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**'HE ASKED FOR WATER AND SHE GAVE  
HIM MILK': ON FULFILLMENT AND  
SATISFACTION OF INTENTIONS**

**By**

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“HE ASKED FOR WATER  
AND SHE GAVE HIM MILK”:  
ON FULFILLMENT AND SATISFACTION  
OF INTENTIONS

In this paper I draw a distinction between fulfilling an intention and satisfying it. This distinction enables me to argue that, contrary to what is often assumed, intention is not a purely internal relation. I take this point, which goes against Wittgenstein, to be supportive—in an indirect but principled way—of Davidson’s causal theory of reasons, or intentions. At the same time, however, the fulfillment/satisfaction distinction seems to allow for the possibility that an intention will be partially determined retroactively, by later events. If I am right that after-facts may indeed constitute, at least in part, the intention with which an action was performed, then this poses a problem for the causal theory of intentions, as well as for ordinary models of rational action. But my admiration for Donald Davidson, which led me to embark on this enquiry in the first place, leaves me in no doubt that, to the extent that the quandary I point to is real, he will show us the way out.

I

Consider: “If I have two friends with the same name and am writing one of them a letter, what does the fact that I am not writing it to the other consist in? In the content? But that might fit either. (I haven’t yet written the address.) Well, the connection may be in the antecedents. But in that case it may also be in what *follows* the writing.”<sup>1</sup>

This story of Wittgenstein’s is somewhat bizarre. Here is an attempt to make it a little less implausible: you give your secretary a list of the names of

people you want to invite to a party, and a standard letter of invitation that is supposed to be sent to each. It turns out that one of the names on your list appears twice in your address book, i.e., you have two acquaintances with the same name, and the secretary asks you whom of the two you intend to invite. At this point, several things may happen. There may indeed be what Wittgenstein refers to as "antecedents". That is, you may have been actually thinking about one of these two acquaintances while you were writing her name on the list. You may have met her recently, or spoken to her, even told her about the party. In other words, you may have "had her in mind" when writing down her name. But then, you may not. It is possible that you had nothing and no one in mind at the time. When this is the case, the secretary's question may genuinely surprise you. You may find yourself deliberating the matter, and coming to a decision which of the two persons to invite (or both).

But Wittgenstein directs our attention at another possibility. It is the possibility that you had nothing and no one in mind at the time, and yet, upon the secretary's question, you give an immediate and resolute answer which of the two is the intended invitee. The difference between this case and the previous one, then, is that here there is supposed to be no process of deliberation which is ordinarily taken to be an intention-forming process.<sup>2</sup> Neither mental states nor mental processes are stipulated here but, rather, an unhesitating answer that seems to make the connection—between your act of writing down the name and the person who is the intended invitee—then and there, upon being asked. Or, to repeat Wittgenstein's formulation: "—it [the connection] may also be in what follows the writing."

In the Talmud, which is the canonical compilation of commentary and debate of Jewish legal norms edited in the fifth century, the case is discussed of a man whose two wives have the same name. He issues a writ of divorce in this name, without further specifying which of the two is the designated one. Since a writ of divorce in Jewish law can only be valid when at the time that it is issued it contains the proper name of the intended divorcee, the question here debated is whether or not this man's writ can be valid. The position of some of the sages is that it cannot. Interestingly, however, there is a dissenting position. This position is based on a Talmudic doctrine called *breira* (selection), which stipulates a legal fiction of retroactive intentions. On this view, once this man decides which of his two wives he wants to divorce—even if he does so only after he has issued the writ—it is as if she was selected in advance, i.e., as if she was the one he had intended to divorce at the time of writing the document, and therefore on this view the document is valid.<sup>3</sup>

Is it possible, as Wittgenstein seems to suggest, that an agent's intention will be constituted by no antecedents of his or her action, but rather by its consequents alone? This is too extreme. A weaker version of the question would be: is it possible that an agent's intention will be constituted not only

by the antecedents of the action, but by some of its consequents as well?

