

## THE FOLK CONCEPT OF INTENTIONAL ACTION: A COMMENTARY

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In this commentary, I discuss the three main articles in this volume that present survey data relevant to a search for something that might merit the label “the folk concept of intentional action” – the articles by Joshua Knobe and Arudra Burra, Bertram Malle, and Thomas Nadelhoffer. My guiding question is this: What shape might we find in an analysis of intentional action that takes at face value the results of all of the relevant surveys about vignettes discussed in these three articles?<sup>1</sup> To simplify exposition, I assume that there is something that merits the label I mentioned.

### 1. The Lucky Assassin and the Single Phenomenon View

Some theoretical background in the philosophy of action will prove useful. Knobe and Burra consider a case in which “an assassin is trying to shoot the president but believes that it is extremely unlikely that he will succeed” (this volume, <ms p. 13>). They write: “it seems a bit odd to say that the assassin has formed an ‘intention’ to shoot the president, but if he actually did succeed, we would surely say that he had shot the president ‘intentionally’.” Why, they ask, do we say that the assassin shot the president intentionally? They assert (1) that “The obvious way to respond would be to appeal to the fact that the agent was specifically trying to perform the behavior that he ended up performing” and (2) that “this sort of response does not in any way involve the concept of intention.” Now, claim 2 is true only if the assassin can try “to perform

the behavior that he ended up performing” without having any relevant intention at all. (Notice that Knobe and Burra say “the concept of intention,” not the word “intention.”) Can he, for example, try to shoot the president in a scenario in which he has none of the following intentions: an intention to fire his gun, an intention to pull the trigger, an intention to aim at the president, an intention to try to aim at the president, an intention to try to shoot the president? This question is related to a perfectly general conceptual question: Can an agent try to A without having any relevant intention at all?<sup>2</sup> Put differently, does an agent’s trying to A entail that he has some relevant intention or other?

One can ask layfolk these general theoretical questions. However, by definition, layfolk are not trained theorists. Their judgments about these questions may not be very reliable. Instead, one might try to design stories in which an agent seemingly tries to do something while having no relevant intention at all and then present these stories to layfolk to see whether they agree.<sup>3</sup> In any event, I doubt that layfolk would agree that, in Knobe and Burra’s story, the assassin tries to kill the president while having no relevant intention at all.

We are now in the vicinity of what Michael Bratman calls the “Single Phenomenon View” (1987, p. 112) – his alternative to the “Simple View.” The Simple View (SV), which Bratman rejects, is the thesis that, necessarily, any agent who intentionally A-s has “an intention to A” (p. 112). The “Single Phenomenon View (SPV), which Bratman affirms, is the thesis that “to A intentionally I must intend to do something” (p. 113) but I do not need to intend to A. SPV is more precisely formulated as follows: (1) necessarily, in any coherent scenario in which an agent performs an intentional action, the agent has some relevant intention, and (2) an agent who lacks an intention to A may A intentionally.

In the context of their discussion of the case of the lucky assassin, Knobe and Burra make the following assertions: (C1) “the concept of intention seems only to be making the analysis [of intentional action] more complex and unwieldy”; (C2) “It seems that philosophers start out with the view that the concept of intention must be playing a key role” in an analysis of intentional action; (C3) “Presumably, the primary reason for positing such an intimate link [between intentional action and intention] would be the morphological relation between the English words ‘intentionally’ and ‘intention’” (this volume, <ms p. 14>). Regarding C1, it should be observed that if trying to A entails intending to do something or other, then using the concept of trying in one’s analysis of intentional action – as Knobe and Burra seem to suggest we should – commits one to a place for intention in that analysis.<sup>4</sup> If the entailment holds, using the concept of intention in an attempted analysis of intentional action would not make the analysis any more complex and unwieldy than using the concept of trying would.

C2 and C3 are false of some philosophers, at least. If SPV is true, then if an analysis of intentional action is possible, intention will figure in it (explicitly or implicitly). Bratman (1987) and I (Mele 1992) both argue for the truth of SPV; we do not “start out with the view that the concept of intention must be playing a key role” in an analysis of intentional action (emphasis altered). And neither of us argues for SPV on morphological grounds.

