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## Acting Intentionally: Probing Folk Notions

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What is it to do something *intentionally*? Philosophical work on this question is motivated by a variety of interrelated concerns. In trying to understand and explain human action, a project that is as old as Plato and Aristotle, philosophers of action are concerned primarily with intentional actions. In discussions of freedom of action, intentional action also naturally occupies center stage. And although people are morally accountable for some unintentional actions, as in cases of negligence, moral assessment of actions is focused primarily upon intentional actions.

In my opinion, any adequate answer to my opening question will be anchored by common-sense judgments about particular hypothetical or actual actions. One can test attempted philosophical analyses of intentional action partly by ascertaining whether what these analyses entail about particular actions is in line with what the majority of nonspecialists would say about these actions. Although I doubt that common-sense *theories* about philosophical issues are likely to be much more successful than common-sense theories about topics in physics, economics, or psychology, I believe that we have good reason to take seriously common-sense judgments about whether an adequately described action is or is not intentional. Making plausible judgments of this kind normally is not a terribly demanding task; it certainly is far less demanding than constructing a plausible theory about the nature of intentional action. It is also worth noting that if there is a widely shared concept of intentional action, such judgments provide evidence about what that concept is, and a philosophical analysis of intentional action that is wholly unconstrained by that concept runs the risk of having nothing more than a philosophical fiction as its subject matter.

In a ground-breaking paper, Bertram Malle and Joshua Knobe (1997a) report the results of some empirical studies of the “folk concept” of intentional action. They write (p. 111):

In people’s folk concept of intentionality, performing an action intentionally requires the presence of five components: a desire for an outcome; beliefs about an action that leads to that outcome; an intention to perform the action; skill to perform the action; and awareness of fulfilling the intention while performing the action.<sup>1</sup>

In the first section, I will argue that this statement of necessary conditions for intentional action needs refinement. In the second and third sections, I will identify some additional issues one would need to explore in constructing a statement of individually necessary and jointly *sufficient* conditions for intentional action. I will conclude with a brief discussion of the conceptual analyst’s task.

### Testing Malle and Knobe’s Five Conditions

#### The Desire and Belief Conditions

Is it true that performing an action intentionally requires “a desire for an outcome and beliefs about an action that leads to that outcome”? Consider the following case. While happily doing some carpentry work in his workshop, John whistles a happy tune and enjoys his whistling. He is quite conscious both of his whistling and of his enjoying it. Is John whistling intentionally?

I believe that the great majority of speakers of English would answer this question affirmatively. (Obviously, we can ask people about this and see what they say.) But does John’s intentionally whistling the tune require that he have a desire for a relevant outcome and a belief to the effect that his whistling, or his whistling this tune, is a means to that outcome? Elsewhere (Mele 1992a, chapter 6), I have argued that the answer is No. Some of our intentional actions are not directed at any further goal—that is, any goal external to the action itself. John’s whistling may well be a case in point. Even if most intentional actions are directed at some further goal and therefore are plausibly explained in part by a desire-belief complex of the sort Malle and Knobe have in mind, we have no assurance that *all* intentional actions are like this.

Now, if we were to ask nonspecialists whether performing an action intentionally requires “a desire for an outcome and beliefs about an action that leads to that outcome,” we might well find that the great majority say Yes. But that finding, I suggest, should not carry nearly as much weight in the project of constructing an analysis of “the folk concept” of intentional action as the finding that the great majority deem John’s whistling intentional. After all, the general question about the dependence of intentional action on desire-belief complexes is more deeply theoretical than the question whether John’s whistling is intentional, and in thinking about the general question nonspecialists may focus exclusively on paradigmatic cases of action—that is, “instrumental” intentional actions, actions directed at a further goal.

