

# Endorsement, Reasons and Intentional Action

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ABSTRACT: In my opinion, Richard Moran's account of the connections between self-knowledge and intentional action presents a certain unresolved tension. On the one hand, the epistemic privilege of the first person derives from the fact that forming an intention is a matter of the subject endorsing a course of action. An endorsing subject is not a mere observer of her intentions. On the other hand, the transparency of endorsement is assimilated to the putative fact that an agent forms her intentions by reflecting on the reasons to make up her mind. The resulting picture is an extremely rationalistic account of intentional action. I will try to defend that this form of practical rationalism can be avoided without renouncing the basic intuitions behind Moran's use of the notion of endorsement.

Keywords: intentional action, self-knowledge, reasons, practical reasoning.

In my opinion, Moran's account (*Authority and Estrangement*) of the first-person way of knowing our own intentions presents a certain unresolved tension. I would say that it is the consequence of the strong assimilation he constantly makes between reasons for believing and reasons for action. The tension I have in mind is the result of two conflicting and, in the end, incompatible images. According to Moran, the epistemic privilege of the first person derives from the fact that forming an intention is a matter of the subject endorsing a course of action. An endorsing subject is not a mere observer of her intentions. On the other hand, endorsement is conceptualized as a matter of accepting certain reasons as good reasons to act. The resulting picture is an extremely rationalistic account of intentional action: a kind of account that, to be fair, is common to many other contemporary, anti-Humean accounts.

Whatever the problems for this overall picture are, the particular strategy that Moran follows seems to force him to accept the conclusion that any case of action against the agent's best reasons—or the reasons the agent thinks are her best reasons—is a case in which the agent's self-knowledge is impaired. As a general principle this does not seem to be true. I can calmly and lucidly decide to eat a chocolate cake against my best reasons without any obvious deficiency in my self-knowledge. In fact, I do think that Moran's overall use of the notion of endorsement does give him an excellent tool both to explain self-knowledge and to distance himself from the extremely rationalistic picture of intentional action that is common to many other contemporary accounts (Nagel, Quinn, Foot, Scanlon, Brandom). To do that, it would be better, in my opinion, to revise some of the connections he makes between endorsing a course of action and acting for reasons.

## I

Moran, as many other philosophers, takes for granted that intentional action (or normal, full intentional action) is action for reasons. And uses *this* notion of reason (i) in a



full normative sense and, also, (ii) as the crucial notion to explain the first person epistemic privilege on her intentions.

The description under which the action is intentional gives the agent's primary reason in so acting, and the agent knows this description in knowing his primary reason. This description is known by him because it is the description under which he conceives of it in his practical reasoning. It is the description under which the action is seen as choice worthy, as aiming to some good to be achieved...

It is an expression of the authority of reason here that he can and must answer the question of his belief or action by reflection on the reasons in favor of this belief or action. (pp. 126-7)

I think that this fully Anscombean conception of intentional action crucially equivocates on the meaning of "reasons in favor of action". In my opinion, the Anscombe-Moran principle that intentional action requires a "primary reason" could only be true under a teleological reading of "reason": to specify such a reason is just to specify the purpose, the goal of the action. By itself, this notion of primary reason does not guarantee any kind of relevant justification: it has nothing to do with considering that the goal is "choice worthy" or "good". Much confusion in contemporary literature is linked to this crucial equivocation: in the sense in which it is true that (full) intentional action is action for reasons, the term "reasons" is used in a very particular sense. And by connecting reasons with intentional action in this sense, you are offering an elucidation of a very particular sense of "reason", more than an elucidation of the notion of intentional action. You cannot take for granted that you are using an independent notion of reason, a notion that can clarify the notion of intention.

In my opinion, then, Moran's account can be described as one more instance of a certain trend in current anti-Humean literature. While he is right in the assumption that (normally) our own pro-attitudes are not reasons for action, he misinterprets the data that seem to support the idea that intentional action is action for reasons. Certainly, our own pro-attitudes are not normative reasons for action. Normally, our reasons for action are the content of certain pro-attitudes: certain fact-like entities, state of affairs, properties...<sup>1</sup> But you cannot combine this intuition with a conjunctive account of the phenomenon of motivation. To be moved by certain facts, or by the prospect of certain (possible) state of affairs, cannot be conceptualized as the conjunction of having a reason and being moved by it. This is an illusion that I call the "Davidsonian" or the "conjunctive" illusion. Motivation does not require the double phenomenon of recognizing some reason for action, and being moved in the relevant way by it.