The strong intuitions we have with regard to intentions resemble the intuitions we have about causation. The very idea that an intention may be constituted (at least in part) by post-action facts resembles, in its counter-intuitiveness, the idea of backward causality, where the effect precedes the cause. Having noticed this affinity between intention and causation, however, we also recognize that, philosophically, intention and causation are supposed to be very far apart in that they are taken to exemplify the polar opposition between internal and external relations, respectively. A relation *R* between *a* and *b* is external when *a*'s and *b*'s identity conditions are independent of *R*; it is internal when *a*'s and *b*'s identity conditions are not independent of the relation *R* between them. Thus, since this pen fully retains its identity when described independently of the circumstance of my hand now holding it, the relation of holding between my hand and this pen is external; in contrast, the number 7 and the number 5 cannot retain their full identity independently of the former being greater than the latter—hence 'greater than' among numbers is an internal, conceptual, relation.<sup>4</sup>

Now, as was just mentioned, intention is often taken as a clear case of an internal relation—say between my intending to wave my hand and my waving of my hand, and causation, ever since Hume, is taken as a clear case of an external relation—say between the event of my eating rotten food and the event of my having a stomach ache. It is partly for this reason, surely, that it is seen by some as so very difficult, if not indeed as entirely implausible, to square an intentional account of an action with a causal account of it. "It was felt that Hume had shown that any two things which are causally related cannot have a logical relation to each other. Since it was also believed that reasons and the actions for which they are reasons do have some logical connection, the conclusion was drawn that they could not be causally related."<sup>5</sup> But this, of course, is precisely the import of Davidson's reasons-as-causes thesis. And in fact the idea that there must be a way to see the reasons for an action, or the intention with which the action is performed, as having caused that action has, *pace* the above, a strong intuitive, common-sensical, appeal. The conjunction of all of this presents a genuine philosophical tangle.

Let us remind ourselves of the three main approaches to intention which may be discerned in the philosophical literature. One approach, influenced by Wittgenstein, sees the role of intention as contributing to an interpretative redescription of events of certain kinds. The event, which may be a bodily movement or motion like the rising of the driver's arm, is redescribed as an action, say the driver's raising of her arm, and is interpreted as signaling, through the attribution to her of an intention to signal.<sup>6</sup> The interpretation has an explanatory role, albeit a non-causal explanatory role: the (physical) motion is connected, via the intention, to a network of beliefs, desires,

conventions, and norms, and is thereby explained *qua* (intentional) action. Another approach is the traditional one, which sees intention as an ingredient of Will. The will is taken to be an independent entity, a mental faculty responsible for acts of volition. And then there is Davidson's approach. Davidson has no use for the will as a separate entity, nor for intention as a special act of will. For him intention is ultimately reducible, through the notion of reasons, to beliefs and desires, whose role in explaining action is interpretative—but not only interpretative. The reasons for your action may do more than reinterpret your action: they may actually cause it. The bodily movement of my arm's rising can be interpreted as an intentional action of my raising my arm. Moreover, on Davidson's analysis the event of my arm's rising may have been caused (non-deviantly) by something which is a reason for it under the specific description of 'raising my arm'.<sup>7</sup>

Stripped to the bone, the problematic here focused on is how to reconcile the ideas that (1) causation is an external relation, (2) intention is an internal relation, and (3) intention may cause action. Wittgenstein and those who follow him deny (3). Davidson's tack, basically, is not to be overly impressed with the distinction between internal and external relations. He uses the pivotal idea that events can be described in a plurality (infinity) of ways to blur the distinction. Hume's view is that the relation of causality holds between events which are independent distinct particulars however described. For Davidson this view is entirely compatible with the observation that there can be descriptions of these events such that the existence of one may be inferred from that of the other. Consider: if it is true that the event *a* is the cause of the event *b*, then we may replace '*a*' with 'the cause of *b*' and get 'the cause of *b* is the cause of *b*.' That is to say, a relation which under a particular description is external was shown to be trivially glossed, through another description, as an internal, conceptual, or logical relation. However, as far as I can see, even when the possibility of playing with descriptions is granted, the question still remains whether or not, given two items which stand in an internal relation to each other, there is *any* description of them under which they are shown to exist independently of each other (or that their existence is independent of the relation between them).

The view I shall offer here amounts to questioning (2). I shall not be challenging Davidson's account as to how reasons—and, by extension, intentions—may cause action, nor shall I be offering an alternative to it. What I am suggesting is that his project may seem less puzzling if we come to recognize that intention is not a purely internal relation. This suggestion takes into account the meaning-in-use of the notion of intention: when we take a closer look at it we realize that in order for us to say that our intention was met, more may be involved than the strict, technical, conceptual, internal relation referred to as fulfillment. The remainder of this article will flow from

the distinction which I shall now proceed to introduce, between two senses in which an intention may be met. The distinction is between fulfilling an intention and satisfying it.