In discussing their five conditions, Malle and Knobe indicate that desires and beliefs of the kind they mention contribute *indirectly* to intentional action: Desires and beliefs influence our intentional actions by influencing what we *intend* (p. 108). If my suggestion about John’s case is correct, it may be that some intentions are not produced by a combination of desire and instrumental belief, and that Malle and Knobe’s instrumentalist desire and belief conditions are dispensable in the case of intentional actions that execute these intentions. I should emphasize that the present worry is specifically about the *instrumentalist* nature of Malle and Knobe’s belief-desire constraint on intentional action—the idea that every intentional action requires a desire for an outcome and a belief that links the action performed to that outcome as (roughly) a means to an end. Plainly, if John’s end or goal in his intentional whistling act is the whistling act itself and he does not whistle for the sake of a further goal, then his intentional whistling act is not explained by a desire for a further goal and a belief that links his whistling to that goal. This leaves it open, of course, that there are alternative desire and belief conditions that accommodate intentional actions of the kind at issue.<sup>2</sup>

Some philosophers would object to Malle and Knobe’s desire and belief conditions on grounds having to do with “double effect.” (See, e.g., Bratman 1987; Harman 1976; 1986.) I myself am not such a philosopher, but the issue certainly merits attention. Consider this example (Harman 1976, p. 433): “In firing his gun, [a sniper who is trying to kill a soldier] knowingly alerts the enemy to his presence.” Harman claims that, although

the sniper “does not intend to alert the enemy to his presence,” he nevertheless *intentionally* alerts the enemy, “thinking that the gain is worth the possible cost.” Plainly, it is false that the sniper alerts the enemy because he has a desire for some relevant outcome and a belief that his alerting the enemy is a means to that outcome.

If Harman is right in claiming that the sniper intentionally alerts the enemy in this case, then not only is it false that Malle and Knobe’s belief and desire conditions are required for intentional action; it is also false that their *intention* condition is required—that is, intending to A is not a necessary condition for intentionally A-ing. But is Harman right? I doubt it. To be sure, Harman’s sniper does not unknowingly or accidentally alert his enemy. For that reason, many people may deny that the sniper *unintentionally* alerts the enemy. But that denial does not, in any *obvious* way, commit one to holding that he *intentionally* alerts the enemy. Perhaps there is a middle ground between intentional and unintentional action. Arguably, actions that an agent in no way aims at performing but that are not performed unknowingly or accidentally are properly located on that middle ground. They might be *nonintentional*, as opposed to *unintentional* (Mele and Moser 1994, p. 45; Mele and Sverdlik 1996, p. 274).

Empirical data on how people respond to cases of double effect would be useful in testing Malle and Knobe’s statement of necessary conditions for intentional action. Even if their instrumentalist belief and desire conditions are undermined by cases in which an intentional action is not directed at a further goal, these conditions—and their intention condition—may be quite consistent with common-sense judgments about what is done intentionally in cases of double effect. In any case, a comprehensive empirical investigation of the folk concept of intentional action should tell us whether that concept includes or excludes actions such as Harman’s sniper’s alerting the enemy.

### The Intention Condition

Does performing an action intentionally require “an intention to perform the action”? If asked, I suppose, most people would say Yes. But a more reliable test of what the folk concept of intentional action implies about the connection between intention and intentional action would feature judiciously selected examples of action.

I begin with some conceptual background. The conceptual connection between intention and intentional action obviously depends not only on what it is to do something intentionally but also on what it is to *intend* to do something. A relatively popular claim among philosophers is that agents intend at a time  $t_1$  to do something A at a time  $t_2$ —where  $t_1$  and  $t_2$  may or may not be identical—only if they believe at  $t_1$  that they (probably) will do A at  $t_2$ .<sup>3</sup> The proposal is designed to capture, among other things, the *confidence* in one's success that intending allegedly involves. A less demanding claim—one that I have defended elsewhere (Mele 1992a, chapter 8)—is that intending at  $t_1$  to do A at  $t_2$  requires that, at  $t_1$ , one *lack* the belief that one (probably) will *not* do A at  $t_2$ .<sup>4</sup> (The person might have no belief on the matter.) If there is a folk concept of intention, what it has to say about various alleged belief or “confidence” constraints on intention may be tested by eliciting lay responses to an appropriate range of cases.<sup>5</sup>

Consider the following scenarios:

(1) Because Karl would like to become an instant millionaire, he buys a lottery ticket. He knows that the odds against his winning the big prize are astronomical.