## 2. The Shape of an Analysis

An analysis that seems unwieldy to some might not seem unwieldy to others, depending, among other things, on their experience with wielding analyses. As I will explain, we do not have sufficient data to warrant confidence in any precise analysis of the folk concept of intentional

action. Even so, theorists are in a position to speculate about the general shape an analysis of the concept might have. Again, what shape might we find in an analysis of intentional action that takes at face value the results of all of the relevant surveys about vignettes discussed in the articles by Knobe and Burra, Malle, and Nadelhoffer in this volume?

One feature of such an analysis, as I will explain, is a significant division between actions that are side-effects – more specifically, side-effects anticipated by the agent – and actions that are not. Call the former SEAs and the latter non-SEAs. One may consider trying to analyze intentional action of each of these two kinds separately and then building an analysis of intentional action out of these analyses.

Here are some relevant findings about SEAs in the vignettes at issue:

S1. When a side-effect action X is bad and the agent who performs it is confident that if he A-s, as he wants to, X will occur as a consequence, most subjects say that he X-s intentionally.

(Knobe's first chairman; Paronne, mentioned by Malle; Nadelhoffer's confident hunter, sniper, and pumpers.)<sup>5</sup>

S2. When a side-effect action X is good and the agent who performs it is confident that if he A-s, as he wants to, X will occur as a consequence, most subjects do not say that he X-s intentionally. (Knobe's second chairman.)

S3. When a side-effect action X is neutral and the agent who performs it is confident that if he A-s, as he wants to, X will occur as a consequence, sometimes most subjects say that he X-s intentionally and sometimes most subjects do not say this. (Nadelhoffer's flying eagle, heated barrel, and moved air molecules.)

S4. When the badness of a bad side-effect action X is held constant and the agent's subjective probability that if he A-s, as he wants to, X will occur as a consequence is greatly reduced, the percentage of subjects saying that he X-s intentionally is greatly reduced and most subjects do not say that he X-s intentionally. (Nadelhoffer's hunters and snipers.)<sup>6</sup>

Obviously, of these four findings, S3 is the one that poses the most trouble for the project of providing an analysis of intentional side-effect actions that takes the findings at face value. A statement of the following sort has no place in a conceptual analysis: Sometimes neutral side-effect actions that agents are confident they will perform are intentional and sometimes they are not. Nadelhoffer (this volume) reports that 35% of his respondents say that the hunter intentionally caused the eagle to fly away, that 68% say that the sniper intentionally heated the barrel of his gun, and that 45% say that the sniper intentionally disturbed some air molecules. It would be rash at this point to offer a diagnosis of the differences in these results. If more studies of this kind were done, perhaps a stable, noteworthy pattern would emerge.<sup>7</sup>

In conducting studies of this kind, it would be useful to tell some stories in which the agent's subjective probability of the side-effect action's happening differs greatly from the objective probability or from what a "reasonable person" would take (perhaps mistakenly) the probability to be. In Nadelhoffer's stories, the agent "realizes" that thus and such will definitely (or possibly, probably, etc.) happen if he A-s: that is, the agent believes this and what he believes is true. These studies leave all the following possibilities open: in making intentionality judgments about side-effect actions, layfolk are equally sensitive to the agent's subjective probabilities and the actual probabilities (or the probabilities a reasonable person would assign);

they are significantly more sensitive to the former; they are significantly more sensitive to the latter.

What about S1, S2, and S4? First, the bad-good asymmetry in S1 and S2 is not especially puzzling. If subjects believe that saying that the shockingly indifferent chairman intentionally helped the environment would make him a potential candidate for praise, they certainly would not want to say that. And, of course, they are not averse to making the chairman who harms the environment a candidate for blame. Second, S4 was predictable, given S1 and our background knowledge. Whether intentionality judgments in cases of bad side-effects also tend to vary with the degree of badness merits investigation. (Some neutral side-effect data are relevant here. Even though there is nothing bad about the sniper's heating the barrel of his gun, 68% of Nadelhoffer's respondents say that this side-effect action is intentional. The degree of badness here is zero.)

