

Essentially Intentional Action¹

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1 Introduction

An act type is something that an agent can do: walk to the store, climb Mount Everest, trip over a wire. Act types are ‘repeatables’: many have climbed Mount Everest. Act types are not events. If you climb Everest, an event occurs—your cold, brutal climb—but this event is not what you do. What you do is climb Everest.

Many act types can be done intentionally or non-intentionally. You can break a vase intentionally by throwing it out the window. You can break it non-intentionally while stretching your arms. Some act types cannot be done intentionally. If you commit involuntary manslaughter, you do so non-intentionally. Anscombe famously said that there are some act types that can only be done intentionally. We defend Anscombe: some act types are *essentially intentional*.

In §II–III, we argue that *Ving intentionally* is itself essentially intentional: it is not possible to be non-intentionally Ving intentionally. And we show how this explains why various other act types—such as trying, lying, and thanking—are essentially intentional.

In §IV, we turn to an important application. The claim that there are essentially intentional act types is a crucial premise in recent arguments against Anscombe’s practical knowledge thesis (Piñeros Glasscock (2020), Beddor & Pavese (2022)). Beddor & Pavese say that we should give up on essentially intentional act types to preserve the practical knowledge thesis. We disagree. Anscombe’s view that there are essentially intentional act types is in far better standing than her practical knowledge thesis.

2 Anscombean Verbs

We will say that an act type *V* is *essentially intentional* if and only if, necessarily, if you are Ving, you are Ving intentionally. (Note: it is uncontroversial that, necessarily, if you are Ving intentionally, you are Ving. It follows that an act type *V* is essentially intentional if and only if: necessarily, you are Ving intentionally if and only if you are Ving.)

Anscombe gave a list of verbs that are supposed to stand for essentially intentional act types. Her list includes ‘sell’, ‘hire’, ‘marry’, and ‘greet’. Many have expressed doubts about Anscombe’s list. Setiya (2016) says: ‘The cases do not convince. These are all things one can do unintentionally.’ Beddor & Pavese (2022) also reject Anscombe’s examples. Though they focus on ‘greet’, they claim that their arguments generalize to the other verbs on her list.³

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³Since Anscombe, essentially intentional act types have had some defenders, especially Ford (2011) and Ludwig (2014, 2017). Ludwig shows how essentially intentional act types are key to understanding constitutive rules.

Say that that a verb or verb phrase is *Anscombean* if and only if it stands for an essentially intentional act type. Suppose Setiya's and Beddor & Pavese's arguments convince us that the English verb 'greet' isn't Anscombean: 'greet' does not stand for an essentially intentional act type. Still, one might wonder: If we want to produce an example of an Anscombean verb, couldn't we just introduce a new verb 'greet_{int}' that stands for intentionally greeting? If we do this, will we have settled the matter? Will we have shown that there is an essentially intentional act type: the act type denoted by 'greet_{int}'? No. To greet_{int} your friend is to do something intentionally: to greet your friend intentionally. But it does not follow that to greet_{int} your friend is to greet_{int} your friend intentionally.

It does not follow. But it still might be true that to greet_{int} your friend is to greet_{int} your friend intentionally. We think it is true. It is true because, in general, intentionally Ving is essentially intentional. That is, 'intentionally' iterates: you are intentionally Ving if and only if you are intentionally intentionally Ving. Given the assumption that 'intentionally' iterates, the following are equivalent:

You are greeting_{int} your friend.

You are intentionally greeting your friend.

You are intentionally: greeting your friend intentionally.

You are intentionally greeting_{int} your friend.

We start in §II.i by briefly motivating the idea that, for any V, 'intentionally V' is Anscombean. (We offer a more sustained defense of this claim in §III.) In §II.ii, we show how this claim can explain why other verbs and verb phrases are Anscombean.

2.1 Intentionally Ving is Essentially Intentional

Both (1) and (2) sound bizarre.

(1) # I was intentionally walking, but I wasn't intentionally walking intentionally.

(2) # Sorry, I had no idea I was walking intentionally! I only meant to be walking.

Contrast (1) and (2) with the following perfectly normal assertions:

(3) I was walking intentionally, but I wasn't intentionally walking slowly.

(4) Sorry, I had no idea I was walking slowly! I only meant to be walking.