(2) Although there are no lotteries in Lydia's state, there is a weekly million-dollar contest for amateur golfers. Contestants pay a dollar for the privilege of taking a single shot at making a hole in one from a distance of 180 yards. Lydia has never hit a golf ball, but, desperately wanting to become a millionaire and thinking that there is a remote chance that she will make a hole in one, she enters the contest. She has seen golf on television, and she estimates her chances of holing her shot at about one in a million. As Lydia eyes the ball, she deliberates about how she might achieve her goal of making a hole in one, giving special attention to what club to use. She selects a three wood, lines up the shot, and then swings hard, with the goal of making a hole in one and winning the big prize. (Mele 1997a, pp. 22–23)

(3) Mary steps up to the free-throw line of a basketball court, knowing that her success rate from there is about 30 percent and believing that she is no more likely to make her next free throw than any other. She tries to sink her shot.

(4) Ned, in a practice session, is about to attempt to bench press 400 pounds. He has never bench pressed more than 390 pounds, although he has tried to do so many times, and he believes that his chance of successfully completing the present lift is quite small.

Leave it open, for now, whether these agents were successful. Did they *intend*, at the time at issue, to perform the featured actions?<sup>6</sup> What would nonspecialists say? There are a variety of ways of seeking lay responses to this question. Consider the following method (keeping in mind that I would defer to psychologists about technical details of an appropriate test). Subjects are given instructions of the following form regarding these cases (and some other cases in which agents are justifiably confident about their chances of success).

**Instruction set 1** Please rate the appropriateness of the following responses on a scale from 1 to 7 (where 1 signifies “highly appropriate” and 7 signifies “highly inappropriate”):

- (a) S wanted to A.
- (b) S hoped to A.
- (c) S intended to A.
- (d) S would be pleased if she (or he) were to A.
- (e) S does not care whether he (or she) As.
- (f) S would be relieved if she (or he) were not to A.

(S is a placeholder for the agent’s name. A is a placeholder for the action at issue—i.e., buying a prize-winning lottery ticket, hitting a hole in one, sinking this free throw, or bench pressing 400 pounds.)

My guess is that, in each of the four cases I have described, responses a, b, and d would receive significantly higher ratings than response c. Suppose that my guess were confirmed. Its confirmation would provide evidence that the state of mind of our imaginary agents fits the folk concepts of wanting and hoping better than it fits the folk concept of intending. If, as I should think, we would not find a similarly broad gap between wanting and hop-

ing, on the one hand, and intending, on the other, in cases in which the agents are very confident of success, that would be evidence that agents' assessments of the likelihood of the success of their attempts are relevant to the folk concept of intention.

Some readers may contend that it would be more productive simply to ask subjects whether the agents in my cases did or did not intend to perform the actions in question (e.g., buying a winning lottery ticket or hitting a hole in one) I think not. There is an unfortunate tendency to read and hear statements like "S does not believe that the Yankees will win" and "S does not want to run into Bill today" as entailing "S believes that the Yankees will not win" and "S wants not to run into Bill today." (Plainly, S might not believe that the Yankees will win while also not believing that the Yankees will not win. It is not as though, with respect to every proposition that we entertain, we must either believe that it is true or believe that it is false. Similarly, S might be indifferent about running into Bill today, in which case he neither wants to run into him nor wants not to run into him.) And a sentence like "Karl did not intend to win the lottery" might wrongly be read or heard as implying that he was somehow averse to winning it.

I return to intentional action. If there is a confidence condition on intention, even if it is only the "negative" one that I identified earlier (i.e., people intend to A only if they *lack* the belief that they (probably) will not A), the door is open to cases in which agents A intentionally even though they lack an intention to A. This is illustrated by the following two-part story.

