Abstract

It is common in political science to assume a quasi-Humean picture of rational action. On this picture, an action is rational if and only if it is such as to be caused by a “rationalizing” set of mental states: the agent’s desire for some optimal outcome and her belief that this outcome will be optimally secured by the relevant action. In short, a rational action is to be explained by an agent’s considerations about its consequences. But this picture operates with a contestable assumption about how best to describe the putative outcomes that agents consider; it takes the conceived outcomes as agent-neutral or action-independent: as familiar sorts of states of affairs that do not include actions themselves. Rather, actions are allegedly explained by mental states whose description does not require further reference to action; instead, mental states’ contents are just standard propositional contents. But recent work in the philosophy of action in the Anscombean tradition has challenged the attractions of this picture, since an agent’s thought about intentional action cannot be reduced into standard propositional contents. This paper brings out this Anscombean challenge, so as to put into view a distinctive conception of political agency. It ends by applying this conception to two topics of concern to political theory: the so-called “paradox of voting”; and the question of consequentialism in normative theory.  

---

*Harvard College Postdoctoral Fellow, Committee on Degrees in Social Studies, Harvard University. Contact via <tontipl@fas.harvard.edu> or <tontiplaphol@gmail.com>. I thank Eric Beerbohm, Sean Ingham, Matthew Landauer, and Richard Tuck for helpful discussions of previous versions of this paper—though I am sure that they would chafe at much of what follows.

I have slightly revised this abstract, distinguishing it from the initial proposal submitted to MPSA.
“Willing, if it is not to be a sort of wishing, must be the action itself. It cannot be allowed to stop anywhere short of the action.” If it is the action, then it is so in the ordinary sense of the word; so it is speaking, writing, walking, lifting a thing, imagining something. But it is also trying, attempting, making an effort,—to speak, to write, to lift a thing, to imagine something, etc.

Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §615

The wanting that interests us, however, is neither wishing nor hoping nor the feeling of desire, and cannot be said to exist in a man who does nothing toward getting what he wants. The primitive sign of wanting is *trying to get*.

Anscombe, *Intention*, §36

We choose to get or avoid something good or bad, but we have opinions about what a thing is or whom it is good for or how it is good for him; we can hardly be said to opine to get or avoid anything.

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* III.ii
## Contents

1. Consequentialism: normative and explanatory 4

2. Standard stories: intentional action and rational choice 10
   - Excursus on our two questions 17

3. The Anscombean challenge 21

4. Causal deviance 43

5. Stressing agential desires 47

6. Challenging normative consequentialism 50
1

As everyone knows, the term “consequentialism” usually picks out a family of positions in normative theory. Crudely put, that family is marked by the view that certain familiar predicates—say, rightness, or wrongness, or goodness, or badness—apply fundamentally to states of affairs or outcomes: ways the world can be, in a sense clear enough from ordinary life. Examples of such ordinary states or outcomes include the following: this apple is on my desk; I am at the grocery; and G.W.B. was elected president. But in what sense do our familiar—moral—predicates hang on these ordinary ways the world can be? On consequentialist views, if some particular action is right or wrong, or good or bad, that fact is owed primarily to the value that some outcome bears. To

1 Of course, there are increasingly sophisticated forms of consequentialism that may seem to falsify my crude characterization, for example, that version articulated recently by Smith (2009). But forming an air-tight crystallization applicable to all theories that suggest the consequentialist tag is itself a philosophically vexed task, not least because sophisticated forms of consequentialism often allow for considerable interpretative dispute, owing to their sophistication. Moreover, the ceaseless iterations of amendment and counter-attack typically work to blur the distinction between consequentialism and its rivals, in such a way as to render opaque—except to the most stringent Kantian formalist—what it would nowadays mean to be a consequentialist, anyway. In light of the consequentialist menagerie, I think there is some sense in which we might all be consequentialists now; but it is unclear whether much has been gained by this kind of consensus. At any rate, as we shall see, the purpose of this paper requires only that some focal sense of consequentialism be kept in view. For similar characterizations of this focal sense, see Roedl (2010); Foot (2001); Sen (1979); Jackson et al. (2004).

2 Two related qualifications must be mentioned, so that I can set them aside. First, some theories—which we can call subjectivist—hang some normative predicates fundamentally on some form of expected value, whether more or less “laundered” by the canons of epistemic rationality. (“The action is right if and only if it is rationally expected to produce such-and-such a world, given the agent’s beliefs. . . , or perhaps given what the agent would or should believe, given suitable time and deliberative resources and. . . .”) Second, to whatever extent these predicates hang on a kind of hypothetical or counterfactual value, it might be apt to speak of the value that some outcome would bear. I do not think any of what follows meaningfully depends on these qualifications; so, to save words, I shall take these variations as captured by my simpler formulas. But it bears registering whether these subjectivist variations trade on the core motivations behind consequentialism. If one cares about making things go best, why hold that moral predicates apply just to how things might go? In principle, a world replete with moral rightness might be a very undesirable world. Now where’s the consequentialism in that? On laundered and subjectivist conceptions of rationality, see Pettit and Smith (2004); Elster (1983); Goodin (1986).
take an example ever more prevalent in popular discussions: If it is right for me to pull this trolley switch, what makes it right is the value, the goodness, borne by a way the world can be: the world in which some fact—that five bystanders live, at the expense of one unlucky rail worker—comes to obtain. And further, on what I take to be a radical form of consequentialism, if it is right for me to pull the switch, that fact is owed to the fact that it is right that five live, even at the expense of one.\footnote{I'm here thinking of the position taken by \textcite{Broome1999}. But what exactly is radical about it? On many consequentialist views, rightness might apply only to actions, while goodness, or some other evaluative but perhaps non-normative predicate, is supposed to apply to familiar sorts of outcome. Here we are to mark a difference between the scope of different sorts of evaluative predicates. But Broome argues that normative predicates apply to states of affairs or outcomes as well: that rightness—or “oughtness”—applies fundamentally to familiar ways the world can be, and not just to actions. For objections to Broome’s view, see \textcite{Roedl2010}.}

Generally, consequentialism’s critics have taken up two lines of attack. On the one hand, in the typical case, it is queried whether particular forms of consequentialism end up generating answers that fail to cohere with our considered reactions to the problems we might face in everyday life: a casuistic approach that presses consequentialism in the light of its tendency to provide what appear to be intuitively wrong judgments. On the other hand, a more metaphysical approach—perhaps familiar to readers of Philippa Foot and Peter Geach—queries the plausibility, and even the intelligibility, of supposing what I have singled out as consequentialism’s characteristic commitment: that normative or otherwise evaluative predicates hang primarily on familiar sorts of states of affairs or outcomes.\footnote{See \textcite{Foot2001} and \textcite{Geach1956}.}

In this paper, I shall not explore anything like the casuistic approach; but I will say something, near the end, about the second—metaphysical—kind of resistance to consequentialism.

Still—what might be surprising—this paper is largely unconcerned with the...
kind of consequentialism I have discussed so far; my focus is less on the idea that moral predicates hang on outcomes as it is on the idea that rationality hangs on an agent’s thought about them. I have sketched, albeit crudely, what we can call normative consequentialism in order to bring into view a different but parallel application of the term “consequentialism,” one that borrows from Daniel Hausman’s recent defense of this different but parallel family of views: explanatory consequentialism

On Hausman’s conception,

A model of choice is consequentialist if and only if: (1) An agent’s final preferences derive from (a) the agent’s beliefs about the properties or consequences of the alternatives, and (b) the agent’s preferences over these properties and consequences; (2) An agent’s choices causally depend on the agent’s beliefs and the agent’s final preferences among the alternatives that, given the constraints, can be chosen.

And, to clarify this somewhat dense description, Hausman immediately adds:

Given beliefs and distal preferences, economists derive final preferences. Through deliberation, attitudes spread out and transfer from consequences and characteristics to actions. The standard model of choice in economics is consequentialist. […] Consequentialism functions as a structure for explaining and predicting final preferences.

Now, as I’ve just suggested, there are many complications even in Hausman’s initial gloss. Moreover, I do not mean to suggest here that, as I use the term, explanatory consequentialism must be committed to all that Hausman says about it. Rather, my point is to underscore an explanatory strategy—one

---

1 See Hausman (2012).
2 Hausman (2012, 43), format modified.
suggested, if not demanded, by Hausman’s conception—that we can intelligibly call “consequentialist,” one that stands dominant, I think, not only in economics, but also in political science. Indeed, I think explanatory consequentialism dominates even our pre-theoretical and commonsense discourse about our own actions.

What marks this explanatory strategy? For a start, it holds that explaining an action can consist in validating a certain model of choice or action. This model requires that the relevant choice or action be caused by the agent’s thought—here understood as capacious enough to include what we colloquially mark as belief and desire—about ways the world can be: about familiar sorts of states of affairs or outcomes. Further, the model requires that the action be caused by a certain kind of thought: one that combines the agent’s beliefs about the action’s consequences and her “final preferences among the alternatives,” preferences which reflect the desirability, as the agent sees things, of various potential actions and their outcomes. Additionally, when the alternative that figures as most preferred among her final preferences is (or is seen to be) the alternative actually chosen, then we have, given that our other conditions obtain, an action of which explanatory consequentialism purports to offer a correct explanation. But, at this point, we can say that our agent did, or took herself to be doing, what she most wanted to do, because she most wanted to do it. So, finally, we can say what it should be at least facially natural to say: that our agent acted rationally. Where explanatory consequentialism applies, so applies, at least facially, an intuitive conception of rationality, too. In short, explanatory consequentialism will seem to carry rationality in its wake.