If 'intentionally V' is Anscombean, we have a simple, compelling explanation of this contrast. (1) straightforwardly describes an impossibility. So does (2), on the plausible assumption that I cannot be Ving intentionally if I have no idea that I am Ving. Nothing is wrong with (3) and (4), on the other hand, for it of course does not follow from the fact that I am walking intentionally that I am intentionally walking slowly.⁴

⁴One might say that we don't need to say that 'intentionally V' is Anscombean to account for the infelicity of

If ‘intentionally V’ were not Anscombean, we would expect it to work more like ‘V slowly’. We would expect to find, and to be able to describe, cases in which you are intentionally Ving, but you are not intentionally Ving intentionally. That is not what we find.

This provides some prima facie support for the hypothesis that ‘intentionally V’ is Anscombean, that it stands for an essentially intentional act type. Why care about this?

One reason is that it can help explain why other verbs are Anscombean. To see how, consider ‘deceive’. Many authors say that deceiving is essentially intentional. For example, Carson (2010) says: ‘I take it to be self-contradictory to say that someone deceived another person unintentionally.’ But now consider how Carson argues for this hypothesis:⁵

Deception requires some sort of intention to cause others to have false beliefs.
[...] In order to deceive you, I must intentionally mislead you, or intentionally cause you to have false beliefs.

To deceive someone, Carson says, is to do something intentionally: to intentionally cause them to have false beliefs. But as we have seen, it does not follow that to deceive is to deceive intentionally. That is, it does not follow unless ‘intentionally V’ is Anscombean. If ‘intentionally V’ is Anscombean, the inference is valid: if deceiving is intentionally causing to have false beliefs, and ‘intentionally cause ...’ is Anscombean, then ‘deceive’ is Anscombean.

More generally, let ‘V’ be a verb or verb phrase that stands for the act type of intentionally Zing, for some act type Z. Then it follows that Ving is essentially intentional and ‘V’ is Anscombean. We think many verbs are like this, on at least some of their readings, including ‘try’, ‘thank’, and ‘lie’. These verbs are Anscombean because, for some Z, they stand for the act type intentionally Zing.

We begin with ‘try’.

2.2 Trying

Many philosophers have thought that trying is essentially intentional.⁶ For example, Adams (1995) says: ‘One can accidentally break a glass figurine (while trying to dust it), but one cannot accidentally try to break (or dust) it.’ In a recent paper, Holguín and Lederman (ms) defend this conjecture. One of their observations is that trying passes Anscombe’s ‘Why’ test for intentional action. Anscombe says that you are Ving intentionally if the question ‘Why are you Ving?’, understood as a request for your reasons, ‘has application’. To say that the question has application is to say, roughly, that you cannot truthfully reject the question by saying something like:

(5) I was Ving, but not intentionally.

(1). We have an alternative explanation: it has repeated words. But (2) sounds just as bad to us, and ‘intentionally’ is not repeated in (2).

⁵See pages 48-49 of Carson (2010).

⁶See McCann (1975), Adams (1995), Ginet (1990), and Holguín and Lederman (ms).

(6) I didn't mean to be Ving—it was just an accident.

(7) I had no idea I was Ving!

If am intentionally poisoning the water, I cannot truthfully reject the question, 'Why are you poisoning the water?' by saying any of the following.

(8) I was poisoning the water, but not intentionally.

(9) I didn't mean to be poisoning the water—it was just an accident.

(10) I had no idea I was poisoning the water!

Now consider *trying* to poison the water. If I ask you why you are trying to poison the water, I would be very surprised to hear any of the following in response.

(11) ? I was trying to poisoning the water, but not intentionally trying.

(12) ? I didn't mean to be trying to poison the water—it was just an accident.

(13) ? I had no idea I was trying to poison the water.

This suggests that 'try' is Anscombean, that it stands for an essentially intentional act type.

Nevertheless, things are not so straightforward. The word 'try' is context-sensitive: 'try to V' stands for different act types in different contexts. Sometimes our standards for trying are demanding, and 'try' is roughly synonymous with 'try with enough effort'. In other contexts, we use 'try' permissively, so that it is very easy to count as trying to do something.⁷ If 'try to V' is context sensitive, standing for different act types in different contexts, then it may be that 'try to V' stands for an essentially intentional act type in some contexts, but not in others.

Say that a verb or verb phrase 'V' is *partly Anscombean* if it stands for an essentially intentional act type in some contexts. Say that 'V' is *fully Anscombean* if it stands for an essentially intentional act type in all contexts.

