

The Will as Epistemic Faculty

Central APA | Feb 25 2022
Juan S. Piñeros Glasscock (Georgia State University)

Topic: What is the relation between intentions/intentional action and belief/knowledge?

2 standard views:

- *(Standard) Cognitivism:* Intentions are beliefs. If one acts intentionally the intention constitutes knowledge.
- *Inferentialism:* Intentions and beliefs are different kinds of mental states. If one acts intentionally, one may have inferential knowledge of one's action.

My view

- *Token-level cognitivism:* Intentions are not beliefs, but they might be; as such, they might constitute knowledge.
 - Metaphysical & Epistemic component.

1. MOTIVATIONS FOR COGNITIVISM

- (1) Practical knowledge: single state that constitutes both practical and epistemic commitment. ("The will is a capacity for practical knowledge" (Setiya 2009, p.131))
 - i. Knowledge is constituted by belief.
 - ii. "The cause of what it understands": constituted by an intention.

- (2) Rational constraints on intentions.

- (3) Expressions of intention in assertoric form:

P1. Intentions are ordinarily expressed through assertions.

P2. Assertions express beliefs.

C. So, intentions are beliefs.

- Problems with P2: expressivism?
 - But: Moorean paradoxes; Testimonial chains.
- Invalid: a single utterance may express more than one mental state.

2. PROBLEMS WITH COGNITIVISM

- (4) Counterexamples.

Martial Arts: Jack has been taking martial arts lessons for a month. As part of his training, he has been learning how to break slats of wood by striking them with his hand. So far, after hundreds of attempts, he has been able to break a single slat of wood only once. One day, his friend challenges to try breaking 7 slats of wood at once, offering \$1000 as a reward if he succeeds. Jack knows the feat would be really hard even for his very experienced trainer, and almost impossible for him. Still he takes up the challenge and swings down with his hands trying as best he can to imitate his instructor's moves. As it happens, he breaks up the 7 slats of wood, and wins the bet.

(5) No practical reasons for beliefs / practical reasons for intentions.

- Schwenkler & Marusic (2018, p.315ff.): practical belief?
 - Qs give us individuation conditions (Hieronymi; Shah and Velleman).
 - Minimal functionalism: Different types of states.

(6) Differing correctness conditions.

- Beliefs: true/false. [absolute]
- Intentions: (more or less) satisfied. [graded]

Plausible verdict: (4)-(6) undermine both cognitivism and its motivations...

...except for (1)?

-But is (1) just a phenomenological illusion? (Paul 2009, "How we know what we're doing")

3. ASSERTORIC COMMANDS AND TOKEN-LEVEL COGNITIVISM

Anscombe's doctor: "nurse will take you to the operating theater" (*Intention*, p.3).

- Assertion+command.
- But not: assertions are commands!
- Rather: a single utterance can be both an assertion and a command.

Token-Level Cognitivism (key claim): a single representational state, *S*, can be both a belief and an intention ('BI-states').

What does this mean? (cf. a single utterance can play the role in the linguistic economy that defines intentions +commands).

Toy functionalist model:

Belief	Intention
Inputs: Theoretical reasons/perception.	Inputs: Practical reasons/plans.
Outputs: Other beliefs/actions/attitudes.	Outputs: Action-control/planning.

- Can account for (1): The states that constitute practical knowledge are BI-states.
- (4) is no problem (B and I can come apart).

But (5), (6) still seem like problems: seems like a single state couldn't be a B- and a I-state!

OBJECTIONS FROM REASONS [CORRECTNESS CONDITIONS]

P1: Intentions can be held on the basis of practical reasons [have graded correctness conditions].

P2: Beliefs can't be held on the basis of epistemic reasons [have absolute correctness conditions].

C: So, a single state couldn't be a belief and an intention.

Response: Illicit extensional assumption (Reasons version):

- i. x is formed for reasons R_1, R_2, \dots, R_n .
- ii. $x=y$.
- iii. Therefore, y is formed for reasons R_1, R_2, \dots, R_n .

