Strategy (Part I): Conceptual Foundations

Abstract:
Strategies are mentioned across a variety of domains, from business ethics, to the philosophy of war, philosophy of sport, game theory, and others. However, despite their wide use, very little has been said about how to think about what strategies are or how they relate to other prominently discussed concepts. In this article, I probe the close connection between strategies and plans, which have been much more thoroughly characterized in the philosophy of action. After highlighting the challenges of analyzing strategies in terms of plans, I show how the work done on the connection between plans and intentions can inspire further questions about the nature of strategy. I conclude by showing how one particular innovation in the understanding of plans—how they can be more or less partial—can be used to help us to mark what makes for a good strategy.

Businesses, armies, and sports teams all act strategically, regularly employing strategies. The chain store adopted a strategy of cutting costs to offer lower prices than competitors. The army engaged in the strategy of waging a war of attrition, wearing down the stamina of the opposing military power. The basketball team used the defensive strategy of switching between zone and man-to-man to disorient their opponents. In these domains (and many more in life), strategies play a critical role in securing the success of our ends.

Despite the importance of strategy, the concept has been under-theorized in philosophy. Though talk of strategy is ubiquitous, one is hard-pressed to find the concept clearly discussed on its own in business ethics, the philosophy of war, the philosophy of sport, or even in game theory. Instead, the strategy at hand is often conflated with the actions taken, and we say that something was done 'strategically' interchangeably with saying that it was done 'on purpose.'

Here, I want to make a start towards analyzing the concept of strategy by considering how it is related to another concept that has garnered significantly more philosophical attention: the concept of a plan. I will argue that strategies are best thought of as the content of a kind of plan, a partial plan. Recognizing this will help to deliver a theory of strategies as well as to make clear what it takes to have a good one. We will also see (in the sequel to this article) how a proper understanding of the concept of strategy is critical across a range of applications.

1.   Strategies and Plans

The closest we have come to a deliberate understanding of strategy comes from the 19th century collection of writings from Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, in which he distinguishes strategy from tactics. He says, "…tactics *is the theory of the use of military forces in combat*. Strategy *is the theory of the use of combats for the object of the war*" ([emphasis in original], 1832/2019:book 2, ch.1). While influential, this won't do for a generalized conception of strategy (unless we take all non-war uses of the term to be

metaphorical).[1] If I can truly form and enact a strategy for grocery shopping for the week, then the concept of strategy must be broader than Clausewitz acknowledges. Even in Clausewitz, however, we can recognize the idea that a strategy involves not merely doing something towards some end, but theorizing about some series of actions and how they relate to that end. In this way, a strategy sounds very much like a plan that one has concerning what one will do and how those actions relate towards the achievement of some end.

It is not hard to get into the frame of mind on which strategies relate in some ways to plans.[2] If my strategy for getting an A on the exam is to study for an hour before bed every night, we would say that I have a plan for how to get an A on the exam that involves studying every night. And we would just as quickly say that the football team has a plan to win as we would say that it has a strategy for victory. Both strategies and plans are theoretical abstractions of some kind, *representations* of things to be done rather than identical with that which is done. In both cases, one can have a strategy or a plan and yet fail to act on it, perhaps out of cowardice or forgetfulness. And one can seemingly act without plan or strategy, perhaps out of habit.

Thinking of a strategy as a plan of action is no innovative in itself. Scholars particularly in the field of strategic management have been discussing whether we should think of strategies in this way for decades.[3] However, drawing this out is important, because in the past few decades philosophers have developed theories of planning and its relation to other concepts. Michael Bratman in particular has done much to investigate the concept of planning and to plumb its practical significance for cross-temporal agency, self-governance, and shared agency (e.g., Bratman 2014; 2018). An early innovation of his was to connect the concept of planning to the more widely discussed concept of intention. In his seminal *Intention, Plans, and Practical Reason*, he has this to say about their connection:

> Plans, so understood, are intentions writ large. They share the properties of intentions recently noted: they resist reconsideration, and in that sense have inertia; they are conduct controllers, not merely potential conduct influencers; and they provide crucial inputs for further practical reasoning and planning. (1987:29)

It is powerful to recognize the connection between intentions and plans, as work on the former can be leveraged to help understand the latter. By the same token, it would be powerful to recognize a connection between plans and strategies, as then the work on both plans and intentions could be leveraged to help us understand the nature of strategy.