**Earl's story, part A** Earl is an excellent and powerful bowler. His friends tell him that the bowling pins on lane 6 are special 200-pound metal pins disguised to look like normal pins for the purposes of a certain practical joke. They also tell him that it is very unlikely that a bowled ball can knock over such a pin. Apparently as an afterthought, they challenge Earl to knock over a pin on lane 6 with a bowled ball and offer him \$10 for doing so. Earl believes that his chance of knocking over a pin on lane 6 is very slim, but he intends to try.

(I interrupt the story here. Does Earl intend to knock down a pin? A plausible answer is that he does not, since he believes that his chances of doing so are very slim.)

**Earl's story, part B** Earl rolls an old bowling ball as hard as he can at the pins, hoping that he will knock down at least one. To his great surprise, he knocks them all down! The joke, it turns out, was on Earl: the pins on lane 6 were normal wooden ones.

Now, if intending to A entails lacking the belief that one (probably) will not A, then it is false that Earl intended to knock over a pin. Even so, other things being equal, I conjecture that most people would count Earl's knocking over some pins as an intentional action.<sup>7</sup> If there is a "belief" constraint of the kind at issue on intending, and if my conjecture is right, the folk concept of intentional action would seem not to entail that agents intentionally A only if they intend to A. Perhaps in some cases agents who intended to *try* to A and succeeded in A-ing are properly said to have intentionally A-ed, even if it is false that they intended to A.<sup>8</sup>

To be sure, sentences of the following sort have a jarring ring: "S intentionally A-ed, but it is false that S intended to A." Even so, it is plausible that Earl hoped and tried to knock down a pin while lacking an intention to knock down a pin. It is plausible, as well, that he intentionally knocked down some pins, given that he tried to knock some down, the pins and lane were normal, he used his relevant, excellent bowling skills in his attempt, and luck was not a factor.<sup>9</sup> People who would confidently reject sentences of the sort in question at first sight may be led to a considered endorsement of some such sentences after due reflection on cases.

Suppose that people presented with Earl's story in its entirety and tested for an assessment about intentional action favor saying that he intentionally knocked down some pins. If these people are then tested for an assessment of intention, they may infer from their previous answer and a (tacit) theoretical belief about the connection between intentional action and intention that Earl intended to knock down a pin. Would the effect of the hypothesized (tacit) theoretical belief be as strong in people who are first tested for an assessment of intention (using something like instruction set 1 above) and then tested for an assessment about intentional action? My hunch is that it would be less strong, but I would like to know. It should also prove instructive to give one group of subjects only part A of Earl's story and test for an intention assessment while giving another group of subjects the entire story and testing for an assessment of intentional action. My guess



is that on symmetrically constructed tests conducted in this way the score on “Earl intentionally knocked down some pins” would significantly outstrip the score on “Earl intended to knock down some pins.” At any rate, how lay folks would respond to Earl’s case is empirically testable, and further tests may show that Malle and Knobe’s claim about the intention component in the folk concept of intentional action is in need of modification.

### **The Skill Condition**

Malle and Knobe claim that, according to the folk concept of intentional action, performing an action intentionally requires “skill to perform the action.” I agree. In a paper offering an analysis of intentional action, Paul Moser and I argued for a skill condition on intentional action (Mele and Moser 1994). Now, on our view, the ordinary concept of intentional action is what philosophers call a “vague” concept. That is, it—like the concept of baldness, for example—lacks precise boundaries. There are clear cases of bald people and clear cases of people who are not bald, but there also are borderline cases. It is quite natural to think that, in cases of this last sort, the ordinary concept of baldness simply is not precise enough to tell us whether or not the individuals in question count as bald. Similarly, Moser and I argued that the ordinary concept of intentional action is not sufficiently precise to sort all actions into those that are intentional and those that are not. And one of the dimensions on which the ordinary concept of intentional action is vague, we argued, is the skill dimension.