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<sup>1</sup> I say "normally" because an important fact, that is misinterpreted by Humean accounts, is that many times the fact that we have a certain kind of desire does give us a reason to satisfy it. This is not what the Humean needs: in those cases, our reason is not the fact that we desire, but certain objective relation between the satisfaction of our desire and certain independent good (our well being, for instance).

## II

A good starting point is to try to describe a certain shared ground between Moran and me regarding the mistakes we attribute to our common opponent —the philosopher who defends a Humean theory of motivation. I certainly agree that, from the specific direction of fit that is proper to desires, you cannot get the Humean conclusion that desires are reasons for action. Even conceding that any case of intentional action can be explained by mentioning certain dispositions that have the direction of fit that is proper to desires, we still need an argument that could show that those dispositions are reasons. Why should they be conceived as reasons at all? Why are they states in which the world *must* fit, as M. Smith has said?<sup>2</sup> In the sense in which, let's say, any disposition is supposed to be a state in which the world *must* fit? Nobody can seriously argue that there is a sense of "reason" in which dispositions are reasons for their relevant displays, or that the world must fit in them.

Now, there is what seems to me a mistaken reaction to this flaw in the Humean account: just to assume that the apparent reason-providing role of desires must be guaranteed by the fact that we can only desire what we consider desirable, worthy, good...<sup>3</sup> Obviously, if this were the case, then we would reach a quite comfortable position: we could concede that desires play a crucial role in rationalizing intentional action, without conceding that desires are reasons. Desires could always (minimally) rationalize the formation of our intentions, just because desires would require the previous recognition of a minimal (normative) reason to desire the desired object. I do not think this is right: the obvious fact that a desire is not a simple disposition, does not ground the conclusion that a desire is a disposition for something that is considered as worthy. And the source of this illusion is connected to the Humean illusion about the role of desires in rationalizations of action.

Of course, desires can be mentioned in rationalizations of action. Facts and beliefs can also be so mentioned. In those rationalizations, we fix certain reasons the agent has. But they are a very special kind of reasons. By saying this, I am not accepting common, standard Humean conceptions about "motivating", as opposed to normative, reasons. The standard ways of introducing the distinction only justify the difference between having a reason and being in fact (minimally) motivated by it.<sup>4</sup> This can hardly count as a difference between two different kinds of reasons. On the contrary, in the sense of "reason" in which intentional action always requires acting for reasons, those reasons are just the content of the intention with which we act. Nothing more. They are not normative reasons to be motivated. They are not the fact that we are motivated. Even if *having* those reasons is *being motivated* in the relevant way by them, they are not the fact that we are in a certain motivational state. They are the content of certain motivational states. In fact, this is a teleological, very special, sense of "rea-

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. M. Smith, 1994, p. 116.

<sup>3</sup> Recently, this has been explicitly argued by Quinn and Scanlon. It is obviously implicit in Anscombe's *Intention*, and in Moran's own book.

<sup>4</sup> Cfr. M. Smith, 1987.

son". You cannot have those reasons, without those reasons guiding in fact your behaviour. They are generated by the mere fact that certain descriptions of our intentional action are better than others, insofar as they fix certain aspects under which our action was intended.

The grain of truth behind the idea that intentional action is (normally) action for reasons, is that intentional action accepts certain paradigmatic why-questions, questions that ask the agent to specify the content of the intention-with-which she acts. To avoid useless terminological discussions we can call reasons in this sense "CS Reasons": content-specifying-reasons. (By calling them "CS Reasons" I am neither assuming nor denying, to start with, that they have *all* the features that Anscombe and Moran would attribute to their "primary reasons". I am just assuming that they are the kind of reasons that are always present in intentional action.) In a crucial aspect, I guess, Moran and me, we are both in the same side: those CS reasons are not pro-attitudes of the agent (they are not her desires and/or her beliefs). They are features of the world—even in some extraordinary cases they can also be psychological features of the world. What does not follow, pace Moran and many other anti-Humean accounts, is that CS reasons are necessarily justificatory in any interesting and practical sense: normally their only justificatory role is to refine the description of the intention with which the agent acts: an intention can be re-described by appealing to certain CS reasons. On the very same grounds on which Moran is prepared to argue against many approaches to intentional action (Davidsonian, Humean) that accept that any proper case of intention requires independent pro-attitudes that are the reasons for which the agent acts, we must also defend that the reasons for which an agent acts (insofar as normal intentional action requires such reasons) do not have the role of justifying the agent when she makes her mind up. For those reasons are just the content of her decision.