Moreover, on this intuitive conception of practical rationality—doing, as one

---

1 I should note that Hausman’s discussion does not explicitly involve talk of rationality, but he admits that this kind of view likely generates at least a necessary condition on rational choice: Hausman (2012, 44n7). See my discussion immediately below.
sees things, what one most wants to do—it will be hard to see how rationality can apply where explanatory consequentialism fails to do so. Note that there are at least two general ways for explanatory consequentialism to lose its grip on some agent’s bit of behavior, in line with Hausman’s two conditions from above: either the causal condition in (2) goes unsatisfied, or an agent’s final preferences do not reflect her non-final thought, in violation of (1). But, if one’s actions are not caused by one’s thought about what it would be best to do, then what one does will not seem captured in the net of what one most wants to do: one’s actions will not be suitably related to one’s desires. And, if one’s final preferences do not express one’s non-final thought, then one’s actions will seem insufficiently guided by stable and informative psychological states. In that event, even if there is some minimal sense in which one does what one most wants to do, two unattractive possibilities seem to open up: either what one does fails to reflect one’s belief about how things might go; or the idea of wanting to do something will lack application. But, if that idea lacks application, it becomes hardly intelligible that the idea of final preference finds a natural home. So, not only will explanatory consequentialism appear to carry rationality in tow; rather, it will seem to impose something like a necessary condition on its application.

Now there is certainly something unimpeachable about what I’ve dubbed explanatory consequentialism. Our familiar ways of thinking about practical rationality and the explanation of human action commit us to some kind of picture according to which what we do can often be explained by what we think; indeed, I do not wish to challenge here the general idea that human action can be caused by what we think. Nor do I mean to cast much doubt, at least here, on the notion that rational action must, in some sense, be caused by what we think it would be best to do. Many others have already challenged,
more or less famously, the view that action-explanation is typically a form of causal explanation, as well as the view that rational action must be understood as a form of optimization.¹

Rather, my sights are set on narrower ground; I want to examine the idea that rational action must be action caused—or however else explained—by thought fundamentally about ordinary sorts of states of affairs or outcomes. In other words, I want to suggest that explanatory consequentialism is likely to lead us to fill in an unimpeachable picture of rational action with disputable detail. In short, I will argue that the disputable picture suggested by explanatory consequentialism overlooks the basic—but easily forgotten—fact that rational action must be a kind of intentional action. What follows, then, builds on recent developments in the philosophy of action, in order to raise doubts about the attractiveness of the idea that rationality is primarily a function of agents' thought about desirable ways the world can be. I will suggest that the dominant conception of instrumentally rational action in mainstream social science—a conception embedded in explanatory consequentialism—gains its plausibility from whatever attractions a dominant but disputable picture in action theory holds out. If, however, recent developments in the action-theoretical tradition of G.E.M. Anscombe are right, the picture on which this conception rests must be abandoned. In short, trouble in action theory will make trouble for the interpretation of standard social-scientific conceptions of instrumental rationality.²

We are now in a position to see more clearly the parallel I’ve been aiming

---

¹ See, for instance, Winch (2008) and McDowell (2010).

² The bold text marks a revision that runs afoul of my promise to William Gorton not to issue a moving target. My apologies for this; but I trust that this revision can be taken on board with little more than logistical pain.
to draw between normative consequentialism and its explanatory cousin. If the former asks us to hold that familiar moral predicates apply primarily to ordinary sorts of states of affairs—ways the world can be, in a familiar enough sense—then the latter asks us to believe that rationality is a function primarily of our thought about similarly ordinary kinds of states or outcomes. The paper ends by suggesting how these two cousins might bear the same kind of congenital defect, as it were, such that challenging explanatory consequentialism risks the credentials of its normative counterpart. But, before raising this suggestion, I will try to make out how rejecting explanatory consequentialism opens up space for reinterpreting the seemingly ubiquitous instances of irrationality we find in political life. For now, though, since I want mainly to argue that explanatory consequentialism depends on implausible theses concerning intentional action, I will begin somewhat far afield. A rhetorical question from Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* will figure as my point of departure.

2

In much of contemporary philosophy, treatments of intentional action often begin with reflection on a “bit of Wittgensteinian arithmetic,” usually as a sort of invitatory ritual: “What is left over if I subtract the fact that my arm goes up from the fact that I raise my arm?” I want to raise a similar sort of question, but in the narrower context of *instrumentally rational* action, and

---

1 Velleman (2000, 1) and Wittgenstein (2009, §621). Some philosophers interpret Wittgenstein’s question as about action in general, and not as about intentional action in particular, as if arm-raising could be unintentional; see Setiya (2007, 23–25) and Ford (2011). (While the upshot of Ford’s fuller treatment is that action is, focally, intentional action, his presentation of Wittgenstein’s question is as of action in general.) But the expression “I am raising my arm” portrays one’s arm’s going up as intentional; otherwise, one would more naturally say that one’s arm is “rising.” So Wittgenstein’s contrast is between bodily movements in general and intentional action, not between bodily movements and action that might as well be unintentional. See McDowell (2010) and Boyle and Lavin (2010, §3).
not just about intentional action in general.

So: When I act instrumentally rationally, what must be added to the fact that I want *something to happen*?

Now, as I just suggested, I mean for my question to be about intentional action, too. It should go without saying that someone is acting instrumentally rationally only where she is acting instrumentally, and that she acts instrumentally only where she acts intentionally. After all, she cannot be acting instrumentally, let alone instrumentally rationally, if there are no descriptions under which her doings count as intentional: without such descriptions, there remains nothing that can figure in an account, roughly speaking, of our agent’s means and ends. In such a case, it might be right to say that she acts *as if* she were acting instrumentally—that, in a loose sense, she acts *in an instrumental way*, inasmuch as (say) most cardiovascular systems act *in such a way*. Yet this just brings out the fact that whatever she does is not *itself* a case of the exercise of instrumental rationality. It would be, at best, some kind of *Doppelgänger*.

Of course, much more on these relationships remains to be said—and some of it will be said farther below—but here I want to point to a certain resonance that our two questions will seem to share with each other.

Wittgenstein’s question is often read as inaugurating a program of analysis in the philosophy of action, whereby the problematic concept of intentional action is to be reduced into more familiar terms: presumably, a stretch of intentional action (arm-raising) consists in a bodily movement (arm-rising) amid further conditions (“what is left over”). The challenge is then to specify “what is left over,” the conditions that turn mere bodily movements into intentional actions. The conventional way of taking up the challenge—what has come to be called the “standard story of action” or the “causal theory of action”\(^1\)—takes,
in Michael Smith’s helpful formulation, intentional action to be
those bodily movements that are caused and rationalized by a pair
of mental states: a desire for some end, where ends can be thought
of as ways the world could be, and a belief that something the agent
can just do, namely, move her body in the way to be explained, has
some suitable chance of making the world the relevant way. Bod-
ily movements that occur otherwise aren’t actions, they are mere
happenings.

There are, of course, many subtleties that divide up the views here grouped
together, but the general outlook that binds them together is what I want to
emphasize. And there are many complications even in this skeletal formula,
especially concerning Smith’s references to causation and rationalization, as
we shall see. At present, though, we can begin by noting the elements of the
intended reduction: roughly, a desire for some state of affairs, a belief about
the causal antecedents of that desired state, and a generic grasp of the causal
operations between mental states and bodily movements. Subtleties aside, a
formula of Smith’s general sort captures well the mainstream way of answering
Wittgenstein’s question.

But there remains my question about instrumentally rational action. What
shape should an account of such action take?

At least in economics and those areas of political science that take inspira-

1Arkonovich (2007); and Ford (2011, 79) notes that Elizabeth Anscombe may have wanted to
call it an “accidentalist” account, though she explicitly calls it the “standard approach” in
Anscombe (1998). Ford places in this camp a list that stretches from Davidson, purporting to
draw on Aristotle, to Smith, purporting to draw on Hume; see Ford (2011, 77–78); Davidson
(1980b); Smith (2004a). My dissertation challenges the thought that either Aristotle or Hume
gives comfort to the causal theorist; see Tontiplaphol (2013).

1Smith (2004b, 165), drawing on Davidson (1980b). Smith’s reference just to “action” may
suggest that intentional action is not specifically in focus, but his claim that the relevant belief-
desire pairs must not only cause but also “rationaliz[e]” bodily movement shows that he is
concerned with intentional action after all.
tion from the approaches of economists, prevailing practices as well as influential interpretations offered by theorists of social science have yielded a general answer strikingly similar to that of the standard action theorist. In the words of Daniel Hausman and Michael McPherson, insofar as the “theory of rational choice” and “utility theory” are concerned,

agents are rational if and only if their preferences may be represented by ordinal utility functions, and their choices [viz., actions] maximize utility. [...] Maximizing utility is just doing what one most prefers to do.

As before, there are complications and subtleties that I hope to set aside. What I want to underscore is rather the kinship that our two formulas bear. Still, a short note on two such complications will help to bring that kinship into focus.

First, our economist’s formula is supposed to be scoped by situations of certainty about the consequences of possible actions; but we can confine ourselves to just this terrain, since our broader topic concerns the general relationship between intentional and instrumentally rational action: nothing I mean to explore requires the discussion of what economists count as cases of “risk” or “uncertainty.”

Second, the above view makes reference to “ordinal utility functions.” But we can set aside a full discussion of this constraint, since it simply marks two technical features—transitivity and completeness—that sets of preferences must bear if a rational choice can be said to maximize utility. The basic idea is just that, if there is to be rational choice, then there must be some potential choice whose object is “what one most prefers to do.” The technical features of transitivity and completeness simply work to guarantee that this condition

---

1 Hausman and McPherson (2006, 49). For an accessible statement general enough to capture recognizably mainstream inquiries in political science, see Elster (2007, chapter 11).
on potential choice is satisfied, so that “what one most prefers to do” picks out a content that can figure as the object of rational choice. Without such a content, there is nothing that one most prefers to do; if there is nothing that one most prefers to do, then there is no way to maximize utility, and hence no way to choose rationally. We can therefore read the technical reference to “ordinal utility functions” merely as short-hand for the idea that there is something that “one most prefers to do,” in relation to which a choice can count as rational.