On the basis of (11)-(13), we might be tempted to say that 'try' is fully Anscombean: for any context, if 'I'm trying to poison the water' expresses a truth in that context, so does 'I'm intentionally trying to poison the water'.

But we should not say that 'try' is fully Anscombean. In some contexts, 'try to V' has what we will call a *merely purposive* interpretation: you can count as trying to V in the merely purposive sense if you are acting in order to V, whether or not you are doing so intentionally.

Consider an example. David is a sleepwalker. One night, he gets up from bed and walks towards the bathroom. David pulls on the handle of the bathroom door, but the door is locked. You and I are watching from the other room. You ask what David is doing, and I reply:

(14) David is trying to open the bathroom door again.

Or suppose David is asleep with his arms tied behind his back. He has an itch on his cheek. He reflexively moves his arm to scratch the itch, but since his arms are tied, he cannot extend his

⁷See Holguín & Lederman (ms) on the context sensitivity of 'try'. See also Sharvit (2003) and Grano (2011).

arm. You ask: ‘Why did David flinch just now?’ I reply:

(15) He is trying to scratch an itch.

In both cases, David is trying to do something, but he is not intentionally trying, since he’s asleep. What you do when you’re asleep may be done for a purpose, but it is not done intentionally.

Let ‘try₁’ stand for trying in the merely purposive sense: the sense in which David is trying to open the door, or trying to scratch an itch. What does ‘try₁’ mean? Plausibly, to be trying₁ to V is to be Zing in order to V, for some Z.⁸ To say that David is trying₁ to open the door is to say that he is doing something—such as pulling the door handle—in order to open the door. To say that David is trying₁ to scratch an itch is to say that he is doing something—such as moving his arm—in order to scratch his itch.

To try₁ to V is not to intentionally try₁ to V: ‘try₁’ is not Anscombean. But the infelicity of (11)-(13) suggests that ‘try’ also has an Anscombean reading. Notice that we can bring out the Anscombean reading through the following variation on the sleepwalker case. David, the recurrent sleepwalker, walks to his sister’s room each night, trying to open her door. One morning, she asks him, ‘Why are you trying to open my door every night? It’s locked for a reason.’ David replies:

(16) I’m not trying to open your door every night—I have a sleepwalking problem!

Let ‘try₂’ stand for the stronger kind of trying David has in mind in (16). What might ‘try₂’ mean? We suggest that it means intentionally try₁: to be trying₂ to V is, roughly, to be intentionally Zing in order to V, for some Z. When he is sleepwalking, David is pulling the handle in order to open his sister’s door, but he’s not intentionally pulling the handle in order to open her door: He has no idea he is doing this. David is not intentionally trying₁ to open his sister’s door.

If this is right, we can use the fact that intentionally Ving is essentially intentional to explain why ‘try’ has an Anscombean use: the use David has in mind in (16), and the use that is responsible for the oddness of (11)-(13). If trying₂ to V is intentionally trying₁ to V, and intentionally Ving is essentially intentional, then whenever you are trying₂ to V, you are intentionally trying₂ to V: trying₂ is essentially intentional.⁹

⁸McCann (1975), Thompson (2008).

⁹Objection: we say that sometimes ‘try’ means try₁, which is not essentially intentional, and sometimes it means try₂, which is. But if ‘try’ has a non-Anscombean reading, shouldn’t (11)-(13) sometimes strike us as okay? Shouldn’t we expect speakers to accommodate, to try to find the non-Anscombean reading? (Thanks to [redacted] for this question.) Reply: we think that sentences like (11)-(13) can sound okay. David, the recurrent sleepwalker, can say: ‘I didn’t mean to be trying to open your door—I was sleepwalking again!’ or ‘I had no idea I was trying to open your door!’. The fact that speakers often don’t access the non-Anscombean reading when they encounter such sentences out of context does not show that there is no such reading. Many context sensitive words have readings that require more contextual clues than others.

2.3 Speech Act Verbs

We think that something similar happens with some speech act verbs. Consider ‘thank (someone)’. It is clear that ‘thank’ has at least one reading that is not Anscombean. Suppose I show my enemy a thank you sign in Japanese (a language that I cannot read). My enemy sees it, and they are pleased. I have thanked them. But I have not intentionally thanked them.