If, under normal conditions, a basketball player with a 90 percent success rate on free throws tries in his normal way to sink a free throw and tosses the ball directly through the hoop, most people would say, I believe, that his sinking that free throw was an intentional action. Now consider my uncle Joe, an athletic blind man. Joe sinks about 2 percent of his free throws. Suppose that, under normal conditions, he tries in his normal way to sink a free throw during a contest with me and tosses the ball directly through the hoop. Did Joe intentionally sink the shot? I conjecture that most people would say No. What about Shaquille O’Neal, who sinks about 50 percent of his free throws? If he were to toss the ball straight through the hoop on his next attempt, would most people say that he sank that shot intentionally? I, for one, would like to know. And if most people were to say that Shaq intentionally sank the shot, would they be as confident about that as

they are in a parallel scenario featuring a superb free-throw shooter? In any case, the connection between “degree of skill” and intentional action merits investigation in a full-blown study of the folk concept of intentional action.

### The Awareness Condition

Malle and Knobe contend that, according to the folk concept of intentional action, performing an action intentionally requires “awareness of fulfilling the intention while performing the action.” I am not certain how they intend this condition to be read. Is the required awareness meant to include the awareness of the intention *as* an intention, for example? If so, there is a problem. Consider the following case. Upon seeing Nancy return from work, her 10-month-old son Otis excitedly crawls to her. Does he intentionally crawl to her? My guess is that the great majority of people would answer affirmatively. Was Otis aware of “fulfilling the intention [to crawl to her] while performing the action”? If the prevailing view that 10-month-old children do not have the concept of intention is correct, then Otis (an ordinary baby) is not aware of this intention *as* an intention. This leaves it open that he is aware of his intention as something or other. But is Otis aware of *fulfilling his intention*? That depends on how much conceptual sophistication such awareness requires. If it requires possession of the concept of fulfilling an intention and Otis lacks the concept of intention, he is not aware of fulfilling his intention. In any case, the awareness condition itself requires some analysis or explication.

Suppose that the awareness condition that Malle and Knobe have in mind is a very modest one. Imagine that being aware of fulfilling one’s intention to A, as they mean this to be understood, requires nothing more than intending to A now and being aware that one is A-ing now. Even then, their awareness condition is problematic. For example: Al knows that funny jokes and cartoons about cows have consistently made his young daughter laugh. When Al composes and sends a funny e-mail message about cows to his daughter with the intention of making her laugh, he is not then aware of making her laugh (although he is aware of composing and sending the message). Even so, under normal conditions and assuming Al’s expertise in making his daughter laugh, if he succeeds in making her laugh with his e-mailed joke he intentionally makes her laugh. More cautiously, I conjecture

that most people would count Al's making his daughter laugh in the present scenario as an intentional action. Of course, my claim leaves it open that intentional action requires awareness of *some* relevant activity.

### Sufficient Conditions for Intentional Action?

Malle and Knobe do not make the bold claim that the conditions they present as necessary for intentional action are collectively *sufficient* for intentional action. A search for sufficient conditions would lead us to some issues that I have not considered thus far in this chapter.

Consider the following case. Al intends to make his daughter laugh and has the necessary "skill to perform the action." He plans to make her laugh by composing and sending her a funny e-mail message, but he accidentally sends the message to his wife's e-mail address. As luck would have it, his daughter's e-mail connection is temporarily out of order and she is using his wife's e-mail account at the time (a rare occurrence); she sees the funny message from Al and laughs (cf. Mele 1992a, p. 151).<sup>10</sup> I believe that most people would deem the following sentence false: "Al's making his daughter laugh is an intentional action." The success of Al's attempt owes too much to *luck* (and hence is too accidental), I believe, for his making his daughter laugh to count as something he did intentionally.