Now, of course, there are differences between our formulas. They both speak of rationality; but the economist’s sense is clearly more demanding, since it incorporates the notion of maximization. Presumably, Smith’s reference is to the weaker sense in which all intentional action is the exercise, or the product, of rational capacities, whether or not those capacities are exercised in so privileged a way as to warrant the economist’s more demanding label. (Not all intentional action is optimizing.) Moreover, while the concept of instrumentality is latent in Smith’s claim, insofar as a bodily movement is seen by its agent as productive of some desired state of affairs, our economist’s view leaves open whether there is some desired state of affairs other than that picked out by “what one most prefers to do.” (Might an action be rational just in case that bare action maximizes utility, no matter the agent’s conception of what acting in that way is likely to produce?) And, finally, in the economist’s formula, an explicit reference to the cognitive component of Smith’s belief-desire pairs has dropped out. (Might an action be rational just in case that bare action maximizes utility, even if the agent has no thought at all about what acting in that way is likely to produce?) So the topics of maximization, instrumentality, and cognition seem to drive a wedge between the standard story of intentional action, on the one hand, and the standard model of rational choice, on the other.

But we should note that these divergences are in some sense merely super-
ficial. Since the economist’s formula applies just to situations of certainty, the presence of (true) beliefs about the effects of one’s choices can be assumed; at the very least, beliefs of that kind are licensed by it. This allows for the relevant beliefs to be understood as folded into the economist’s concept of preference: that the economist’s formula lacks an explicit appeal to cognition poses no necessary wedge between our formulas. And something similar can be said about the topic of instrumentality, since the economist’s formula does not rule out instrumental thought, thought in the light of which a choice or action counts as maximizing utility.\

Now what about the issue of maximization itself? As I’ve suggested already, the fact that Smith’s formula—or the standard story of action—does not list a demand for maximization poses no threat to the idea that our two formulas are structurally similar. Obviously, not all intentional action must be maximally instrumentally rational, or “optimific.” And there is no bar that prevents some instance of intentional action, so far understood as the standard story asks us to understand it, from counting as “optimific.” All that’s additionally needed is the satisfaction of the condition that the agent’s thought (correctly) capture the content of what the agent most wants to do: that it pick out what the agent sees as maximizing utility in the case at hand. It should seem straightforward that such a condition can be placed atop the conditions articulated by the standard story, so that the standard story of intentional action, given the maximization condition, comes to resemble pretty closely the kind of articulation available to the standard story of rational choice. In other words, if the standard story of intentional action relies upon three items—a desire about the way the world

\[\text{\textsuperscript{1}}\text{In fact, Hausman (2012) argues, rightly in my view, that the standard formula of economists should be amended so as to require instrumentality; otherwise, economic explanations of this sort end up approaching an intolerable vacuousness: people do what they most want to do, because they most want to do it.}\]
can be, a belief about the causal antecedents of that kind of outcome or state, and a generic operation of causal forces—then the standard story of rational choice relies upon the same sorts of items, except that the first element, desire, must pick out what is, as it were, *most* desired.

So, to return to my question—when I act instrumentally rationally, what must be added to the fact that I want *something to happen?*—we now see, at least in rough order, how the standard story of rational choice would answer it. But, strikingly, we also see how this way of answering my question is structurally analogous to the way the standard story of intentional action answers its question from Wittgenstein.

It might come as no surprise to find that our two stories articulate such similar positions. For what would an alternative picture, on either front, look like? Our standard stories enjoy the place they do, I suspect, exactly because rival ways of answering our two questions—whether about intentional action in general, or about rational action in particular—are easily overlooked. The next two sections aim to bring out these overlooked options.

But, before proceeding, I want to say a bit more about how our two questions are related: the question of what makes for an intentional action, on the one hand, and the question of what makes for an instrumentally rational one, on the other. Of course, I began this section by claiming, perhaps too boldly, that it goes without saying that an exercise of instrumental rationality must also be an exercise of intentional agency. Perhaps that is right. But what more can we say about how these kinds of exercises are related? Answering this question will open into my motivation for exploring instrumental rationality via a route that begins with intentional agency.
2.1

In (say) intentionally turning on the lights, I am also intentionally alerting the burglar of my threatening bulk as well as unintentionally over-loading the city’s power grid, and unintentionally—perhaps in a different sense—running up the electricity bill. If my perhaps over-bold claim is right—that instrumental rationality hangs on intentional agency—then my question concerns what I intentionally do, the kinds of doings to which Anscombe’s “certain sense of the question ‘why?’ has application,” and for which Davidson sought “rationalizations”: flipping the switch and alerting the burglar, but not running up the power bill. And, of course, it concerns what I instrumentally do: flipping the switch to alert the burglar, but not to cause a blackout down the road.

These concerns are related; indeed, they must be. When an intentional action is also an instrumental one, an explanation can be given that emphasizes its instrumental or purposive or teleological dimension, as when I explain my switch-flipping by saying that I am flipping the switch to alert the burglar. Indeed, that an explanation of this form is available marks the action given in the explanandum as instrumental. What’s more, the availability of such an explanation marks an action—a doing attributable to a human agent, and not just to one’s parts or organs—as itself intentional. So, where an action is explicable in this way, we are given in the explanandum an intentional action,

---

1 Anscombe (2000, 11) and Davidson (1980a, 3). But there is a complication. In my little example, if flipping the switch is one of my intentional actions, is alerting the burglar yet another such action of mine? Isn’t one actually the same “event” or “process” as the other? We can side-step these questions by noting that an action is intentional under certain descriptions, unintentional under others. In what follows, I won’t bother with being careful about the distinction between the identity conditions of actions as events or processes, on the one hand, and those of the descriptions under which an action is intentional, on the other. For our purposes, here and throughout, when we say, with respect to some one agent, that there are two intentional actions here, we mean that there are two different descriptions under which her action is here intentional; the same goes for instrumental action, too, mutatis mutandis.

2 See Anscombe (2000, §§23 and 47).
too. If I am flipping the switch to alert the burglar, switch-flipping is not only an instrumental action of mine but also an intentional one. In other words, the light shed by an instrumental explanation illuminates the action as intentional. This is not to say, of course, that an intentional action must be explicable in this way; there might after all be non-instrumental intentional actions. Rather, when an action is so explained, we will have cottoned on to an intentional action.

But some might object that an instrumental explanation, in my sense, does not have to set out an “intensional context,” and so may not reveal actions as intentional. To my ears, this position fails tests of substitution: in my example, I am not smearing skin cells on plastic from Cleveland to alert the burglar, nor am I am flipping the switch to alert a movie buff with an interesting birthmark. And it must so fail, as we shall see.

Moreover, when an instrumental explanation of action is available, a corresponding alternative explanatory form is also sometimes available, one that emphasizes an action’s character as explicable by what Anscombe calls a wider description, as when I say, “I am turning on the lights because I am alerting the burglar.” An explanation of this form is only sometimes available, since a statement of wider description might be false even when a corresponding instrumental explanation is rightly at hand: in a different case, I am flipping the

---

1 My proviso about actions as attributable to human agents means to exclude, among others, teleological explanations of the following sort: “My heart is pumping in order to circulate blood.” (I am tempted to reject characterizing teleological explanations of this kind as instrumental or purposive, for reasons explored below, with the implication that the teleological casts a wider net.) Certainly, this explanation will not by itself certify some stretch of heart-pumping as an intentional action. We might find some such stretch to be intentional, though, if I am manually operating, say, some antique pacemaker that causes my heart to pump. But when are “doings” attributable to human agents, and therefore rendered “actions”? For now, the distinction on which the proviso relies will have to remain fixed by intuition. But see Anscombe (2000 §19) and Boyle and Lavin (2010).

2 See Anscombe (2000 §§22 and 47) and Skinner (2002).
switch to alert the burglar, and hence switch-flipping intentionally, though I am not alerting the burglar, intentionally or otherwise; for, unknown to me, the fuses have been blown. But, when an explanatory wider description of the favored kind is available, we will be given to see in the explanans still another intentional action: that of alerting the burglar—which, for all we know, might or might not be instrumental.

And, finally, we must sometimes allow for a return to the instrumental or purposive or teleological even where a purported explanatory wider description contains a false explanans, as when I say, in our modified case, “I am flipping the switch because I am turning on the lights,” right after the fuses have blown out. All the same, I am flipping the switch to turn on the lights. But this return to the purposive is only sometimes allowed, since there can be statements of explanatory wider description that do not occupy a place in the foregoing, even when they are true, let alone when they are false. For instance, one might say, rightly, that Ludwig is raising his hand because he’s saying goodbye to that stranger, when, having misplaced his glasses, Ludwig is mistaking a prowler for his beloved aunt. But this statement is not of Anscombe’s kind, nor ours—though true, and pari passu when false—since it does not entail a corresponding instrumental explanation (at least on the most natural understanding of the

1 It is notoriously difficult, though, to articulate in any clear and general way the kinds of conditions needed to certify such wider descriptions. (Is one making tea yet, when one is heating a kettle to make tea?) See Anscombe (2000, §23) and Thompson (2011). But one necessary condition on the availability of an explanatory wider description of this kind seems to be that the agent think the explanans true (pace Davidson). Of course, something which appears as a wider description simpliciter need not require for its truth this cognitive element: I do not need to think that I am causing a blackout to be, in fact, causing a blackout. But, if the wider description is correct as explanatory of intentional action in the way meant here, then the cognitive requirement is apt: I need to think that I am alerting the burglar, if, in the sense scoped by a suitable instrumental explanation, I am flipping the switch because I am alerting the burglar. But, when such an explanation is available and therefore correct, what I think is true. This appears to be a case of non-accidentally true belief, which is as plausible a gloss on knowledge as any. These brief observations go some way to support Anscombe’s cryptic and controversial remarks, at the apex of Intention, on so-called “practical knowledge.”
latter). As we mean them, our explanatory forms, all of them, “trap” what they “gover[n] in an ‘intensional context.’”

So our two questions’ concerns must be very tightly related: a focus on instrumental action is itself a focus on intentional action, insofar as the various explanatory forms that bring out an action’s instrumental character also work to isolate those descriptions, sometimes as *explananda* and sometimes as *explanantia*, under which an action is intentional. Of course, there are cases in which expressions of the form “I am φ’ing” are true descriptions *simpliciter* but, further, false descriptions of *intentional action*: for instance, “I am running up the power bill.” But, when such expressions can play the roles articulated in correct explanations of the above shapes, they are then *guaranteed* to be successes as expressions of intentional action, and not just as descriptions *simpliciter*.