This shows that there’s a use of ‘thank’ on which it means, roughly, that you have done something that conventionally expresses gratitude, such as holding up a thank you sign in Japanese. Let ‘thank₁’ stand for this act type of conventionally expressing gratitude.

There is also a stronger use of ‘thank’ on which I do not count as thanking my enemy just by holding up a sign. Upon learning what the sign says, I might exclaim:

(17) Oh no, I wasn’t thanking you! I thought the sign said something much ruder.

Let ‘thank₂’ stand for this stronger sense of thanking. What does ‘thank₂’ mean? Plausibly, ‘thank₂’ means intentionally thank₁: to thank₂ is to intentionally do something that conventionally expresses gratitude. It is no coincidence that we can paraphrase (17) with ‘mean’ or ‘intend’: ‘I didn’t mean to be thanking you! I thought the sign said something much ruder.’ You are not thanking₂ your enemy because you are not intentionally thanking₁ her.

This is not the place to defend a full account of thanking or of ‘thanking’. That would require saying much more about how speech acts work, and this is not a paper about speech acts. We will only observe that if something like what we’ve said is right, then ‘thank’ is partly Anscombean. If ‘thank’ sometimes means thank₂, and to thank₂ is to intentionally thank₁, then thank₂ is essentially intentional: whenever you are thanking₂ someone, you are intentionally thanking₂ them.

2.4 Lying

As a final example, consider ‘lie’. Sometimes we use the word ‘lie’ in a way that counts any false claim as a lie. ‘Where are the keys?’ my partner asks. ‘They’re on the table’ I reply. (That’s where I saw them last.) A few minutes later I look down and see them in her purse. ‘Oops! I lied—the keys are in your purse!’ I exclaim.

We are inclined to think this is a non-literal use of ‘lie’. If a friend asks ‘Why would you lie to your partner about her keys?’, I would respond ‘No, it wasn’t really a lie at all. I just meant that I was mistaken.’

If we set aside this non-literal use, it seems plausible that ‘lie’ is fully Anscombean. I ask my friend why he lied to me about his dog’s age. I would be surprised to hear that he wasn’t lying on purpose, or that his lying was a sheer accident. How could it be a sheer accident? If he tells me that he was confused, then we aren’t dealing with the literal use. If he tells me he blurted out the words without thinking, his lie would still be intentional, even if done without prior deliberation. If he tells me that he blurted out the words without even knowing what he was saying—maybe he’s still learning English—then he didn’t lie at all.

If lying is fully Anscombean, we can explain why by appealing to the fact that ‘intentionally V’ is fully Anscombean. Plausibly, to lie is to intentionally assert something false. Since ‘intentionally assert something false’ is fully Anscombean, it follows that ‘lie’ is too. Not everyone agrees that to lie is to intentionally assert something false. Some theorists say that intent to deceive is also required.¹⁰ But these theorists can still agree that ‘lie’ is at least partly Anscombean. For them, to lie is, roughly, to try to deceive by asserting something false. Since ‘try’ is partly Anscombean, ‘lie’ is too.

3 Objections

We began §II by showing that there are prima facie reasons to think ‘intentionally V’ is Anscombean. To move beyond prima facie support, we should consider possible counterexamples and objections. We start with purported counterexamples in §III.i. Then in §III.ii and §III.iii, we present and respond to two objections.

3.1 Purported Counterexamples

We can partition potential counterexamples into three types of cases. They differ in what your intentions are vis-à-vis intentionally Ving. In an *against* case, you are Ving intentionally against your intentions. Your intention is to V non-intentionally. Despite your intentions, you are Ving intentionally. And so you are unintentionally Ving intentionally. In a *neutral* case, you are Ving intentionally with neutral intentions. You do not intend to V intentionally, nor do you intend to V non-intentionally. And so you are not intentionally Ving intentionally. In a *for* case, you V intentionally, and you intend to V intentionally, yet your intentional Ving is caused in a deviant way by your intention, rather than the one planned. And so you are not intentionally Ving intentionally.

We argue that purported against cases and neutral cases are unconvincing on reflection: they do not succeed in showing that it is possible to be non-intentionally Ving intentionally. When it comes to for cases, our reasoning is different: there is a principled reason why for cases cannot even be constructed.

Against Cases

Here is a possible against case.

