

**MORE THINGS MERE MORTALS
CAN DO...**

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“THINGS MERE MORTALS *CAN* DO THAT PHILOSOPHERS CAN'T” (2015)



- Introduces the Intention Problem.
 - Stems from the tension between intending to ϕ and believing you won't ϕ .
 - Argued that while ordinary time travellers could (although never *would*) kill their grandfathers...
 - ...the more philosophical could not.
- “If I am right, then her inability to commit deliberate grandpatricide is only one such limitation on the philosopher (albeit an oft-discussed one)” (p. 25 fn4).
- Today – other limitations!

2 MERE 2 MORTAL

- The more you know (or believe), the less you can do.
 1. Intention Problem and WBR
 2. Overview of 2015
 3. Bilkings, deliberation, free will, moral responsibility
 4. Avenues of escape
- Problem for time travellers and those with particular kinds of foreknowledge (but does useful explanatory work).
- Affects everyone else, but not considered problematic.
- Tells us something about actions involving intentions/their role (beyond TT).

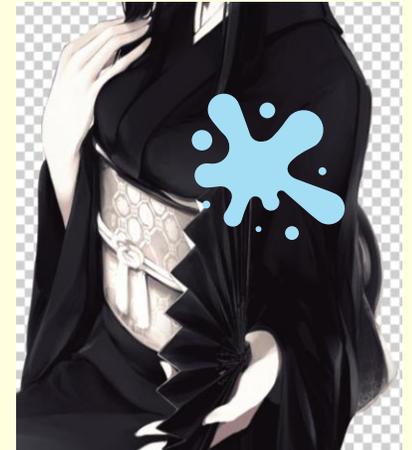


INTRODUCING ANNE

Anne stands in front of her wardrobe, apparently indecisive.

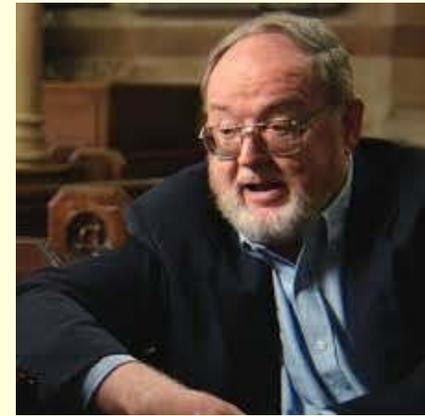
Her black kimono hangs freshly pressed, but her gaze is drawn to her green velvet suit.

- Anne can rationally deliberate on her options, form and act on the intention to wear either outfit.
- (Although circumstances might transpire against her)
- Anne can choose either option...
- ...even if it's true that Anne will wear the black kimono.
- But what if Anne is a time traveller?



THE INTENTION PROBLEM

- You can't intend to ϕ if you believe you won't ϕ
- If Anne believes she won't pick the green suit, she can't intend to.
- Three things to clarify:
 1. The type of **can't**
 2. Underpinning assumption (intention/belief)
 3. Why and when that's a problem
- Caveat: today, assuming the 'Simple View' is true (McCann).
- So a belief that you won't ϕ will rule out both intending to ϕ and intentionally ϕ -ing (contra Bratman).



(1) A RATIONAL CONSTRAINT

So, Anne can't rationally intend to pick the green velvet suit.

- The constraint on intention formation is a rational constraint, i.e.
- One cannot *rationally* intend to ϕ while believing one won't ϕ .
- Not that it's logically or metaphysically impossible.
- Related question: psychological possibility (cf. Smith 2007; Fernandes 2018) – depends on the connection between rationality and psychological possibility.
- Nonetheless, there is something (intuitively) psychologically *weird*.
- Many of the actions undermined are ones for which we'd want to be rational.
- I'll follow the literature in assuming that “agents can be *expected* to be rational for the most part” (Fernandes 2018).