We shall see below why this is no accident. But, for now, my immediate aim has been to put into place some of the relations that obtain between exercises of instrumental rationality and exercises of intentional agency. While pursuing this aim might be warranted by its intrinsic interest, I have meant to show the ways in which a focus on instrumental rationality must itself be a focus on intentional agency: where there is instrumental rationality, there must be intentional agency. But this suggests that a special kind of dependence obtains between our two questions about action, whether generally intentional or particularly rational. It suggests that our conception of instrumental rationality depends on our conception of intentional agency. If our thinking about intentional action must be appreciably modified or revised, then it is likely that so must our thought about instrumental rationality. And so now we turn to an alternative to the standard story of action, one that promises to challenge the

---

1 Thompson (2008, 137).
standard story of rational choice. The next two sections hope to show that, once we find that we have reason to doubt the standard account of intentional action, the standard story of rational choice and, equivalently, explanatory consequentialism must fall with it.

3

The text of §2 began with a bit of Wittgensteinian arithmetic, and I there sketched one way of responding to the question of intentional action. Here I want to sketch a rival view.

Wittgenstein’s arithmetic has invited two markedly different and even incompatible agendas in the philosophy of action. Common ground between the two families is that intentional action is, whatever else it might be, “movement guided by thought” and that an intention is, at least, “a thought on which movement may rest.”  

(As I’ve already suggested, “thought” and later “representation” are each to be understood as capacious enough to include what now travel more colloquially as “beliefs” and “desires.”) In light of this shared idea, a general goal of action theory comes into view: to articulate the conditions that graduate some movements but not others into intentional actions, conditions that turn, in Wittgenstein’s example, some arm-risings into arm-raisings. But, if intentional action is movement guided by thought or movement that rests on thought, two elements of action theory’s quarry also come quickly into view: a movement is an intentional action insofar as it depends on thought. These two elements make out the points of departure between our two families.

On the one hand, there is the conventional view, what I’ve followed others in dubbing “the standard story of action.” We have already seen something

---

1 Boyle and Lavin (2010, 169) and Roedl (2007, 33).
of its details. But the key point, for now, is that this mainstream view responds to Wittgenstein’s question, first, by taking it as seeking an analysis of intentional action, and, second, by supplying analysantia that purport to reduce the problematic or puzzling concept of intentional action into unproblematic and familiar terms—roughly, a desire for some state of affairs, a belief about the causal antecedents of that desired state, and a generic grasp of causal operations.

On the other hand, there is a growing band of Anscombeans about action, who, for starters, reject Wittgenstein’s question, if it is understood as inviting reduction, and who, additionally, doubt that any such reduction is possible. (Indeed, my opening epigraph from Wittgenstein suggests that he would so reject his own question.) Anscombe herself marked her opposition to the standard story, not only by claiming bluntly that “something I do is not made into an intentional action by being caused by a belief and desire, even if the descriptions fit,” but also by arguing against the hope of reduction:

[I]n describing intentional actions as such, it will be a mistake to look for the fundamental description of what occurs—such as the movements of muscles or molecules—and then think of intention as

---

1 I mentioned above that much resistance to the standard story has centered, ever since Winch, on whether the relevant sort of dependence is causal, and, ever since Anscombe, on whether a form of causality other than “efficient causation” is needed. But, for now, I leave aside these areas of dispute, focusing instead on how to understand the relata of dependence, however “dependence” should be understood. So as to evade these difficulties, we can assent to causal dependence insofar as intentional action admits of explanations that can naturally enough begin with the word “because,” though etiological dependence might better capture the evasiveness, following Thompson, I mean to deploy. See Thompson (2008, 86n3, 112).

2 Perhaps not the best label, since those whose thought I mean to characterize often see themselves as followers of Wittgenstein and, increasingly, Aristotle. But renewed interest in Anscombe’s Intention has surely sparked the kind of view I mean to employ; that Anscombe is often seen as “reading Wittgenstein in the light of Aristotle”—and the latter in the light of the former—goes some way in justifying my label; see Stoutland (2011, 6).

3 My discussion in this section draws heavily upon Boyle and Lavin (2010); Roedl (2010); Lavin (2013a); Lavin (2013b).
something, perhaps very complicated, which qualifies this. The only events to consider are intentional actions themselves, and to call an action intentional is to say it is intentional under some description that we give (or could give) of it.

To confine our focus to “intentional actions themselves” is, in part, to judge that “we do not add anything attaching to the action at the time it is done by describing it as intentional.” But the search for this additional attachment is the search for some “mere extra feature of events whose description would otherwise be the same,” in pursuit of a reductive account of intentional action. Rather, for Anscombe and her followers, the concept of intentional action must itself figure in any characterization of the thought that directs intentional action, dooming the prospects for reduction. As Matthew Boyle and Douglas Lavin have recently put it:

The causal theorist’s project of explaining what it is for a bodily movement to be an intentional action by appeal to its psychological causes faces a basic difficulty, since the basic sort of psychological cause that such a theory must posit, a desire to do something, can itself be explained only by appeal to the notion of intentional action.

On this view, since the concept of intentional action is irreducible, Wittgenstein’s question is to be read, not as an invitation to which increasingly sophis-

---

1. Anscombe (1998, 3); see also Anscombe (2000 §19).
3. Anscombe (2000, §48). Also see Ford (2011, 78–79): “[This] formulation appears to be a reference to Aristotle’s definition of an accident as ‘something which may either belong, or not belong to some self-same thing’ (Topics, 102b6–7). So Anscombe rejected what might be called an ‘accidentalist’ account of intentional action.”
4. Boyle and Lavin (2010, 169). Although I draw heavily upon this wonderful paper, I supply additional arguments and elaborations with which they might not agree. In this connection, also see Thompson (2008, part 2), especially 128n11.
ticated versions of the standard story should respond, but as a sign marking—unsurprisingly, in light of its source—a philosophical dead end. If the Anscombean is right that no substantive answer to Wittgenstein’s question can be given, then the best reply to that question might be, in a word: “nothing.” For the kind of bodily movement at issue is essentially an intentional action.\footnote{Compare Anscombe’s infamous (and abandoned) slogan that “I do what happens”; see \cite{Anscombe2000 §29}. Ford \cite{2011, §83–84} gives a helpful illustration of how “nothing” would be the best response: “To the question, ‘What is left over if I subtract the fact that Bucephalus is an animal from the fact that he is a horse?’ no answer is forthcoming. The question assumes that Bucephalus is a horse in virtue of something additional to—and thus separable from—his animality, whereas in fact his being a horse is nothing but the determinate form that his animality takes.” Also see \cite{McDowell2010}.}

Now, at last returning to my own question, I want to examine how this Anscombean line of thought applies, not just to intentional action in general, but to instrumentally rational action in particular.\footnote{For more on this kind of application, see the suggestive comments in Thompson \cite{2008, §112n12}, on “practical calculation” and “justifying reasons,” and, more directly, as will be seen below, \cite{Tuck2008, chapter 2}.} The application should seem natural. For, if we suppose that instrumentally rational action must be intentional action—something not to be queried as much as likely to be forgotten—the idea that intentional action is, whatever else, movement that rests on thought suggests that instrumentally rational action is, whatever else, intentional action that rests on instrumentally rational thought. But what must such thought contain? Just as a goal of action theory is to articulate the “sorts of representations [that] must figure among the causes of a bodily movement if that movement is to constitute an intentional action,”\footnote{Boyle and Lavin \cite{2010, 170}.} I want to examine the sorts of representations that turn an intentional action into an instrumentally rational one.

The application I shall make of the Anscombean position to instrumental rationality might seem less than straightforward. If, in replying to Wittgen-
stein’s question, the Anscombean reply, phrased in its most provocative form, is: “nothing”—if that is so, then the reply to mine would be, if similarly phrased: “almost everything.” That would be the Anscombean answer to the question: What must be added to one’s desire that something happen, for one to act instrumentally rationally?

On reflection, this is exactly to be expected. In the former case, the Anscombean is committed to resisting, in John McDowell’s words, the “familiar sorts of shrinkage” that intention and intentional action may seem to undergo once we focus our attention just on bare instances of arm-rising, whether intentional or not: nothing is left, because arm-raising just is a way for arms to rise. But, in the latter case, and for the same reason, almost everything remains, since instrumental action, as a form of intentional action, expands into much of the space—to stick with McDowell’s metaphor—seemingly occupied by the fact that I want something to happen. For the Anscombean, an account of intentional action must refer to an irreducible desire to do something, a representation hardly exhausted—because irreducible—by the desire that something happen. In Aristotelian terms, the latter desire—for a way the world could be—is best seen as a species of mere wish or at best practical opinion, and as such has no essential place in an account of intentional action, and so no place in an account of instrumentally rational action.

Articulating, defending, and applying this Anscombean line of thought are the aims of this section and the next. But the approach taken here will seem to put considerable strain on our common picture of instrumental action and

1 McDowell (2010, 432).
2 Again, see Ford (2011) for a defense of this Anscombean answer, in addition to McDowell (2010); Lavin (2013a); Lavin (2013b).
3 See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* III.ii, especially 1111b20–25 and 1112a1–5, from which one of my epigraphs comes.
rationality. For what is instrumental action, if it is not mainly concerned with something’s happening? And what is instrumentally rational action, if it is not concerned with the most efficient way of securing a way the world could be?

Now, as I’ve stressed, the standard theorist of action replies to Wittgenstein’s question by undertaking a philosophical agenda that aims to specify the following generalization:

A bodily intentional action [...] consists in (1) a bodily movement (2) caused in some “right way” by (3) mental states or events of certain specific sorts.

The task is then to elaborate on the needed causal relations and the requisite mental items, a task pursued with ever-increasing sophistication and interest. In particular, some sophisticated versions of the standard story aim to make good on, and explain, the requirement, underscored by Anscombe, that the subject of intentional action have correct beliefs or even knowledge about what she herself is doing—in a word, that she manifest self-knowledge. And many have, of course, focused on articulating the “right way” in which intentional action might be caused, and so on the idea of practical reasoning. For now, though, I want to set these concerns aside, focusing, not on the explicitly cognitive elements of this picture, nor on its causal conditions, but instead on the desiderative aspect of intentional action.