Breathe Naturally

Over the past minute, you have started paying too much attention to your breathing and are having trouble breathing unintentionally. You want to breathe unintentionally, and so you try to distract yourself from your breath. But you fail: your

¹⁰For defenses of the view that lying requires intent to deceive, see Lackey (2013). For objections, see Carson (2006) and Sorensen (2007).

breathing continues to be intentional. One might say that you are unintentionally breathing intentionally, since you intend to breathe unintentionally.

We are not convinced that you do intend to breathe unintentionally. What's clear is that you intend to cause yourself to breathe unintentionally. You intend to distract yourself—say, by working on your paper, or by doing some jumping jacks—thereby causing yourself to breathe unintentionally. Should we also say that you have another intention—an intention to breathe unintentionally?

We think we shouldn't. If you intend to breathe unintentionally, then you have an intention that it is metaphysically impossible for you to fulfill. In general, it is better not to attribute to others intentions that it is metaphysically impossible to fulfill—if we can avoid it. And in *Breathe Naturally*, we can avoid it. For we can explain your behavior by saying that you intend to cause yourself to breathe unintentionally. There is no need to appeal to an intention to breathe unintentionally.

It is impossible to fulfill your intention to breathe unintentionally because it is impossible to intentionally breathe unintentionally. This follows from the following more general principle.

Adverb Dropping

If you are intentionally Ving Z-ly, and necessarily, anyone who is Ving Z-ly is Ving, then: you are intentionally Ving.

Adverb Dropping is plausible: if you are intentionally running slowly, you are intentionally running. If you are intentionally dancing gracefully, you are intentionally dancing.

(Why restrict the principle to act types V such that, necessarily, anyone who is Ving Zly is Ving? Because without this restriction, there are counterexamples. Take adverbs of completion, such as 'partly' or 'halfway'. I can intentionally shut the door halfway without intentionally shutting the door. Adverb Dropping is not subject to this counterexample: if you are shutting the door halfway, you are not shutting the door.)

Adverb Dropping entails that it is impossible to be intentionally breathing unintentionally. For suppose you could be intentionally breathing unintentionally. Then, by Adverb Dropping, you would be intentionally breathing. And so you would not be unintentionally breathing after all.¹¹

Neutral cases.

In a neutral case, you are Ving intentionally with neutral intentions. You do not intend to be Ving intentionally. (Nor do you intend to be Ving non-intentionally.) And so you are not intentionally Ving intentionally.

¹¹See Wilson (1989) and Ginet (1990) for defense of an even stronger thesis—that, necessarily, if we intend to V, we intend to V intentionally. We are sympathetic to this claim, but we won't defend it here.

Why should we think neutral cases are possible? We will consider two arguments. We find neither compelling.

The first appeals to the following, somewhat vague constraint on intentional action: that if you are Ving intentionally, you must be thinking about your intentional Ving. Suppose I am intentionally drinking some water from the fountain. But I am not thinking about whether my drinking is intentional. Then—some may say—I intend to drink, but I do not intend to drink intentionally.

But intentionally Ving in a particular way does not require you to think about whether you are Ving in that way. Ballerinas can intentionally dance gracefully without thinking about whether their dancing is graceful.

The second argument appeals to a conceptual requirement on intentional action: that you are intentionally Ving only if you have the concept V. Consider an agent who has the concept V, yet lacks the concept *V intentionally*. Suppose she is intentionally Ving. By the conceptual requirement, she is not intentionally Ving intentionally, since she lacks the concept *V intentionally*. But then she is a counterexample to our claim that intentionally Ving is essentially intentional.

We have two responses to this argument.

First Response. There are apparent counterexamples to the conceptual requirement. A toddler can intentionally steal my computer—she wants my attention—without having the concept *computer*. She can intentionally eat a legume—she loves peanuts—without having the concept *legume*.¹²

Second Response. Concede the conceptual requirement. But deny that there are agents who act intentionally yet lack the concept *intentional action*.¹³ We can imagine a few different arguments for this conclusion. Here is one that we find particularly persuasive. Necessarily, if you are Ving intentionally, you have some idea that you are Ving intentionally. To V intentionally is to V for a reason—to V in order to Z, to V because *p*, or perhaps to V for its own sake.¹⁴ But if I am Ving in order to Z (or Ving because *p*, or Ving for its own sake), then I must have some idea that I am Ving in order to Z (or Ving because *p*, or Ving for its own sake). And this entails that I am Ving intentionally. So unless I am somehow unaware of this obvious entailment, I also have some idea that I am Ving intentionally, and so I possess the concept *V intentionally*.

