Believing you’ll act as intended

Intention is a special attitude that agents have toward states of affairs involving their expected agency. When I speak of intention, I have in mind what has been called prospective or future-directed intention, not intention-in-action. Unlike believing, which is often viewed as a cognitive commitment to a proposition, intending is often viewed as a conative or motivational commitment to a course of action. But these things typically go together. We often intend to do something at some future time. And we often believe that we will do what we intend to do. For instance: I intend to go to the party on Friday. I also believe that I will go to the party on Friday. It’s plausible to think that intenders are typically epistemically warranted in forming and having this belief (call it the “intention-belief”). The question I want to consider is this: what warrants the intender’s belief that he will ϕ? Given that these beliefs concern a forecasted action, it’s plausible to think that the intention must figure in the story. So to sharpen the question a bit: how does the intention to ϕ warrant the intender’s belief that he will ϕ?

Two answers to this question have been proposed in the literature. I want to sketch and defend a third. Very roughly, here are the three options: the intention doesn’t justify belief —intending to ϕ involves inter alia believing that you will ϕ, but the belief is not justified by the intention;\(^1\) intending to ϕ inerentially justifies believing that you will ϕ; intending to ϕ non-inferentially justifies believing that you will ϕ.\(^2\) It is the latter of these options that has yet to be explored and that I want to defend.

The idea behind the view that intending to ϕ involves believing that you will ϕ is that there is the following conceptual connection between intention and belief: necessarily, if an agent intends to ϕ, then the agent believes that he will ϕ. For ease of discussion, let’s call this “the belief condition”. The belief condition commits us to denying the very possibility of intending to ϕ without believing that you will ϕ.\(^3\) I argue this view should be rejected for two familiar reasons.

First, there are counterexamples to the belief condition —cases where an agent intends to ϕ but lacks the belief that he will ϕ. After surveying the counterexamples and standard responses to them, I argue that theoretical considerations concerning the functional role of intention demonstrate that the belief condition is false.

\(^1\) This view can attempt to answer to the initial question, but rejects the presupposition to the sharpened question, namely the assumption that the belief is justified by the intention.
\(^2\) This way of carving the landscape should be familiar from the literature on perceptual beliefs. Roughly, the analogues are: perceptual states are beliefs; perceptual states inerentially justify perceptual beliefs; perceptual states non-inferentially justify perceptual beliefs.
\(^3\) There are different ways this might be the case. For instance, intention might be identical to, in part constituted by, or simply come along with a belief of this sort. See Velleman (1989), Setiya (2007), (2008), (2009) and Harman (1986a) and (1986b). I argue that only the former two are committed to saying that the intention doesn’t justify the intention-belief; it is open to the latter to say that the intention does justify the intention belief.
Second, it seems the intention-belief is not epistemically warranted on this view. The only evidence available to the agent in forming the belief will be whatever evidence is available en route to forming his intention, but this evidence is insufficient to justify the belief that he will \( \varphi \): either the considerations that led to the formation of the intention are not evidence for that belief or, insofar as they are evidential, they are insufficient to support the agent’s expectation that he will \( \varphi \) (rather than \( \psi \)) in the absence of a settled fact about what he intends to do. In forming the intention the agent, it seems, has formed a belief without sufficient evidence, and knows this to be so.\(^4\) I consider both Velleman (1989) and Setiya’s (2008) solutions to this problem and argue that they remain subject to it.

To make the distinction between the remaining views a bit more precise, here’s the distinction between inferentially and non-inferentially justified beliefs that I have in mind.\(^5\) A belief is inferentially justified if and only if it is justified in a way that depends upon the justification to believe some other proposition. In contrast, a belief is non-inferentially justified if and only if it is justified in a way that does not depend upon the justification to believe any other proposition. So, according to the view on which these beliefs are non-inferentially justified, the intender has defeasible justification to believe that he will \( \varphi \) simply in virtue of the fact that he intends to \( \varphi \); no further justification to believe anything else is necessary for the belief to be justified. Whereas according to the view on which these beliefs are inferentially justified, the intender’s justification to believe that he will \( \varphi \) depends on the intention to \( \varphi \) and on the justification to believe some further proposition(s)—e.g., that he has a general tendency to do what he intends.\(^6\)

After sketching the inferentialist position in its general form, I argue that proponents of inferential justification should accept that intention itself is sufficient to play an epistemic role in the justification of the intention-belief. However, accepting this leads to a provisional challenge: if intention is sufficient to play an epistemic role in the justification of the intention-belief, then why suppose that it is insufficient to play this epistemic role except in combination with justification to believe some other proposition(s)?

Given that it’s not yet been ruled out, and in light of the problems facing the alternatives, we should consider the possibility that intention non-inferentially justifies believing that you will \( \varphi \). The view is intuitively plausible: I seem to form the intention-belief immediately, spontaneously, and not on the basis of gathering evidence. Moreover, given its affinity to the popular view in the perception literature, it’s worth taking seriously.\(^7\) My case

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\(^4\) This problem only gets a grip for the first two ways you might hold the belief condition (see fn.3).

\(^5\) See Smithies (2014). Some authors, e.g., Alston (1989), Pryor (2000) and (2005), and Silins (2008) use the terminology “mediate” versus “immediate” justification; however, this is merely a terminological difference.

\(^6\) See Paul (2009).

\(^7\) Viz., that perceptual experiences non-inferentially justify perceptual beliefs.
here will be limited to showing that arguments against this view don’t work. Much of the focus is on what I take to be the most pressing argument.

Roughly, the thought is that the analogy with perceptual experiences breaks down because, unlike perceptual experiences, intentions have the wrong direction of fit to justify beliefs. More formally:

1. Premise principle: nothing can justify a belief that \( p \) on its own unless it assertively represents some proposition that entails or makes it probable that \( p \).
2. Intentions don’t assertively represent anything because they have a world-to-mind direction of fit.
3. So, intentions don’t justify beliefs on their own.

If sound, this argument against non-inferential justification provides advocates of inferential justification with the resources to block the provisional challenge mentioned previously.

The remainder of the paper surveys the various potential responses to this argument. Ultimately, I argue that we should reject (1.) in its present form: it doesn’t matter whether intentions assertively represent or not because intentions do defeasibly entail or make it probable that I will \( \varphi \). This is because intentions are conduct-controlling attitudes that guide our deliberation and behaviour in ways that justify the expectation: if my intentions persists until the time to act, and I see that the time to act has arrived and nothing interferes, it will control my conduct then and make the belief true. But an intender need not be justified in believing this about his intention in order to be justified in forming the intention-belief, just as a perceiver need not be justified in believing his perceptual faculties are reliable in order to be justified in forming some perceptual belief.