All parties—within and without the standard camp—agree that an account of someone’s intentionally φ’ing must contain a reference to the agent’s desire to φ. And this seems exactly right. For, if a student, say, intentionally moves

---

1 Boyle and Lavin (2010, 168).
3 Whether and in what sense such an account must be “causal” are topics of great controversy, which we can set aside for now; see the above footnote on causal dependence. The parenthetical insertions that irritatingly litter this paragraph aim to make space for the causal theorist’s assent.
his hand, perhaps in pursuit of other desires—to get his teacher’s attention and, further, to inspire envy among his peers—then he must, at least, desire (or have desired) to move his hand. “Otherwise, whatever movements he makes will not themselves be guided by thought in the way that the adverb ‘intentionally’ demands. [...]. They will not themselves be realizations of any aims of the agent.”

If he doesn’t (or didn’t) desire to move his hand, then, among the things he is intentionally doing—getting attention and also sparking envy—there will not be a bit of intentional hand-moving, even if his hand moves. And this will be so even when his hand rises because he wants (or wanted) to get the teacher’s attention, and even when it rises because he is, say, intentionally inspiring envy.

Here imagine an eager but bullied student who intentionally moves his left hand, in intentionally getting the teacher’s attention, only to have realized, along the way, that his nemesis has wired him up so as to have both hands go up at once, if one were ever lifted. Surely, he caused his right hand to go up, and he knew, after a moment, that it would go up. But, if he did not want to lift his right hand, it would be right to say that he intentionally lifted it only inasmuch as it would be right to say that he intentionally moved, say, the mole on one of his forearms.

2. Note that this latter case does not show his hand’s rising as subject to an Anscombean explanation by wider description as canvassed in §2.1 above. An explanatory wider description of that kind must admit of instrumental reformulation, which is, as we’ll see, unavailable here: it’s false that he is moving his hand to inspire envy. See Thompson (2008, 107n2).
3. This kind of example should be familiar; it is a case of what is commonly called “deviant causation.” I discuss this aspect of our case farther below. Also see Roedl (2007, chapter 2) and Roedl (2010).
4. It is easiest to withhold the relevant desire when we imagine a case where the right hand’s rising on this score. But this should seem needless, so long as we focus on actions in progress: if one is going on φ’ing intentionally at time \( t_1 \), then there must be, at \( t_1 \), one’s desire to φ, even if the causal theorist is right that there must also have been, at \( t_0 \), a desire to φ. See Setiya (2007, 56–59) and (McDowell, 2010, 415–16, 422).
We can begin to cancel whatever correctness there might seem to be, though, by recalling, for a start, those marks of instrumental action mentioned near the start of §2.1 above. For, if our student did not want to move the mole on his forearm, then corresponding forms of instrumental explanation are made unavailable, and with them the thought that he instrumentally moved his mole: if he did not want to move his mole, then, even if he did move his mole, he did not move his mole to do anything. Just so in the case of his right hand: if he did not want to move it, then, even if he moved it, he did not move his hand to do anything. So instrumental explanations of his intentional actions, whichever they are, will not contain, as explananda, any stretches of mole-moving or right-hand-lifting. But this suggests an easy application to explanantia in such explanations, too. If our pupil did not want to move his mole, then he also did not do anything to move his mole. And, again, just so in the case of his right hand. Excluded from the record of his instrumental dealings, whether as explananda or as explanantia, must therefore be mole-moving and right-hand-lifting.

These exclusions seem confirmed by the fact that, after expressing an instrumental explanation of one’s own action, as in “I’m φ’ing in order to ψ,” the judgmental can always intelligibly rebuke, “You shouldn’t want to φ,” while the curious can always intelligibly ask, “Why do you want to ψ?” Moreover, falls entirely outside the scope of the student’s knowledge or belief; it may seem harder, though, in the different case, of which our bullied student’s is a species, where the right hand’s rising falls, after a moment, as I said, within the student’s knowledge, as a foreseen consequence does. But recall the example from the start, where I intentionally flip the switch and alert the burglar but unintentionally yet knowingly run up my power bill. This topic requires a deeper look at practical reasoning and Anscombe’s conception of “knowledge without observation” than is necessary here, however. I take it for granted that, at present, the attribution of intentional action will not hang on the presence or absence of knowledge or correct belief insofar as I shall assume, for the sake of simplicity, that our agents know or at least believe all that they need, on the causal theorist’s conception, for the attribution of intentional action. (Such a conception will be challenged farther below.) This isolates the proper target, which is the characterization of the desiderative element on which intentional action depends.
after making plain this instrumental explanation, it would be bizarre, if at all intelligible, to meet with the question “But why do you want to φ?”

Talk of this kind, which bears on its surface the instrumental or purposive dimension of intentional action, imparts a plausible sense to the idea of a desire to φ. We can conceive of the desire to φ, as it figures in an account of intentional action, as picking out either means or end. This much is already suggested by the general shape of instrumental explanation, which can admit as relata actions as well as desires: for instance, “I want to φ in order to ψ.” And so the absence, in some agent, of a desire to φ entails that φ’ing counts, for her, as neither means nor end. But, if φ’ing remains neither means nor end, then whatever φ’ing in which she ends up otherwise engaged will seem hardly intentional. In this sense, again, her movements “will not themselves be guided by thought in the way that the adverb ‘intentionally’ demands. [...] They will not themselves be realizations of any aims of the agent.”

This explains why it is no accident that the form of instrumental explanation sheds light on the attribution of intentional action: it picks out an intention in the execution of a desire. And this also explains why an instrumental explanation must set out an “intensional context”: it picks out the content of one’s desires in the execution of an intention.

Still, there might remain the thought that, though our pupil’s instrumental dealings will not include mole-moving and right-hand-lifting, a record of his non-instrumental intentional actions yet may. On this view, an intentional action might be sometimes revealed by an instrumental explanation—just as the discussion near the start of §2.1 suggested—but it need not be. Rather,

1 See Thompson (2008, 103–4).
2 See Thompson (2008, 97ff.).
3 Barring the special case of so-called “basic action,” to be discussed below; see Lavin (2013a).
4 Boyle and Lavin (2010, 170), already quoted.
some intentional actions are, in a technical sense, *teleologically basic*: “an action is basic in this sense when no means are taken in its execution, or equally, when it is not the end of any other action.” So the fact that some action fails to be captured in an instrumental explanation’s net, either as *explanandum* or as *explanans*, need not mark it as unintentional, on this view.

Indeed, this kind of position has been left open. The foregoing observations have focused on intentional actions whose descriptions are controlled or scoped by correct instrumental explanations. So appeals either to the concepts of means and ends or to the marks of intentional action articulated in §2.1 will not dispose of the possibility of basic action. If this possibility can be kept open, then there might be room for someone to deny that φ’ing intentionally requires the desire to φ.

However, the idea that intentional action could be basic, in this technical sense, has recently come under much criticism, persuasively I think. One source of criticism is the difficulty in seeing just what might constitute compelling examples of basic action. That difficulty arises from a natural assumption: that intentional actions take time, and so must consist of phases. Such phases, or some of them, will then seem apt for capture by instances of instrumental explanation. If intentional actions consist of phases, then each phase seems instrumentally explicable: the phase can be explained as a means to an end. If this is right, then all intentional actions bear a kind of *internal* instrumental *structure*, even if some intentional actions are not themselves means to some further—*external*—end.

For instance, we registered above (§2.1) the possibility that my *alerting the burglar* might be non-instrumental; we can mark that possibility by saying that

---

1. Lavin (2013a).
2. See Thompson (2008, chapter 7) and Lavin (2013a).
any explanation of the form “I am alerting the burglar to φ” might be unavailable. But, even when that possibility is realized, if I am indeed intentionally burglar-alerting, and not just, say, thinking about alerting the burglar, it seems plausible to require that I am doing or have done something to alert the burglar—that some phase of the larger process in which I am engaged is itself underway or already complete, no matter how small. So, when I am intentionally alerting the burglar, I must, say, be walking towards the light panel, or have walked there, or have walked halfway there, or be lifting my finger towards the switch, or have flipped it, or have flipped it halfway—and so on.

These observations might seem just to register the fact that actions have physical manifestations, as if to say just that intentional limb-movements require the movement of limbs and therefore the movement of bits of flesh and bone. But the opponent of basic action must register more than simply that. What is needed is the further claim that, of such physical events or processes, there exist true descriptions capable of playing the role of explanandum in correct instrumental explanations. Beyond the thought that there is intentional φ’ing only if there is or has been β’ing, there must be the additional thought that there is intentional φ’ing (burglar-alerting) only where there is or has been instrumental β’ing (finger-lifting), such that an instrumental explanation is made available: “I am or was β’ing in order to φ” (“I am or was lifting my finger in order to alert the burglar”). But I want to suggest that, of any action that seems teleologically basic, an an instrumental explanation is available. It is hard to imagine an action for which some phase cannot serve as a means. If this is right, that a description be fit for such manipulation, so as to figure as an explanans in an instrumental explanation, will come to seem a requirement on an action’s status as intentional, even when it is not itself instrumental. But
this is just what our remnant thought means to deny. Nonetheless, it is hard
to imagine a case in which no such phase of $\phi$’ing—some bit of $\beta$’ing—can be
captured in a truth of that form. Even a bit of intentional finger-lifting will
consist of some such phase apt for filling the role of $\beta$ in our schema, no matter
how small.

All the same, the present context need not eliminate the sheer possibility
of basic action—for two related reasons—even though one should, I think, be
suspicious of it.