Before we do this, though, let's pause to consider how to best understand the connection between strategies and plans. One way of spelling out this possible connection would be to think that strategies are best analyzed in terms of plans. We might say that something is a strategy if and only if it is a plan. This is short of the claim that the predicates 'is a strategy' and 'is a plan' refer to one and the same object, but it still posits an extremely close connection. Perhaps it's *too* close.

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[1] Clausewitz himself seems to conflate a strategy with the steps taken to enact the strategy, as he later defines strategy as "…the employment of battle to gain the object of the war" (*ibid.*:book 3, ch.1).

[2] This is much closer to how the concept is used in game theory. For instance, in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry on 'game theory,' Don Ross writes that "A strategy is a predetermined 'programme of play' that tells [the player] what actions to take in response to *every possible strategy other players might use*" ([emphasis in original], 2019). Though I think the strategy concept within game theory diverges somewhat from our natural understanding of it, the concept as its used in game theory may still be understood as understanding strategies as plans where those plans are maximally specified and non-partial in the sense to be discussed below.

[3] See Mintzberg (1994) for discussion of this history. Mintzberg himself is in fact *against* understanding strategies in terms of plans – construing them instead as closer to synthesized *visions* of managers about possibilities for the firm. That said, he is more concerned with the strategic process and with disabusing readers of the idea that strategic action must involve lots of activity specifically around the practice of planning. On his preferred view of strategy itself, then, it may be that strategies could still be understood along the lines of partial plans as discussed below.

We might argue that plans are not *necessary* for strategies—that something can be a strategy without being a plan. One place where we might find this would be in the case of 'emergent strategies,' instances where we find ourselves engaged in a particular strategy but without any prior planning. That is, we engage in behavior when pursuing an activity that comes to amount to a strategy as we go along. The process through which strategies seem to emerge within corporations has been discussed to some extent (Mirabeau & Maguire 2014), and it is a regular feature of many games that players might find a strategy along the way that fits with how they happen to have been moving. If strategies genuinely can emerge unplanned, then this seems to constitute a counterexample to the claim that plans are necessary.

Alternatively, we might argue that plans are not *sufficient* for strategies—that there can be a plan for something without there also being a strategy. I have plans for this Sunday. I will wake up whenever I happen to, get brunch with some friends, and hopefully find the will to write something in the afternoon. But it would seem odd to say that this is my strategy for this Sunday, or that I have a strategy for what I will do on Sunday. Similarly, I may form a plan to get up for some water after ten more minutes of writing, but this is no strategy. I am fortunate enough to not need a strategy for how to get water at home.

What can we say about these challenges? To some extent, we can push back against them. For the challenge to necessity, it might be a stretch to claim that plans too can emerge after all – the whole point of them is that they are forward-looking. However, we might well say that the actions constituting an emergent strategy are at least engaged in intentionally. The intent is not to be in conformity with the strategy (at least, not at first), but the agent will still be acting on intentions. If we follow Bratman in understanding a plan as a kind of intention, so we will still be saying that intentions of some kind are necessary in order for one to act on a strategy. Perhaps that's enough.

For the challenge to sufficiency, we might answer by watering down our notion of strategy. Sure, we typically talk of having strategies in fairly high-stakes contexts, where we face failure and must employ our strategy to help us to secure some prized end. But perhaps we should say that we do technically have strategies in more mundane contexts after all. It might be odd to say that I have a strategy for getting water in ten minutes, but maybe that's because the strategy to employ is so obvious that it's not worth mentioning. This isn't to say that there is literally *no* strategy that we use, only that we need not attend to our strategy or choose between them in determining how to act.[4]

Though these are things that can be said in the face of these challenges, I think we are better off learning from them to come to a better understanding of the connection between strategies and plans. Concerning the first challenge, it may be that an agent that has a strategy or that acts in such a way that a strategy emerges nevertheless acts with intentions, and plans are intentions writ large. Still, we need not bend over backwards to construe strategies as plans, as it can seem upon reflection that they are after all somewhat different kinds of things.

Metaphysically, a strategy seems to be a kind of representation—it is a representation of a sequence or pattern of actions[5] the performance of which by the agent might secure some end. As such, a strategy can be recognized and consciously adopted by the agent, or the agent might

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[4] In this way, our response would be similar to those that have argued that *all* actions involve *trying* (e.g., McCann 1975). We sometimes say that we could do some action 'without even trying.' For example, I may say that I can raise my arm without even trying. Though we may *say* things like this, philosophers have challenged whether it is true. All actions involve trying to perform the action, they maintain, though we only focus on our trying to do something when that thing is novel or especially difficult (and so when we must *concentrate* on trying). I take no stance on this question of the ubiquity of trying, but we might think similar considerations would speak in favor of the ubiquity of strategy.