Intensionality of reasons ascriptions (in x, y positions).

Case: Mercedes' quick and loud lecture.

TRUE

- (7) The reason M. speaks loudly is to be heard by the large audience.
- (8) The reason M. speaks quickly is to be able to pick up her child from childcare.
- (9) M's speaking loudly = M.'s speaking quickly.

But FALSE:

- (10) The reason M. speaks quickly is to be heard by the large audience.
- (11) The reason M. speaks loudly is to be able to pick up her child from childcare.

Intensionality of correctness conditions

Case: Burton's sound but aggressive objecting.

TRUE

- (12) Burton's objecting to the argument's validity was correct.
- (13) Burton's objecting to a student so aggressively wasn't fully correct.

FALSE

- (14) Burton's objecting to a student so aggressively was correct.
- (15) Burton's objecting to the argument's validity wasn't fully correct.

N.b. Hard to see how this strategy could be employed by standard cognitivists since they hold that *what it is to be an intention is to be a belief* (cf. what it is to speak quickly is to speak more words/time than some salient threshold).

4. WHY A SINGLE WORLD?

If intentions are not beliefs, why integrate our cognitive and practical lives through a BI-state? (cf. Velleman's complaint against Bratman).

The rational pressure to conjoin beliefs is a pressure to fuse them into a single characterization of the single world that all of them aim to fit. ... As before, however, the question is why my intentions must be jointly executable if I can be agnostic as to whether they will be executed. If I can have a plan without believing that it will be carried out in this world, why should I confine myself to planning for a world in which it is carried out? (Velleman, "What Good Is a Will?", sec.6)

Attempted Response 1: Computational costliness.

- Worry: Having several practical world-pictures is common (Paul, "Plan B").

Attempted Response 2: Knowledge is a good thing, and BI-states ground practical knowledge.

- *Problem:* Why care about *practical* knowledge? (cf. learning something by testimony vs. by perception).
 - Though, Schopenhauer: “The philosophical thought *par excellence*” (ctd. in O’Shaughnessy, 1999; cf. Harman on beliefs from practical reasoning)

Final response: (Normally) Where practical knowledge can be had, no other knowledge could be had.

Knowledge Suppression: If *S* knows that *p*, then *S* can rule out every relevant alternative where *not-p*.

‘Practicable affair’ = An affair that *S* takes to be under her control=a question that *S* takes it can be settled by her intention. (e.g. *whether I will drink a sip of water before the talk is over*).

Kantian Fact of Reason: If *whether p* is a practical affair for *S*, then (a) both *p* and *not-p* are relevant alternatives for *S*, and (b) *S* can only close those alternatives from the standpoint of an intention.

Therefore, S can know about practicable affairs only from the standpoint of an intention.

Objections

-Are *p* and *not-p* relevant EPISTEMIC alternatives?

R/ Can’t draw this distinction with knowledge given its connection to action.

-Can’t one base one’s belief on an intention? (cf. knowledge of others’s actions)

R/ Not unless its already knowledge!

Selected References

- Anscombe, G. E. M. ([1957] 1963). *Intention* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Hieronymi, P. (2006). Controlling attitudes. *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, 87(1), 45-74.
- Marušić, B., & Schwenkler, J. (2018). Intending Is Believing: A Defense of Strong Cognitivism. *Analytic Philosophy*, 59(3), 309-340.
- O’Shaughnessy, B. (1980). *The will* (Vol. 2): Cambridge University Press Cambridge.
- Paul, S. Plan B. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*.
- Paul, S. K. (2009). How We Know What We’re Doing. *Philosophers’ Imprint*, 9(11), 1-24.
- Setiya, K. (2009). Practical Knowledge Revisited. *Ethics*, 120(1), 128-137.
- Velleman, J. D. (2014). What good is a will. *Rational and Social Agency: The Philosophy of Michael Bratman*, 83.