For cases.

In a for case, you V intentionally and you intend to V intentionally. But you are not intentionally Ving intentionally because your intentional Ving is caused by your intention to V in a deviant

¹²See Holguín & Lederman (ms) for arguments against a similar objection to their claim that ‘try’ entails ‘try to try’.

¹³Levy forthcoming argues on the basis of empirical work in developmental psychology (Saxe et al 2005) that the concept of acting intentionally is a very basic, ubiquitous concept, possessed even by infants.

¹⁴See Davidson (1963) and Anscombe (1957). Note that Anscombe herself allows that you can Ving intentionally for ‘no particular reason’. We ignore this complication here.

way, rather than the one planned.

Here is a classic case of deviantly caused, and thus non-intentional Ving: Davidson's mountain climber. Climbing down a mountain, the climber intends to drop down from a ledge. His intention unnerves him, and he starts to sweat. His grip on the ledge loosens, and he drops down accidentally. The climber intends to drop down from the ledge, his intention causes him to climb down from the ledge, and yet he does not drop down intentionally because the causation is deviant.

Can we find a structurally similar example of deviant intentional Ving?

We're not convinced that we can. In general, if we want to construct a case of deviant Ving, here's what we do. First we find an example of non-intentional Ving. Then we find a case in which that non-intentional Ving is caused by the agent's intention to V. The mountain climber loses his grip on the ledge and he accidentally drops down. This is caused by his intention to drop down, which unnerves him, causing him to lose his grip. But while we know what it is to accidentally drop down, we don't yet know what it would be to accidentally V intentionally. To come up with a case of deviantly caused intentional Ving, we would need to already have a non-deviant case of non-intentional intentional Ving.

3.2 Intention ad Infinitum

Consider what Bratman calls the 'Simple View' of intentional action: the view that if I intentionally V, then I intend to V. Although Bratman rejects the Simple View, it has many defenders.¹⁵ Given the Simple View, if intentionally Ving is essentially intentional, then whenever I intentionally V, I have infinitely many intentions: I intend to V, intend to intentionally V, intend to intentionally intentionally V, and so forth. Some will worry about this: how did I fit so many intentions inside my finite head?

We have two responses.

First, our view does not entail that you have infinitely many intentions, even given the Simple View. We say that to intentionally intentionally V just is to intentionally V. (Likewise, to intentionally intentionally intentionally V just is to intentionally V, and so forth). So there are only two things you intend to do: to V and to intentionally V.

Second, there is nothing unusual about having infinitely many intentions. I intend to draw a straight line that is more than two inches long. Then I also intend to draw a line that is more than one inch long, to draw a line that is more than one half an inch long, and so forth.

3.3 Objection: Control

A final objection concerns control constraints on intentional action. Some will worry that our claim that intentionally Ving is essentially intentional is in tension with a control constraint: that you are Ving intentionally only if your Ving is under your control.¹⁶

¹⁵See Bratman (1984) for arguments against the Simple View. See Amaya (2018) for a defense.

¹⁶Frankfurt (1978), Bishop (1987, 1989), Mele & Moser (1994), Wu (2016), and Beddor & Pavese (2022).

Some control constraints are formulated in terms of propositional knowledge. Beddor & Pavese (2022) say that your Ving is under your control only if you know you are Ving. We are not concerned to accommodate such views: we reject the practical knowledge thesis (§4).

Other control constraints are modal. Here is a particularly simple modal constraint.

Nearby Robustness

If S is Ving intentionally, then S is Ving in all nearby worlds where she is trying to V.

(We state the constraint using the progressive ('is Ving'), since the progressive formulation is what threatens the claim that intentionally Ving is essentially intentional.)

Nearby Robustness is in tension with our claim that intentionally Ving is essentially intentional. Intentionally Ving requires that there are no nearby worlds where I am trying to V and yet I am not Ving. But intentionally Ving intentionally requires more: that there are no nearby worlds in which there are nearby worlds where I am trying to V and yet I am not Ving. So intentionally Ving is not essentially intentional: I can be Ving intentionally without intentionally Ving intentionally.

We have two responses: one less conciliatory, one more conciliatory.