## II

Suppose the object of my intention is an item *a*. There is a straightforward sense in which *a*—and only *a*—fulfills my intention. This apple will fulfill my intention (desire, wish) to have this apple; any apple, and only an apple, will fulfill my intention to have an apple; a new car, any new car, and only a new car, will fulfill my intention to have a new car. How do we account, then, for the case when instead of an apple I get a pear, and feel happy with it? And how do we account for the case when I am presented with a surprise gift of a new jeep, and am disappointed with it? In other words, there seem to be cases where even though the intention is not strictly fulfilled, there is yet a not-irrelevant satisfaction, and also opposite cases, where even though the intention is fulfilled, there is yet a dissatisfaction.

Let us say that an intention is fulfilled if, and only if, it is met by a (specific) item which belongs to the extension class of the (possibly generic) object of the intention. This relation, as presented, is clearly internal. Now we may note that since intentions are, in one way or another, desire-based, then there is a first-approximation expectation that whenever an intention of mine is fulfilled, then, relative to this intention, I am satisfied. However, I shall want to show that this common-sensical, first-approximation expectation may fail. Furthermore, I shall want to be able to talk directly about my intention being satisfied, and I shall want this to be not merely a shortened notation for saying that, strictly speaking, it is *I* who am satisfied when my intention is fulfilled and that my intention is therefore only derivatively satisfied as well. Thus, my account will have to differ from Russell's, for whom the relation between an intention and that which satisfied it is an altogether external, causal relation.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Russell's account is open to the sort of fun poked at him by Wittgenstein: "I believe Russell's theory amounts to the following. . . . If I wanted [intended] to eat an apple, and someone punched me in the stomach, taking away my appetite, then it was this punch that I originally wanted."<sup>9</sup> As we shall presently see, a fuller account of the satisfaction relation will require a more adequate semantics than the simple class-extension semantics used in connection with the fulfillment relation. A fuller account of the satisfaction relation will also reveal it as not purely an internal, or conceptual relation, like the fulfillment relation—yet at the same time as not purely an external relation either.

Before continuing, let us pause to consider the possibility, suggested by the

apple/pear and car/jeep cases sketched above, that all four fulfillment-satisfaction combinations may occur. That is, that an intention may be both fulfilled and satisfied, that it may be neither fulfilled nor satisfied, that it may—more interestingly—be fulfilled yet unsatisfied, or—perhaps even more interestingly—that it may be unfulfilled yet satisfied. These possibilities are summarized in the following 2-by-2 matrix:

	fulfilled	unfulfilled
satisfied	standard (+)	apple/pear
unsatisfied	car/jeep	standard (-)

The case where an intention is both fulfilled and satisfied we may regard as 'standard' with a positive marker, and the case where an intention is neither fulfilled nor satisfied—as 'standard' with a negative marker. Let us ignore these two standard cases, and focus, first, on the non-standard case where an intention is fulfilled yet unsatisfied. We are looking, then, at cases where strictly speaking one gets (achieves, does) what one intended to get (achieve, do), and yet one is unsatisfied. These are cases of disappointment. How are we to understand this sort of disappointment?

Disappointment relates to a wide range of phenomena. Central among them are cases of thwarted expectations, hopes, and aspirations. For present purposes, however, we want to attend to a particular sort of disappointment, which comes about when an intention remains unsatisfied even though it has been fulfilled. What can go wrong? My intention to get, or do, *a* presumably reflects, inter alia, my belief that the fulfillment of my intention will satisfy me. When I get, or do, *a* and yet remain unsatisfied, this belief turns out to have been mistaken: was I wrong about *a*, or was I perhaps wrong about myself?

Here is one possibility. Suppose that *a* is a generic term: that it is really *A*. Underlying my belief that *a* will satisfy me there might have been a belief, or possibly a default assumption, that *any* member of *A* will do equally well—and it is this underlying belief which may turn out to be wrong. Thus, if my intention was to get a new car, when I am presented with the new jeep it may hit me that "this is not what I had in mind". This may be so in spite of the facts (i) that a jeep is a car, and (ii) that when my intention was formed, or

expressed, I had no specific car in mind—nor, for that matter, was I excluding any cars in my mind. How can this be so?