[5] This may include a program for deciding how to act (as is more familiar from the game theoretic understanding of strategy mentioned in fn.2.

haphazardly perform actions that in fact can be represented as leading the agent to achieve some end. But there can be strategies for achieving ends that perhaps no agent will ever recognize or act on.

Plans *can* be representations. Or, at least, in referring to a plan we often mean to refer to a representation. If I say, "What's the plan?" I am asking about the content of what it is that we will do. Even if I say, "Where are the plans?" referring to the architectural specs, these are also representations of what is to be done. However, the term 'plan' is ambiguous between the abstract representation of action and the mental state that does the representing.[6] Taking plans to be intentions writ large, after all, means that we take them to be mental states, as intentions are mental states. In contrast to strategies, we do not say that there are plans for achieving ends that no agent will recognize or act on, since plans are the plans of *somebody* for doing *something*.

It is because of this ambiguity that we might find ourselves going back and forth on whether strategies are plans. Thinking of plans as representations, they seem quite similar; but they seem distinct when we see plans as mental states, as strategies aren't mental states. So, instead of saying that strategies and plans refer to the same things metaphysically, perhaps it would be better to say that strategies are representations that can constitute the content of plans.

I say that strategies *can* constitute the content of plans because if we are convinced by the second challenge, then we may say that we can have many plans the content of which don't amount to strategies. My plan for a relaxing Sunday, remember, may involve no genuine strategy. Accepting the counterexamples to sufficiency, we might take this to call us to constrain the type of action or end that requires strategies. And I think it is right for us to do this. If an end is immediately achievable, if, for instance, the end is just the performance of some basic action itself, then it is achieved just by acting. The end of blinking is achieved by blinking, no strategy needed.

Critical to our adopting a strategy is our having in mind a goal that from our epistemic position it is possible to achieve, but where from our position achieving the goal is not inevitable (we will not reach it no matter what we do). It also must seem that the goal might be achieved in at least one way. It might be that the goal can in fact only be achieved in one way, by employing a very particular strategy. Or it might be that goal is in fact impossible for us to achieve. It may even that it is trivial for us to achieve the goal—we can employ a strategy towards its achievement so long as it does not *appear* trivial. If we do not know what activity will in fact secure the end, and it seems to us that there are options that might or might not secure the end, then these are strategies that we must weigh adopting. So, critical to the circumstances of strategy adoption are that we aim at some goal that is achievable from our perspective, where are presented with options, and where we risk failing to achieve the goal. In this way, plans with strategies involve the assumption of risk.

2.   Further Theoretical Questions

The stronger motivation for considering this topic involves our coming to a better understanding of what makes for a good strategy and with finding further helpful ways of applying the concept of strategy across a variety of domains. That said, even appreciating the connection between strategy and plans is already enough to raise a number of fascinating further theoretical questions.

First, we might ask after the difference between acting *from a strategy* and acting *strategically*. Within the subfield of philosophy of action, there is a debate concerning whether an action done *intentionally* must be done for or caused by an *intention*. The so-called Simple View of Intentional Action

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[6] Bratman himself began his discussion of plans by recognizing this ambiguity and resolving to use 'plan' purely in the mental state sense (1987:28-29).

states that intentionally ϕ-ing entails an intention to ϕ, for instance (e.g., McCann 1987; Amaya 2018). Others have argued that intentionally ϕ -ing only entails an intention of some kind, perhaps an intention to try to ϕ (as Bratman himself maintained [1984]).

Given this debate, we might wonder about possible parallel principles for strategic behavior. If an action is performed *strategically*, does this entail that a strategy is in place of which that action is a part? Or does it merely entail that there is a strategy being acted on? Or, might it be possible to act strategically without any strategy whatsoever, perhaps if one is simply acting in a somewhat calculated manner (a way amenable to future strategies although not in line with any strategy in particular)? More generally, we can ask which of these principles is true and whether this bears on the debate in the context of intentional action.

A second question we might ask concerns whether the formation of a strategy is *itself* part of the strategy. This question has been significant within the field of strategic management, where much of the work done on this topic concerns the degree to which firms should invest in strategic planning, and how much power management should cede to strategic planners (Mintzberg *op. cit.*). Again within philosophy of action, however, this question mirrors the question concerning the self-referentiality of intentions: If we say that I intend to raise my arm, and that this intention is supposed to cause me to raise my arm, then we may think that I intend to raise my arm *by this very intention*. The content of this intention might be taken to refer to the intention itself, and so this and other intentions would be self-referential. The debate is thus over whether intentions are in fact self-referential in their content. (See Harman [1976] and Searle [1983] in favor of self-referential intentions, and Mele [1987] and Kapitan [1995] against.)