(2) BELIEFS & INTENTIONS

- Widespread that there is a belief condition on intending.
- Disagreement about what the condition is.
- Some are very strong:

If one intends to ϕ , one believes one will indeed ϕ (Beardsley 1978; Grice 1971; Hampshire and Hart 1958)

- Others have argued for weaker, but still positive, belief conditions:
 - The belief there's a chance you will ϕ (Harman)
 - The belief that you might ϕ (Ginet)
 - The belief that there's a possibility that you will ϕ (Moya)



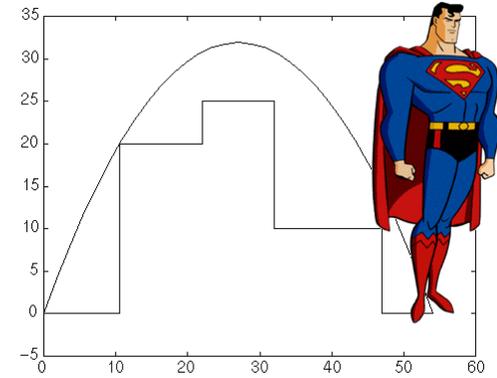
WEAK BELIEF REQUIREMENT (WBR)

- The belief requirement that generates the intention problem is even weaker.

WBR Intending to ϕ requires the absence of the belief that you will not (or cannot) ϕ .

- Negative requirement: we can be agnostic about whether a positive belief is required (or just a desire/commitment etc.)
- A necessary (rather than sufficient) condition.
- I'm stipulating it, rather than arguing for it, but:
 - At least some of the stronger conditions entail it
 - If WBR is false then a good chunk of action theory will need to be revised.

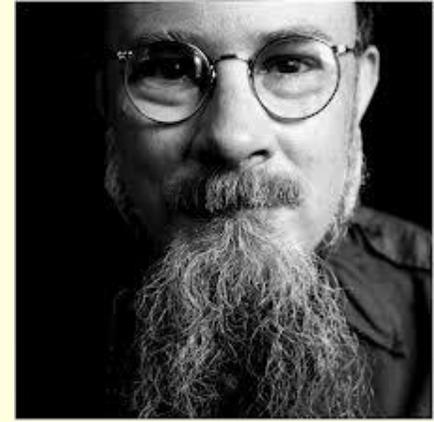
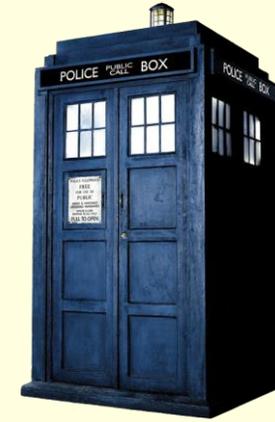
(3) WHEN IS IT A PROBLEM?



- Presuming we're rational agents, the intention problem stops us forming the intention to do lots of things.
- The more you know, the less you can do.
- None of that seems problematic.
- But there are cases where the tension generates unexpected consequences, most vividly:
- When agents have beliefs about the future as the result of info/abilities we don't ordinarily expect (e.g. time travel, crystal ball), and...
- Where the abilities impeded are ones we *would* usually expect them to have.
- Those will be my focus today.



MERE MORTALS V PHILOSOPHERS



Lily wakes up with a bright idea and a grandpatricidal gleam in her eye.

With the help of her trusty time machine she will venture into the past and murder her infant grandfather...

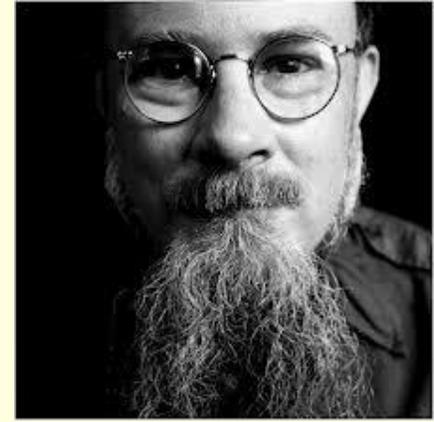
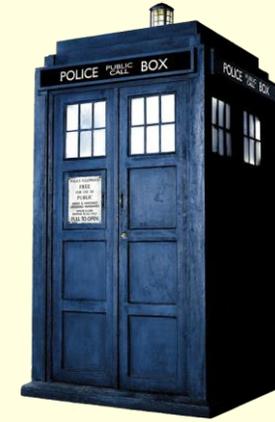
- Time travel literature tends to assume 4D framework (Lewis 1976) and possibility of backwards causation.