First, our main goal here has been the claim that intentional $\phi$’ing requires
a desire to $\phi$. In the course of making out that goal, we have appealed to
arguments that presuppose the impossibility of basic action. But, even if one
remains convinced of the possibility of basic action, there is little philosophical
motivation for her to deny our starting claim about the necessity of desire.
Skepticism about that requirement does not seem to follow from a commitment
to basic action. In fact, the opposite seems likely. Descriptions of basic action

\footnote{If there is intentional action only where there is instrumental action, and if there is intentional
action, an Anscombean wider description is made available: “I am or was $\beta$’ing because I
am or was $\phi$’ing.” The availability of this kind of explanation underwrites Thompson’s main
“conjecture” from Thompson \cite{Thompson} part 2 (112):
X’s doing $A$ is an intentional action […] under that description just in case the
agent can be said, truly, to have done something else because he or she was doing
$A$. The intended sense of “because” is, as usual, the one deployed in rationalization.
If we may be permitted free appeal to the notion of a part, then our thought might
also be expressed, a bit more metaphysically, as follows: an event, the building of
a house, for example, is an intentional action just in case it is the “cause” of its
own parts—where, again, the intended notion, of “cause” is not pre-conceived, but
is that captured by the “because” of rationalization, whatever it may be.
Thompson’s is a counterpart to—a “sort of reverse of”—Anscombe’s account, but it is more
elegant insofar as it captures in its net that for which Anscombe must make special allowance,
namely, non-instrumental action as well as action most naturally explained by reference to
“motive” (see Anscombe \cite{Anscombe} §§12–14).

\footnote{Of course, this is not to say that all true descriptions of movement must work as instrumental
explananda; it is just to say that there must be some such description. Nor must the opponent
of basic action claim that intentional $\phi$’ing requires a conscious plan of $\beta$’ing; what’s needed
is just the claim that there exists an order that the agent can bring to consciousness, an order
described in statements of instrumental explanation.}
cannot play the role of describing an end in instrumental explanations; this is just what it means to be a basic action. So either such descriptions count as means or as non-instrumental. In either case, the necessity of desire is in place.

Second, the focus of this essay is instrumental action, or a subset of such action. Even if we allow for basic action in the case of non-instrumental action, insofar as a particular basic action action is instrumental, then the necessity of desire will be in place.

So we can proceed on the assumption. Call this requirement on intentional action—that its agent want to $\phi$—the conative condition.

I said above that all sides agree that such a condition is necessary. The standard action theorist’s point of departure, though, is how best to meet this requirement alongside her explanatory ambitions. Recall that, for the standard theorist, the aim is to supply an analysis of intentional action that is reductive in aspiration. And so the required account, on pain of circularity, will have to articulate the causal conditions of bodily movements in a way whose grasp does not presuppose the notion of intentional action. It is this demand (among others) that the Anscombean finds impossible to satisfy.

The attack can begin with an observation as to the seeming ease and frequency with which the conative condition is translated, by the standard story, into a condition wherein agents’ desires take contents that are propositional in form: from the desire to $\phi$, on the one hand, there issues a reformulation into the desire that $p$, on the other. (Recall Smith’s crystallization of the standard story above, at the start of §2.) For instance, when I want to cross the street, I merely want that I cross the street. But how are we to understand this desire’s object? When would such a desire count as satisfied?

Again, to make good on the explanatory ambitions of the standard story, the causal theorist must answer without presupposing the concept of intentional
action itself. So, of course, she cannot simply answer, on this score, that my desire is satisfied when I intentionally cross the street, or when I cross the street in the way my intention directs. Something more domesticated is in order, something which analyzes out appeals to the concept of intention. The frequent move to translate, on the causal theorist’s lips, from the infinitival (“to φ”) to the propositional (“that p”) is therefore no accident. The answer will have to be that the desire’s object is a proposition of some more familiar kind, a state of affairs, a way the world could be, in principle an object unproblematically appropriate to belief; and its satisfaction consists in the world’s being as the world could be—in the proposition’s being true—as when an unproblematic sort of belief is as it should be: as when it becomes true, because the world is as the content represents it. And so, as I just suggested, the desire to cross the street is supposed to have as its object that I cross the street, and so its satisfaction must consist in its becoming true that I cross the street.

But what are the truth-conditions of this sort of content? When is it true that I cross the street? “At any given time, a particular action will be either still underway, in which case we describe it in the progressive, ‘S is A-ing,’ or already complete, in which case we describe it in the perfect, ‘S has A-ed.’” As the content stands, in the simple present tense, it conveys the sense either of habit or frequency, as when one says that “Jane goes to the movies on Fridays,” or of the “historical present,” as when one recounts, “And then he has the gall

---

1 Here and throughout, I assume, again for the sake of simplicity, that the agent comes to grasp that the state of affairs relevant to the standard story obtains. This leaves open any commitment to the view that a desire’s satisfaction hangs on its possessor’s perception that her object’s desire obtains.

2 Boyle and Lavin (2010, 172). In English, we may also use the simple past, but that is also marked by perfect aspect, though not perfect tense. It is, as Boyle and Lavin point out, following Thompson, aspect that is decisive here, as marking either completion, in the perfective, or progression, in the imperfective.
to tell her... and so I pay him a visit...[1] But neither of these senses will work in the context of the conative condition: an intentional action need not be caused by desires for frequent satisfaction; nor does its presence hang on a true accounting from some kind of timeless perspective.[2] The causal theorist’s explanatory program, then, forces a choice over propositional forms. For now, either: *I am crossing the street*; or: *I have crossed the street*.

However, these options fail to capture, anyway, what was meant by the conative condition: the desire to \( \phi \). For an example, turn to the option that we take a propositional content in the perfect tense, with perfect aspect, as in: *I have crossed the street*. (Other options will be canvassed in turn.)

Note that my desire to cross the street will remain unfulfilled even when it becomes true that, swept along by a sudden storm, I have crossed the street, so long as I want to have brought about this state of affairs. Of course, if I want to cross the street in order to be on the far side, then my desire might fade when I find myself there; but that it can often fade into something like indignation shows that the desire often lapses exactly when it was slighted.[3]

---

1 I leave aside, as immediately irrelevant, a third possible sense, what Thompson and Foot have stressed in their work on “natural-historical judgments” or “Aristotelian categoricals,” an instance of which might be: “The umbrella jelly develops into a medusa”; see Foot (2001); Thompson (2008 esp. parts 1 and 3); Thompson (2004). Boyle and Lavin (2010, 174ff.) make a compelling case for the slightly indirect relevance of such “generics” or “form-characterizing judgments” to action theory; but that must await another occasion.

2 See Thompson (2008 125).

3 Moreover, it seems false to say, as many causal theorists do, that desires, unlike beliefs, must tend to “endure” when a conflicting judgment is formed. If I come to believe that I’ll end up spending the holidays with my tiresome aunt, because, say, a blizzard has blocked all easy alternatives, my desire to avoid her might very well “go out of existence”; such might be my character, as one guided by modest expectations. Nor must a desire fade when one comes to adopt a corresponding belief. In a different sort of case, I come to believe that I will be spending the holidays with my aunt; her roast turkey will be hard to turn down, I predict. All the same, I might still desire that I will visit my aunt; indeed, if the desire lapses, the belief will probably become false. Similarly, if I want to be crossing a street and find myself doing just that, I probably won’t stop suddenly, as though no longer motivated by desire. The key thought is to conceive of a motivating desire as sustaining action, which, of course, can be expressed in terms apt for belief. See Setiya (2007 49–51), commenting on Smith (1987).
(“It was my turn to tell the story,” the hostess protests)

A desire’s lapsing and its fulfillment seem distinct. A desire may lapse when one realizes its object can no longer be achieved, or can be achieved only at intimidating cost. Of course, when a desire is fulfilled, its object can no longer be achieved—whatever else can be achieved may become a new object, for a new desire—but its fulfillment does not, I think, consist in this. Rather, as Aristotle might say, it is fulfilled when its possessor’s actions, amid the circumstances, have left nothing left for it to achieve.\footnote{See Aristotle, \textit{De Anima} 433a29–31.} That a desire to cross the street might lapse when one happens to find oneself on the far side records, I suspect, just that one’s crossing the street (as one wants) is now impossible. Actions take time, and they have to start \textit{in} time and \textit{at} a time; occasionally the time for starting to act expires.

Recognition of this does not commit one to the view that the relevant desire’s satisfaction must somehow be an achievement \textit{entirely} of one’s own—that actions satisfy desires \textit{all by themselves}. Stepmotherly nature might sometimes show agents a kindness; after two steps, a gust of wind might help one’s feet along to the far side. The commitment is not to the idea that one’s actions are all that’s needed, but rather to the idea that stepmotherly nature cannot satisfy the relevant desire \textit{all by herself}. Actions take time, and they have to proceed \textit{through} time and \textit{amid} circumstances, circumstances which might change in surprising ways; occasionally the time at which one expects to stop acting expires.

One’s desire, moreover, to bring about one’s crossing the street does not seem like a \textit{further} element, something that must supplement what is typically expressible as the desire to cross the street. It already marches, perhaps implicitly, under the infinitival form that the causal theorist aims to decode. If
anything, *denying* that one is attached to one’s causal powers is what needs explicit registering. (“I want him dead, and I don’t care how.”\(^1\) In other words, the desire to \(\phi\) contains the desire to *make* it the case that \(p\). Of course, the standard theorist is right to the extent that the desire to cross the street contains the desire that I have crossed the street: the desire to \(\phi\) seems to require the desire that \(p\). But the standard theorist has to say more than that; she has to say that the former desire is *reducible* to the latter. But this seems so far incorrect, if the above considerations are on the right.

Now—to return to the case in which I have crossed the street, having been propelled by strong storm—some might object that my being on the far side was the storm’s doing, and not my own. That is exactly right. But, as an objection, this just seems to re-introduce into the account what the causal theorist is at pains to avoid: the concept of intentional action. If something weaker than this is meant, as when, as it were, the cause is *in* me but not necessarily *of* me, would one’s desire count as satisfied if one got to the far side through a series of seizures, or if one “walked” there in one’s sleep? Again, it will do no good to protest that one didn’t *mean* to get across the street *in that way*. That would either inject what is supposed to be excluded, or pick out what philosophers can easily arrange from the armchair: perhaps one’s seizures cause one’s steps to fall in a pattern mirroring one’s usual gait. The causal theorist must allow us to hear her favored *anlysantia* without prejudice.