In order to help the discussion onward we focus, then, on an intention to get some non-specific item *a*, where *a* is a member of *A*; *a* will be said to be the object of the intention. Such an intention is fulfilled if, and only if, it is met by a (specific) item which belongs to the extension class of the (generic) object of the intention. This intention-fulfillment relation assumes a semantics of homogenous extension. In order for an intention to be fulfilled, no differentiation need be made within the extension class of the object of the intention. The procedure whereby the extension class is determined is that of necessary-and-sufficient conditions, which goes back to Frege's venerable *Merkmale*, or defining-features, technique. The jeep example, however, suggests that the intention-satisfaction relation is based on a different semantics, which is one of non-homogenous extension. Here differentiation needs to be made within the extension class of the object of the intention, the differentiation relating to prototypical (central) versus atypical (peripheral) members of this class.<sup>10</sup> The procedure associated with this semantics has to do with the characteristic features, rather than with the defining-features, of the members of the class. For example, all members of the class of birds possess such defining features as being feathered, laying eggs, having two legs and two wings, being warm-blooded, and so on. But birds also possess features which are thought of as characteristic of birds, even though they are not properties of all birds. Thus, birds paradigmatically have short legs, are rather small, fly easily, sit in trees, have a musical call, etc. To be called a bird, an object need have the defining features of birds. But the more characteristic features a member of this class has, the more prototypical it is. (Robins, eagles, chickens, and penguins are thus viewed as progressively less typical of birds.)<sup>11</sup> In addition to the list of characteristic features, the procedure associated with this semantics requires some metrics of similarity which will make it possible to arrange the members of the class according to the measure of their closeness to or distance from the prototypical members of the class.

It is when the item obtained is judged to be a sufficiently prototypical, and not an atypical, member of the extension class of the object of the intention that the intention is commonly satisfied. A cozy Chevrolet sedan may be the prototypical member of the class of cars, while all other types of cars are arranged in the relevant semantic space according to some metrics of similarity which reflects one's judgment as to their closeness to or distance from the prototypical core. A jeep may indeed be judged as relatively distant from the prototypical Chevrolet, hence the disappointment. Note, however, that this disappointment, attendant upon a fulfilled-yet-unsatisfied intention, is different from the sort of disappointment that may come about when the

expectations which generate a particular intention are not met, in spite of the fact that the intention itself is both fulfilled and satisfied. Thus, even though I may get my Chevrolet, I may nevertheless eventually be disappointed with its performance; or, even though my intention to go to the movies tonight is both fulfilled and satisfied by my being taken to watch *The English Patient*, I may nevertheless be disappointed with the movie. The latter two cases belong to the broad category of cases where it is the intending person who is unsatisfied. The jeep case, on the other hand, exemplifies what we are after, namely, the category of cases where it is the intention itself which, while fulfilled, is unsatisfied. The point to be emphasized here is this: whether or not the intending person is satisfied is a psychological question, the answer to which depends on a set of conditions of an extremely wide-open, unconstrained, nature. Whether or not this person's intention is satisfied is, in contrast, a question the answer to which, in light of the above discussion, is subject to semantic considerations and constraints of a fairly structured nature.

Again, consider Wittgenstein's example: "Someone says to me 'shew the children a game.' I teach them gaming with dice, and the other says: 'I didn't mean that sort of game.' Must the exclusion of the game with dice have come before his mind when he gave me the order?"<sup>12</sup> Here, too, there is disappointment (or disapproval) even though gaming with dice *is* a game, and in spite of the fact that the exclusion of this game did *not* have "to come before the mind" of the person concerned at the time when his intention, or order, was expressed. While gaming with dice is an atypical game (especially with regard to children), any game from among those commonly taken as prototypical<sup>13</sup> would, presumably, have satisfied this person's intention.

Fulfillment of an intention, then, does not guarantee that the intention is satisfied as well. In order for there to be satisfaction, the extension class of the object of the intention can no longer be treated as undifferentiated; it has to be organized, structured, stratified. And it is here that the internal nature of the relation no longer remains pure. The satisfaction relation is internal by default as far as the core, prototypical, members of the extension class are concerned: my intention to get (have, do) *a* is not only fulfilled but it may also—in normal, non-devious circumstances—be assumed to be satisfied by "ideal-type" *a*'s; however, while it is fulfilled it may or may not be satisfied by peripheral, atypical *a*'s. And it is important to note here that what counts as central/peripheral, or the nature of the similarity/dissimilarity metrics that introduces the relevant differentiation within the extension class of *a*—these are subject to considerations which go beyond the purely conceptual. Whether or not the baby-sitter's playing dice with his wards will satisfy their parent's intention that he should play a game with them will depend, among other things, on the social background of the family, as well as on various expectations based on norms and conventions. In other words, the satisfaction

relation, while retaining a quasi-internal nature, introduces non-conceptual, external elements into the notion of intention—and this, I believe, is as it should be.