To see this, let's consider the following answers to a typical why-question that an honest and knowledgeable agent might give, when asked by a friend in Girona station, to explain his presence there:

- (1) I have the intention of going to Barcelona tomorrow.
- (2) I am buying a train ticket because I have the intention of going to Barcelona tomorrow.
- (3) I am buying a train ticket because I want to go to Barcelona tomorrow.
- (4) I am buying a ticket for tomorrow's train to Barcelona because I have just remembered that tomorrow is the last day of the Caravaggio's exhibition in Barcelona.
- (5) I am buying a ticket for tomorrow's train to Barcelona because I have always desired to see Caravaggio's painting.
- (6) I am buying a ticket for tomorrow's train to Barcelona because I have read that tomorrow's is the last day of Caravaggio's exhibition.

- (7) I am buying a ticket for tomorrow's train to Barcelona because Caravaggio's exhibition is worth seeing.

I guess, it is obvious that, in the sense in which (1)-(3) specify a reason for action, the specified reason is just the content of the intention. (1) is an avowal of intention and I am prepared to happily accept most of what Moran says about the special, immediate, non observational knowledge of my intention. Look at (2) and (3). Moran would accept, I guess, that the very same kind of non observational knowledge is normally present here, regarding the true reason why I buy the ticket —my going to Barcelona, instead, for instance, of my going away from a nasty visitor at home. There is an even deeper agreement here: Moran would agree with me (see his discussion on what he calls “justificatory” reasons) that the true reason for my buying the ticket is, at least normally, not my having previously formed an intention of going to Barcelona, it is the content of this previous intention. In (2) and (3), in a normal context, the relevant reason why I buy the ticket is just the (content of the) intention with which I buy the ticket, the purpose, the goal, of my buying the ticket. The mechanism of avowing one's intention with the language of “I want...” (3) is quite common. In those contexts “because I want to...” seems to work as a teleological connective: it specifies the intention with which the agent acts, the goal aimed at by her action.

Cases (4)-(7) might look quite different. In them, a reference to the pro-attitudes or some intrinsic value seems to work as a way of specifying the reasons why the agent acts. There are of course certain differences, but, in my opinion they are systematically misunderstood in contemporary literature. It is true that (5) can be a conversationally appropriate answer to a paradigmatic why-question (“Why are you going to the station?”). The Humean is obviously impressed by (i) the fact that a similar answer —an answer that mentions desires, for instance— is always possible and (ii) the fact that desires seem obviously appropriate to explain behaviour —the “direction of fit” intuition. Moran says that the explanatory role of desires is not the relevant issue when we think in the reasons why we intentionally act: even if my desire causes my intention, the fact that I desire is not, at least not normally, my reason to act. And I agree. He would insist that in the relevant sense of “reason” in which we have an immediate, non observational knowledge of the reasons why we act, this knowledge cannot be explained by observation of a causal link between desires and intention/action. And I agree too —of course, this does not mean that there is *no kind* of causal link between desires and action.

It might seem that (5) is an appropriate answer to the typical why-question that asks for the reasons why we act. The diagnosis is quite simple: (5) is a perfectly appropriate way of conveying the relevant information about those reasons (the SC Reasons). But not because my desires are those reasons. It is because the agent is exploiting her conversational commitment to provide relevant information. She is just talking about the special causal antecedents of the action that are internally linked to the purpose that guides her. There are millions of causal antecedents of the action that might be mentioned, and that are, nevertheless, quite irrelevant for the information that has to be provided. By choosing this particular causal antecedent, the honest agent con-

veys information about the relevant kind of reasons she is being asked for: the CS reasons that fix the content of her intention. So we can nicely extend the kind of non-observational, immediate knowledge that is proper to pure avowals to the first person knowledge of the relation that is introduced by “because” in (5). This knowledge is not derived from a previous knowledge of the causal antecedents, it is because the agent knows her intentions that she can mention —among the many causal antecedents— one that conveys the content of the intention to the audience.