As yet, the survey data on SEAs do not provide a broad enough basis for an attempted analysis of intentional side-effect action. More information on lay reactions to neutral side-effect actions is needed. We also need more detailed information about the kinds of probabilities subjects respond to in making their intentionality judgments about these cases (for example, agents' subjective probabilities, subjects' subjective probabilities, their conjunction, the probability that a reasonable person would assign, etc.). And we need more information about the range of combinations of degrees of badness and degrees of probability that generate majority judgments that a side-effect action is intentional and the range of combinations of these things that generate the opposite judgment.

I turn now to non-SEAs. Here is an interesting finding:

N. Subjects require considerably more skill for intentional action in cases in which agents successfully attempt a neutral action than in cases in which agents successfully attempt a bad or good action. (Knobe's 2003 Jake study and Malle's replication of it; Knobe's courageous radio disabler, mentioned by Malle.)

My guess is that at least a comparable bad-neutral asymmetry would also show up when "awareness" (see Malle, this volume) rather than skill is the issue. An agent who intends to kill his uncle and accidentally "runs over a person who turns out to be his uncle" is said by 70% of respondents to kill him intentionally (Malle, this volume, <ms p. 14>). When he runs over his uncle, he is not aware that it is his uncle he is running over. To see whether a bad-neutral asymmetry shows up one might construct a parallel neutral case in which, for example, someone who is trying to win a small prize by driving his car into a certain cardboard target accidentally drives into a target that turns out to be the right one. When he drives into the right target, he is not aware that it is the right target he is driving into.

To test for a good-neutral asymmetry in cases of the kind at issue one may modify Knobe's case of the courageous radio disabler (mentioned by Malle, this volume) and construct a parallel neutral case. In Knobe's vignette, Klaus tries to save many innocent lives by disabling a communications device (2003, p. 320). He "raises his rifle, gets the device in his sights, and presses the trigger. But Klaus is not very good at using his rifle. His hand slips . . . and the shot goes wild. Nonetheless, the bullet lands directly in the communications device. The mission is foiled and many innocent lives are saved."<sup>8</sup> In a counterpart case that is similar in structure to Malle's story about the bad nephew, courageous Klaus is trying to get what he believes to be the

communications device in his sights when he accidentally pulls the trigger: he did not mean to pull it yet. The bullet travels 500 yards to the left of the device that Klaus was trying to aim at and ends up hitting – and disabling – the actual communications device. Again, many innocent lives are saved. Klaus is not aware that he hit the communications device; he thought he missed it by 500 yards. An impressive 92% of the respondents to Knobe’s story say that Klaus intentionally hit the communications device (2003, p. 321). It would be interesting to see how lay subjects respond to the modified story.

The modified Klaus story can be paired with a story of the following sort to test for a good-neutral asymmetry in cases of this kind. Joe is participating in an amateur target shooting contest for a small cash prize. He is trying to get what he believes to be the target he is supposed to shoot at next in his sights (target A) when he accidentally pulls the trigger: he did not mean to pull it yet. The bullet travels 500 yards to the left of target A and ends up hitting target B, the target that Joe was in fact supposed to be shooting at. Joe is not aware that he hit the target he was supposed to be shooting at. He thought he missed it by 500 yards. Questions: Did Joe intentionally hit the target he was supposed to be shooting at? Did he intentionally hit target B?

I claimed that one feature of an analysis of intentional action that takes at face value the data I have been discussing would be a significant division between SEAs and non-SEAs. The division would accommodate the point that (thus far, at least) the good-bad asymmetry is restricted to SEAs. Malle finds this asymmetry puzzling in light of some other results. He writes:

we have enough evidence to state confidently that people don't make intentionality judgments about immoral actions the same way they make intentionality judgments about neutral actions. But now we face an interesting puzzle. [H1] On the one hand we learned that people seem to take intentionality more strongly into account when blaming negative actions than when praising positive actions (Malle & Bennett, 2002). [H2] On the other hand, we found that when people actually make intentionality judgments for negative actions, they somehow take intentionality less into account – or seem to ignore certain components of intentionality. An account of the moral asymmetry findings will have to reconcile these two findings. The key question here is what the exact difference is – how we should interpret the findings of the “moral asymmetry” of intentionality judgments. (this volume, <ms p. 16>)