Malle and Knobe rightly identify the need for a skill condition on intentional action. But even when relevant skills are used (e.g., comedic and e-mailing skills), "lucky success" may render the pertinent action unintentional. A full-blown study of the folk concept of intentional action requires an investigation of the role played by considerations of luck in common-sense judgments about cases of action, including cases in which the agent has the relevant skills.<sup>11</sup>

Assumptions about agents' background beliefs may play an important part in shaping common-sense reactions to some instances of lucky success. Consider the following case (Mele and Moser 1994, p. 51):

Young Thor grew up in a distant land in which a game, 'hoops', remarkably similar to basketball is the national pastime. The chief difference is that hoops is played without a backboard. On a visit to Los Angeles, Thor encounters basketball for the first time, noticing some skilled young men playing a hoops-like game in a park. He is surprised by the wooden slab to which the hoop is attached. It strikes him as simply a device to minimize running after wayward balls. He has not seen a shot banked

off the backboard; nor does it occur to him that the wood can serve this purpose. After joining the game, Thor is fouled and goes to the foul line with his standard hoops plan—a plan involving his shooting the ball *directly* into the hoop. He misses by a foot, hitting the backboard above the basket, and the ball bounces smoothly through the hoop. Thor is dumbfounded.

Did Thor intentionally sink his free throw? I would be curious to see how nonspecialists respond. It would also be revealing to compare lay responses to this case with lay responses to a related case in which an equally skilled *basketball* (as opposed to hoops) player shoots a foul shot with the plan of tossing the ball directly through the hoop but banks the ball in instead. Even if Thor and his counterpart (who is very familiar, of course, with relevant properties of the backboard) are equally lucky, the counterpart's sinking of his free throw may well get a significantly higher intentionality rating. If it does, it may be that the folk concept of intentional action is sensitive to agents' appreciation—or lack thereof—of ways in which modest departures of their actions from their plans do not preclude the success of their attempts.

Of course, luck, like skill, raises the issue of vagueness. A little luck need not stand in the way of an action's being intentional. Unbeknownst to Alex, there is a glitch in his phone that produces a mismatch between the number he dials and the number he contacts about one in a thousand times. So at least a little luck was involved in his contacting the person he intended to contact on his last call. However, this certainly seems consistent with his having intentionally contacted this person. If the probabilities were reversed, Alex's contacting the person he intended to contact would seem to be too lucky to be intentional. I doubt that there is a clear point of demarcation between intentional and nonintentional contact of the intended party in this "glitchy phone" scenario. The relevant vagueness would have to be accommodated in a full-blown analysis of intentional action.

### **Intentional Action and Morality**

Might the folk concept of intentional action treat morally significant and morally insignificant actions differently?<sup>12</sup> Might it have a lower threshold, for example, for the intentionality of "lucky" actions deemed morally wrong than for the intentionality of equally lucky actions deemed morally neutral? If so, this would complicate the project of capturing the folk concept of

intentional action in terms of individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions of an agent's performing an action intentionally.

Consider the following four cases.<sup>13</sup>

**Case 1** Fred, who has never fired a gun, is offered \$100 for hitting a distant bull's-eye that even experts normally miss. With a view to winning the money, he takes careful aim at the bull's-eye, fires, and hits it dead center. Fred has no natural talent for marksmanship, however. He fires 200 additional rounds at the target—with equal care and for larger cash prizes—and does not even come close.

**Case 2** In a variant of case 1, two details change. Fred's first shot ricochets into the bull's-eye off a rock situated 50 feet in front of the target. (Again he aimed carefully at the bull's-eye.) He fires half of the 200 additional rounds at the bull's-eye and half at the rock. (They all miss the bull's-eye, and the rock as well.)

**Case 3** Fred, who has never fired a gun, is offered \$100 for shooting a distant horse that even experts normally miss. The horse has been chained to a post in a field. With a view to winning the money, he takes careful aim at the horse, fires, and hits it in the head. Fred has no natural talent for marksmanship, however. He fires 200 additional rounds at another chained horse at the same distance—with equal care and for a larger cash prize—and does not even come close.

**Case 4** In a variant of case 3, two details change. Fred's first shot ricochets into the horse's head off a rock situated 50 feet in front of the horse. (Again he aimed carefully at the horse.) He fires half of the 200 additional rounds at the other horse and half at a rock 50 feet in front of that horse. They all miss the horse, and the rock too.