The non-standard case where an intention is unfulfilled yet satisfied (upper-right cell in the above matrix) will further drive the point home. The example used to introduce this case was my getting a pear, which does not fulfill my intention to get an apple, yet may satisfy it nevertheless. For Russell, if a pear satisfied me, then what I had wished for (desired, intended to get) was really a pear. This points to the possibility that we may sometimes be confused, or mistaken, or otherwise less than clear about our intentions (desires, etc.) This is an interesting phenomenon, and it certainly happens, but the present analysis suggests that it does not need to happen in the case in hand. A pear may well satisfy an intention to have an apple insofar as it counts as an adequate—possibly even as a superior—replacement for an apple, when 'apple' is taken *qua* member of the category of fruit.<sup>14</sup> Would a plum do? A fig? A coconut? All of these are fruit, but they are not prototypical of the category, whereas both apple and pear are.<sup>15</sup>

Consider: "He asked for water, and she gave him milk" (Judges 5, 26) The phrase refers to the Biblical Yael who invited Sisera, the Canaanite enemy general, into her tent. "And he said unto her, Give me, I pray thee, a little water to drink; for I am thirsty. And she opened a bottle of milk, and gave him drink" (Ibid. 4, 19). From the narrative of the story it is clear that Sisera's unfulfilled intention (wish, expectation) to get water is amply satisfied when Yael gives him milk instead. Indeed, both this and the apple/pear example suggest that while the non-standard cases of fulfilled-yet-unsatisfied intention discussed above commonly involve disappointment, the non-standard cases of unfulfilled-yet-satisfied intentions highlight the phenomenon of more-than-satisfaction.

Why does Yael give her guest milk rather than water? Surely not because she has no water to give. Clearly, she wants to please him; she treats him for more than he asked for. In the given context, milk is taken both by hostess and by guest to be superior to water; moreover, it is known to both that for each of them milk is indeed superior. When Sisera asks for "a little water to drink, for I am thirsty," his explicit intention is to get water, i.e. a specific item (unlike the case of the generic item 'car' discussed above). However, Yael correctly interprets this specific item as 'water-*qua*-(thirst-*quen*ching)-drink', that is, as falling under the class, or category, of thirst-*quen*ching drinks. While only a specific item can fulfill an express intention for that specific item, other members of the same category may satisfy it—provided they count as central and prototypical enough members of that category, and also provided that the category under which the item falls is taken in the circumstances to be correctly identified or interpreted. Now the question which

members of the category will and which will not do as a replacement for water—indeed, as a superior replacement for water—is not strictly conceptual. Milk did handsomely for Sisera; it may not do quite as well in an equivalent contemporary context. Would soda do? Coffee? Beer?—Well, it depends. It depends on the time of day, on the age of the guest, on social conventions. Moreover, in certain circumstances some non-liquid may conceivably do as a replacement, even as a superior replacement, for water: ice-cream, say, or watermelon. In such a case the category under which the item 'water' falls is liberally reinterpreted as 'refreshment', rather than 'drink'. In order to determine whether or not there may be satisfaction where fulfillment fails, then, much knowledge and information is needed of a non-conceptual, "external," nature.

We may now pause once again to pose the question, what light does the above discussion throw on the internal nature of the intending relation. 'The intending relation', as we saw, is equivocal between the fulfillment relation and the satisfaction relation. The strong intuition about the internal nature of intention is captured by the fact that the relation between an intention and that which fulfills it remains, on the account offered here, a strictly internal relation. But I believe that we also have some pretty strong intuitions about the satisfaction (or lack thereof) of intentions. And with regard to the satisfaction relation we saw that it is a mixed relation: it has both internal and external elements. The precise sense in which an intention may be fulfilled yet unsatisfied was here exemplified by a case where the object of the intention is generic ('game'), and the intention is met by an item (gaming with dice) which falls under the relevant extension class—hence the fulfillment of the intention—but at the same time is a non-prototypical member of the relevant extension class—hence the non-satisfaction of the intention. The precise sense in which an intention may be unfulfilled yet satisfied was here exemplified by the case where the object of the intention is a specific item (water), and the intention is met by a relevantly different specific item (milk)—hence the non-fulfillment of the intention—which at the same time however is considered a prototypical member of the extension class identified as the class to which the object of the intention belongs—hence the satisfaction of the intention. And, as was pointed out, the evaluation of a member of a category as prototypical (central) or atypical (peripheral), as well as the judgment as to which category should be identified as that category *qua* member of which a specified item is intended, are based both on conceptual, intra-linguistic considerations and on external, extra-linguistic considerations. So, while intention and its fulfillment "make contact in language,"<sup>16</sup> the contact between intention and its satisfaction is made, at least in part, outside of language.

