

## The Problem of Intention

It often seems quite natural to us to say that we should judge people depending on what they intended to do rather than just what they ended up doing. Hence we can convict people for 'attempted murder' even if they failed to carry out the deed and, on the other side of the coin, we differentiate murder from manslaughter when someone has died by the 'killer' didn't actually mean to do it.

However, it is actually quite difficult to clarify exactly what intention is, and how it explains human actions. The following situations point up this difficulty:

1. Your enemy is traveling on an airplane; you insure his life and place a bomb on the plane, timed to explode in flight. Do you also intend to kill the other passengers? When you intend an action, do you intend all the *consequences* of that action?
2. If you say you did not know there would be other passengers are you thereby exonerated? Do you intend what you *ought* to know? In that case, did all Germans intend to torture their victims in the concentration camps? Did Einstein intend the destruction of Hiroshima?
3. Your enemy comes to lunch; you offer him a drink of water and you say to yourself, I wish it were poisoned. He suddenly drops dead. You later discover that poison had somehow gotten into the water supply. Did you intend his death? Does *desire* equal *intention*? or is *something* also required?
4. You decide to kill your enemy, who lives in the next town. You get your gun, jump into your car, and drive there. On the way, you accidentally run over and kill a man, who turns out to be your enemy. Can you intend the end or goal, but not the particular *means*?
5. You are mountain climbing with your friend, and your ineptitude causes his accidental death. Suppose you later discover, through psychoanalysis or introspection, that you really hated him. Can you have an intention and not be *aware* of it?
6. Are we always the best judges of our own intentions? Albert Speer asserts in his memoirs, *Inside the Third Reich*, that he went back to Berlin at the end of the war to say good-bye to Hitler, but elsewhere that he went to warn Lüsschen to leave. Do you always believe the person who claims to be doing something, not for the money, but for the principle of the thing?
7. Can you intend an action if you are drunk? drugged? brainwashed? hypnotized? sleepwalking? Must an intentional action be *consciously* intended?
8. Oedipus intended to marry Jocasta; unknown to him, she was his mother. Did he intend to marry his mother? Can what you know be an element of intention?
9. Can you intend to win at roulette? Can you intend (for the tenth time!) to give up smoking? Is *ability* an ingredient of intention or is hope enough? or must that hope be a rational hope?
10. You come upon your enemy lying down and you shoot him. (I'm sorry these examples are all so gory.) But it turns out that he was already dead. Can you intend the *impossible*? (Can you intend to find the greatest prime?)
11. Suppose your enemy was falling from the top of the Empire State Building: you shoot him as he passes the fifty eighth floor. Can you intend the *inevitable*? (But we are all on our way to dusty death!)
12. The price of movie admissions goes up, and you decide not to go. Can you intend *not* to do something? Intentionally not acting may be called *forbearance*.
13. Kitty Genovese was murdered on the night of March 16, 1964, on a Street in Forest Hills, New York, and no fewer than thirty-eight people living in apartment houses nearby heard her scream and saw

her trying to escape; not one person intervened or even called the police. Did these onlookers intend her murder? If you, a good swimmer, ignore the cries of someone in the water calling for help, do you intend that he drown? What if you are a poor swimmer? Can you intentionally *not act* when you may be said to have a moral obligation?

14. Old Karamazov was killed by his epileptic servant Smerdyakov; but Smerdyakov made Ivan realize, afterward, that it was he, Ivan, who wanted his old father dead: Smerdyakov was only carrying out Ivan's intention. Can you intend that *someone else* act? Can you intend someone else's *action*?
15. When may intentional behavior be equated with the following of *rules*? When you play chess, is every move intended to checkmate your opponent? Can you "play chess" and intend to lose?
16. Is behavior intentional when it is persistently directed toward a *goal*? Are bird migrations intentional? the motions of a sunflower?
17. So much crime and violence seem wanton, purposeless, unmotivated, Hannah Arendt has coined the phrase "the banality of evil." Is stealing or shooting "just for the hell of it" intentional?
18. As you are walking downstairs, you trip, and thrust your hand out to break the fall. Was your action intentional or *reflexive*? (Can the knee jerk reflex ever be intentional?)
19. As you are driving your car, a dog suddenly runs in front of you; you slam on the brakes. Was your action intentional or *reactive*? (Unlike the case of a knee jerk reflex, you have a motive.)
20. A commuter on a railroad, disgusted by the heat, dirt, delays, and crowds, decides on the spur of the moment to refuse to pay his fare. Is his action intentional or *impulsive*? (Note that there has been no deliberation.)
21. You are a kleptomaniac and cannot resist "swiping" something from a department store counter. Is your behavior intentional or *compulsive*?
22. At dinner, you are asked to pass the salt, and you do. Is your action intentional or *conventional*?
23. You are a chain smoker and reach for a cigarette. Is your action intentional or *habitual*?
24. The telephone rings while you are working and you reach to answer it. Is your action intentional or *automatic*?
25. Income tax time has come around again; you hate to pay taxes, but you do. Is your behavior intentional or *obligatory*? Or, your child is kidnaped, and a ransom is demanded. Is your payment intentional or *coerced*?

These examples illustrate the idea that it is difficult, perhaps impossible, to pinpoint a mental act called intention. In Latin *intendo (arcum)* means "I aim (my bow)." It was thought that the mind could somehow be aimed or directed at a target; the usage survives in "this is what I aim to do." But, like trying to isolate the act of "volition" by subtracting "my arm goes up" from "I raise my arm," isolating the act or entity called "intention" seems hopeless. Like other "states of consciousness", intention seems intuitively clear at the outset, but becomes under scrutiny quite hazy.

*Adapted from Reuben Abel's 'Man is the Measure' (Chapter 20)*