The less conciliatory response is that there are counterexamples to Nearby Robustness. Suppose I'm writing my name with a pen. Conditions are normal: the pen works, my hand is steady, and so on. But the pen has barely enough ink. If it had slightly less, I would not be writing my name. Nearby Robustness seems to say that I am not intentionally writing my name. But surely I am.¹⁷

We will not press this problem further, but instead turn to our conciliatory response. Some modal control constraints, such as Nearby Robustness, conflict with our claim that intentionally Ving is essentially intentional. But not all do. Compare: while some reliability constraints on knowledge conflict with the claim that knowing entails knowing that you know, others do not. For example, Goodman & Salow (2018) say that a belief is reliable if it is true in all worlds at least as normal as the actual world.¹⁸ This is compatible with the claim that knowing entails knowing that you know. In a similar spirit, we might endorse the following.¹⁹

Normal Robustness

If S is Ving intentionally in w, then S is Ving in all worlds at least as normal as w where S is trying to V.

Normal Robustness is compatible with the claim that intentionally Ving is essentially intentional because 'at least as normal as' is transitive. You are intentionally Ving only if there are no

¹⁷For similar examples, see Carter & Shepherd (2022), Shepherd & Carter (2023), and Holguín & Lederman (ms, §8).

¹⁸For other normal conditions approaches, see Stalnaker (2006, 2009, 2015) Greco (2014), and Goodman & Salow (2023).

¹⁹For a modal control constraint in terms of normality, see Valaris (2022).

worlds at least as normal as the actual world where you are trying to V and not Ving. You are intentionally Ving intentionally only if there are no worlds at least as normal as some world that is at least as normal as the actual world where you are trying to V and not Ving. But any world that is at least as normal as a world that is at least as normal as the actual world is itself at least as normal as the actual world. Intentionally Ving intentionally does not require more modal robustness than Ving intentionally.

To be clear, we do not endorse Normal Robustness. Like Nearby Robustness, it faces apparent counterexamples, such as the case of the nearly inkless pen. Our point is just that the claim that intentionally Ving is essentially intentional is consistent with there being modal control constraints on intentional action.

4 Practical Knowledge

The claim that there are essentially intentional act types is a crucial premise in recent arguments against Anscombe's practical knowledge thesis (Piñeros Glasscock (2020), Beddor & Pavese (2022)). Beddor & Pavese say that we should give up on essentially intentional act types and preserve the practical knowledge thesis. We disagree: Anscombe's view that there are essentially intentional act types is in far better standing than her practical knowledge thesis.

4.1 The Argument from Anti-Luminosity

Piñeros Glasscock shows that one version of the practical knowledge thesis is inconsistent with certain plausible, and widely accepted, Williamsonian theses about knowledge. We present his argument in a simplified form.

Say that a proposition p is luminous for a subject S if and only if whenever p is true, S knows that p is true. It is natural to think that certain special propositions—such as propositions about our own phenomenal experiences—are luminous. If I am in pain or feel cold, then surely I can always tell that this is so by carefully attending to how I am feeling.

But Williamson (2000) gives a powerful argument—his anti-luminosity argument—that there are no (non-trivial) luminous propositions.²⁰

Anti-Luminosity

There are no non-trivial luminous propositions.

Briefly, here's how the argument works. Knowledge requires a margin for error: if you know p , then p must be true in all worlds that are very similar to your world. These very similar worlds are meant to be so similar that you cannot tell the difference between them and your own.

If this margin for error principle is true, then, as Williamson shows, there are no non-trivial luminous propositions. Why? If p is non-trivial, then there's a world w_1 where p is true that is very similar to a world $w_2 \dots$ that is very similar to a world w_n where p is false. Now suppose,

²⁰A non-trivial proposition is a proposition that is sometimes true and sometimes false.

for reductio, that p is luminous. Then, since p is true in w_1 , you know p is true in w_1 . By the margin for error principle, p is true in w_2 . By another application of luminosity, it follows that you know p in w_2 , and so by another application of the margin for error principle, p is true in w_3 . By iterating this argument many times, we reach the conclusion that p is true in w_n . But by hypothesis, p is false in w_n .²¹

Here is the version of the practical knowledge thesis Piñeros Glasscock targets.

Practical Knowledge

Necessarily, if you are Ving intentionally, you know that you are Ving intentionally.

Practical Knowledge says that the proposition that you are Ving intentionally is luminous for you. Anti-Luminosity says there are no luminous propositions. So Practical Knowledge is inconsistent with Anti-Luminosity.