How puzzled should we be? H2 is an interpretation of a finding specifically about bad SEAs, as in the case of the chairman who is said to harm the environment intentionally even though he is also said not to intend to harm it. The finding reported in H1 is not about SEAs. It is about a difference in blame and praise intensification in pairs of cases whose members are an intended intentional action (calling the person one intended to call) and an unanticipated accidental action (calling someone other than the person one intended to call). (See Malle, this volume, on the Baite study.) A theorist who takes the survey results at face value – a face-value theorist, for short – will be impressed by the fact that although, in the case of bad SEAs, the absence of an intention to A does not stand in the way of the judgment that A is an intentional action and does not stand in the way of high blame, bad actions of which the following is true are

treated differently: they are neither intended nor anticipated by the agent and the agent had no reason to anticipate them. Some concepts are disjunctive – for example, a person can be one’s brother-in-law by being a brother of one’s spouse, the husband of one’s sister, or the husband of one’s spouse’s sister – and a face-value theorist regards the folk concept of intentional action as being among them.<sup>9</sup> The hypothesis that this concept is disjunctive coheres, for example, with the finding that the bad-good asymmetry shows up in majority judgments about SEAs but not (as yet) in majority judgments about actions agents try to perform and succeed – luckily or otherwise – in performing. The hypothesis also coheres with N, the finding that there is what might be termed a valenced-neutral asymmetry (i.e., a good-or-bad vs. neutral asymmetry) regarding skill requirements for intentional action in non-SEAs.

One possibility is that a successful face-value analysis of the folk concept of intentional action will have three major disjuncts:

1. Necessary and sufficient conditions for a neutral non-SEA’s being intentional
2. Necessary and sufficient conditions for a valenced non-SEA’s being intentional
3. Necessary and sufficient conditions for a SEA’s being intentional.<sup>10</sup>

Of the labeled findings reported above, N is directly relevant to 1 and 2 and S1 through S4 are directly relevant to 3. Malle (this volume) reports another interesting finding that bears on 2. Although, in the luck condition, all respondents say that Jake killed his aunt intentionally and 84% (vs. 90% in the skill condition) say that he shot her intentionally, only 49% (vs. 95% in the skill condition) say that he hit her heart intentionally.<sup>11</sup> As Malle observes, this suggests that

considerations of skill do play a role in the generation of at least some folk judgments about whether bad actions that an agent tries to perform and luckily succeeds in performing are intentional.<sup>12</sup>

I have already identified some connections in which further data would prove useful to someone interested in constructing a face-value analysis of the folk concept of intentional action. Another merits mention. A division-of-labor question naturally arises about Knobe's "chairman" vignettes. Presumably, the chairman's true belief that he will harm the environment by starting the program plays a role in producing the judgment that he intentionally harms the environment, but how much of a role is played by his striking indifference to the prospect of harming the environment? (See Knobe and Burra, this volume, for the chairman's statement: "I don't care at all about harming the environment. I just want to make as much profit as I can.") And how much of a role is played by his remarkable indifference to helping the environment in generating the judgment that he does not intentionally help it? ("I don't care at all about helping the environment. I just want to make as much profit as I can.") Relevant data may be gathered by means of modified vignettes in which the chairman responds along the following lines to the information he receives: (Harm) "I truly wish that I could make money for this company without harming the environment. Unfortunately, that seems to be impossible. Reluctantly, I'm instructing you to start the new program"; (Help) "I am extremely pleased that I will make money for this company while also helping the environment. But, in all honesty, I must tell you that the terms of my employment do not allow me to take the environment into account in making policy decisions. I would instruct you to start this new program even if I did not believe that it would help the environment."<sup>13</sup>