Imagine a study in which untutored subjects are asked to rate the appropriateness of an intentionality ascription on a seven-point scale. Half of the subjects (group A) are presented with cases 1 and 2 and asked about the appropriateness of the claim that Fred intentionally hit the target, and half (group B) are presented with cases 3 and 4 and asked about

the appropriateness of the claim that Fred intentionally hit the horse. Suppose that the subjects are *not* given the impression that the experimenters are studying the folk concept of intentional action. My hunch is that case 3 would evoke a significantly higher intentionality rating than case 1, that the same would be true in a comparison of case 4 with case 2, and that, even though case 4 involves more “luck” than case 1, it would evoke a significantly higher intentionality rating than case 1. If my hunch were confirmed, would that show that the folk concept of intentional action has a lower threshold for the intentionality of “lucky” actions deemed morally wrong than for the intentionality of equally lucky actions deemed morally neutral? Not necessarily. Most people, I conjecture, would feel inclined to pin some blame on the horse shooter. I conjecture, also, that, if the experimental design is such that the *only* way subjects can express blame is by means of an ascription of intentionality, there will be a significant inclination to make that ascription. Imagine a new group of subjects (group C) presented with the same cases as group B but given the following instructions about each case:

**Instruction set 2** Please rate the appropriateness of the following claims about this case on a 1 to 7 scale (where 1 signifies “highly appropriate” and 7 signifies “highly inappropriate”):

- (a) It was wrong of Fred to shoot the horse.
- (b) Fred deserves blame for shooting the horse.
- (c) Fred’s hitting the horse was more a matter of luck than of skill—good luck for Fred and bad luck for the horse.
- (d) Fred intentionally shot the horse.
- (e) Fred tried to shoot the horse.
- (f) Fred should be excused for shooting the horse, since his shooting it was just a case of beginner’s luck.

My hunch is that group C would give Fred’s shooting the horse a significantly lower intentionality rating than group B. If this hunch were confirmed, we would have reason to be suspicious about the reliability of the initial test.

Earlier, I said that an adequate analysis of intentional action—of what it is to do something intentionally—will be anchored by common-sense judgments about particular hypothetical or actual actions. However, an adequate analysis cannot simply be “read off” from such judgments. People occasionally make theoretical errors that taint their judgments about cases. For example, until they are caused to think with some care about the matter, many people may (tacitly) assume that an agent is blameworthy for doing something only if he or she did it intentionally. Such an assumption obviously may influence a person’s assessment of the “horse” cases, for example. And it is easy enough to show most people that, upon consideration, they themselves would *reject* the assumption.

Consider the following case: Bob got rip-roaring drunk at a party after work. When the party ended, he stumbled to his car and started driving home. He was very drunk at the time—so drunk that he eventually lost control of his car, swerved into oncoming traffic, and killed a family of five. Now, did Bob intentionally crash into this family’s car, or intentionally kill these people? The great majority would say No, and I believe they would also say that Bob is blameworthy for crashing into the car and for killing these people. Once this point is brought home to people who make these claims about this all-too-familiar scenario, they see that the assumption at issue is false—and false by their own lights rather than by the lights of an externally imposed theory. Subjects who have recently been led to see this point would, I believe, be more reliable judges about the “horse” cases than subjects who have not. It would be interesting to compare the responses of groups like B and C above to the “horse” cases to the responses of a group that had recently discussed the “drunk driver” case.