Strategies as understood above constitute the content of plans, rather than having content themselves,[7] but we can similarly wonder whether part of them represents the strategy itself. It seems that many strategies do contain ways in which the strategy will be engaged with or evolve as action continues, or that a solid strategy begins with careful consideration of what the rest of the strategy should be going forward. Before going shopping, after all, the first step is often: Make a list of what to get! So, I leave it to the reader to judge whether all strategies represent themselves as a part of the strategy, how they are represented, and what this can tell us about the self-referentiality of intentions.

A third and final question we might ask concerns how to think about habitual or subconscious strategies. Most of the attention in the philosophy of action is to intentional actions that are the upshot of deliberation, or that seem caused by mental states like beliefs and desires. However, philosophers have growingly been interested in exploring how unconscious or habitual actions can nevertheless be construed as intentional (e.g., Douskos 2017; Owens 2017; Lumer 2017). It is thus open to us to ask whether and when such behavior can be construed as strategic as well.

As one example, coping mechanisms may be behaviors that we engage in subconsciously towards some end. Can such conduct be viewed as amounting to a strategy (e.g., as a way to avoid past trauma)? Is this strategic behavior for which we can bear some degree of responsibility? By answering these questions and others, we can deepen our own understanding of our responsible agency.

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[7] This may be the difference. One point is that intentions don't just tell us what to do; they *motivate* us to do those things. (And, critically, we *intend* for them to be so motivating.) And though my firm's strategy day might motivate the team to work hard once the strategy is in place, it is odd to think of the strategy itself (the pure representation of conduct) as being motivating. But perhaps there are other reasons why a strategy would be facilitated by self-representation.

3.   *Partial* Plans and *Good* Strategies

In the space remaining, I want to show a special way in which the work done on plans can help us to understand strategy, as well as what makes for a *good* strategy. In his original discussion of plans, Bratman goes on to show how plans as they are often made are typically not completely filled out at the start. He says,

> …our plans are typically *partial*. Suppose I decide this morning to go to a concert tonight. I do not settle all at once on a complete plan for the evening. Rather, I decide now to go to a concert, and leave till later deliberation about which concert to go to, how to get tickets, how to get to the concert in ways consistent with my other plans, and what to do during intermission. Later, as time goes by, I fill in my plan with specifications of means, preliminary steps, and more specific courses of action. Of course I am aware when I first decide to go to the concert that my plan is importantly incomplete. But I know that for now only a partial plan is needed; I can fill it in later as required. ([emphasis in original] *ibid.*)

Though the notion of a partial plan is intuitive, it's worth noting two things. First, despite being 'partial' plans, they do not necessarily pick out a proper part of a larger plan (nor being partially committed to the plan).[8] Above, going to the concert is the whole plan alright, it's just that certain features of the plan remain indeterminate. You certainly aren't doing anything *besides* going to a concert, but all the details aren't yet settled.

Second, partial plans may be even more common than Bratman conveys. Our plans will almost always be partial *to some degree*. Even the most detailed plans leave room for creativity in execution, and the plan may only become fully formed as it's being executed. So, plans will generally be more or less indeterminate as they are made and communicated.

This naturally leads us to the question: Why would we make a plan that is more or less indeterminate, more or less partial? What considerations bear on precisely how partial the plan should be? Bratman has an answer to these questions insofar as he takes us to need partial plans because of the natural limitations of our cognitive abilities. He says,

> …we need to coordinate our activities both within our own lives and socially, between lives. And we need to do this in ways compatible with our limited capacities to deliberate and process information. Further, given these same limitations we need a way to allow prior deliberation to shape later conduct. This argues for being planning creatures…[T]he world changes in ways we are not in a position to anticipate; so highly detailed plans about the far future will often be of little use and not worth the bother. (29-30)

Making plans that are too detailed is a waste of time, and we can't handle extremely detailed plans and continuously augmenting them anyway. Apart from our limited nature as individuals, Justin Snedegar has recently brought out the utility of partial plans for cooperative enterprises:

> …there are reasons to form partial plans not deriving from our contingent limitations. One such reason…has to do with the importance of *stability* of plans. Since both the agent herself and those with whom she must coordinate need to use her plans as fixed points in reasoning about what to do, it is important that plans are stable, and not constantly being reconsidered or abandoned. Highly specific plans are more likely to need to be abandoned in the face of new information…Relatedly, partial plans are more likely to be compatible with our other plans and with the plans of others with whom we need to coordinate. ([emphasis in original], *op. cit.*:602)

Obviously, if plans are *too* partial, then agents risk failing to do the work to fill them in or failing to coordinate appropriately. But these advantages are strong considerations in favor of having

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[8] As Snedegar (2017:fn.6) observes, this notion of partial plan is distinct from other notions of partial mental states developed in the literature, such as Holton's (2008) notion of a partial intention (also discussed in Archer [2017]).

sincerely partial plans at times. More generally, it introduces us to the kinds of considerations that bear on having a plan that is partial to a greater or lesser degree. This is important for our discussion here, because it sets up a nice way of thinking about the considerations that bear on what makes for a *good* strategy.

If we try to think about what makes for a good or successful strategy, a natural starting point is to think of it in terms of how likely we are to achieve our end given the strategy in question. Strategies lay out sequences of actions meant to achieve some end, where (it seems) that end is not guaranteed. If strategies do not guarantee ends, then acting in accordance with them will raise or lower the subjective probability of our achieving the end in question. And so, we could in principle rank strategies by how likely it would be to us that we would achieve the end if they were followed.

Though a natural way to think about how to rank strategies, it is important to distinguish how likely a strategy is to lead to success *if followed* from how likely we are *to be able to successfully follow it*. Strategies may lay out a sequence of actions that we are in principle capable of performing, but some strategies will be harder to execute than others. (Just ask any ice skater choosing between routines for a competition.) So, a good strategy does not merely depend on the probability of success if followed; it also depends on the probability that those employing it can follow it.[9] By the same token, we can see that failure to achieve some end may come about because the strategy was flawlessly executed yet did not result in success or that agents were not able to fully implement the strategy.

Once we recognize the importance of the connection between the strategy and the competence of those attempting to follow it, we can see how helpful it is to think of strategies as (the contents of) partial plans. Partial plans can save time, respect our cognitive limitations, and facilitate coordination. Their being less committed to fine-grained details can additionally allow for greater flexibility in execution, should the situation change.[10] These are elements that make it more likely that the plan will be seen through in action. But the plan will fail if it is too partial. It will be too sketchy to actually inform conduct or insufficiently detailed to facilitate our collaboration. Given this, we can ask: How partial of a plan should a good strategy be?

And the answer to that question will obviously depend on the situation. If I am an expert chess player forming a strategy for victory, then it can be a highly specific and technical strategy that won't be understandable to non-experts of chess. But if I am a manager forming a growth strategy for our company, then a successful strategy may look quite different. It may need to be much more general so that it can be successfully communicated to audiences with different expertise and then referenced constantly to keep employees on task. In the chess case, the strategy will be something that any player could do in the right circumstances, so it becomes much more important that I conceal the strategy from my opponent. In the corporate case, it may be that the strategy is quite hard to act on, but it is something that our firm is uniquely positioned to pursue given our current assets, in which case it may not matter if our competitors discover it.

So, unsurprisingly, there won't be an answer to the question of what makes for a good strategy, apart from the generic answer that the right strategy needs to be specific enough to actually guide conduct while general enough to be maximally understood by engaged parties. Where this line is depends on the talents and risk appetite of the agent as well as the competitive landscape. And, even

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[9] I leave aside considering exactly *how* the goodness of a strategy depends on these factors. Though it may sometimes be that case that the best strategy will simply be the strategy where the product of the likelihood of success and the likelihood of following is highest, many factors might complicate the calculation. For instance, it could be that there is a strategy that is very likely to lead to the achievement of some end if followed, and agents are very likely to be able to follow it, but deviation from the strategy is also possible and will result in failure; whereas there are other strategies that do not have as high of a chance of leading to the achievement to the end if followed, but slight deviations from those strategies are themselves less likely to lead to failure. These considerations and others would complicate the ranking of strategies.

[10] Snedegar (2019:688) offers some of these suggestions about the uses of partial plans, and their role in deliberation.

still, a strategy that *will* succeed doesn't yet tell us whether we *should* engage in it, whether there are certain moral constraints on the strategies we take up, or whether or not there are contexts were it might even be bad to be strategic in the first place. But we are getting ahead of ourselves. In the sequel to this article, we will consider these questions along with a range of other issues in the application of the concept of strategy across business, war, and sport.

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