So far I have raised considerations meant to block the causal theorist’s reduction from the infinitival to the propositional, from the desire to \(\phi\) to the desire that \(p\). These considerations might seem to leave the matter unsettled, however: either because one’s judgments about my examples and distinctions are more favorable to the standard story than I presume; or because one doubts

\(^1\) But, when one says things of this sort, is one usually said to be *doing* anything? If so, then the agent cares about *some* way of proceeding after all.
whether the infinitival target for reduction is as essential as it might appear. Perhaps the trouble lies, on this latter view, not with some proposed reduction, but rather with the phrasing of the conative condition itself, a condition I’ve deployed as a lever, more or less convincingly, against reduction. Perhaps the conceptual point that the condition means to capture is itself better expressed, at the start, in terms of the propositional, so that an account of intentional φ’ing requires, instead, an appeal to the desire that p. It would then cut no ice to object, as I have, that the conative condition in its infinitival version remains somehow unfulfilled throughout our cases. On this tack, with the purported requirement that one desire to φ allowed to lapse, intentional φ’ing requires, if anything, the desire that p, the desire, more specifically, that one has φ’d.

To be clear, this proposal urges both the view that intentional φ’ing requires the desire that one has φ’d—something the Anscombean need not deny—and, more controversially, the view that intentional φ’ing does not require the desire to φ. It is this latter kind of requirement that is supposed to make trouble for the standard theorist, since, if the foregoing is right, the infinitival form does not seem reducible to the bare propositional form: the infinitival contains an irreducible element that picks out intentional action. And so, in order to make good on reducing out any such element, the standard theorist must analyze the idea of intentional action without having to appeal to the infinitival form.

But will recourse to this reconfigured—propositional—form of the conative condition give comfort to the standard theorist? A fuller reply will be given in the next section. For now, I want make two remarks.

First—very briefly—if the conative condition, in its infinitival form, is taken to be inessential in the way (right at the start) this reconfigured proposal suggests, then it is likely that the kind of intentional action about which this proposal might speak correctly must be a teleologically basic action. Otherwise,
the action must contain an internal instrumental structure; but, with such a structure, it is hard to see how the infinitival form of the conative condition can be side-stepped. (Can one be \(\beta\)’ing in order to \(\phi\), without wanting to \(\phi\)?\(^1\) But we have already examined a few reasons to doubt the usefulness of appealing to basic action in this context.

Second, I want to return to the proposed reduction, as it must fall from the standard theorist’s lips, from the infinitival to the propositional. To be clear, note that the reconfigured proposal, which awaits treatment in the next section, side-steps this particular reductive demand, by claiming that some cases of intentional action do not require, and even do not involve, the infinitival form of desire. For now, then, return to the attempt to make good on this particular demand for reduction.

So far, I have argued that the infinitival form of desire cannot be reduced into a counterpart form cast in the propositional: that the desire to \(\phi\) does not amount just to the desire that \(p\). To make this case, I’ve toyed with one way of specifying the relevant \(p\): the desire that I have crossed the street. And I’ve argued that the satisfaction of this latter kind of desire seems ill-equipped to satisfy what has been our target idea: the desire to cross the street.

But what about the other alternative mentioned above, for specifying \(p\)? There I mentioned the additional candidate: \(I\ am\ crossing\ the\ street\). On this alternative, the content that figures in the proposed reduction from the infinitival to the propositional is a state of affairs, an outcome, that is itself cast in the progressive, not the perfective, as our previous candidate has been. Now does this progressive option fare any better than its perfective peer?

\(^1\) Admittedly, there are complications here, insofar as it might be intelligible to say: I am \(\beta\)’ing in order that I have crossed the street. But, whatever is meant by this form of words, it seems likely that the outcome aimed at will be rightly characterized as an intentional action. If that is so, then the reductive move has the wrong target in view.
No, I think. For the desire to cross the street seems to require, not just that some phase or action-in-progress be *underway*, but also its *completion*. To desire to φ is to desire having φ’d: that is just the kernel of truth that is contained in the standard theorist’s appeal to the perfective option, which we have just discussed. So there is a sense in which either alternative, either candidate, overlooks the appeal of the other: the progressive route slights the sense in which an outcome is desired, while the perfective route slights the sense in which an outcome is desired as the result of a particular kind of process or series of phases.

Now this suggests that we might do well to combine the two alternatives into a joint proposition, so that

the desire: *to cross the street* 

reduces to 

the desire that: *I am crossing the street and will have crossed the street.*

But this kind of move also seems unsatisfactory, since the proposed reduction picks out what appear to be two distinctive states or outcomes. Intuitively, the desire to φ requires that some outcome, p, come to obtain *in virtue of* the fact that one is φ’ing. It is this kind of relation that this joint proposition fails to represent: the desire for that kind of joint outcome seems open to satisfaction just by the instantiation of two separate states or processes. So perhaps we can represent the needed relation by a different kind of reductive move:

the desire that: *I am crossing the street as much as necessary so that I will have crossed the street.*

But, if we can attach any sense to this expression, it seems that whatever sense we make of it will ride on the back of whatever grasp we have of the concept
of intentional action itself. For the suspicion is that the content of “as much as necessary” here has to be given by whatever is supposed to satisfy the desire to cross the street; it seems that “as much as necessary” is governed by the desire for agency that is encoded, or embedded, in the desire to \( \phi \). But, if the above is right, the satisfaction of this kind of infinitival form of desire cannot be cast in terms of mere outcomes or states of affairs. So, as Boyle and Lavin note:

The object wanted is not some final state of affairs which might be brought about either intentionally or unintentionally, but rather an object which “exists” only insofar as a certain intentional action has been carried through to completion. This makes difficulties for any attempt to explain such wanting in the causal theorist’s way, by appeal to the generic notion of a representation of a “way the world could be” and the generic idea of a causal tendency. For to want to do A is not merely to want to be in some terminal state. It is, as we have seen, not to want to be in any mere state, but rather to want what is essentially a goal-directed course of action: “enough A-ing to have A-ed,” as we were led to put it. And equally, to want to do A is not merely to want that the relevant course of action should occur just anyhow. It is, as we have seen, to want to be oneself the source of the relevant action: to want it to be one’s own doing. When I want to do A, in short, the content of my want is of a form such that the world can only come to conform to that content insofar as it not only comes to be a certain way, but does so as the outcome of a goal-directed process guided by the agent. Indeed, even this way of putting the matter leaves the outcome and the process too external to one another: to represent my doing A is to represent, as it were, a kind of state of affairs whose obtaining is my having intentionally

caused it to be.

It has been the goal of this section to defend, at least partially, the idea that, where there is intentional action—and especially where there is instrumental action—there is an irreducible desire to act. In particular, this kind of desire, which is expressed most naturally in an infinitival form, cannot be reduced to those sorts of attitudes that appear to take meaningful shape in other forms: the infinitival representation is not exhausted by familiar sorts of propositional representation.

What this suggests, for our wider purposes, is that satisfying explanations of intentional action cannot abstract from what we can call agential desires. But, if, as I’ve argued (§2.1), instrumentally rational action must be a form of intentional action, then this demand must apply to the ways we hope to explain instrumental action, too. This means that explanatory consequentialism, insofar as it rests on a certain conception of preference or desire, must be rejected. For that conception, as it is standardly glossed, relies on the idea that preference takes, as its object, familiar ways the world could be: states of affairs or outcomes of ordinary sorts. In §2, I argued for the formal or structural similarity between the standard story of intentional action, on the one hand, and what Hausman calls the standard model of rational choice, on the other. But, if §3 is here convincing, we shall have to discard the standard story of action. This suggests that the standard model of rational choice must be discarded, too. Their common weakness, if I am right, is their reliance on the assumption that action-explanation must “bottom-out” in propositional forms of desire: in conative thought about typical ways the world could be.

But this assumptions forces us to get intentional action wrong, and, with it, instrumentally rational action, too. For, if an agential desire is an inelim-
inable component or feature of intentional action, it must be the same with instrumentally rational action. Wherever a conception of instrumentally rational action fails to carve out fundamental space for an agential desire, it ceases to be a conception of intentional action at all. In other words, if instrumental rationality demands *doing what one most wants to do*, we must stress what this form of words wears on its sleeve: what one most wants is an *action*. And so we have to resist—what is all too common, as we shall see (§5)—the translation of this natural thought into a misleading form. We must resist the idea that rationality hangs on an agent’s thought about non-agential outcomes.

4

In §3, I argued against the proposed reduction from the infinitival form of desire to the propositional form of desire, in the hope of making plain the fact that intentional action cannot hang on an agent’s thought about standard sorts of outcomes or states of affairs. But I have left open a way of resisting this kind of conclusion, since the lever I have deployed against the standard story of action has been the irreducibility of desires represented in their infinitival form. Must we, though, conform to the demands of the conative condition? Must intentional \( \phi \)'ing require the desire to \( \phi \)? If it doesn’t, then the lever I’ve wielded leaves an alternative unmolested. This section attempts, briefly, to cast doubt on the attractions of this other route, what I’ve called the *reconfigured* proposal.

Here I want to examine this different proposal from an angle that brings into view its connection to the well-worn topic of “deviant causal chains.” The connection can be seen, from a distance, by observing that, while the conative condition sets out a *necessary* condition on intentional action, the proposal
now entertained sets out conditions *sufficient* for the attribution of intentional action, conditions that are supposed to suffice even when the conative condition is not satisfied. It is this aspect of the proposal that makes the problem of deviant causation particularly striking. Let me explain.

The truth-conditions of a thought expressible as *I have crossed the street* can be seen either as the product or culmination of intentional action or otherwise. (Not all street-crossings are intentional, of course.) Yet, when such conditions can be seen as such a product or culmination, the standard story requires that they *must also* be seen otherwise, so that a more specific reduction of intentional action can fall into place. (Again, that is the explanatory demand that sparks the Anscombean’s skepticism.)