### 3. Parting Remarks

We have at least two uses for a notion of intentional action. Intentional action is the kind of action with which theories of action-production or action-explanation are primarily concerned. It may be said, accordingly, that one use for a notion of intentional action is as a specification of the primary target of theories of action-production or action-explanation. Intentional action also is the kind of action with which moral and other evaluative or normative judgments about actions are primarily concerned. Another use for a notion of intentional action is as a specification of the primary target of action-evaluation. The results of Malle's LEXIS-NEXIS search for "intentional" and "intentionally" (this volume, <ms p. 11>) certainly suggest that the second use is predominant in lay thinking. Malle reports that "Overall, 94% of all instances concerned negative or socially undesirable events, 88% in the case of intentional, 99% in the case of intentionally." People in the business of constructing general theories of action-explanation or action-production are not primarily focused on socially undesirable actions.

My own primary interest in intentional action in previous work (e.g., Mele 1992 and 2003a) is tightly connected to the aim of constructing a theory about how actions are produced by their agents. I am not, in this connection, interested in all kinds of action nor all senses of "action." We speak not only of the actions of human beings and other intelligent animals but also of the actions of acids and waves. The philosophy of action is not concerned with actions of inanimate objects. A common label for the kind of action with which it is primarily concerned is "intentional action." But if the meaning of "intentional action" is determined solely by majority folk judgments about cases, no philosopher of action that I know of uses the expression "intentional action" entirely properly. For example, no philosopher of action that I know of

would say that Nadelhoffer's sniper intentionally heated the barrel of his gun while also saying that his sniper did not intentionally disturb air molecules and that his hunter did not intentionally cause the eagle to fly away.

Elsewhere (Mele 2003b, pp. 334-38), I suggested that a conception of intentional action of special interest to philosophers who are in the business of constructing a theory about how actions are produced by their agents may lie at the core – in a certain sense – of the folk concept of intentional action, if there is such a concept. To find the core (in my sense), we look for interesting properties shared (explicitly or implicitly) by all coherent scenarios in which an agent performs an intentional action even if not all intentional actions have those properties. For example, it may be true that in every scenario of the specified kind, “the agent does something that she intends to do even if it is false that every intentional action is intended” (p. 336). In all of the stories about intentional action that I have discussed here, the agent certainly seems to do something or other that he or she intends to do: the assassin fires his gun and intends to do that, the chairman orders the vice-president to start the program and intends to do that, and so on. Perhaps lying at the core of the folk concept of intentional action is a certain kind of intended intentional action (see Mele 2003b, pp. 336-38). In any case, it is a good bet that philosophers of action who have tried to explain how what they call “intentional actions” are produced have not been concerned with the full range of actions that the majority of English speakers call “intentional.”<sup>14</sup>

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## NOTES

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1. Malle raises important worries about some of the results. I lack the space to discuss them in any detail here. By an analysis of a concept of X, I mean a statement of individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions of a thing's being an X.
2. How readers interpret the variable "A" should depend on their preferred theory of action individuation. Donald Davidson writes: "I flip the switch, turn on the light, and illuminate the room. Unbeknownst to me I also alert a prowler to the fact that I am home" (1980, p. 4). How many actions does the agent, Don, perform? Davidson's coarse-grained answer is one action "of which four descriptions have been given" (p. 4). A fine-grained alternative treats A and B as different actions if, in performing them, the agent exemplifies different act-properties (Goldman 1970). On this view, Don performs at least four actions, since the act-properties at issue are distinct. An agent may exemplify any of these act-properties without exemplifying any of the others. (One may even turn on a light in a room without illuminating the room: the light may be painted black.) Componential views represent Don's illuminating the room as an action having various components, including his moving his arm (an action), his flipping the switch (an action), and the light's going on (Ginet 1990). Where proponents of the coarse-grained and fine-grained theories find, respectively, a single action under different descriptions and a collection of intimately related actions, advocates of the various componential views locate a "larger" action having "smaller" actions among its parts. Readers should understand the variable "A" as a variable for actions themselves (construed componentially or otherwise) or actions under descriptions, depending on their preferred theory of action-individuation. The same goes for the expressions that take the place of "A" in concrete examples.