One last quibble on this issue: what about the so-called intensional nature

of intention? How can it be reconciled with the class-extension semantics which is here claimed to underlie the intention-fulfillment relation? The intensional nature of intention manifests itself, e.g., in the fact that even though both of the following statements may be true:

(1) I intend to watch *Secrets and Lies* tonight

and

(2) *Secrets and Lies* is Mike Leigh's most recent movie

it may not be true that I intend to watch Mike Leigh's most recent movie tonight. The context of intention, that is, may involve failure of substitutivity; it is thus an intensional, not an extensional, context. Still, the point is this: while the truth of the ascription to me of an intention is sensitive to the description of the object of my intention, once the description of the item under which it is truly the object of my intention is fixed—anything which falls under the extension of the item thus described will fulfill my intention.

### III

Recall that the etymology of 'intend' has to do with drawing a bow while aiming an arrow. The natural direction of fit one thinks of, with regard to aiming, would be from the drawn arrow to the encircled target. But sometimes we operate with the opposite direction of fit: you hit a spot with your arrow, and you encircle it as the target at which you were aiming. By analogy, the first direction of fit would be from an intention (to get water) to that which strictly fulfills it (water). The second direction of fit would correspond to the situation where in light of what you get (milk) you redescribe the intention with which you set out to get it (a thirst-quenching drink, typified by water). And, as the discussion above was meant to bring out, for this sort of situations to occur no self-deception need be invoked. Rather, these situations suggest the potential fruitfulness of the distinction, from among the variety of possible ways in which an intention may in general be "met," between its being fulfilled on the one hand and its being satisfied on the other. The fulfillment relation was analyzed in terms of a homogenous-extension semantics, and was shown to remain an internal relation. The satisfaction relation was analyzed in terms of a non-homogenous-extension semantics and was consequently claimed to be neither purely internal, nor purely external either: it was shown to mix elements of both. If this analysis is correct, then the notion of intention may supply a principled support for Davidson's reasons-as-causes project.

In accounting for action, however, there is tension between the interpretative role of intention and its causal role. One aspect of this tension concerns the time dimension. When we consider propositions which stand in an interpretative relation to each other, this relation is a-temporal. When we consider events which stand in a causal relation to each other, this relation is temporal: the cause has to precede the effect, or, at the limit, to be simultaneous with it. Thus, to see intention as providing a redescription of an act, thereby interpreting it as an intentional action, is to operate in the a-temporal realm of propositions: the question which comes first does not come up. But to claim that intention may cause action implies a commitment as to the direction of the time arrow, which must fly from the intention to the action.

What Davidson recognizes is the possibility that an act may undergo a process of reinterpretation, in light of the intention with which it was carried out. What I have been arguing is that a further possibility should be recognized, namely, that the intention may undergo a process of reinterpretation, in light of the action which presumably carries it out and the attendant satisfaction or disappointment with it. The picture that emerges is the following: an event, one of whose descriptions is in terms of someone's intending something, may be the cause of another event—a motion, a movement—one of whose descriptions is in terms of that person's intentional action. This description of the action itself radiates back, so to speak, to the intention with which it was carried out, and it may change the way we describe, understand, or even determine, this intention. Indeed, we may carry this one step further and say that once the intention with which the action was carried out is redescribed, the ensuing action might once again be reinterpreted, because actions are liable to be reinterpreted in light of the intentions with which they are performed. There is, in other words, a sort of "reflective equilibrium" between intention and action, an interpretative process that goes back and forth, whereby each partially illuminates and partially determines the other.

