, and Practical Reason (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987; reissued by CSLI Publications, 1999).

² I describe this basic approach in Intention, Plans, and Practical Reason at 9-10. As I say there, my approach tries to articulate “a web of regularities and norms” characteristic of intention and planning; and it appeals to “an account of the norms of rationality that are appropriate for agents for whom such planning plays a central role.”(10).

³ A complexity that I put to one side here is that it can matter whether one thinks one needs now to intend M, or only needs to intend M by some later time. See Intention, Plans, and Practical Reason at 31.

⁴ They are, as I say in Intention, Plans, and Practical Reason at 109, “internal norms”.

are possible here: some suppose that an intention to A involves the belief that one will A; some say only that it involves a belief that A is, in an appropriate sense, possible. But however we spell out this belief involvement we may also be struck by a second idea, namely that one's beliefs are themselves subject to demands for consistency and coherence. Indeed, it is in the context of belief that demands for consistency and coherence may seem to have their most fundamental home. And this leads to a conjecture: the rational demands for consistency and coherence of intention are grounded, by way of the involvement of belief in intention, in rational demands for consistency and coherence of belief. To this extent, practical rationality of one's system of intentions is, at bottom, theoretical rationality of one's associated beliefs. Call this cognitivism about the demands of consistency and coherence on intention.

Cognitivism, so understood, is not simply the idea that demands of consistency and coherence on intention parallel demands of consistency and coherence on belief. The idea is, rather, that demands of consistency and coherence on intention derive from demands of consistency and coherence on involved belief. And versions of such cognitivism can be found in some of the best work on this subject, including work of Gilbert Harman, David Velleman, Jay Wallace, and, perhaps to some extent, John Broome.⁵ One of my aims in this essay is to explore a

⁵ Gilbert Harman, "Practical Reasoning," reprinted in Gilbert Harman, Reasoning, Meaning, and Mind (Oxford University Press, 1999), 46-74; and Change in View (MIT Press, 1986); J. David Velleman, Practical Reflection (Princeton University Press, 1989), The Possibility of Practical Reason (Oxford University Press, 2000), and "What Good is a Will?" unpublished manuscript, downloaded from Velleman's web page 10/26/04; R. Jay Wallace, "Normativity, Commitment, and Instrumental Reason," Philosophers' Imprint 1, no. 3 (2001); John Broome, 2004 Stockholm

range of problems that arise for various versions of cognitivism about consistency and coherence of intention.⁶ One main issue here will be the implications for cognitivism of our fallibility about our own intentions. A second issue will be the status of a norm of agglomerativity of intention. My view, in the end, is that cognitivism about the norms of consistency and coherence on intention is problematic, and that it is more plausible to see these norms as fundamentally practical norms that are part and parcel of a planning system that is so important to our lives.

Lectures (unpublished manuscript). Broome's view is difficult to classify, however, and less clearly cognitivist than that of Harman, Velleman, and Wallace.

⁶ According to the planning theory intentions are also subject to certain rational pressures for stability; and we can also ask whether these pressures for stability of intention are grounded in corresponding pressures for stability of belief. But this is an issue for a different occasion.