**I DON'T ALWAYS TIME
TRAVEL TO THE PAST**



BUT WHEN I DO, I DID.

MERE MORTALS V PHILOSOPHERS



Lily wakes up with a bright idea and a grandpatricidal gleam in her eye.

With the help of her trusty time machine she will venture into the past and murder her infant grandfather...

- Time travel literature tends to assume 4D framework (Lewis 1976) and possibility of backwards causation.
- Given Lily's existence, we know she *won't* murder her grandfather.
- Debate over whether there's a meaningful sense in which she *can*.
- If we only consider facts about her abilities and opportunities, Lewis says she *can*.
- I say, if she's a philosopher, she *can't*: murder requires intention.

“According to Lewis, Lily can kill her grandfather. She ‘has what it takes... [Lily] is as much able to kill Grandfather as anyone ever is to kill anyone’ (1976: 149).

She won’t, of course and any philosopher should, upon reflection, believe as much.

But if Lily herself is a philosopher, and she believes (as she should) that time travellers will not murder their grandfathers, then she believes she will not murder her grandfather.

And given such a belief, she will not be able to form the intention to murder her grandfather...

murder requires an intention – mens rea – an intention precluded by the existence of a belief that any such attempt will fail.

So even if Lewis is right – and typical time traveller Lily, and other ordinary unreflective agents, can kill their grandfathers – a philosopher certainly cannot” (2015: 24).

THE INTENTION PROBLEM AND...

- Bilking
- Deliberation
- Free Will
- Moral Responsibility
- Consent/Promises

Two ways out:

1. Intending to Try
2. Abandoning Ship





BILKING ATTEMPTS

- Murder might seem uniquely vulnerable to the intention problem.

“There is no straightforward inference from limits on intention to limits on action.

This is why Rennick’s ([2015](#)) conclusion in a similar case is limited to Tim’s ability to *murder* young-gramps: murder, unlike most actions, explicitly requires intention” (Fernandes, 2018)

- If the Simple View is correct, then a whole range of intentional actions are undermined. (And perhaps even if it isn’t).
- Grandpatricide via time travel is one type of **bilking attempt**.
- Debate re the possibility of bilking attempts, what foils them, and whether they entail long strings of improbable coincidences.

BILKING ATTEMPTS (II)



- Although one can explain the failure of a single bilking attempt by means of a common-place reason, multiple attempts are thought to be harder to explain.
- Enter the intention problem.
- Although it only applies to rational agents with the requisite belief regarding their own failure –
- i.e. not the irrational or those unsure of the likelihood of their success –
- It's plausible to think that a time traveller who starts out unsure will come to doubt the possibility of success (after multiple attempts fail).
- When she comes to believe that she will not, or cannot, succeed, the intention problem will rear its head and prevent her making attempts.

BILKING ATTEMPTS (III)

- More generally, people have supposed there are limits on what time travellers can do...
- ...but these have proven difficult to argue for by appeal to free will or ability.
- The intention problem gives us a new way forward here.
- Also has a role to play in the debates on coincidence.





SELF-INTERACTION & RATIONAL DELIBERATION

- The intention problem affects not only *what* Anne chooses, but how she goes about choosing.
- It seems to undermine our ability to rationally deliberate.
- Smith (2005) points us in this direction by means of a problem similar in spirit.
- Suppose that rather than watching what outfit Anne chooses, TAnne has a chat.
- This would be weird for Anne, who should remember it ‘from the other side’.

“If the time traveller is about to fall silent, she remembers that too; if she is about to run screaming from the room because she is totally freaking out, she remembers that too. There is no escape: *whatever* she does next, she knows what she will do, before she does it (Smith 2005: 389).”