Within the realm of propositional attitudes, belief is commonly assumed to be distinguished from intention, as well as from wish, expectation, hope, command, etc., with regard to the notion of the direction of fit alluded to above. For a belief to be true, the proposition expressing it has to fit the world. For an intention, wish, expectation, hope, and command to become true, the world has to fit the appropriate proposition. What I have here tried to show is that with intention (and its cognates), matters may be more complex, in that there may be a sort of "negotiation" process of going back and forth between the two directions of fit. And the upshot of this is that this process does not necessarily have to end before, or with, the acting: it may continue thereafter. In such cases we shall have to say that the action was carried out with a partial, or with an underdetermined, intention, and we shall

have to recognize that the story about the causal relation between intention and action may be even more baffling than we have come to know it to be.<sup>17</sup>

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#### NOTES

1. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, ed., G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. Von Wright (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967 [1981]), #7.
2. Note, however, that often an intention is a prelude to a deliberation process: you intend to go to the movies tonight, and then you have to decide to which movie to go.
3. For a further discussion of this and related issues see Edna Ullmann-Margalit, "Retrospective Intentions," in Hans Friedrich Fulda and Rolf-Peter Horstmann, eds., *Vernunft in der Moderne* (Stuttgarter Hegel-Kongress [1993], Klett-Cotta, 1994), pp. 691-703.
4. See Richard Rorty, "Relations, Internal and External," in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan, Inc., 1967), Vol. 7, pp. 125-33.
5. Simon Evnine, *Donald Davidson* (Great Britain: Polity Press, 1991), p. 47.
6. See A. I. Melden, *Free Action* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), p. 88.
7. Intentional action, for Davidson, seems adequately accounted for in terms of reasons, construed as beliefs and desires. However, the phenomenon of "pure intending" where one intends to do something but never does, forces Davidson to try to come up with an account of intending which goes beyond his account of acting intentionally—but which he hopes will, as he says, "mesh in a satisfactory way" with that account. The account he ultimately proposes is in terms of an unconditional judgment in favor of doing something: "—intending and wanting belong to the same genus of pro attitudes expressed by value judgments. Wants [ ] provide reasons for actions and intentions, and are expressed by prima facie judgements; intentions and the judgements that go with intentional actions are distinguished by their all-out or unconditional form" ("Intending," in *Essays on Actions and Events* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980], pp. 101-2.)
8. See Bertrand Russell, *The Analysis of Mind* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1921); lecture III.
9. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Remarks*, ed. R. Rhees (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975), p. 64.
10. See the works of E. Rosch, starting with "On the Internal Structure of Perceptual and Semantic Categories," in T. E. Moore, ed., *Cognitive Development*



and the Acquisition of Language (New York: Academic Press, 1973), pp. 111–44, through “Human Categorization,” in N. Warren, ed., *Advances in Cross-Cultural Psychology*, Vol. 1 (London: Academic Press, 1977).

11. See Herbert H. Clark and Eve V. Clark, *Psychology and Language* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1977), pp. 462–68.

12. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953), p. 33° (un-numbered section after #70).

13. ‘Game’, as is well known, coheres as a category not because all members possess the defining features of games, but because each member shares a “family resemblance” with the other members of the category. Categories which do not possess defining (i.e. necessary and sufficient) features may still have prototypical members. In order for a member of this category to count as prototypical, or central, it has to possess a sufficient number of the prototypes’s features. (See Clark and Clark, op. cit., n. 11, p. 467.)

14. I may have asked for apple-*qua*-ball-like object, for purposes other than eating (e.g. throwing and catching, explaining the earth’s movement around the sun, etc.) here a pear will likely not satisfy my intention.

15. Table 12-2 in Clark and Clark, (op. cit., n. 11) p. 464, has ‘apple’ as the most prototypical member of the category of fruit. The studies they report also suggest that “the more typical a category member was, the more easily it could replace the category name,” (p. 465). That is, ‘fruit’ is easily replaced by ‘apple’, and so an intention involving an apple is perhaps likely to be satisfied by other prototypical members of the same category. Or at least it is likelier to be satisfied by such members than by atypical members.

16. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (op. cit., n. 12), #445.

17. I wish to thank Avishai Margalit for crucial help and support in writing this article.

## REPLY TO EDNA ULLMANN-MARGALIT

The argument against holding that attitudes like beliefs and desires are the causes of actions which impressed Wittgenstein and some of his followers was that causal relations are contingent whereas the relations between reasons and the actions they explain is necessary or conceptual. My point against this argument was that it does not make sense to say of a relation that it is either contingent or necessary: it is statements or sentences or judgments that have these properties. Edna Ullmann-Margalit transposes the distinction to the supposed distinction between internal and external relations. I have said nothing about this distinction, but it seems to me equally suspect, at least as it is applied here. For it depends on the same confusion between things and their descriptions as the supposed distinction between contingent and necessary relations or between the essential and accidental properties of things. 7 is necessarily greater than 5, but it is a contingent fact that the number of eggs in my refrigerator is greater than the number of radishes. So I remain unimpressed with the assertion that there is a “genuine philosophical tangle” involved in saying actions, described in some ways, entail their causes, described in some ways. What some see as “playing with descriptions” I see as ignoring the difference between things and their descriptions.