I do not think that Moran would object to anything I say in the previous paragraph. Otherwise, I do not see how he could argue against the thesis that (5) provides relevant information about the intention because it mentions a certain pro-attitude that is the reason for which the subject acts. Be that as it may, there is a crucial test in favour of my approach. Compare, now, (4), (5) and (6). According to most standard views about what is literally said, we can assume that they are not avowals, at all. And, as Davidson saw, the fact that I have had certain desires or that I have read something in a newspaper can hardly count as a reason that is necessarily effective. I could have had the desire without being moved in the relevant way by it. On the other hand we have the intuition that they are standard ways of conveying the intention, the goal, the purpose with which the agent acts. Both things are true. We can say that there is mechanism of conversational implicature by which the agent conveys her intention just by selecting as relevant a certain causal antecedent of the action. Our intuition that (4), (5) and (6) are ways of conveying CS Reasons goes hand by hand with our intuition that the agent tries to use this conversational mechanism. *The crucial test is: if the agent cancels the corresponding conversational implicature, then we are forced to stop assuming that (4), (5) and (6) convey information about the relevant CS reasons.* It is not only that the mentioned pro-attitudes are not the reasons for which the agent acted. It is that we lose an obvious right to consider them reasons in favour of what the agent is doing. For instance, the agent might add to (6):

Even so, I do not go to Barcelona with the intention of visiting the exhibition. I go there because I promised to my mother (who knows how much I like Caravaggio) that I will visit her before the end of the exhibition.

By doing this, she is not contradicting herself. Simply she has cancelled any right to assume that the intention was to visit the exhibition. And when this is true, we cannot assume that the desire of visiting the exhibition is a reason to do what she tries to do.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> It is important to see that I am not begging the issue against the Humean. He cannot say that I must show that the desire to visit the exhibition is not —still— a reason to visit it. For this is something that I do not necessarily deny. Sometimes, our desires can be reasons: when, given that we have the desire, its satisfaction is a good thing. That obviously depends on the kind of desire. Remember the dialectical setting of the previous paragraphs: the point here is that it is the Humean who needs to show that the universal possibility of mentioning desires as dispositions that rationalize actions gives those dispositional-like entities the status of reasons. Without this further move, he can only rely on the “direction of fit” argument. It is this necessary, complementary move what the present argument tries to block.

How does the first personal, privileged knowledge about our intentions depend on an special way of knowing our reasons for action? Well there is such dependence, but it seems useless for explanatory purposes, just because the reasons involved in such a knowledge are just what I have called CS reasons, they are just the content of our intentions. Let's compare (5) —the kind of answer that has certainly impressed Davidsonian and Humean philosophers, not Moran— with case (7), in which Moran would say that my knowledge of the reason because of which I act explains my knowledge of my intention. Against Moran, I will argue that (5) is not so different from (7) as it might seem. Of course, in (7) the content of the relevant intention includes the worthiness of visiting the exhibition: the exhibition is going to be visited under the aspect of being something worth visiting. But this is something that is conversationally implicated by (7) —in the same sense that the relevant intention is conversationally implicated in (5)— and something that goes beyond the mere fact that the agent recognises the value in visiting the exhibition (plus the fact that this valuable aspect causes his going to Barcelona).

In (7) the speakers' commitment to convey the relevant information about the purpose, about the CS Reasons, about the intention why she acts can be cancelled in exactly the same way as in (4-6)

The fact that the exhibition is worth seeing caused my promise to visit my mother before the end of the exhibition. So I am going there to visit her.

(7) specifies, in a normal context, the intention with which I act. A crucial difference with the rest of the cases is that the specified intention has a normative content: I intend to visit the exhibition under the description of it being something worth seeing. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the fact that it is considered by me as worth visiting fixes the intention. Not even the conjunction of the fact that (I believe) is worth seeing plus the fact that my belief on this valuable aspect causes my intention manages to fix my intention.