SELF-INTERACTION & RATIONAL DELIBERATION (II)

- Smith points to a similar tension, but focusing on psychological possibility:
“It would seem that it is psychologically impossible for someone to both know exactly what she is going to do next, and also deliberate in the normal way about what to do next (391).”
- But Smith thinks this is a problem specific to self-interaction: that seems too limiting.
- SI is just one context where agents know/believe “what they will decide to do, before they decide to do it (394)”.
- Instead of Anne, imagine her partner Dan time travelled and told her what she would (or wouldn't) wear.

SELF-INTERACTION & RATIONAL DELIBERATION (III)

“According to an ignorance condition on deliberation, agents can’t reasonably deliberate when they’re already certain of what they will or won’t do – when they ‘self-predict’ their own behaviour (or its intended results).

According to a distinct evidential norm, agents should be certain of what their evidence settles” (Fernandes 2018)

So if Anne has evidence that settles she will wear the black kimono, and if her beliefs conform to this evidence (either visual or testimonial)...

...she’ll be certain she won’t wear the green suit, and thus can’t reasonably deliberate on the matter.

“Insofar as time travellers [like Anne] are evidentially and deliberately rational, they won’t deliberate on parts of the future we would expect them to control in the actual world” (Fernandes 2018).



FREE WILL

- Generally, the intention problem doesn't undermine your free will.
- But there is a type of free will account that might be at threat – mesh accounts.
- Compatibilist accounts requiring a mesh or reconciliation between various mental states for an act/willing to be free.
- Different meshes are required under different accounts:
 - First-order desires and second-order volitions (Frankfurt)
 - Valuational system and motivational system (Watson)
 - Desires and general intentions (Bratman)
- Mesh accounts posit that free will is compatible with determinism and even fatalism...

FREE WILL (II)

- And yet, if the mesh includes intentions (explicitly, or as part of a bigger system), the intention problem could prevent an agent acting freely.
- Under other accounts of free will, our freedom isn't at threat by the problem.

However,

- There is a pervasive folk intuition that if someone knows your future, it undermines your free will.
- Generally I think this is mistaken (and I'm not alone).
- Nonetheless, one of the attractions of the intention problem is it points to a nugget of truth in the intuition: the more you know, the less you can do.

MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

- Ought implies can

Take rational David. David ought to ϕ .

David mistakenly comes to believe that he won't (or can't) ϕ .

So David can't intend to ϕ .

Thus David can't (intentionally) ϕ .

Ought David ϕ ?

- If yes, then ought doesn't imply can.
- If no, then we need to be really careful about what we believe and what we come to learn about the future.



WAY OUT #1: INTENDING TO TRY



- You might think that even if you can't intend to ϕ , you could intend to try to ϕ .
- We often use 'try' when there's doubt about an outcome.
- Some suggest a difference in belief underpins the distinction:

“[S]uppose Herbert's boat sinks. The nearest land is five miles away and Herbert is a poor swimmer.

Nevertheless, Herbert sets out with the aim of swimming ashore.

Does he intend to swim ashore? He certainly intends to try – but it would seem that more is required if he is flatly to intend to swim ashore.

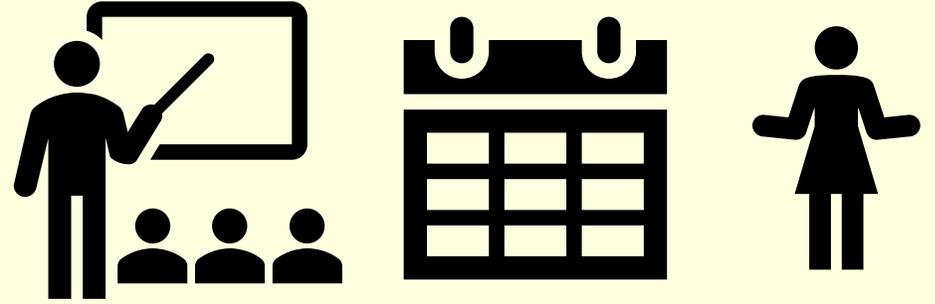
What more? Here again perhaps belief is needed. If Herbert is to intend to make it, he must get himself to believe he will make it.” (Harman 1986)

INTENDING TO TRY (II)



- But, assuming WBR, there is no difference between Herbert intending to succeed and intending to try –
- All that's required for the former is the absence of a belief in the attempt's futility.
- There are some exceptions – cases where what you try comes apart from what you intend to do (Hornsby 2010).
- In these cases, your reasons for trying come apart from your reasons for doing.
- Generally, intending to try will just be intending to do.