### Stalking Folk Concepts

Must any attempt to locate the (or a) “folk concept” of intentional action rest on unacceptable presuppositions about human beings? An opponent of the search for folk concepts may suggest that the project presupposes that people have tidy analyses or definitions of these concepts in their heads. However, the suggestion is mistaken. For example, one need not be in possession of a detailed analysis of intentional action in order to make reasonable judgments about whether particular (actual or hypothetical) actions

are intentional. An imaginary “conceptual analyst” attempting to formulate a particular person’s conception or understanding of intentional action would proceed by asking that person about the intentionality of a wide range of judiciously selected cases of action, including cases of the various sorts considered here. The analyst would then attempt to formulate a tentative statement of necessary and sufficient conditions for “S did A intentionally” that coheres with the person’s judgments about cases. If such a statement were to be formulated, the analyst would proceed to test it by asking questions of such a kind that certain answers would provide disconfirmation and others confirmation. (If significant inconsistencies were found, the analyst might look for their source. A *Socratic* conceptual analyst would make the person aware of his or her inconsistencies and see whether—and if so, *how*—the person found a way to resolve them.)

The procedure followed by a conceptual analyst in search of a collective conception or understanding of intentional action would be quite similar. Once again, there would be no presumption that any member of the group is in possession of a detailed, well-formed account of intentional action. Nor, obviously, would there be a presumption of a “group mind” that houses an analysis. Of course, a conceptual analyst will not find complete agreement about all cases of action, but thank heaven for statistical analysis!

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### Notes

1. In this volume, Gibbs argues that “many aspects of intentional . . . behavior are, at least partly, products of dynamic social interactions and not solely the result of privately held, internalized mental representations.” Notice that dynamic social interactions can influence a person’s intentional behavior by influencing her or his desires, beliefs, and intentions.
2. For example, it may be claimed that all intentions to A encompass a desire to A and, accordingly, that John desires to whistle the tune. On this idea, see Mele 1992a, pp. 169-70. I will return to belief shortly.
3. The proponents—some of whom omit the parenthetical qualifier—include Audi (1973, 1986, 1991), Beardsley (1978, 1980), Davis (1984), Harman (1976, 1986), and Velleman (1989). See also Moses, this volume.



4. Other alternatives include the requirement that S believe to a “degree” (even a degree associated with a subjective probability significantly less than 0.5) that he will A (Pears 1984, p. 124; cf. Pears 1985) and the requirement that S believe that “there is some chance that he can” A (Davidson 1985, p. 215).
5. Malle and Knobe (this volume) develop differences between folk concepts of intention and desire, some of which bear on the confidence issue (cf. Moses, this volume). Astington (this volume) offers evidence that 5-year-olds have a relatively good grip on both concepts.
6. In chapter 8 of Mele 1992a, largely on functional grounds, I defend an account of intention that portrays this mental state, roughly, as an executive attitude toward a plan (which plan, in the limiting case, is a simple representation of a simple action, e.g. flexing one’s right wrist). But, on nonfunctional grounds, I argue for a modest, negative belief constraint on intention. On this negative belief constraint, also see Malle and Knobe this volume. (Incidentally, in that chapter they seem to have a more robust notion of a plan than the one I just alluded to.)
7. This conjecture is subject to a qualification voiced in the final paragraph of this subsection.
8. For discussion of a distinction between intending to A and intending to try to A, see Mele 1992a, pp. 132–135 and 147–150.
9. I take it that it was not a matter of luck that the pins were normal wooden pins.
10. This is a simple case of “causal deviance.” For a variety of more complicated cases, and distinctions among types of causal deviance, see Mele and Moser 1994.
11. As I have observed elsewhere (Mele 1992b, n. 20), lucky success of a kind inconsistent with the relevant action’s being intentional is not always improbable success. “Bart, a normal agent, will win \$20 for throwing anything other than ‘snake eyes’ (two ones) on his next roll of a pair of normal dice. The chance of his throwing a non-snake-eyes roll is high. Still, assuming that Bart, hoping to throw such a roll, does throw one,” people would be disinclined, I believe, to claim that he intentionally throws non-snake-eyes. A plausible diagnosis of the disinclination (assuming that I am right about it) is that people take Bart to lack control over the dice of a kind required for the intentional throwing of a non-snake-eyes roll.
12. For discussion of a closely related issue, see Mele and Sverdlik 1996.
13. Cases 1 and 2 are from Mele 1992b, p. 363.