In response to this argument, Beddor & Pavese reject Strong Practical Knowledge in favor of the following weaker thesis, which we call ‘Weak Practical Knowledge’.²²

Weak Practical Knowledge

Necessarily, if you are Ving intentionally, then you know you are Ving.

Weak Practical Knowledge does not say that the proposition that you are Ving intentionally is luminous for you, since it doesn’t say that whenever you are Ving intentionally, you know you are Ving intentionally. Practical Knowledge is consistent with Anti-Luminosity.

But it’s not consistent with Anti-Luminosity together with the claim that there are essentially intentional act types, as Beddor & Pavese observe. To see why, suppose V is an essentially intentional act type. Then:

1. Necessarily, if S is Ving, S is Ving intentionally.

By Weak Practical Knowledge:

2. Necessarily, if S is Ving intentionally, then S knows that she is Ving.

It follows from (1) and (2) that:

3. Necessarily, if S is Ving, S knows that she is Ving.

²¹Williamson’s argument has not convinced everyone. For objections, see Berker (2008), Wong (2008), and Stalnaker (2015). For a defense of Williamson, see Srinivasan (2013).

²²As Tomlinson (forthcoming) shows, Anscombe herself seems to endorse Practical Knowledge. On Anscombe’s view, when I am Ving intentionally, I know that I am Ving in order to Z, or I am Ving because p , or I am Ving for its own sake, or I am Ving for no particular reason. But all of these straightforwardly entail that you are Ving intentionally, on Anscombe’s view. Tomlinson also discusses essentially intentional action. She says: ‘All intentional actions, when we consider the forms of description that render them intentional, are essentially intentional.’ See Ford (2011) for a similar claim.

4.2 Rejecting Practical Knowledge

Given Anti-Luminosity, we have two options: reject Weak Practical Knowledge, or deny that there are essentially intentional act types. The first option is far more attractive than the second. The thesis that there are essentially intentional act types is intrinsically plausible, and much more plausible than Weak Practical Knowledge.

It is well known that Weak Practical Knowledge is subject to counterexample. Here is a counterexample that we find especially compelling. My house is out of water. I go outside, in the middle of the pitch-black night, to replenish the water supply by operating the pump. I believe the pump is working; my landlord told me it is. I know how to replenish the water supply; I've done it before. And the pump is working, so I'm replenishing the water supply.

Then I am intentionally replenishing the water. But do I know that I am replenishing the water? Not necessarily. I believe that I am replenishing the water, because I believe the pump is working. But suppose it turns out that I don't know that the pump is working. Maybe I don't know because my landlord often lies. Or maybe I don't know because I'm surrounded by broken pumps. If I don't know the pump is working, I don't know that I am replenishing the water.²³

Friends of Weak Practical Knowledge often point out that it is stated in the present progressive ('is Ving').²⁴ It is easier to know that I am replenishing the water than that I have replenished the water or that I will replenish the water. This is because that I am replenishing the water doesn't entail that I have replenished the water or that I will replenish the water. Perhaps I start to replenish the water supply, but then I am interrupted and never return. (Compare: that I am crossing the street does not entail that I have crossed the street or that I will cross the street. Imagine that a bus hits me and I never make it across.)

Appealing to the present progressive may help with some apparent counterexamples to Weak Practical Knowledge. But it does not help with the pump example. If I don't know the pump is working, it's not just that I don't know that I will replenish the water supply; I also don't know that I am replenishing the water. For I am replenishing the water only if I can start to replenish the water. And I don't know that I can start if I don't know the pump is working.²⁵

Those who defend Weak Practical Knowledge must bite the bullet and deny that I am intentionally replenishing the water. Is it worth it to bite the bullet? No, because Weak Practical Knowledge is still in trouble: that is the lesson of the anti-luminosity argument. Defenders of Weak Practical Knowledge must also either defend the luminosity of intentional action, or deny the existence of essentially intentional act types. That cost is too high: the arguments for anti-luminosity and essentially intentional act types are powerful. The only remaining option is to deny Weak Practical Knowledge.

²³This kind of example is due to Schwenkler (2015). Similar cases can be found in Shephard & Carter (forthcoming) and Holguín and Lederman (ms).

²⁴See Falvey 2000, Thompson 2011.

²⁵See Szabo (2007) for defense of the claim that I am Ving only if I can start to V.

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