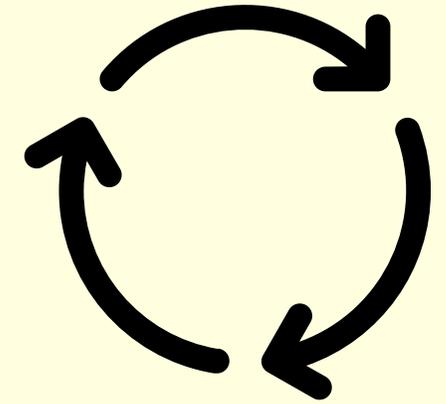
WAY OUT #2: ABANDON SHIP



- A potential solution from the Surprise Examination literature.
- Give up the belief you will fail and the intention problem won't arise.
- Voluntarily and deliberately adopting/abandoning beliefs mightn't be so simple.
- A fairly common response posits an oscillating, unstable circle of belief (Clark 2007; Goldstein & Cave 2008):
- Given Friday is the last opportunity for the exam, come Thursday evening the student

“[W]ill think, ‘So either there will be an exam which I expect or there will be no exam...’”

ABANDON SHIP (II)



“But in that case I can no longer be sure there’ll be an exam, since the teacher’s announcement cannot be fulfilled.

So it could be a surprise after all.

But then I must expect it, so it won’t be a surprise.’

This could go round and round indefinitely. In such an unstable position the pupil cannot be sure there will be an exam, so that if an exam does take place it will be unexpected” (Clark 2007).

- Cave echoes this point:

“Such reeling means that no stable belief can be reached. The reasoning loops round and round (Cave 2007)”

ABANDON SHIP (III)



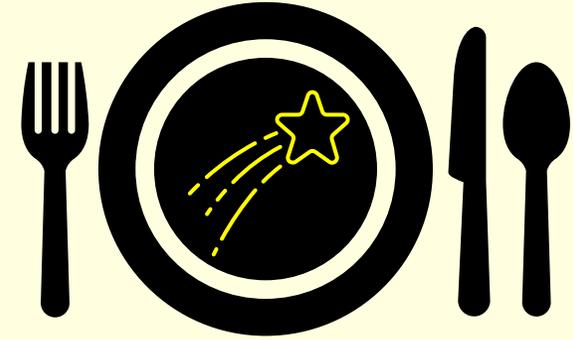
- One way out of the Intention Problem may be just such a reeling.
- Recall Anne, deciding on an outfit.
- The belief that she won't wear the green suit precludes her from forming the intention to wear it.
- But choosing an outfit hanging in her wardrobe is the sort of thing she is usually able to do.
- So she might start to doubt whether she really saw herself, and come to believe it's possible that she chooses green after all.

“One need only extricate oneself from the reasoning, doomed to be futile”
(Goldstein & Cave, 2008).

A LIMITED SOLUTION?

- But if Anne's belief was correct, then she will indeed pick the kimono.
- And if this scenario repeats, with her checking in on her future self...
- ...then her doubt might lessen.
- And then the intention problem rears its head again.
- Even if 'abandoning ship' is a promising avenue of escape from the intention problem, it reinforces its (surprising?) lesson:
- The more you know (or believe), the less you can do.

CONCLUSION



- Assuming even a weak condition on intention formation –

WBR Intending to ϕ requires the absence of the belief that you will not (or cannot) ϕ

- – You can't rationally intend to ϕ if you believe you won't ϕ .
- Given the role of intentions in so many of the acts we engage in,
- The more you know (or believe), the less you can do.
- So if you want to eat a star, it's best not to believe me that you won't.

THANKS!

"STATE YOUR NAME, RANK, AND INTENTION."