What would be involved in seeing “otherwise” an intentional stretch of street-crossing? Suppose that all of the causal elements and operations favored by some version of the standard story are present, in whatever baroque form seems suitable: movements caused jointly, for instance, by the belief that my foot’s being here allows my other foot to be there, and so on; by the belief that the movement of this muscle will cause the movement of that bit of bone, and so on; by the desire that one’s foot is thus, and then that one’s foot is so, and so on; and even by the desire, at the summit of self-referential sophistication, that *this very desire* causes one’s foot to be here and then there, and so on. Where these elements and operations are in play, the standard story has us find an intentional action, namely, an intentional street-crossing. But, on the proposed refinement we’ve been considering, there is a twist: the favored elements and operations need not involve the desire to walk across the street. The favored conditions, perhaps unvarnished or rather baroque, would be sufficient.

Now, after these elements and operations have run their course, it might

---

1 For an account that emphasizes the reflexive or self-referential, see Setiya (2007, esp. part 1).
become correct to say that I have crossed the street. If the causal conditions have been satisfied in the favored way, then, when it becomes correct to say that, it would also be correct to say that I have intentionally crossed the street. It is in this sense that the proposed refinement is committed to a certain picture of conditions sufficient for the attribution of intentional action.

But the cases in which such conditions are satisfied will hardly map on to the cases in which we’d without strain attribute intentional street-crossing to our agent. In other words, where the favored causal conditions are satisfied, we are supposed to mark out an intentional action. But counterexamples can be easily produced that falsify what the favored story is supposed to say. We would have a chain that satisfies whatever conditions are on offer, but there is something wrong about the causal chain’s operations: it is deviant, in some way. The favored causal operations work, but not “in the right way.” (Recall Smith’s formulation of the standard story of action, from §2.1.)

What might an example look like, which illustrates how things might go “in the wrong way”? Drawing on a nice example from Sebastian Roedl, suppose that, in line with the reconfigured proposal, I want that I am losing weight. Also suppose that this desire causes it to be true that I am losing weight, but in an odd way: I have become so anxious about wanting it to be the case that I am losing weight that somatic symptoms set in, and I become victim to a process of which it is true that I am losing weight. Suppose, too, that, to round out the account, I believe, rightly, that wanting that I am losing weight is likely to lead to the outcome of which it is true that I am losing weight. And, finally, suppose whatever other beliefs that q and desires that p one might want to favor. After all these conditions in place, are we licensed to infer that I am losing weight intentionally?

1 This line of response is strongly indebted to Roedl (2010), the richness of which I can only touch on here.
As many have noted—and this is why all parties to our dispute agree, at least initially, on the conative condition—one key feature that is missing from the above account, no matter how many beliefs that \( q \) and desires that \( p \) are put into place, is the desire to lose weight. If one doesn't insist on the conative condition, in its infinitival form, it becomes all too easy to misconstrue victims of causal happenings as intentional agents.

Now, of course, insisting on the conative condition will not be sufficient to get us to a satisfying account of intentional action. For we will still be able to find counterexamples, even once the conative condition is satisfied. But this is just where the standard action theorist and the Anscombean part ways: the former thinks that “the right way” can be specified so as to avoid the threat of deviant causation, while the Anscombean holds to the thought that no reductionist program will work, however sophisticated. The main culprit, on the Anscombean view, is the standard theorist’s promise to factor out the concept of intentional action itself: the reductionist program might seem attractive, if it can be supposed that intentional action just is a mundane sort of event caused in a mundane sort of way by special kinds of causes. The Anscombean, however, insists that intentional action is, rather, a special kind of event caused in a special kind of way by special kinds of causes: with all of its uniqueness in mind, intentional action cannot be assimilated, along any dimension, to whatever we disparage by calling a mere “happening.” In a slogan, the Anscombean believes that “I do what happens”—what happens, in the case of intentional action, is constitutively intentional—while the reductionist believes that what happens is, anyway, sometimes caused by what I intentionally do, while sometimes not.

The subtleties of this kind of dispute need not detain us, however. The crucial point is that, so long as the threat of deviant causation remains, the conative condition seems motivated. To that extent, all parties agree on it,
even if there is dispute about what *in addition* must be added to the conative condition in order for an account of intentional action to come into clearer view.\footnote{For more on the promise of the Anscombean tack, and its implications for the interpretation of Aristotle’s *Ethics* and *Politics*, see Tontiplaphol (2013). A crisp and helpful distillation of the general strategy undertaken by Anscombeans of late is Lavin (2013b).}

5

At this point, it remains to be explored what the rejection of explanatory consequentialism means more generally. I hope that the lines of thought urged above have already gone some way to alter our conception of what instrumental rationality must be. For, in a word, the aim of this paper has been to argue in favor of the idea that agential desires must figure ineliminably in any account of instrumental rationality, exactly because they must so figure in any account of intentional action.

I have already summarized some of the morals of the story, at the end of §3. For now, I want quickly to point at how these morals find application to a well-worn topic in political science: the rationality of voting.\footnote{Much of what follows is owed to reflection on Tuck (2008). In certain ways, it is meant to supplement Tuck’s account, though I come to his sorts of conclusions via a very different route. In particular, I suspect that Tuck is driven by a commitment to consequentialism: the distinctiveness of his account, as we shall see, diverges from the kind of approach taken here.}

Of course, the details that are supposed to generate something like a “paradox” in this context are well known. But the main idea is simply that it can seem less than instrumentally rational for citizens to vote, since some desired outcome does not seem to hang on their going out to vote. If a citizen is interrogated as she exits the polls, and asked for her reason for doing as she has, her answer is supposed to run along the following lines: I want that N.N. become. . . . And this is taken to spark the utility theorist’s puzzlement; for it is
widely recognized—let us suppose—that the fact that N.N. is elected into office, if it becomes a fact, does not hang on our voter’s vote. So perhaps there is some other desired state of affairs in view, one that will exorcise the utility theorist of his puzzlement: perhaps the desired outcome concerns a voter’s having expressed her views, or her having satisfied some kind of ethical demand. But the kind of exorcism sought here still works within the framework of explanatory consequentialism, since the candidate states of affairs must, if the exorcism is to be successful, be ordinary—propositional—outcomes; the twist is just to discern those outcomes, of that shape, that hang on the voter’s behavior.

There are senses in which the recent work of Richard Tuck both departs from, and accords with, the strategy just articulated in the previous paragraph. Rather than seeking out candidate outcomes which hang on, and therefore rationalize, a voter’s action, Tuck challenges the demand, assumed by most utility theorists, that rationalization requires a particular kind of dependence relation between action and desired outcome. In other words, Tuck aims to keep in view the normal sort of desired outcome—that N.N. is elected into office—but hopes to make space for the thought that, in voting, our agent can be said to cause that outcome. In short, there is allowed the idea that our agent has indeed elected N.N. into office. This is so, on Tuck’s account, because we have good reason, at least in certain cases, to abandon the counterfactual analysis of causation, according to which an event $A$ causes an event $B$ if and only if, had $A$ not occurred, $B$ wouldn’t have occurred. Once the strictures of this kind of analysis are relaxed, we are, at least in principle, licensed to view voting, even in certain kinds of over-determined elections, as causally efficacious. So long as the voter desires that N.N. become elected into office, there is a provisional case to be made for the claim that, in voting, our agent has caused the outcome she most desires. And this kind of claim seems to be a familiar enough manifestation
of what it means to act instrumentally rationally.

Many readers, I think, are relatively dissatisfied with Tuck’s alternative strategy, and for a simple reason. While Tuck might be right that our agent can be said, at least in principle, to have caused some desired outcome, even an outcome she *most* desires, these critics claim that instrumental rationality demands more of our agent than Tuck requires. For it remains open to wonder whether our voter has an instrumentally rational basis for *wanting to cause the election of N.N.* Insofar as Tuck side-steps this question, the utility theorist’s puzzlement arises anew; for now it is assumed that there must be some *further* desired outcome that is supposed to rationalize, if all goes well, the pursuit of the desire to be a causal force in the world. And the hunt is on for new candidate states of affairs, to the effect that we have lost our grip on what Tuck wanted to keep at hand: the desire for typical sorts of electoral outcomes, of the familiar sorts, as opposed to outcomes that seem markedly “expressive” or “symbolic” in character. To the extent that Tuck’s account ends in something like the rationalization of a brute desire to be a causal agent, the ending will appear *ad hoc.*

The account offered here, however, gives us reason to doubt our impression that such desires must be *ad hoc* or otherwise cheap. For, if the foregoing is right, intentional action must always contain an ineliminable agential desire. And so, wherever there is instrumentally rational action, there must be a desire to act, a desire to be a distinctive kind of causal force in the world. That some desired state of affairs does not hang on one’s contribution in intentional action need not make any trouble for an account of instrumentally rational action: the rationality of instrumentally rational actions hangs primarily, not on an agent’s thought about ways the world could be, but on her thought about *further* actions. If an action is seen as an optimal way of performing other
actions, then that is enough, I want to suggest, to ground the attribution of instrumental rationality. If I am right, the idea that we must abstract from the desire to act, in favor of the desire that some way the world could be comes to be the way the world is, is an idea we have no reason to credit.

6

I want to end by making a suggestion in the light of this paper’s opening thoughts. There, at the start, I characterized normative consequentialism as that family of views which holds to the idea that familiar moral predicates, or most of them, hang primarily on states of affairs or outcomes—ways the world could be. Of course, this paper has been concerned with a different sort of predicate, namely, rationality. But I think we are now in a position to entertain a challenge to normative consequentialism, on the basis of this paper’s main moves.

It comes to this. If moral predicates apply fundamentally or primarily to states of affairs, in the way the consequentialists demand, then, if intentional actions are marked, at least in part, by desires whose objects are never fundamentally or primarily states of affairs, in what sense, if any, can an intentional action as such count as bearing moral predicates?

---

1 To be clear, I do not mean to suggest that the conative condition renders all instrumental actions magically instrumentally rational, in the demanding sense I’ve been meaning the term to bear. Actions can be better or worse ways of realizing other actions; where an action is suboptimal, in whatever sense that matters to attributions of rationality, then we can deploy the charge of irrationality. The point made here is just that rationality cannot hang primarily or fundamentally on desires of an ordinarily propositional form. Once that thought is recognized, it will become significantly easier—indeed unavoidable—to resist the puzzlement that typically inhabits our utility theorist.
References