So, let's agree with Moran that there is a special, immediate, non observational first person knowledge about our intentions, about the purposes of our action, about the reasons because of which we act. There is a special sense of "reason" in which any case of intentional action is action for reasons. And there is some special immediate, non observational first person knowledge about those reasons. If I am right in the previous paragraphs, in the only sense in which intentional action is action for reasons, those reasons are just the content of the intention with which we act. Our knowledge of those reasons can hardly be used to explain our knowledge of our intentions just because they are just the content of those intentions. And, more relevant for Moran overall strategy: they are not the reasons why we act because of the fact that they are (conceived by us) as good or bad. They are not, at least not necessarily, normative or justificatory in any interesting sense.

Of course, sometimes it is the fact that they are good reasons that moves me: then it is this goodness that it is a constitutive part of (the content) of my intention. But this can hardly be a universal requirement of intentional action. And it is not possible to derive our first personal knowledge of our intentions from certain normative fea-

tures that we might discover in those reasons, independently of the more primitive fact that they are the purpose with which we act. In my opinion, there is no way in which the special transparency of our own intentions might be explained by our acceptance of any special feature, value, virtue of their objects, except the transparency of the fact that they are endorsed as our purpose-in-action. And, even if Moran masterfully explores this transparency, I do not think that he provides a satisfactory explanation of it.

### III

There is a tradition of anti-Humean literature that is obsessed with the idea that a good argument against the Humean is the fact that we usually have reasons for our desires or our intentions. Moran insistence in the peculiarity of “judgement sensitive” or “motivated” desires is a particular case (chapter IV). As many anti-Humeans (Nagel, Quinn, Scanlon) he suggests that this phenomenon shows that, at least in many normal cases of motivation, it is quite obvious that we need reasons of the normative kind to have certain desires. And certainly he says that in sound pieces of practical reasoning our desire does not survive to the absence of *those kinds* of reasons:

the presence or absence of justification makes a difference to the presence or absence of the desire itself, and the direction of the desire is in fact guided by the direction of his thought about what is desirable. (pp. 117-8)

There are many crucial differences between the concept of reasons for desires and the concepts of reason for action. In the previous sections, I argued that it is a mistake to assume that there is an interesting sense of “reason” such that any case of intentional action is a case of action for reasons, if they are not just CS reasons, the content of the intention for which we act. As I suggested there, a typical source of illusion is to equivocate about the meaning of standard avowals of the form “I want...”. Many times they are different from mere avowals of desire and they have all the marks of avowals of intention: for instance, in a normal context, I cannot insist that I still want to eat this cake *now* without even trying to eat it *now*. When Moran talks about “judgement sensitive desires” sometimes he seems to be thinking in “judgement sensitive intentions”. For dialectical purposes I will ignore the difference that does not affect the crucial point of my diagnosis: for all that Moran says, “judgement sensitive desires” is a way of referring to the (normal) incompleteness of (most) descriptions of our desires or intentions.

I think, then, that Moran misinterprets the phenomenon of those “judgement sensitive” desires. They require, of course, a sophisticated conceptual equipment: certainly small babies and animals cannot have them. To adapt one’s of Moran own examples, if I want to learn French because I am going to live in Paris and I think that being a fluent French speaker will make my life there much better, my justification for my desire/intention/plan to learn French and the presence of the desire/intention/plan itself seem to be fixed by certain future prospects in my life. It cannot survive my abandonment of the plan of living in Paris, when I learn that in fact I will not receive the expected funding. All right. Nevertheless, this is just a particular case of what I de-



scribed before as CS reasons: to say that I want to learn French is an *incomplete* description of my attitude that is refined when I say that I want to learn French as my chosen way of having a happier life in Paris. I want to go to the station now, because I want to go to Barcelona: my going to the station is only a part of my intention. The intention is better specified by describing it as my chosen way of going to Barcelona.

By itself, the phenomenon of refining the description of our desires and intentions does not introduce any normative notion (“desirable”) at all. If my plan/intention/desire of having a happy life in Paris would justify my learning French, for everything Moran says when he talks about “judgement sensitive” desires, my desire to kill someone would justify as desirable my buying an appropriate gun. This is something that, I guess, both Moran and me would consider as the most undesirable consequence. To follow this route is playing with fire: it is the first step to just reduce practical rationality to a mere theoretical knowledge about the instrumental connection between certain means and certain ends. Something that, I am sure, Moran does not like, at all.

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