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3. Some philosophers have contended that some cases of sudden or impulsive intentional action involve no relevant intention. For discussion of this contention and related ones, see Mele 1992, pp. 184-87.

4. This is not to say that one would be committed to using the word “intention” in one’s analysis. An analogy might help here. One may analyze “X is Y’s sibling” as “X is Y’s brother or sister.” The word “parent” does not appear in this analysis. Even so, a necessary condition of X’s being Y’s brother or sister is that X and Y have a parent in common. The concept of parent has, by conceptual entailment, a place in this analysis insofar as it has a place in the analysis of “brother or sister.”

5. In most but not all of these cases, the badness at issue is moral badness.

6. Although I formulate S4 in terms of the agent’s subjective probability, formulations in alternative terms are possible, as I explain shortly.

7. In conversation, Randy Clarke suggested that respondents may be sensitive to differences in “causal closeness.” The thought is that, other things being equal, the nearer in a causal chain a neutral anticipated side-effect is seen by subjects as being to the intentional action that causes it, the stronger the intuition will be that the side-effect action of generating it is an intentional action.

8. Presumably, if the bullet hits the device Klaus was aiming at even “the shot goes wild,” a ricochet is involved.

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9. Some readers will have noticed that my identification of three ways of being a brother-in-law is dated. One may bring it up to date by substituting “sibling” for “sister.”

10. The disjuncts in a disjunctive analysis may overlap with one another. Also, one or more of the disjuncts may itself be disjunctive.

11. One hypothesis about figures close to 50% (as in the case of the lucky hitting of the heart and the side-effect action of moving air molecules) is that the two groups of respondents have different concepts of intentional action. Another – which, in my opinion, is much more likely to be true in the two cases I mentioned – is that we have found something like a borderline case of intentional action in lay thinking about the topic. One way to test this is to ask subjects to answer the questions on a scale ranging from “definitely intentional” to “definitely not intentional.” Many concepts are vague in the sense that they lack precise boundaries. The concept of baldness is a stock example. There are clear cases of bald people and clear cases of people who are not bald, but there also are borderline cases. It is plausible that, in cases of this last sort, the concept of baldness simply is not precise enough to tell us whether or not the individuals in question count as bald. Similarly, if there is something that is correctly called “the folk concept of intentional action,” it might not be sufficiently precise to sort all actions into those that are intentional and those that are not.

12. Evidently, respondents are sensitive to the following facts: bullet wounds to various parts of the body – not just the heart – can cause death; and, other things being equal, the smaller and more specific the target, the more useful skill at shooting is.

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13. A potential problem with the modified help scenario is that readers may regard the chairman as having an intention to help the environment that he does not want to express, in which case they would not see his helping the environment as a side-effect. One way to reduce the likelihood of the chairman's being seen as hiding an intention to help the environment is to make him and his advisor (the vice-president) very close friends who are always honest with one another. Another is to have the vignette report that the chairman honestly says thus and such.

14. Notice that I did not say that these philosophers have been concerned only with a segment of the range of actions that the majority of English speakers call "intentional"? There may be actions that (most of) these philosophers count as intentional whereas the majority of layfolk do not. Consider the following case:

Almost every day, Al drives home from work along the same two-mile route. He drives east on Store Street for a mile and turns left onto Home Street. His house is a mile north on Home. While eating lunch in his office today, Al decides to drive to his favorite store later in the day to pick up some beer and chips before driving home. He wants to have them on hand for a game he plans to watch on TV. The store is east on Store Street a half mile beyond Home Street. Al's plan is to drive east on Store to the store, buy the beer and chips, and then drive home. But he forgets. When he gets to Home Street, he turns left, as usual. Shortly after he gets home, he remembers what he had planned to do. A little upset with himself, he gets back in his car and drives to the store.

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I have argued elsewhere that the judgments that Al's turning left and driving home are not intentional rest on a simple unwarranted assumption and that these actions are intentional (Mele n.d.). Thomas Nadelhoffer kindly tested my prediction that most layfolk would answer "no" to the questions whether Al intentionally turns left and whether he intentionally drives home. Seventy-two percent of his fifty lay subjects answered as I predicted.