There remains an interesting question about intentions which is raised by the suggestion that sometimes intentions are modified by what follows, not in the trivial sense that the intention one has in mind when acting may, and very often does, change as the intention is acted out, but retrospectively. And, of course, a person may not be satisfied when she gets what she asked for: as George Bernard Shaw remarked, “There are two tragedies in life. One is not to get your heart’s desire. The other it to get it.” Ullmann-Margalit rules such cases out. One of her examples involves buying a car. It’s a little hard to be clear how it happens. She intends to buy a car of an unspecified model (or cost? or condition?) and somehow receives a jeep. Now the character of the intention is retroactively changed: it now explicitly excludes a jeep (or a car costing a million dollars? or a car that is inoperative?). I find I am not fully

satisfied that such a case does constitute a retroactive change. For while my intention could retrospectively be described simply as intending to buy a car in answer to the question why I went to the car dealer, I cannot imagine someone intending, even at the start, to buy *any* car. Even if it were wired to explode? Surely there are many things I could easily specify in advance, and would if I were ordering, say, from a catalogue. However, there is never a point at which I could completely specify the content of my intention (which is why it is impossible to draw up a foolproof contract). Even if I receive the make, model, and color of car I ordered, it may turn out to be a lemon. I didn't intend to get a lemon; does this show the original intention has turned out, retrospectively, to have included this caveat? I doubt that our intuitions (or lawyers) are clear enough always to settle such issues. If we attribute an intention to ourselves or others we normally use a fairly brief utterance to specify what is intended whereas the state of mind attributed may be both vaguer and more detailed than the utterance. But this doesn't show that either the meaning of the utterance or the actual state of mind when the attribution is made is subsequently changed by the outcome.

Of course, an externalist like me will happily agree that external factors enter into the determination of the correct description of any propositional state of mind, and states of intending are among these. Thus what a person has in mind when thinking of cars is apt to be determined, in part, by a history of perceptual encounters with cars. But this points to the past, not the future. There are entities which, though fixed in time, assume new properties and relations with the passage of time. Thus an act of aiming a gun and pulling the trigger, though finished before the bullet is out of the barrel, may sooner or later become an act of assassination (Davidson 1987). However, this is not a case of a change in the description of a propositional attitude.

This brings me to a complication I have been avoiding. I do not see how to think of the connection between an intention and its outcome (whether or not the outcome "fulfills" or "satisfies" the intention) as a relation, for I do not think intentions are entities nor that their "objects" are objects. When we act on an intention, we act on the basis of various beliefs and values. Where explicit reasoning takes place we may form an intention, which is a state of mind, and if the act takes time, we monitor our behavior in the light of the intention. But states of mind like beliefs, desires, wishes, valuings, and intentions are not entities, but modifications of a person. We describe these modifications by relating the person to a proposition, or, as I would rather say, a sentence, but I do not think it helps to say these abstract objects are "before the mind" of the person to whom the thought is attributed (Davidson 1989). And do intentions have objects? Not, I think, physical objects, not things like cars or apples. Nor can it be "generic objects", since there are no such things. We speak, it is true, of wanting or desiring a particular person or object, but

on reflection it becomes clear that we don't simply want or desire them; we want them to love us, or to eat them, or to drive them, or to have them at our disposal, and so on. In other words, we want or desire that some proposition be true; wants and desires and the other pro-attitudes, if they have "objects" at all, do not have physical objects. Neither of the "entities" related by the satisfying or fulfilling relations is a concrete particular and so the question of a causal relation is moot.

Intentions can, though, be called the causes of actions, and this is especially obvious when the intention is formed some time before it eventuates in action. What we mean, in my view, when we speak of beliefs, desires, and intentions as causes of actions is that they are significant causal *conditions* of actions. Often, but by no means always, it is a *change* in belief (for example perceiving that something is the case) that trips the action, or a sudden yen, or reaching a decision.

D. D.

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